

‘FINDING A VOICE’
**THE EXPERIENCE OF MATURE STUDENTS IN A
COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION**

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Abstract

This study explores the experience of mature students in a Further Education college in Ireland. It looks at the development of the further education sector and its current role in Irish education. Further education is a major provider of education for adults as more than half the students in further education are now mature students. The system grew largely within the Vocational Education system and, it is suggested, has adopted many of the neo-liberal ideas and practices prevalent in society more generally.

The first research element was a survey and focus group, followed by nine qualitative interviews which explored with the students their reasons for returning to education, their experience while in further education and what they consider to be the benefits of participation. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach the data were generated and analysed through a systematic process of coding, categorisation and the development of core concepts grounded in the students' lived experience. Three significant concepts emerged from the analysis. The first concept of 'The latent self' describes the range of social, personal, structural and biographical influences and discusses how they interact and impact on the decision to return to education. The second concept, 'The Emerging Self' describes the negotiation of challenges faced by the students in the process of change. The third concept, 'The Revised Self', describes the changed self emphatically described by the students as resulting from their participation and characterised by greatly enhanced confidence and agency.

The conceptual label 'Finding a voice' was used to describe this 'Revised Self' as many of the participants spoke in terms of feeling able to speak and having things to say. It encompasses willingness and a sense of entitlement to participate and engage with others and a sense of having something to contribute.

The findings demonstrate that further education is a site of significant learning for adults. Although the purpose of the further education sector is to provide students with the skills needed in the workplace and many students came for vocational reasons, the actual learning went beyond the instrumental and resulted in many surprising benefits to the students and to society more generally.

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INTRODUCTION

I have been teaching in the Further Education (FE) sector in the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC) for thirty years. The sector grew up within individual Vocational Education Committee (VEC) colleges from the early 1980s. Over the years it has become a significant part of Irish education and now has over 30,000 students, of which half are mature students. This means that FE is now a major provider of adult education. While it is generally recognised by teachers and managers in FE that mature students are different from more traditional students, little formal effort is made to accommodate their particular characteristics and needs.

This thesis sets out to explore the experiences of mature students in further education, why they come to FE and what they see as the benefits of participation.

In FE, a student aged twenty one or over is considered a mature student. Many younger mature students are similar in many ways to their colleagues a year or two their junior. This research focuses on mature students who have been out of full-time education for some years.

To help connect my experience with this exploration I will describe an incident that gave me a significant insight and made me think.

I teach media studies. In a media analysis class we were studying a print advertisement from the point of view of its construction, semiotics, narrative, audience and representation. The advertisement depicted a romantic scene and this led to a discussion of the nature of romance and whether romance was a natural or socially constructed phenomenon. We discussed different cultural, religious, commercial, ideological and historical perspectives and other mating practices and how these could be assessed. Later in the day I met a mature student from the class, Lisa, a local woman in her forties, and asked her how she was getting on. She said she loved being in the college but that she had found the class that morning 'very upsetting'. She went on to say that she had never thought about things like that before, just accepted them.

When I asked her if others in the class were upset, she said, ‘Sure they’re young, that wouldn’t upset them.’

This encounter prompted me to consider how mature students are different from their younger classmates, why they come to a college of further education and what they get from it.

Despite the growth in FE in recent years there is little work done on the FE sector in Ireland. The one major review, The McIver Report (2003) was based on institutional analysis and examined 15 colleges from those with 150 or more students. This report outlined the range of provision in FE and called for the establishment of a separate FE sector. A Report in 2006, by the ESRI for the Department of education and Science (Watson, McCoy & Gorby, 2006) looked at Post-Leaving Certificate courses and Employment outcomes. There has been no attempt to explore student experience or views or to examine the implications of the growth in the numbers of mature students in FE. There are a small number of unpublished Masters’ Theses that touch on various aspects of FE but none look at the experience of students, especially older students. This thesis is an attempt to address this imbalance.

There are a number of important studies on mature students in Higher Education in Ireland (Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Lynch, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999) these studies predate the transformation of Ireland in the last decade. There are a number of more recent studies that have much to offer a study of FE which I will be looking at in another chapter.

Government policy in recent years has seen widening access to education as being central to promoting inclusion, employment and fostering national economic growth. There has been a commitment to widening participation in third level education and upgrading the qualifications of the workforce generally, especially among groups who traditionally were under-represented, including mature students. Further Education (FE) has been successful in attracting students from backgrounds traditionally under-represented in Higher Education (HE) and clearly has a role to play in providing a route back into education for those who were disaffected by their previous experience. FE offers progression, including access to HE to students whose lack of qualifications or participation in the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) would have

precluded them from direct entry. For most, however, FE is an alternative to HE rather than a route to it, and its provision for mature students is an important part of attempts to combat inequality and exclusion.

This study is grounded in my own experience of working in FE for many years and my conviction that the curriculum accounts for only a small part of the learning that occurs, especially with mature students. I also believe that the emotional aspects of education are often neglected in considering how these students get on and how they facilitate the process of change that they often speak about.

The students in this study have come to further education at a time when the dominant discourse in education is instrumental and preparation for work is seen as the principal objective of FE colleges. Success is usually measured by the completion of awards and progression to employment or HE. This study explores with the students their reasons for coming to FE, their experience as mature students and what they see as the benefits of participation.

The students and teachers in FE operate in an environment with conflicting influences. On one side there is the neo-liberal context of marketisation, quality assurance and performativity and on the other the VEC history and tradition of inclusion, care and support. We are in a time of global uncertainty and economic recession with cutbacks in staffing and resources and more urgent demands being placed on education by increasing numbers of applicants and the expectations of government that we do more with less. In this climate it is important that we protect the values of the VEC system and affirm the contribution of FE to the education of adults. This thesis tries to contribute to that process. The research was carried out in the large college of further education where I work, referred to in the text as ‘the college.’

I began my research with the general aim of exploring the experience of mature students in a Further Education College within the CDVEC.

There are a number of sub questions:

- Who are the mature students in FE? What is known of their educational socio-economic and cultural background?
- Why do adults return to education? Why FE particularly?
- In what ways are they different to younger students?
- What helps or hinders their learning in FE? What can the FE sector and individual institutions do to promote effective learning and a positive experience?
- What do the students see as the benefits of participation?
- What are the implications of the findings for further education in Ireland?

The initial research involved a Focus Group and a questionnaire. The main focus was qualitative, using interviews with mature students and constructivist grounded theory methodology for data generation and analysis.

Structure of the thesis

The first three chapters establish the background and context of the work. Chapter one looks at the evolution of the FE sector in Ireland. It is suggested that the sector grew, not as the result of an overall plan, but in a haphazard fashion depending on the enthusiasm of individual principals and teachers. Vocational Education Committees (VECs) are the main providers of FE and their role in Irish education is an important factor considered in this chapter.

Chapter two considers the ideological climate in which FE and Irish education is operating. It suggests that in its practices and policies FE has adopted, by default, a neo-liberal agenda and considers some theorists who offer a way of understanding this development and addressing it.

Chapter three continues to set the context by looking at a selection of studies that contribute to an understanding of FE. This is done at this point ‘to set the stage for what *you* do’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.66). Their conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches were influential for this work and help to place FE in the broader context of Irish education. Engaging with a selection of the literature at this stage also contributed to a general theoretical sensitivity and awareness of broad issues and approaches. A more focused review of the literature was done when the research was carried out and categories and relationships between them emerged from working with the data.

Chapter four outlines the epistemological stance and the constructivist grounded theory approach of the study. It details the research procedure, the process of data generation and analysis and considers some ethical issues.

Chapter five looks at the findings from the questionnaire, the focus group and briefly profiles four of the participants and two others in more detail. Instead of dealing with the abstraction of the concept of ‘mature student, these separate narratives introduce the individuals that make the concept real. Their experiences and feelings are the stuff of this study and their individual stories are, I think, vital for understanding mature students’ experience.

Chapter six offers a more themed account of the participants’ stories and outlines how the key ideas of Latent Self, Emerging Self and Revised Self emerged as core concepts.

Chapter seven engages in a discussion of the findings from a more abstract perspective and, in keeping with grounded theory procedures, engages with the literature relevant to these emerging findings.

Chapter 8 reviews the research questions and findings, looks at some of the implications and points out some of the limitations of the work and areas for further study.

Grounded theory.

The study set out to use grounded theory as a methodology for exploring the experience of mature students. The intention was to gain an understanding, not to generate theory. However, as the study progressed, theory emerged around the process of transformation through participation in education and the emergence of a 'revised self.'

CHAPTER 1

FURTHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

Introduction

This chapter establishes the context of the study by examining the development of the further education sector in Ireland and outlining the diversity of its provision and its position as part of the Vocational Education system. It also looks at the increase in the numbers of mature students and some of the issues facing FE now.

Understandings of Further Education

The term 'Further Education', is somewhat problematic. It is often used in Ireland in conjunction with 'Adult Education' and in many documents and discussions the terms are interchangeable. This perhaps reflects the fragmentary evolution and the complexity of educational provision for those who have left compulsory schooling. The first formal recognition of Further Education was in the White Paper on Education from the Department of Education and Science (DES, 1995) which saw Further Education as a new category and proposed the establishment of a FE training authority 'to provide a coherent national developmental framework' (DES, 1995, p.81) and to have responsibility for the coordination of adult education, apprenticeships and Post Leaving Certificate education. Since then, FE has come to mean education and training 'which occurs after 2nd level schooling, but is not part of the third level system' (DES, 2004). Third level, or Higher Education, is made up of the universities, Institutes of Technology (ITs) and a number of other designated colleges, including Teacher Training Colleges. The White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000, p.27) defined adult education as 'systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training'. A DES report on the state of the art of adult learning and education (2008, p.10) says 'the philosophy of Adult/Further Education in Ireland is to provide a range of education programmes for young people and adults who have either left school early or who need further vocational education and training to enhance their employment prospects and to enable them to progress their education up to a standard equivalent to upper secondary level'.

There is a degree of overlap in the definitions and practices which makes a clear separation difficult. The first Minister of State for Adult Education, Willie O’Dea, was appointed in 1997 which indicated a commitment by government to adopt a more focused approach to adult education. The new minister pointed out the lack of organisation and cohesion in the sector. Even though recognition for FE came only in 1995, post Leaving Certificate courses had been running for many years and the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), established in 1991, recognised that ‘an unofficial FE sector has, in effect, developed’ (NCVA, 1992, p.33).

Until recently FE provision was the responsibility of two government departments: the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE). The DETE delivered mainly through Foras Áiseanna Saothar (FÁS), the National Employment and Training authority established in 1967 as ANCO to provide vocational training, it now offers training programmes aimed at helping unemployed people re-enter the labour market. FÁS (now under the DES and re-branded as Solas) caters mainly for apprenticeships in a rather restricted number of areas. In Ireland the apprenticeship trades are traditionally ‘male’ occupations and the participation of women in apprenticeship is negligible (OECD, 2010, p. 8). In 2004 less than 0.5% of registered apprentices in the first phase of apprenticeship were women. Conversely, in 2003/4 women accounted for seventy two percent of participants in Post-Leaving Certificate courses, which cover many traditionally ‘female’ occupations such as hairdressers, beauticians and child care (Watson et al., 2006, p.8). There are other organisations engaged in sectoral training. These include Teagasc (agriculture) focusing mainly on farm training, Fáilte Ireland (tourism) and Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) (fisheries). The DES provision is mainly through the 33 VECs which offer a range of programmes including the Back to Education initiative (BTEI) and Vocational Education and Training Scheme (VTOS).

The range of organisations offering Further Education and Training (FET) was complicated by the lack of a coherent qualifications structure. The National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), established in 1991, brought in a national system of certification. However, it was not broad enough to match the diversity of provision in FET and many providers continued to offer certification from UK and other bodies.

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 was an important development. It provided for the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) to replace the NCVA. The NQAI was established in 2001 to set up and maintain a framework of qualifications and to promote and simplify access, transfer and progression (NQAI, 2003a, p.5). The National Framework Qualifications (NFQ) was introduced under the 1999 legislation to be ‘a single, nationally and internationally accepted entity through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards’ (NQAI, 2003b, p.7)). It is based on outcomes – packages of knowledge, skills and competence. FETAC, which has responsibility for making awards from levels 1 to 6 on the NFQ, simplified the system of FET awards by taking responsibility for awards previously made by FÁS and a number of other bodies.

The National Qualifications Framework was a major part of European agreements, outlined in the Bruges-Copenhagen Process (2002) and reviewed every two years, to promote the European dimension in vocational education and training and the development of quality assurance mechanisms. It aims to establish a European Education and Training Area to include a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning to promote recognition of qualifications, mobility for working and learning, quality and transparency. Importantly for mature students, the European Framework of Qualifications and the Irish NFQ seek to promote the concept of lifelong learning and offer recognition of older awards and of knowledge and skills gained through experience or informally. This is seen by Connolly (2007, p.115) as a ‘key solution to the elitism of the traditional qualifications pathways...’. It offered adult education a foothold in the formal system traditionally resistant to the needs of non-traditional students.

As many FE courses are certified by UK awarding bodies, the work of the NQAI in the recognition and alignment of awards on the NFQ is of particular interest. FE, for the most part, offers awards at level 5. However, there are a considerable number of courses offering awards at levels 6 and 7 and a small number at level 8 (Honours

Bachelor Degree). The provision of awards at levels 6, 7 and 8 in FE is a contentious issue as, under current DES guidelines, FE providers are not permitted to develop non-FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) courses.

The number of mature students in FE has increased greatly in recent years. Older students have also increased their share of all levels of FETAC award. Those over forty years of age accounted for a fifth of all major awards in 2009, a third of minor awards and fifty-two percent of specific purpose awards. My focus is on mature students in full time FE courses in a college of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee which is the largest provider of FE and FETAC level 5 awards.

Background to FE in Ireland

The FE sector grew out of the Post-Leaving Certificate courses which emerged from the early 1980s. Many of the courses, practices, and assessment systems in this sector evolved as a result of pragmatism. As enrolments in traditional courses declined, schools looked for other ways of maintaining student numbers and teachers. O'Sullivan's point about the emergence of adult education is valid for FE also – that it was it 'depended very much on the level of interest and commitment on the part of a particular CEO, VEC committee member, school principal or individual member of a school's staff' (2005, p.518). Individual colleges were quick to recognise and provide for gaps in employment and training. Structures emerged within colleges such as Departments and Programme Leaders, which had no official recognition but met the needs of the institution. Many colleges re-named themselves Further Education Colleges to reflect the changing profile of the students, increasing numbers of whom were non-traditional students and many did not have a leaving certificate. For many years the sector used a variety of certifying bodies including the CDVEC's Curriculum Development Unit and a number of national and foreign examination boards and professional institutes. FETAC (the Further Education and Training Awards Council) now certifies one-year courses and most two-year courses are certified by EDEXCEL, an English awarding body, (formerly BTEC). Both of these systems are outcomes-based and modular.

Despite having significant numbers of students (30,500 in 2010, 11,000 within the CDVEC (DES, 2010) the self-styled FE sector still operates within the confines of the

second level system which have increasingly proved unsuitable. The doubling of student numbers in FE since 1991 is attributable, almost entirely, to mature students. The sector provides a range of courses not available elsewhere and accommodates students who could not access third level education directly as well as those who wish to study areas not catered for elsewhere. It also has an important role in providing 'second chance' education and facilitates a significant number of adults and non-traditional students both on designated 'return to learning' programmes and in mainstream courses. FE colleges now offer a large variety of courses including part-time day and evening courses, one and two year full-time courses and courses offering bachelors degrees awarded by Irish and UK universities. It blurs the distinction between second and third level education and is sometimes referred to as 'level two and a half'.

Most of the teachers in FE were initially trained for the second level system although many have undertaken re-training to adapt to their new and evolving situation. Very few have any training in teaching adults and many (especially those coming from industry) have no teacher-training at all. The system has established progression routes to third level colleges in Ireland and the UK. It is a feature of the fragmentary nature of FE provision that many colleges individually negotiate entry to the first, second or third year of third level courses with the colleges directly, while FETAC has also established progression routes to Irish HE colleges for holders of its awards. In 2009, eleven percent of all Central Applications Office (CAO) applicants were holders of a FETAC major award, fourteen percent in 2010 (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2010). For many years there have been calls for the recognition of FE as a distinct sector within Irish education with appropriate structures and resources and particularly for the implementation of the McIver report (2003). This review of the sector called for an increase in funding to provide the type of resources required by FET providers. The measures recommended included a revised organisational and administrative structure, reducing teaching time and creating non-teaching roles for advisors, counsellors and programme managers. It addressed the teaching workload, upgrading buildings, facilities and learner support services and issues relating to teacher qualifications, induction and development. So far there has been much discussion but none of the recommendations have been implemented. Because of this,

the operation of the new framework and quality systems are seriously hampered and the government's commitment to FE must be questioned.

Vocational Education

The VECs are by far the largest providers of FE. Historically, Vocational schools, established under the 1930 Vocational Education Act, and secondary school were part of a binary system in which students from working class backgrounds were encouraged to study for trades. Academic or liberal education was the preserve of the religious-controlled and often fee paying secondary schools or colleges. This dual system that emerged in Ireland fits with Bourdieu's contention that the education system is more an agent of social reproduction than of transformation in that it works to 'consecrate' social distinctions by cultivating ways of being that have the effect of reproducing social inequality. It has been suggested (Tierney and Clarke, 2007. p27) that the late recognition of further education and training in Ireland could be interpreted as reflecting negative perceptions of vocational education in a system that has historically been classically oriented. Anderson, Brown & Rushbrook, (2004) argue that the primary function that national governments attribute to vocational education and training is the provision of working class education. Those who lack cultural capital due to age, gender or socioeconomic background are more highly represented in this sector.

This history and ethos of Vocational Education is important to the country's VECs which created a broad range of courses including foundation level, degree and post graduate programmes, adult education, literacy, youth and community services, outdoor education centres and prisoner education. In some cases these take place in the same centre. VECs have a presence in every county and have been nominated to administer additional programmes on behalf of the state e.g. youth work and the higher education grants scheme under the new Student Support Bill (2008, p28). VEC colleges have responded quickly to perceived training and education needs and have worked with local groups to meet local needs. They are not selective in their intake and have a long history of accommodating non-traditional students and students with difficulties. Their history, structure and willingness to innovate meant that VEC schools were well placed to provide FE. The stigma attached to 'Techs' has not

disappeared completely and FE is sometimes seen as ‘the poor relation’ – there for those who couldn’t make it into HE. However, perceptions are changing as colleges offering courses such as Film, Sound Engineering, Animation, Rock and Traditional Music have acquired a degree of ‘trendiness’. These changes are indicative of the move from the technical to the knowledge economy and the growing status of these professions as well as the general national and European policy emphasis on employment and the VEC’s adaptability and readiness to provide training for these new areas. VECs were also quick to recognize the economic and cultural importance of these disciplines and responded more readily than higher education institutions. This also reflects the blurring of the distinction between academic and technical knowledge and the shifting status of FE.

The history and culture of VECs is important also in looking at mature students in FE. The openness and flexibility that characterises VECs has been a significant factor in making returning to education attractive, especially for those whose previous experience had not been positive. This is something I will be returning to as well as the danger that the ethos of the VEC is being overshadowed by narrow neo-liberal instrumentalism. I will be considering the role of FE in addressing disadvantage and examining how disadvantage is conceptualized and the multiplicity of factors that impact on it.

Access Courses

In the UK Access courses, developed in the 1970s, were established ‘to prepare mature students for entry into HE and provide the underpinning knowledge and skills needed to progress to a degree or diploma course at a university or college’ (UCAS, 2004). Since then they have been key to widening adult participation in higher education. Before this, some institutions offered courses to prepare adults for entry to higher education. Otherwise they had to take ‘A’ levels or come to an informal arrangement with individual colleges or admissions officers. These arrangements were unsatisfactory, ineffective, unfair and lacking consistency. ‘A’ levels were considered by many to be unsuitable preparation for adult students because ‘too little attention is paid to study skills or the more general problems of people returning to formal learning after what might have been a long absence’ (West, 1996, p.3). As with the development of further education in Ireland, the development of Access courses in the

UK was often in response to the needs of individual colleges and the zeal of individuals within them. The convergence of other issues gave further impetus to their development. Inner city problems and race issues resulted in attempts to recruit more minorities into higher education and professions like teaching and social work. Increasing unemployment highlighted the need to improve the skills of the workforce and to widen access to higher education for those previously excluded.

As Warmington (2002, p.588) points out; 'Access programmes located themselves in opposition to the (gold) standard belief that those who would benefit from higher study could be identified and selected by the age of eighteen'. In the 1990s, the rationale for widening adult participation in FE and HE was firmly embedded in the discourse of the need for flexibility, re-training for the new technologies and new working practices. Warmington goes on to suggest that as work patterns have become characterised by impermanence, retraining is increasingly common. He cites Ainley (1993, p.87) who maintains that retraining consists not only of specialised occupational information but with 'generalised knowledge that allows individuals to be flexible and easily adapt to changing labour contexts. Similarly, in Ireland the Enterprise Strategy Group (Forfás, 2004. p.28) stated:

All occupations are becoming more knowledge-intensive, with a corresponding rise in the requirement for qualifications and technical skills. Employees will be required to acquire a range of generic and transferable skills and attitudes. In most cases, work is becoming less routine, with a requirement for flexibility, continuous learning, and individual initiative and judgment.

Access courses in the UK began as a pilot project scheme in seven local education authorities to prepare students who had 'special needs which cannot be met by existing educational arrangements' and who possessed 'valuable experience but lack the qualifications required' (DES, [UK] 1978). However, with the expansion of higher education they became a significant part of government strategy. By 1994 there were 900 formally validated Access programmes in England and Wales and such programmes were a 'major pathway to higher education for adult learners' (West, 1996, p.4). A caveat in the Deering Report (1997) has relevance for the Irish experience: 'There is a basic tension or contradiction in the whole Access enterprise. What is offered is a non-traditional pathway to a traditional provision; and a student-centered preparation for a subject-centered enterprise' (The Deering Report, (1997) V,

5:3). This is something identified by mature students in FE themselves and it has also been noted in relation to FE students who progress to HE in Ireland. FE students are perceived to get more 'hand-holding' and to be less equipped for third level study than students who completed dedicated access courses. This was also identified by Murphy and Fleming (2000) who point out that the learner-centered and experiential approaches of access courses are at odds with that put forward in university.

Although FE in Ireland does offer a small number of dedicated access courses with links to universities and some Institutes of Technology (ITs), access courses are not a common feature of provision in Ireland as they are in the UK. It is important to point out that many mature students in FE who progress within FE or to HE did not come to FE with the intention of progressing and would not have enrolled on a course offering access to HE. In most cases the idea of such progression, or participation at any higher level would not have occurred to them at the time (Fleming and Murphy, 1997, p.65).

VTOS and BTEA

The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) is an educational opportunities scheme for unemployed persons which is funded by the Department of Education and Science under the National Development Plan 2007-2013 with assistance from the European Social Fund. The Scheme is operated through the Vocational Education Committees and provides a special range of courses in over 100 locations throughout the country designed to meet the education and training needs of unemployed people and is aimed in particular at unemployed people who are early school leavers (citizensinformation.ie).

Participants keep their benefits and secondary benefits, course fees are paid and books and materials are provided. Depending on individual circumstances participants are also eligible for other allowances, such as meal allowances, travel allowance and childcare and a training bonus.

To qualify, participants must be at least 21 years of age and be in receipt of an unemployment payment for at least six months. The aims of the scheme are to give unemployed people education and training opportunities which will develop their

employability, and to prepare people to go into paid employment or on to further opportunities leading to paid employment.

Participation in VTOS is in two modes – as a ‘core’ group of VTOS students participating in a group of up to twenty in a VTOS centre or adult education centre, or as ‘dispersed’ VTOS students participating in a group of students some of whom may be VTOS students and some of whom will be studying through other schemes/programmes or as part of the general student body. These ‘dispersed’ VTOS students generally attend Further Education Colleges. There are approximately 1,300 VTOS places in the City of Dublin VEC, the largest FE provider in the country, which are allocated among its colleges. The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is a similar scheme although operated somewhat differently. These supports are of crucial importance in allowing adults to return to education. In their document ‘Government for National Recovery, 2011-2016, (2011, p.43) the Labour Party and Fine Gael promised that ‘Vocational training for jobseekers will be a high priority. We will expand training options for jobseekers across the VEC, further and higher education sectors to facilitate upskilling of the labour force.’ What this means in practice remains to be seen, perhaps extending the VTOS and BTEA programmes. It is worth pointing out that although there has been much welcome discussions about widening participation in HE, especially increasing the number of mature students, there has been no such discussion, apart from the election promise above, about widening participation in FE and its role in providing alternative routes to HE.

Mature students

In recent years there have been attempts to widening participation among sections of the population who were traditionally under-represented in HE. Widening participation is seen as central in promoting economic competitiveness and becoming a ‘knowledge economy.’ HE has seen a huge increase in numbers progressing to third level in Ireland. In 1980, twenty percent of school leavers progressed to third level this had increased to fifty five percent currently (McCoy and Byrne, 2011, p.145). This expansion was, however, mainly in the 18-21 age group and disproportionately from managerial and professional classes (OECD, 2006). Participation levels of mature students is low by European standards, although this has increased significantly in

recent years, particularly in FE. There has also been a significant increase in the number of non-Irish students in HE and FE.

Various pieces of national legislation aimed at increasing participation were enacted since the mid 1990s. The 1997 Universities Act allowed for more places on HE courses and imposed a duty on universities to prepare and implement statements of their policies in respect of access to university education for all. The Equal Status Act (2000), the Disability Act (2005), and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) have created a framework for equal access and encouraged participation by under-represented groups. Financial and other support has been provided to support widening participation in higher education through the National Development Plans 2000-2006 and 2007-2013 and the HEA which have allocated considerable funds. The establishment of the National Access Office helped raise public awareness of access issues and establish targets and review progress. Initially the focus was on mature students, students from low socio-economic groups and on students with a disability (Conway, 2009).

Access officers in HE institutions have greatly supported entry by non-traditional students. The Disability Support Service in partnership with the National Learning Network provides disability support for limited number of colleges of Further Education in the City of Dublin VEC. This is funded by the European Social Fund and has been successful in helping people with a disability access courses in further education and supporting them while there. However, in further education, this support is available only to students with a disability and other disadvantaged groups are not offered similar help. This may be because the VEC sector, the main providers of FE, has traditionally welcomed students from disadvantaged backgrounds and other non-traditional students. The VECs still accommodate such students and many FE colleges and secondary schools are located in areas that are considered disadvantaged. However, the competition for some courses in FE is intense and the access issues can be very similar to those in HE.

The term 'mature student' is often used to differentiate older students from the 'traditional' students of 18 or so who have just left secondary education having done the Leaving Certificate exam. In FE mature students are those who are 21 years of age

or older. In HE in Ireland a mature student is 23 or older, in the UK a mature student is 21. The term adult learner is seldom used as almost all students in FE are over 18 and officially adults. The term 'non-traditional' student embraces many other sub-groups. The report 'Access and Retention: the experience of non-traditional learners in Higher Education' 2008-2010 (RANLHE) defines 'non-traditional' as students who are under-represented in HE and whose participation is constrained by structural factors: including students from low income families, first generation entrants, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, students with disabilities and mature students. All levels of education in Ireland have seen a dramatic increase in such non-traditional students in recent years with inevitable transformations and demands on resources and structures. The concept of the 'traditional student' is thus increasingly of limited use in FE and implies a homogeneity that does not take account of the complexity of individual histories and dispositions and, even as a cultural stereotype, has undergone rapid changes although the images of students as young, hard drinking, sex-obsessed party animals is perpetuated in many of the student notices on college walls.

There are, of course, shared commonalities of age and experience which clearly characterise student and other groups. However, a twenty-one year old single mature student will probably see themselves (and be seen) as very similar to an eighteen year old. Young mature students share most of the characteristics of students a few years younger. For this reason I will be concentrating, in this study, on the experience of students who have come back to full time education in the FE sector after an absence of several years.

Many twenty-one year old students in FE delayed continuing education or did not have the necessary qualifications to progress to HE. FE can provide an alternative route to HE or progression to vocational qualifications. Waller (2006) reports that in the UK 'non-disadvantaged' groups are using Access courses to enter HE. This he sees as supporting the contention (Ball, 2003) that the middle class eventually dominate any form of public service. In Bourdieu's terms, they have the necessary social capital to ensure this. The Points Commission, (DES, 1999, p.107) expressed concern about the potential of mature entry being seen as a fallback for already advantaged groups.

Government commitments to policies of lifelong learning and the demand for education to be of service to the economy and society has prompted great changes and increased the number of mature students in education. Many such students are coping with other obligations and demands and this forces a consideration of how the needs of such students can be accommodated and their contribution valued if learning in FE is to work for them. A small proportion of older mature students in FE have the resources, time and support, perhaps having retired from full-time work, and are pursuing their interests as a leisure activity.

In both FE and HE, modularisation, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework, the adoption of European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and new opportunities provided by technology for distance learning, offered the promise of greater flexibility in delivery, transfer and progression. There were also major implications for access, the establishment of structures more suitable for adult and part-time students and the recognition of informal learning and experience. In FE the promise offered by these innovations is yet to be explored.

FE now

Although the initial rationale of post-leaving certificate courses was to 'bridge the gap from school to work' the sector has changed significantly. The Term 'Further Education' has been adopted as recommended by the McIver report (2003) to reflect the changing nature of the courses and the profile of the student body. In summary:

- There are over 30,000 students in the FE sector. This year has seen huge growth in the demand for places. The DES has capped the number of FE students at 30,000.
- More than 50% of entrants to FE are mature students (over 21)
- Younger students tend to be concentrated in the middle range in terms of educational achievement. Older students more likely to have left school with no qualifications.

- FE an important route back to into education for those who did not complete second level.
- Seventy percent of the students in FE are female.
- FE is now an important alternative route to Higher Education and professional qualifications.
- There is no central application system – admissions policies vary considerably. The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (or equivalent) is acceptable for FETAC courses.
- Older and female FE students tend to come from less advantaged backgrounds than younger and male FE students.
- All FE students are less likely than average to come from professional backgrounds, especially younger females FE students.
- The changed profile of FE students has not been acknowledged officially and little effort has been made to consider the implications.

In my experience, within FE there are several, often conflicting and unstated, views that underpin practice in FE that reflect different positions on its ideology and role and form an important part of the background to the study of mature students.

- *To what extent should FE offer second chance education?*

This is reflected in individual approaches to student intake, especially in courses for which there is great demand. Certain courses are more welcoming of mature students. It is also reflected in the desire for ‘success’ as measured by course completion with a full award as opposed to anything else - ‘Schools have little incentive to take those who will lower its performance profile’ (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh 2004, p.147). There is considerable variation in admission requirements and practices among FE colleges.

- *Vocational ethos v educational ethos*

At present the focus in FE is on vocational development. This is particularly noticeable in debates in which the demands of the ‘real world’ are often contrasted with attitudes of education, care and personal development. This reflects the lack of a shared view of the purpose of FE.

- *Individual and community*

There is little space in FE to include aspects of a broader social and global dimension. Some attempt is made to do this by individuals. This is also reflected in debates about attendance policy. Some see attendance and the meeting of outcomes to be entirely the responsibility of the individual student. Others see the process and communal aspect of learning to be of importance.

- *Acceptance of outcome-based education.*

There is little debate about learning needs or methods and their implications. This reflects the focus on the unproblematic transfer of skills, knowledge and attitudes in FE.

- *Institutional status*

Its second level status continues to be an issue as it greatly limits the kind of provision that can be offered. The lack of flexibility imposed on the sector means that arrangements are often made ‘under the radar’ without official approval. Under current DES guidelines the FE sector is not permitted to develop non-FETAC courses. In fact, thousands of students in FE gain level 6 awards from (and pay fees to) UK certifying bodies, mostly BTEC (EDEXCEL). The lack of a stated role for FE, the ad hoc nature of its development and the tolerance of provision that run counter to DES guidelines indicates ambivalence at the official level that merits investigation.

Conclusion

I have been working in the CDVEC for thirty years and I have been part of the evolution of the FE sector. As a practitioner I am well placed to observe how policy and practice interact and to see the real problems and the benefits of FE. The circumstances of its growth have meant that most attention was given to practical and immediate issues with little time for the development of a vision or philosophical base for FE. The increase in the number of mature students in education generally, and especially in FE, demands a reassessment of FE’s role and function and the values that underpin it.

The strengths of the VEC system include its flexibility, its history and ethos. It has long experience of inclusive education and working with students from all backgrounds and circumstances including adult and compensatory education. The CDVEC, quite justifiably in my opinion, prides itself on its culture of care for its students and providing a safe, inclusive and supportive learning environment. This culture of care has prevailed even in the current climate. Adults are now a major part of the CDVEC's mainstream provision, and curriculum, pedagogy and practices in FE need to be reassessed and the value of public, accountable education reaffirmed. Individual colleges and the CDVEC management machinery deal, for the most part, with the immediate with little time set aside for reflection or planning. Providing time and structures for such a reassessment is a challenge I feel we must take on. Apple, (2005, p.228) speaking about public schools in the US says; 'How do we uphold the vision of a truly public institution at the same time as we rigorously criticize its functioning?

The next chapter considers the ideological context in which FE operates and the values it has adopted. It also looks at some critical theorists who offer a way of understanding this context and offer alternative perspectives.

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This chapter sets out the conceptual framework for the work and looks at some of the significant ideas which I suggest have relevance for looking at mature students in Further Education. The concept of neo-liberalism is important as I suggest that FE in Ireland, in the absence of an underpinning philosophy of its own, has adopted this logic by default. This is the context in which I locate my study. Some critical theorists help illuminate this and offer alternative visions of FE. Ways of seeing mature students are broadened by using the lens of concepts such as habitus, class and disadvantage. Concepts are seldom uncontested and looking at their different interpretations has contributed to my understanding of the complexity of the issues and ways of addressing them.

Neo-Liberalism

There are diverse manifestations of neo-liberalism, many of the political directions and policy decisions in Ireland and elsewhere in recent times are easily recognizable as fitting into neo-liberal orthodoxies which celebrate individual responsibility and a radical reconfiguration of the role of the state. As well as being an economic model that became prominent in the 1980s (although its roots go back much further) it also describes an ideology, a set of ideas that inform a particular world view and how society should operate. The ‘governmentality’ based on this ideology is founded on a kind of economic thinking which favours the self-regulating free market over state intervention and is rooted in entrepreneurial values such as competitiveness, individual ‘empowerment’ and self-interest. Other characteristics include deregulation of the economy, privatization of state owned enterprises and liberalization of trade and industry regulation nationally and globally and the restructuring and downsizing of the public sector. Prominent also are tax cuts, reductions in welfare and social services, anti-trade unionism and the promotion of labour ‘flexibility.’

Neo-liberalism is entwined with concepts such as globalization and the digital revolution which facilitated it. Increasingly mobile capital and the growth in global economic competition led to greater volatility in labour markets and the need for constant readjustment of structures and work patterns. Knowledge, skills and flexibility were seen as essential and education systems were harnessed to produce them. The development of a global market aided by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and its design of free trade agreements also assisted the spread of the ideology of neo-liberalism and the commercialized culture that helped create and sustain it. In keeping with Marxist doctrine, the ideology of the dominant class became the dominant ideology. Large transnational corporations, financial elites and politicians were supported by public relations specialists offering convincing arguments for the benefits of their economic policies and, almost unnoticed, such thinking was adopted as normal, natural and inevitable. Finnegan (2008, p.58) describes neo-liberalism as a form of 'cultural hegemony' used 'to secure consent for the increasingly uneven distribution of power and wealth across the globe.' The weakening of public service media contributed to the decline of the public sphere and its invasion by the system thinking that characterise neo-liberalism. Government objectives were framed by the thinking and discourse of commerce and the more traditional pursuit of the public good and social justice were overshadowed by the imperative of meeting the demands of the market. The citizen was redefined as a client or customer and the state's relationship to concepts such as health and education were re-defined as marketable products. The individual became responsible for his/her own health and poverty is not something to do with social structures, but with the individual who has not acquired the training or learning to make him/herself employable. As Jarvis (2007, p.67) points out that the development of a market in education, and the personal responsibility to avail of this market, disadvantages those who are already disadvantaged.

As we have seen in this country, the power of global corporations and financial institutions have eroded the sovereignty of the state and the possibilities for political action; we *had* to support Anglo Irish and put billions into it and the other banks. The language and discourse of the market entered everyday parlance and now pervades many spheres, including education, and reflects the assimilation of a way of seeing these areas and their role in society.

Even though the present global financial turmoil confirms the inbuilt crisis of this model, the current public discourse in this country is seeking a solution within the established parameters. There are some indications that in other countries more radical solutions are percolating up from a local more popular discourse.

The European context.

Declining employment figures in the 1990s made education a matter of European concern. EU policy documents from the 1990s saw education and training as a key element of employment policy to enable its citizens to adapt to ever-changing technological developments and labour markets. Lifelong learning was seen largely in terms of keeping workers up-skilled and 'flexible' in the new globalised 'knowledge economy'. This is an important discursive shift in education discussion. The term 'lifelong learning' as opposed to 'lifelong education' put the emphasis on the individual who was seen as taking charge of his/her own learning, whereas 'education' placed the emphasis on the structures and the onus on the state to put structures in place as well as ignoring other economic and political factors (Coffield, 1999; Walters et al., 2004, Jarvis, 2009). An EU White Paper (CEC, 1995) on the Learning Society, proposed a number of short-term objectives including the necessity to encourage the acquisition of new knowledge and to bring the school and the business sector closer together. Although its meaning is contested, 'the Learning Society' has been accepted by most western governments as a major part of their education and economic policies. The reasons for this and the dangers for the individual and society have been outlined by Coffield (1999) who maintains that it is based on the acceptance of the unproblematic connection between a country's competitiveness and the up-skilling of its workforce, and that there is no alternative (Bourdieu, 1998, p.30).

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF), established under The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, (1999) was part of major European agreements, outlined in the Bruges-Copenhagen Process (2002) to promote the European dimension in vocational education and training and the development of quality assurance mechanisms. The process aims to establish a European Education and Training Area to include a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning to promote recognition of qualifications, mobility for working and learning, quality

and transparency. Importantly for mature students the European Framework of Qualifications and the Irish NFQ seek to promote the concept of lifelong learning and offer recognition of older awards and knowledge and skills gained through experience or informally. This is of great importance as it offers non-traditional students a foothold in the formal system. Connolly (2007, p.116) points out that ‘while policy development in lifelong learning has been driven by the emergence of the knowledge economy, the policy proliferation has created a fertile ground on which adult and community education can grow and flourish’. She goes on to caution for the need to be vigilant that adult education is not hijacked by another agenda which does not serve the public good.

A number of initiatives from the mid-1990s were designed to strengthen the links between the education and training systems and the enterprise and industry sectors. The cumulative effect of which was ‘to highlight the awareness of the critical link between education and economic and social well-being’ (Heraty et al., 2000). The two ideas of employability and citizenship underpin much EU policy on education and lifelong learning. Jarvis (2009) points out that the expansion of the European Community to incorporate many less economically advanced and culturally different countries made citizenship and social inclusion important priorities in EU education policy. Hogan (2010, p.23) suggests that there are good economic reasons for this as the consequences of social exclusion are disproportionately costly compared with the efforts that try to minimize it, and economic activity requires political stability. Deakin-Crick and Joldersma (2007) contend that social integration is distorted when reduced to its political or economic dimensions and education is a key vehicle in the process of social integration. The Lisbon Agenda (2000) set the goal ‘to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy...with more and greater jobs and greater social cohesion’. It underlined the central role of education and training in boosting EU competitiveness. The Irish Government also identified cohesion as one of six priority areas in the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000). Education and training are seen to have a key role in promoting economic and personal development, social inclusion through the economic process of employment, and thereby inclusion in society and participation as an active citizen and ‘the skills required for success in the market economy as the same skills necessary for active citizenship (Walters et al., 2004, p. 147). The concept of citizenship in the context of

an enlarged European Union and an increasingly globalised world is problematic. In Ireland, National Development Plans from the 1980s on, supported by international bodies, identify education and training as key to the development of the economy. In a context of globalization, many other countries around the world adopted similar policies and philosophies. Tony Blair (1998) said ‘Education is the best economic plan we have’. More recently, the Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard promised to “make education central to my economic agenda” (*The Age*, Melbourne, 15th July 2010). Hogan (2010, p.23) sees this recent appropriation of education to economic and political ends as having the character of a revolution as it occurred so rapidly (over the last thirty years) creating a ‘new international uniformity’.

Neo-liberalism and Further Education in Ireland

The emergence of the Further Education sector in Ireland occurred largely in response to the unemployment situation in the 1980s and its growth has paralleled the transformation of Irish society by globalisation and neoliberal orthodoxies. FE claimed from its outset that it was responsive to the needs of the market, that it could identify gaps in training or provision and move quickly to develop programmes that would provide people with necessary skills. This early identification with market needs and demands was to characterise FE and be offered as one of its major justifications along with its flexibility and the practical, work-related nature of its courses. With the decline in traditional industries and the move of manufacturing to cheaper developing countries, Ireland, along with other western countries, focused on new and emerging industries such as childcare, hospitality, the ‘culture industries’ and occupations based on information and communication technologies. FE was at the forefront of many such developments.

I consider this context to be important in looking at FE in Ireland as I believe that the practices and ideologies currently dominant in FE have been heavily influence by the neo-liberal agenda with consequences for the way education is understood and for conceptualising non-traditional students.

The language and concepts of business now permeate FE – we frequently refer to students as stakeholders. Colleges compete with each other for students and VECs

now engage in expensive marketing campaigns. There are places for employers on college boards. People are recruited from industry to teach and staff are allocated to work with industry and employers. The practices and ideologies currently dominant in FE emerged by default and have resulted in the uncritical transfer of knowledge, practices, cultures and mindsets of industry with no interrogation of practices or exploration of alternatives. Certain ways of seeing have now become accepted as common sense and embedded in the discourse. The lifeworld has been colonised by the demands of the economy, the system world and the state. The system promotes an individual responsibility and autonomy in education

Finnegan (2008) and others have pointed out that as the market has become the dominant paradigm of the age, and activities like education, that were once seen as distinct from the market, are now 'commodified' and incorporated into binding multilateral agreements. In 2000 UNESCO estimated that education was a \$2 trillion 'industry' (Lynch, 2006a). The Government for National Recovery Document 2011-2016 promised to implement a strategy for the development of the 'Education Ireland brand.' There is also the demand for transparency and accountability in the expenditure of public money and a demand for 'value' measured in quantifiable outcomes and 'clearly defined societal benefits' (van Vught, 1994, p.6). FE in this country has recently been directed to become involved in Quality Assurance provision ('performativity' as measure of output). Since 2005 centres offering FETAC courses must have an approved Quality Document. Deakin-Crick and Joldersma (2007, p.83) point out 'This accountability move has profoundly reshaped the curriculum, the character of teaching and the nature of learning by markedly narrowing what constitutes knowledge, teaching and learning.' Much of the demand for Quality Assurance has come from the emergence of the international trade in education, (facilitated by WTO, GATS and the EU) engaged in by publicly funded as well as commercial organisations. The social benefits became identified exclusively with economic development and the provision of courses and graduates that can best contribute to it. The emphasis on narrowly defined 'quality' is a feature of new-managerialism and is increasingly evident in FE as well as in other areas of education (Lynch, 2006b).

Outcome-based systems

The demand for quantifiable measures of education had led to the reliance on outcome-based models of assessment, which has implications for the kind of education provided in FE. It has been suggested (Burke, 2007, p.3) that this has led to an ‘...almost unstoppable trend towards thinking largely in quantitative terms about teaching/learning ...and the utilization of business language and concepts in education debates and policy documents’.

Competency-based systems and learning outcomes are a feature of vocational education in many parts of the world. Although understood somewhat differently in different countries, attempts have been made, and continue to be made, to further common understandings across Europe and elsewhere (CEDEFOP, 2008). A common feature has been the shift from a content-led curriculum to a learning outcomes approach which is often associated with a modular systems and attempts at European and national levels to develop systems of credit accumulation, transfer and international recognition (CEDEFOP, 2008). The European Qualifications Framework is such a system. This in turn is connected with student migration and the development of an international market in education. Encouraged by supranational organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD, many developing countries have embraced competency based systems (Anderson et al., 2004). Many developing countries are keen to establish similar international networks of qualification frameworks (Zambia and other southern African countries) which can be seen as an aspect of globalization and the development of education as a marketable commodity.

Outcomes-based systems were first introduced to enhance the employability of young people and improve the labour market relevance of vocational qualifications. Employers have a substantial input into the identification of skills required. This saw the student as someone functioning in the workplace that will need to be flexible and to have transferable skills of use to the market. The outcomes are based on standards that can be validated with transparent procedures to ensure quality at national and international level.

It has been suggested (Wheelahan, 2009, p.203) that this privileges employer perspectives and as such acts as a mechanism for social power and, by denying

students the underpinning theoretical knowledge, results in ‘unitary and unproblematic conceptions of work’. Knowledge is limited to its application in a work context, but students ‘are not provided with the means to relate it to its general and principled structure and system of meaning.’ O’Brien and Brancaleone (2011, p.2) question the validity of the learning outcome paradigm and highlight what they call ‘the central paradox of learning outcomes, that is to say, significant epistemological and pedagogical insights that remain hidden and inarticulate in the learning outcomes paradigm.’

Learning outcomes do not constitute a curriculum and teachers are free to develop their own teaching strategies that are appropriate to their situation to enable the outcomes to be met. ‘The emphasis is on defining learning outcomes to shape the learner’s experience, rather than give primacy to the content of the subjects that make up the curriculum’(CEDEFOP, 2008, p.9). Learning outcomes are separated from the process of learning and the duration and location of the course are not important as the focus is on what the learner can do not on how or where she/he learned to do it.

One of the putative advantages of outcome-based systems is that they are reported to recognize non-formal and informal learning. In this country there are, increasingly, requests from students in FE for Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and some colleges have a designated APL post. In some cases parts of an award, or indeed a complete award, may be claimed on this basis. However, there are considerable problems in implementing APL procedures¹ and the potential of the system has yet to be fully explored.

Although FE colleges have considerable control over how they organize their courses and their internal procedures, there are inevitable consequences of outcome-based systems in practice. As courses are modular and outcome-based, there is a great degree of flexibility in the duration of courses and the rate at which individuals can show themselves to have met the outcomes. Traditional timetabling and the standard of the academic year may no longer be seen as appropriate. Attendance may not be considered necessary, especially if part of the course may not be relevant or the

¹ These difficulties are often to do with not having staff available to do this. FE operates within the second level system and has very limited flexibility in allocating teachers to non-teaching roles.

outcomes may already have been met. This has implications for the kind of teaching and learning that happens and it promotes more of an emphasis on individual achievement and less on the communal aspects of participation and the kinds of learning this promotes. Outcomes based learning is appropriate in many aspects of vocational education, but an exclusive reliance on it in FE is limiting.

Promoting a broader range of access routes to HE has been a policy objective for some time (National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA) 2008-2013). However, the requirement of many HEIs for FETAC applicants to have achieved all the components of a level 5 award in the same year appears to be negating the advantages of a modular system and denying flexibility to non-traditional candidates.

Real vocational preparation is, of course, important, and measuring knowledge and skills for accountability and other purposes is legitimate. However, my concern would be that the exclusive reliance on such approaches, and the thinking behind them, reflects an extremely limited conception of education that has evolved by default, and reflects the hegemony described by many critical theorists (Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Apple, 2006). It underlines the need for a consideration of the nature and purpose of further or vocational training and education, the requirements of the individual and the nature and demands of society.

Habermas (1969, p.3) suggests that the university, along with its role in transmitting and developing the technical knowledge and cultural tradition of a society, also forms the political consciousness of its students. This can be done without deliberate intent as systems of knowledge and education are not neutral. Systems that are not reflexive, and aim to pass on established knowledge and practices uncritically, reproduce existing systems and ways of knowing. This is not in the best interests of the student or society. Burke (2007, p.4) cites Freire: 'all educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator's part' and asks what is the philosophy underlying the competencies-based standards approach to education? Such systems are based in behaviourist psychology (Fleming, 2009) and are attractive in that outcomes can be identified and measured and are effective in teaching in many of the skills-based areas taught in FE. However, an exclusive reliance on them is limiting as it can separate

performance from understanding and seeing the wider context in which the competency is applied.

The FETAC system is based on such measurable outcomes and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) is part of an attempt to standardise awards, facilitate the recognition of other national qualifications and facilitate international transfer in keeping with the Bologna and subsequent EU agreements. Training for FETAC awards is now offered by an increasing number of private providers whose fundamental agenda is commercial rather than educational. VECs now tender to provide educational services to employers and in many ways have adopted the ethos and priorities of their commercial competitors. This has implications for the kind of education provided in FE. It has been suggested (Burke 2007, p. 3) that this has led to an ‘...almost unstoppable trend towards thinking largely in quantitative terms about teaching/learning ...and the utilization of business language and concepts in education debates and policy documents’. We frequently refer to ‘stakeholders’ and see students as clients who are surveyed to establish their satisfaction with the product, which the provider can then improve, to better meet the demand. Colleges, even within the CDVEC, are competitive and spend large amounts of time and money on marketing. Pressure to ‘keep the numbers up’ is felt by everyone in the system. (The rationale that was offered for this in the past was that increasing numbers meant that the college could maintain or increase its number of teachers. Changing economic and employment conditions, such as the huge reduction in the number of part-time teachers, have made this reasoning much less relevant). It is generally accepted that student numbers are a measure of the success of the institution. Assignments for the EDEXCEL awarding body, (wholly owned by Pearson PLC, the international media and education company) widely used in FE in Ireland, include a ‘scenario’ to simulate the workplace and make the material relevant. Employers have reserved places on the college’s board of management and are frequently consulted on course development. People are recruited from industry to teach and their practical experience of a vocational area is greatly valued by the institution and students, often much more than the contribution of the traditional teacher.

Although this approach can offer many benefits to vocational training, the economy and society more generally, the uncritical transfer of knowledge and industrial and commercial attitudes allows for no interrogation of practices or exploration of alternatives. Most colleges have a post dedicated to working with 'industry' and college walls now carry commercial advertising. The General Secretary of the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) said in 2006: 'The world of FE should be in the business of servicing the world of work'. Finnegan (2008) sees the politics of neo-liberalism as a powerful and complex form of cultural hegemony and cites Bourdieu, Giroux and Harvey who see it as a world view that promotes a certain conception of human beings as self-interested, calculating and individualistic. The incorporation of the language and concepts of the market into education and civil society is testimony to this hegemony 'when the commercialisation of life is normalised in educational bodies, its values are encoded in the educational system, generally without reflection' (Lynch, 2006a).

In my own daily practice in FE I can identify the relevance of these observations. We frequently hear that we have to live in the real world and prepare our students for it. As Finnegan points out, the argument that 'there is no alternative' serves to 'stifle dissent and narrows the social imagination' (Finnegan, 2008, p.59). Many of the practices that have evolved in FE reinforce a particular view of education as a commodity and the student as an individual consumer. There is no concept of a communal aspect to education where ideas are formed and exchanged through discussion or 'problem posing' but rather a promotion of individualism and a narrow focus on discrete measurable outcomes in separate modules. FE has adopted the neoliberal logic of education as a matter of consumer choice and as a private commodity quantified in internationally recognised units to be traded in the market place for individual and organisational profit. The emphasis on individual autonomy in adult education has been identified by Inglis (1997) and Grummell (2007) as being inherent in a neoliberal logic which makes the individual responsible for their own learning and readiness for employment. It lacks a social and critical dimension. Students are empowered to work in the system not 'emancipated' from it (Inglis, 1997).

In the context of globalisation and neo-liberalism, FE, in its content, practices and ethos, seems to have become primarily a resource for economic policy and the development of mind-sets that unquestioningly accept dominant orthodoxies. 'Colleges of higher and further education become producers of commercially-oriented professionals and skilled workers rather than public interest professionals' (Hanlon, 2000, cited in Lynch 2006a). Reid (2005) stresses the importance of public education systems in the context of challenges to democracy posed by economic globalisation. As Colleran et al. point out (2006) that education systems that focus on the needs of the knowledge economy do not necessarily serve the public good. Since 1930, VECs in this country have been providing education as a public good with none of the affiliations of other education providers. Hanlon (2005) has commented on how new ideological climates can affect the culture of public service organisations as well as the individuals working within them, how they perceive themselves and their careers and how they can be reshaped politically. This has direct relevance for teachers working in the FE sector at this time as many of the practices he describes are evident in Ireland also: casualisation of employment in colleges and the encouraging of flexibility, competition, the development of markets and quasi-markets, mechanical adherence to often inappropriate guidelines. These new practices, Hanlon argues, create uncertainty in the minds of public service professionals about their role and how they see themselves and how others perceive them. He also identifies a dissonance between different generations of public sector professionals as new regimes are accepted by recent entrants (especially if they wish to be promoted) and soon seen as normal as 'natural wastage wipes out the dinosaurs and new professional identities take hold' (Hanlon 2005). In my own college such divisions are noticeable, especially among those recently recruited, who know no other way of working, or part-time teachers still working in industry. Disparaging comparisons are often voiced about the public service and the 'real world', which contribute to the erosion of the educational ethos and practices of the CDVEC. The demands of a system that prepares students for employment and more recent policies and work practices have contributed to a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1970b) and contributed to a lack of questioning in vocational preparation in FE.

The discourse of Further Education

The concept of discourse is useful in looking at how neoliberal ideologies have become normalised in the field of FE. Foucault (1980) maintains that discourse establishes the basis on which we make sense of the world and process our experience. It influences the ways we can think and act and produces our assumptions about the way things are. As Ryan puts it: ‘...discourse language and visual imagery do not simply ‘reflect’ or describe reality, but play an integral role in constructing reality and experience, the ways we know and understand the world, and what we assume to be natural or normal’ (Ryan, 2004, p.23).

Fairclough (1997) supports Habermas in his contention of a progressive colonization of the lifeworld by the economy and the state, entailing a displacement of communicative practices by strategic practices. In making the point that contemporary society has been characterized as ‘promotional’ or ‘consumer’, Fairclough critically examines the discourse of the prospectuses of some English universities which he notes were informed by market research with promotion as their primary function. He comments that the discourse of such organisations can illuminate the decline in their implicit authority and their transformation into the construction of more entrepreneurial institutional identities. Similar shifts are identifiable in the promotional literature of FE colleges in this country with similar implications for power, ideology and hegemony. The language and practices of New Managerialism have become unconsciously assimilated into discussions of education. Jacinta Stewart, CEO of CDVEC recently asked ‘who else has our market penetration?’ (2008). All CDVEC colleges now put considerable resources into their brochure, website, student handbook, ‘brand image’ and slogan ‘...what were formerly seen as rightest policies have now become “commonsense”...’. (Apple, 2005, p.209). Habermas (1973) saw the necessity of unmasking power relations as embedded in linguistic convention in order to challenge them. The discourse of business and economics is now dominant in debates about education and alternative discourses and possibilities are excluded. Pring (1996) argues that the current tendency to use business terminology in education parlance is not innocent, but rather entails a fundamental re-definition of education itself. Outcome-based practices emphasise the ‘product’ of education, whereas, as

Palmer (1998) points out 'good education focuses on the process rather than the product. He also notes that the process may be uncomfortable with results not seen immediately. This imposes great constraints on education in a system dominated by commercial concepts of success and immediate customer satisfaction (Brookfield, 1987, p.234).

There is a lack of debate in FE about the changes in practices, systems and the thinking that underpin them. Connolly (2007, p.119) identifies the dearth of funding for research as being crucial in maintaining this silence.

Critical and transformative theorists

Real vocational preparation is, of course, important, and measuring knowledge and skills for accountability and other purposes is legitimate. However, my concern would be that the exclusive reliance on such approaches, and the thinking behind them, reflect an extremely limited conception of education that has evolved by default, and reflects the hegemony described by many critical theorists. It underlines the need for a consideration of the nature and purpose of further or vocational training and education, the requirements of the individual and the nature and demands of society.

It would seem appropriate that any conception of education in FE should incorporate an examination of the underlying assumptions and the vocational, economic and political framework for which it aspires to prepare its students. Freire's notion of 'conscientisation' is a useful idea in this context, 'in which men (sic) not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality (Freire, 1970a, p.27).

Habermas

Habermas suggests that the lifeworld has been colonised by the economy and the state. The lifeworld is 'a storehouse of unquestioned cultural givens from which those participating in communication draw agreed-upon patterns of interpretation for use in interpretive efforts' (Fleming, 2008a, p.6). Our perceptions and assumptions about the world are unquestioned and limiting. When the lifeworld is taken over (colonised) by the demands of the system world of the state and by the economy, the capacity to

make meaning is distorted and limited. Real need cannot be identified. 'The colonised lifeworld sees those things that are supportive of and consistent with the imperatives of the economy as common sense' (Fleming, 2008a. p.7). Evidence of the colonisation of education by the economic system is seen by Deakin-Crick et al. (2007, p.82) in the current perception of the purpose of education as being the production of individuals 'capable of maintaining their own economic well-being and who will participate in the economy as workers and consumers'. With the decline in critical investigation of assumptions, students view schools less as learning institutions and more for 'credentialising'.

A recurring theme in Habermas' work is the decline of the public sphere where issues are discussed informally. Such discussion is essential for democracy. He sees individualism and the focus on the self as being a consequence of this decline and the decline in the critical investigation of assumptions the resulting 'structurally depoliticised public realm' (Habermas, 1975, p.37) which promotes a privatised attitude to life and minimises challenges to the dominant order. Similarly, the focus on employment in FE and the assessment practices promote a narrow and uncritical individualism that precludes a consideration of alternatives.

Habermas (1975, p.37) identifies 'a learning project at the centre of democratic society that will rescue reason from being taken over by money and power'. For him, the realisation of the conditions for democracy is similar to the conditions necessary for adult learning (Fleming, 2008a p.13). Developing a critical reasoning necessary for democracy is a key task of adult education, as reason has become distorted under capitalism with the decline of civil society and the public sphere and the colonisation of the lifeworld. Habermas believed that adult learning happens primarily through speech. Free open discussion is central to his thinking on how to question everyday practices and assumptions and decolonise the lifeworld. He identified four conditions, or validity claims, for mature, rational authentic discussions: comprehensibility, sincerity, truth and legitimacy. Fleming (2008a, p.11) drawing on Habermas, says 'The role of the educator is one of creating classrooms that encourage the fullest participation in discourse, assisting students to assess critically the validity of their ways of making meaning and seeking perspectives that are more open to change'. For Habermas, this entailed communicative action, which '...involves critical reflection on

assumptions that underpin beliefs, a discourse to justify what we believe'. Such discussion must meet the conditions mentioned above and the ability to participate in it is a learned ability. For Habermas it is *the* learning task for adults. Brookfield (2005, p.251), again drawing on Habermas, says, 'learning systems can ...be created that institutionalise norms of critical scepticism as does ...the concept of critically reflective education for professional practice.' Andreotti (2010) and Hodge (2010) also point out that preparation for the jobs market does not rule out critical or transformative approaches to Vocational Education and Training (VET). Pring (1995, p.14) seems to be making a similar point when considering incorporating vocational values in academic education.

Such an education would develop self-reflection – the capacity to examine one's own motives and ideas, to understand oneself as a person, to examine the values which guide one implicitly and to ponder alternative goals....to develop....a social and political awareness....'.

Andreotti (2010, p.9) suggests that a new epistemology 'to decolonize the imagination and to pluralise the possibilities for the future by pluralising knowledge in the present in order to enable dialogue, relationships of solidarity and ideally, the collective creation of non-hegemonic systems.' She suggests the 'pluralisation of epistemological frameworks' and an emphasis on social and historical relativism as a way of opening more possibilities for the future. Part of the teacher's role, for her, is to see the world from different perspectives and 'to support learners to learn to unlearn' and to think 'otherwise'

Reflexive learning involves examining and challenging everyday practices and discussing their justifications. This kind of practice for Habermas, involves 'the mix of credible practical experience and socio-political awareness' (Brookfield, 2005, p.251). Such conceptions of education avoid 'the dualisms between education and training, between thinking and doing, between theory and practice...'(Pring, 1995, p.183). The separation of academic and vocational education reflected a particular idea of society based on dominant orthodoxies and a narrow conception of education. Dewey (1916) strenuously argued against the separation of theory and practice, thinking and doing. As Pring (1995) points out, the liberal/vocational, education/training dichotomies are false. The dominant idea behind vocational

preparation is the acquisition of instrumental knowledge or ‘competence’, and while competence as a goal might be limiting, it need not be. Further Education can develop a capacity for critical professional practice and transformative learning which combines being skilled in one’s vocational area but also being able and willing ‘to resist politically the dubious functional application or control of knowledge that one practices’ (Habermas, 1969, p.47).

Mezirow

Drawing on Habermas, Mezirow’s ‘Transformation Theory’ (2007) was based on research into ‘What happens when adults return to education?’ This is an explanation of how our frames of reference influence the way we make meaning and how they may be transformed to empower adult learners. ‘A frame of reference is a structure of assumptions or taken for granted beliefs we have about reality’ (Mezirow, (1995, p11). This is how we interpret the world and create experience. ‘Transformative learning experiences are emancipatory in that they free learners from the constraints and distortions of their worn frames of reference’ (Mezirow, 1995, p.11). A more fully developed and dependable frame of reference is one that is more inclusive, differentiating, more open to alternative perspectives and more integrative of experience’ (Mezirow, 1995, p11). Central to Mezirow’s transforming frames of reference is the notions of critical reflection and collaborative discourse, which questions the basis for assumptions. Collaborative discourse requires freedom, trust, participatory democracy, tolerance, solidarity, and respect for other viewpoints. It is the role of the educator to create the conditions which allow this discourse to occur. For Mezirow, ‘the professional goal of the educator is to foster the learner’s skills, habits of mind, disposition and will to become a more active and rational learner. This involves becoming more critically reflective of assumptions supporting one’s own beliefs and those of others...’ (Mezirow, 2003, p.5). Being critically reflective of assumptions is necessary to fully understand communication and where we and others are ‘coming from’, given the complexity of communication and the psychological, socio-linguistic, contextual, emotional and epistemic factors involved and allow transformation in frames of reference. This freeing from conditioned assumptions about the world, others and ourselves Mezirow (1998, p.6) sees as ‘essential in the world of work, in functioning as a citizen in a democracy and in making responsible moral decisions in fast changing societies...’.

I found it helpful to consider the concept of attachment (Bowlby, 1979; Fleming, 2007) in the context of transformative learning. It has been acknowledged (Cranton, 1994; Andreotti, 2010) that questioning assumptions or long-held ideas can result in considerable discomfort. The idea of the ‘strange situation’ appeals to me as it captures the unease I have often noticed in students, especially mature students, when starting out on their college career, engaging with new perspectives or examining certainties. I think it offers a useful conceptual tool for looking at mature students in FE.

Bourdieu

Bourdieu offers concepts such as capital, field and habitus as a way of looking at education and its role in addressing inequality or reinforcing it. The habitus can be understood as ‘...the values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that generally stay with us across contexts...’ (Webb et al., 2002, p.36.). The social and cultural messages that constitute the habitus often unconsciously influence our thoughts and actions. Social groups may have what Bourdieu calls a ‘class habitus’ which may influence educational choices and contribute towards a socio-cultural understanding of under-representation. The concept of institutional habitus is significant for education which was, for Bourdieu, the main institution through which class difference was maintained as the knowledge and experience of the dominant groups are favoured in educational institutions.

Bourdieu (1986) talks about three types of capital: economic capital which refers to economic resources – money etc. which can be converted to other kinds of capital, to buy educational resources for example. Social capital exists as sets of lasting social relationships, networks and contacts. Cultural capital is made up of forms of knowledge, education, skills dispositions and attitudes. Cultural capital allows dominant groups to legitimize the maintenance of status and power.

The field of education has the capacity to confer capital, especially cultural capital, which plays an important role in the reproduction of social structures and relations. In Ireland, historically, students at vocational schools came largely from the lower socioeconomic groups. Only a minority of students who finished primary school

progressed to the secondary system. It was especially difficult to progress without having passed the Primary Certificate exam, introduced in 1929. Many went straight into employment, or became unemployed. Others, mainly children from working class families, went to vocational schools, where having a Primary Certificate was not a requirement. The separation of vocational and general academic education was reinforced and remained until the late 1960s and the establishment of Community and Comprehensive schools.

Ireland was not the only European country in which the education system was structured in such a way as to encourage students from working class backgrounds to study for trades and to value the knowledge associated with academic or liberal education over other kinds of knowledge. The binary system that emerged in Ireland fits with Bourdieu's contention that the education system is more an agent of social reproduction and stratification than of transformation in that it works to 'consecrate' social distinctions by cultivating ways of being that have the effect of reproducing social inequality. The academic (often fee-paying) secondary schools were a means of transferring or acquiring the cultural capital that allowed for the perpetuation of social divisions and dominance and exclusion. The two systems operated side by side at post primary level in almost every town in Ireland. The 'College' for academic education and the Vocational school or 'Tech' for the others – similar to Bourdieu's Grand Ecoles and Petites Ecoles (1996). Considerable snobbery existed (and to a degree still does) which perceived the 'Techs' to be for the students who weren't considered suitable for the higher status academic education.

The structure of social space as observed in advanced societies is the product of two fundamental principles of differentiation – economic capital and cultural capital – the educational institution, which plays a critical role in the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital and thus in the reproduction of the structure of social space, has become a central stake in the struggle for the monopoly on dominant positions.

(Bourdieu, 1996, p.5)

The habitus is key to the reproduction of social relations. It is as much unconscious as it is conscious and is incorporated into a way of being, habits of mind and attitudes. It is the way that values and cultural capital are passed on. This is a useful way of looking at how vocational education passes on the dispositions of a vocational area

(cultural and social capital) as well as the technical skills. It also helps in examining the vocational learning cultures and different kinds of capital associated with various strands in the education system – HE and FE and even with different courses within the one system or college.

Colley et al. (2003) suggest that learning in vocational education is not just a matter of acquiring a determined set of skills and competencies rooted in outcomes referenced models of curriculum, but that there is a hidden curriculum of adjustment and conformity to the dispositions and attitudes of a vocational area. It is a process of identity transformation and the development of a workplace habitus. The acquisition of the emotional capacities and personal qualities for the role are the key aspects of the training. It is ‘a process of becoming’ (Colley, et al., p.471) and of structuring a vocational identity that is of paramount importance is establishing a legitimate position within the field. Habermas (1969, p.2) speaks of acquiring the ‘extrafunctional abilities’ which he describes as ‘those attributes and attitudes relevant to the pursuit of a professional career that are not contained per se in professional knowledge and skills.’ The ‘guiding ideology of practice’ (James, 1989, p.25) underpins a vocational culture and is an important aspect of the field. Colley (2003) maintains that a central aspect of the student’s learning is an orientation to a particular identity, a sense of what makes ‘the right person for the job’. This vocational habitus dictates how one should properly feel, look and act as well as the values, attitudes and beliefs one should espouse. As many of the tutors in FE come from ‘industry’ and are immersed in the vocational culture, there are limited opportunities for interrogating that culture. Part of the education process may be to filter out candidates who are seen as not fitting in or not having the right attitudes (Bates, 1991). For Bourdieu, it is through the habitus that social reproduction takes place. The concept of institutional habitus may be useful in the context of retention in HE institutions, especially with reference to mature students and other non-traditional groups.

In this research I see these concepts as offering a way of seeing participation in education, especially by non-traditional groups. Archer (2003) and Reay et al. (2002) emphasise the difficulty inherent in concepts such as ‘class’ since the meaning of the terms are fluid, changing and limiting. Bourdieu offers other understandings by illuminating the way cultural norms shape the educational expectations and decisions

of social groups and how they contribute to patterns of participation and exclusion. This also contributes to understanding the concept of ‘disadvantage’ (Thomas and Quinn, 2007) and the factors that are seen to constitute it and inform attempts to remedy it. It focuses too on the way different kinds of capital may be necessary to successfully participate in education and how the distribution of this capital serves to exclude some groups. It prompts an investigation of how those disadvantaged by lack of cultural capital can be supported and the role of institutions, policies and individuals in doing so.

Conclusion

The first section of this chapter outlined the neo-liberal context in which FE in Ireland operates. It is suggested that FE has, by default, assimilated neo-liberal attitudes in its policies and practices and now needs to re-evaluate its role. Brookfield (2005, p. viii) defines critical thinking as ‘the process of unearthing, and then researching, the assumptions one is operating under, primarily by taking different perspectives on familiar, taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviours.’ This offers a way of understanding and questioning the current position and considering alternatives that may offer ways of addressing disadvantage and inequality.

The theorists mentioned in this chapter have had much to offer in illuminating my experience in FE and its practices and in contributing insights that may contribute to a way forward. They offer too, a vision of further education which, along with vocational preparation, includes a focus on the personal and the social and a questioning of established practices and systems. Whatever political aspirations motivate it, cultivating an ‘ability of individuals to disengage from the tacit assumptions of discursive practices and power relations in order to exert more conscious control over their everyday lives’ (Kincheloe, 2000, p.24) is a key task of adult education, especially as the discourses of vocationalism and new managerialism have colonized FE. Learning for living and learning to make a living need not be incompatible. We need to consider the balance.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

Introduction

Although Further Education (FE) has been a significant sector of Irish education for many years, very little research has been done on the area. FE in Ireland emerged in an uneven fashion usually through the efforts of individual principals, teachers or institutions and it is only in more recent times that there has been a degree of cohesion in provision and awards.

Irish FE is significantly different to FE provision in other countries and while studies of other systems have much to offer, there are important differences, including differences in structures and training of staff, which somewhat limit their immediate usefulness for exploring the experience of mature students in FE in Ireland. The similarities however, are noticeable and most systems are dealing with the same macro-political and ideological influences as we are. Mature students have similar experiences and cultural and institutional differences help to illuminate the situation in this country. From a methodological point of view, the approaches taken by other studies have proven to be extremely useful and have influenced the decision on a methodology for this study.

Mature students in FE in Ireland have been somewhat neglected in research. There are, however, a number of important studies on mature students in Higher Education (HE) in Ireland (Fleming and Murphy; 1997, Lynch, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999), however, the FE sector is significantly different to HE and these studies pre-date the transformation of Ireland which occurred in the last decade.

I am going to look at the two major studies on FE in Ireland: A Report in 2006, by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) for the DES (Watson et al.) which looked at Post-Leaving Certificate courses and Employment outcomes, and the McIver Report, (2003). Neither study sought to explore student experience or views or to examine the implications of the growth in the numbers of mature students in FE.

There are a small number of unpublished Masters theses that touch on various aspects of FE but none look at the experience of students, especially older students.

I will also be looking at some more recent studies. ‘Hidden Disadvantage’ (McCoy et al., 2010), a study of the low participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group’, and ‘*Where Next? (2010) A Study of Work and Life Experiences of Mature Students (incl. disadvantaged) in Three Higher Education Institutions*, by Fleming et al. for the Combat Poverty Agency, have much to offer to a study of mature students in FE.

The McIver Report

The McIver Report (2003), the one major review of FE in Ireland, was based on institutional analysis and examined 15 colleges among those with 150 or more students.

The review had come about because of the commitment in the White Paper on Adult Education: ‘Learning for Life’ (2000) and the recognition that a FE sector had been operating within the second level system for many years. Increasingly it was pointed out that these structures were unsuitable and the FE system could exist only by creatively stretching the second level regulations. The situation was extremely unsatisfactory. The report was to examine and make recommendations regarding the organisational, support, development, technical and administrative structures and resources required in schools and colleges with large scale PLC provision having regard to good practice in related areas across the system and in other countries.

The McIver report’s detailed recommendations were a blueprint for the establishment of a well resourced, vibrant FE sector, separate from second level with several changes in structures and staffing to reflect the distinction between the needs of staff and learners in FE and second level education. It called for an increase in funding to provide the type of resources required by Further Education and Training (FET) providers. The measures recommended included a revised organisational and administrative structure. It recommended reducing teaching time and creating non-teaching roles for advisors, counselors and programme managers. It addressed the teaching workload, upgrading buildings, facilities and learner support services, and issues relating to teacher qualifications, induction and development. The methodology

encompassed a questionnaire for the 15 colleges, detailed site visits, visits to other similar institutions in Ireland and abroad and a review of the literature.

The McIver report was extremely important in many ways. It was the first study of the area and collected data and detailed the scope of the work done in FE and made a strong case for the establishment of a separate FE sector. The vision was of a modernised sector with improved facilities and childcare whose staff would be trained and properly resourced to respond to adult learning needs. Those working in the area were pleased with the report and encouraged to think that changes would be made as a result. Since 2003, despite continuous calls for its implementation, nothing has been done. Staff hours and staff-student ratios are still high and the structures and funding still does not reflect the complexity of FE or the range of needs it tries to meet.

The report used both qualitative and quantitative methods and was effective in fulfilling its terms of reference. It was limited in that it examined only 15 colleges from those serving 150 or more students and excluded all second level schools with PLC students. Although there was an element of student consultation, it was, of necessity, very limited. It drew together information on a very disparate sector that provided a good base for further study.

The Post-Leaving Certificate sector in Ireland.

One such further study was the 2006 ‘The post-Leaving Certificate sector in Ireland: A multivariate analysis of educational and employment outcomes’, by Watson et al. This is a mainly quantitative study. It recognised the relative neglect of the area in the research literature and sought to address some central and key issues surrounding the role of post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses: to what extent the levels of participation in PLC courses have changed over time, the profile of PLC participants in terms of gender, age, educational attainment and regional location, the impact of PLC participation on progression to further study and how PLC leavers fare when they enter the labour market. The report drew predominantly on a supplemented sample of the PLC sector, weighted to ensure representativeness of gender, programme year and age group.

From the point of view of this study, one of the most striking findings was that since the early 1990s there has been a steady increase in older participants (over 21) who now make up roughly fifty percent of FE students. This dramatic change in the student profile indicates the success of these courses in bringing people back to the educational system and the need to consider the implications of this change something the report does not address. It makes interesting points in terms of the family background of FE students. All students are less likely than average to come from professional backgrounds. Young male and female students are particularly likely to come from intermediate non-manual backgrounds. This is significant as these groups have relatively low rates of entry to higher education. This is the subject of another report, 'Hidden Disadvantage?' (2010), considered below.

In terms of performance at Leaving Certificate, most FE students are in the middle range. However, older students are more likely to have no qualification, which again shows the importance of FE in providing a route back into education for those who did not complete second level. Although a considerable number of students progress to third level education, the report maintains that FE is more likely to be an alternative to HE. It raises the issue of the marked regional differences in participation in courses and in the relative numbers of older and traditional participants, and suggests that this may be accounted for by the different approaches of various VECs. This points to the unstructured and haphazard development of the sector, which is not developed in the report.

Some of the information in the report was hard to follow for the non-technical reader and, perhaps because its brief was limited, it did not thoroughly pursue the implications of its findings. It was a good general picture but did not capture the practice on the ground or deal with any of the problems facing FE. It considered the employment outcomes and progression to HE, but did not consider any of the other personal or social benefits of participation.

From a practitioner's perspective, these two reports, those of McIver and Watson et al. gave an overview of the sector and confirmed many of the ideas about the broad social and academic backgrounds of FE students we had from observing our own situations locally or picked up anecdotally. They also made us aware of the variations in

provision, student profile and progression and suggested areas that need further investigation.

Watson et al. (2006) use the traditional social class and socio-economic approaches to categorise students which fails to explore more complex aspects of difference or significant differences within groups. McCoy et al. (2010) and Thomas and Quinn (2007) point out the limitations of considering disadvantage in such a confined way and emphasise the need to include a consideration of cultural and social capital as well as economic capital. Archer (2003) highlights the difficulties inherent in the traditional conceptualisations of class which rely on economic or employment status and do not take account of how class may interact with other social identities such as race or gender. This is particularly relevant when considering mature students who are especially difficult to fit into established categories.

Although both studies together give a good indication of the complexity of FE provision and the broad patterns of participation, they do not discuss the differences between course type: one or two year, level of the course and the differences in the characteristics and expectations of the students. The student experience is absent from these studies. Watson et al. do not deal with some of the major issues currently facing FE, and which existed at the time the reports were written, such as the reliance on non-national awarding bodies for awards above level 5 and the refusal of the DES to allow HETAC awards in FE. However, they provide a useful platform for further investigation of FE.

Hidden Disadvantage?

The report 'Hidden Disadvantage? A study of the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group', (McCoy et al., 2010) by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) is more nuanced in its perception of social class and the factors contributing to low participation in Higher Education. It raises the inadequacy of a categorical approach, specifically in this case the classification 'non-manual', which it says is not homogenous but made up of two distinct groups – the intermediate and other non-manual with different characteristics. It fundamentally questions the traditional definition of under-represented groups in HE as it points out that participation by

young people from lower white collar backgrounds is no higher than those from lower blue collar backgrounds. It maintains that the merging of these two groups, intermediate and other non-manual, has concealed a dramatic picture of educational disadvantage among young people from other non-manual backgrounds.

The study combines quantitative analysis of trends with qualitative research exploring attitudes, experiences, aspirations and expectations of young people from the non-manual groups. The combination of in-depth open-ended interviews and quantitative data provided a thorough overview as well as uncovering the complexity of non-participation and the opinions and feelings about post-school decisions. Methodologically the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was effective in providing context and revealing the experience and thinking of the participants.

The report has little to say about mature students but has several interesting things to say about FE. It points out that, although participation in FE courses among school leavers declined over the 1997-1998 and 2002-2004 periods, the take-up of such courses among older people meant that numbers in the sector overall increased. It also shows the relatively high level of entry into FE among young people from other non-manual backgrounds and skilled manual backgrounds, the groups whose low levels of entry into HE are the subject of the report. (There is, however, no such information on mature students in FE.) This highlights the role of FE in providing a route back into the education system for those who were disaffected by it at secondary level. FE offers clear progression routes, including access to higher education. FE students from non-manual and manual backgrounds have relatively high levels of participation in the LCA programme which would preclude them from direct entry to HE. The report by Watson et al. acknowledges that a considerable number of FE graduates go on to higher education. FE has been very successful in encouraging second chance and non-traditional students and in redressing previous negative experiences of education, which this report highlights is an important determinant of post-school choices. This, and the use of concepts of social and cultural capital, helps to locate the reasons for non participation in broader societal inequalities and not in individual or family deficits.

The report identifies as important, but does not go into detail about, issues to do with the opportunities to progress from FE to HE. There are significant difficulties about this that are not mentioned including the number of places allocated to applicants with FETAC or other awards, the recognition of non-national awards and the requirement of many HEIs for applicants to have achieved all the components of a FETAC major award in the same year. These issues need further exploration as they impact seriously on progression to HE from alternative routes and facilitating access by non-traditional groups.

Other issues to do with decisions to progress to HE are identified. Many are relevant to mature students in FE. Information, guidance and school expectations and support are considered key, especially for groups with little family involvement in HE. Financial matters play a major role in decision making and availability of grants and information about them is vital. The availability of jobs in recent years was a disincentive for some young people to go to college, while for mature students, becoming unemployed can start a process that results in a decision to return to education.

The report also examines some of the other socio-economic disparities in participation in FE courses. Nationally, females make up more than seventy percent of FE students, which may be explained by males taking up apprenticeships.² The type of school attended is also a key determinant of participation; students who attend a vocational school are over two and a half times more likely to participate in a FE course. This may be partly accounted for by the fact that almost all FE courses are run by VECs and students attending vocational schools would therefore be more familiar with FE, especially when FE shares staff and a building with the second level school. To put it another way, the institutional habitus of FE colleges would be familiar to these students. Other connections could be made here between the status of FE and the historical and current perception of vocational education in the Irish context. (It would be interesting to know if socioeconomic and other disparities exist in course choice within FE.)

² It is likely that this balance has changed. The recession and the decline in the building industry have led to a huge reduction in apprenticeships.

From a theoretical point of view, the cultural and rational action perspectives were helpful in illuminating the complexity of the issue and how cultural norms and beliefs contributed to the shaping of expectations and decision-making. The concepts of habitus and cultural capital are useful in understanding many aspects of educational inequality. Likewise, the idea of ‘distance from social origin’ and the importance of cultural factors offered ways of understanding aspects of education choice. Unlike the other studies, ‘Hidden Disadvantage?’ used the voices of students which brought the quantitative data to life and gave a very rounded picture.

Where Next?

Another report which is relevant to this study is ‘Where Next? A Study of Work and Life Experiences of Mature Students (incl. disadvantaged) in Three Higher Education Institutions’ by Fleming et al. for the Combat Poverty Agency (2010). The report set out to examine how mature students and ‘disadvantaged’ mature students view and value higher education after graduating. While much has been done to improve access to HE for mature students, this report attempts to address a gap in the research and focus on what happens to such students while in HE and particularly after they graduate. It maps their destination after completion of their first degree, explores their transition into the workplace or other arenas and investigates their reflections on their motivations for entering HE, their expectations and experiences. I found this HE study very interesting as it is very relevant to an investigation of the experiences of mature students in FE.

Like ‘Hidden Disadvantage’, ‘Where Next?’ used a mixed methods approach and used questionnaires and in-depth semi-structured interviews to identify and analyse broad trends while attending to the lived experience of the graduates. The literature review which outlined the context for the research emphasised the government commitment to widening participation in education for groups that have been under-represented, including mature students. This is seen as key to overcoming disadvantage and solving a range of social problems. It is also seen as vital for up-skilling the workforce and maintaining economic competitiveness. The low levels of educational attainment of Irish adults are to be addressed by targeting mature students and encouraging their participation in HE. This policy context is important in looking at FE as well as the findings of this report, which point out that despite many initiatives, there are still

considerable inequalities in access to HE and relatively few mature students participating. The report points out that the lack of disaggregated data has limited research, which is the case in FE also. It also maintains that there is little relevant research on mature students and a dearth of qualitative research about their experience.

Interestingly, the concept of 'disadvantaged mature student' was found to be of limited usefulness as the research findings were not significantly different whether one was a mature student or a disadvantaged mature student. The unpacking of the concept of disadvantage was interesting as it provided a socio-cultural as well as an economic understanding. The report looked at the social and personal benefits of participation in HE as well as the economic benefits. This is something which I think should be explored with FE students also as it gets away from seeing education in purely instrumental terms in a system whose *raison d'être* was to prepare students for employment. The report found that, for the students, 'destination' included a broader range of concepts than employment or progression and included self esteem, confidence and identity. This was a 'sensitising concept' I brought into my study.

Overall, this study was extremely useful and interesting as it focused on mature students, and although it dealt with HE, many of the issues are relevant to FE also. It identified the global and national context of education policy as being informed by an instrumentalist and work-oriented imperative which is also important to our understanding of FE also. Extending the concept of destination and finding that the benefits of participation in HE went beyond financial or career rewards confirms my experience of FE students and is something that is explored in the current study.

It suggested different understandings of mature students and prompted questions about the role of FE in addressing disadvantage and encouraging mature students and others considered to be disadvantaged, into education. Although this is something VECs pride themselves on, often justifiably, there is no co-ordinated approach or targets. With the current economic downturn and student demand in FE exceeding supply, it is likely that non-traditional students will be less welcome. Looking at mature students through the lens of equality, addressing generational poverty and exclusion gives a

focus and imperative for FE to re-think its role and implement real policies in this area.

The report mentions the vital role of access offices in HEIs in ensuring the participation and success of mature students. FE does not have access offices and this work is done (when it is done) informally and on an individual basis by teachers or others in the system. FE operates within the second level system and has a limited, number of teachers with posts of responsibility it can appoint to non-teaching roles. The recent cuts and the decision not to replace posts of responsibility when an incumbent retires have greatly impacted on the non-teaching support FE can offer. Applicants are often refused on the basis that ‘we don’t have the supports they need’. It provides much of the services it does through good will, juggling budgets and the very flexible implementation or ignoring of rules. There is a disincentive to accept students who require extra support of any kind. This illustrates the importance of the demand for appropriate structures and supports called for in the McIver report.

Access courses were identified as a very important factor in mature students’ progression to HE and the importance of developing access routes from FE was mentioned. This is clearly an area where providers of FE (especially the CDVEC which is the largest provider) could usefully work with HE especially as unskilled and semi-skilled workers are poorly represented in HE but young people whose parents are in these categories constitute a large proportion of FE students. (There is no such information specifically about mature students in FE). FE is well placed to encourage the most disadvantaged, marginalised or impoverished sections of Irish society who are not represented as mature students in HE.

The issue of financial supports is common to mature students in FE and HE. It was interesting to see how important they are to both sectors. The support of family is also common and the report identified the trickle-down effect in encouraging an acceptance and normalising of learning in the families of the students. These ‘vertical and horizontal’ supports need greater attention in FE.

I believe the report entitled ‘Where next?’ went beyond the McIver report and the report by Watson et al. on the PLC sector by framing its study of mature students in

the context of poverty and equality. Its use of qualitative as well as quantitative data enabled it to give a comprehensive sense of the issues affecting real people as well as providing an overview and a context.

RANLHE

Another work on a similar area to mine is the literature review of the ongoing '*Access and Retention: The experience of non-traditional learners in Higher Education 2008-2010*' (RANLHE). Although concerned with HE, its subject matter, conceptual framework and methodology are of great interest as FE shares many of the concerns and characteristics outlined. This European project has eight partners from England, Poland, Germany, Ireland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. It is set in the context of a huge increase in student numbers in HE globally and increased recognition of the benefits of participation for social and economic development. It recognises that despite the increase in student numbers, there are still inequalities in participation which many countries are taking measures to address. Its overall aim is to examine issues of access, retention and non-completion in relation to non-traditional students, including mature students, in HE on a comparative European basis. It recognises, as does '*Where next?*' that, while historically there has been much discussion of issues of access and recruitment of non-traditional students, recently there has been more focus on the importance of outcomes and retention in HE. These issues are important for the individual student, the institutions and the state and its investment in education. This is of interest to FE in Ireland which has high non-completion rates and is an area which requires attention.³

The report takes a biographical research approach and defines 'non-traditional' as students who are under-represented in HE and whose participation is constrained by structural factors: including students from low income families, first generation entrants, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, students with disabilities and mature students. The report claims that the biographical research methodology allows for a more complex understanding of non-traditional learners with its focus on the historical and socio-cultural as well as the psycho-social context of their lives. As an international project with eight partners, it seeks to understand international

³ Based on one study in a large FE college, anecdotal evidence and experience. The CDVEC does not compile statistics on its FE colleges.

patterns and contexts and to look at different theoretical approaches and, finally, to identify key issues.

Although there are significant differences, the concept of higher education is undergoing change in all participating countries characterised by more diverse provision and neo-liberal influences. The distinction between further and higher education is becoming increasingly blurred. In England, an increasing proportion of HE is now being taught in FE colleges as a partnership or franchise. Irish FE is different in many ways from its counterpart in England but these trends are noticeable in Ireland too. FE colleges offer degrees in association with Irish and UK universities, although there are clear indications that the DES is anxious to curtail this kind of development.

Some of the difficulties associated with using terminology in an international study are addressed. Definitions of social class, ethnicity or low income are difficult to use in comparative international research. The review refers to the international research done by Thomas and Quinn (2007) which also acknowledges this difficulty and uses the idea of 'first generation entrants' but points out that this term overlaps other categories of non-traditional student. All the countries showed significant inequalities in HE participation and understanding what is meant by 'non-traditional' and identifying the complex and inter-related factors impacting on inequality is important. The situation is complicated further by the limited availability of reliable data and agreement on terminology.

The difficulty of accessing accurate data on retention from institutions in Ireland was mentioned. Interestingly, one study showed lower completion rates in Institutes of Technology (ITs) than in universities which was considered significant as ITs historically have attracted a greater proportion of students from a working class background and are seen as being on the front line in widening participation. There is some evidence that FE, which also caters for a high proportion of students from the lower socioeconomic groups, has a high rate of non-completion, especially in one-year FETAC level 5 courses. This is significant as FE has an important role in widening participation and progression to HE. However accessing accurate data on the FE sector is a problem.

The review's theoretical perspectives on retention were interesting and had much to offer FE. Tinto's model is widely used and although it does not focus specifically on non-traditional students is useful in considering issues of retention. Tinto (1993) identified five conditions for student retention: expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning. This model has been criticised for its emphasis on integration and says little about factors outside of college that affect the student.

Bean and Metzner (1985) maintain that for adult students the traditional social environment of the campus is not nearly as important. Mature students are more focused on the academic side of college and interactions in college do not matter as much as they do for younger students. Outside concerns and supports, especially from family, are much more important for mature students. This is supported by Yorke (2004) who suggests that Tinto's model does not take enough account of these factors. This emphasis on the importance of family support for mature students was mentioned in the two previous reports also.

Other useful concepts used to understand access and retention issues are cultural capital, habitus and field. Drawing on the work of Reay et al. (2002; 2005) the report refers to the idea of non-traditional entrants being like 'fish out of water' while HE entry for traditional students is very much part of their habitus and often seen as a natural progression. Cultural capital and the institutional habitus are seen as key elements in retention. Such socio-cultural theories require an examination of the complex ways that class and culture function and interact with institutions and pedagogy. The concept of social capital or habitus is a useful way of looking at the comparative status of FE in post compulsory education and even of different colleges or courses within FE. It is also helpful in thinking about the perception of VECs and further education colleges and why they might be more accessible centres than universities or other HE institutions for non-traditional students. FE colleges, as VEC institutions, are usually long established and well recognised in the community. They are familiar and have none of the connotations of elitism that often attaches to universities. This can be important in the decision making processes of applicants.

Looking at overall trends, key factors and the development of various 'typologies' are useful ways of generalising and give a broad picture of retention and drop out.

However, it is only when concepts are unpacked that the complexity of understandings and their meaning in individual lives is revealed.

The next section of the review gives an overview of the approaches identified in the literature to improve retention and success, especially of non-traditional students. In this it distinguishes between national, institutional, faculty and departmental approaches. Many of the ideas resonated with my own experience and I found they offered extremely useful ways of engaging with the issues at several levels.

The review had much to contribute to the ideas I brought to the current study. The international nature of the project highlights the similarities and suggests some differences in circumstances and approach. Agreeing terminology and matching data sets, when they exist, forces a closer examination of terms and concepts and their use in different contexts. The biographical research methods used in the report allow a greater appreciation of the importance of the historical, cultural and social context which I think is necessary for a full understanding of students' experience. I found it useful to consider how the concept of 'mature student' might overlap and interact with other aspects of 'non-traditional' student.

College Knowledge

College Knowledge by Fleming and Murphy (1997) looked at the experiences and characteristics of mature students in NUIM. Although quite an old study now, it proved helpful by setting the increase in numbers of mature students in the context of national and international developments in HE at the time and it highlighted many of the issues affecting mature students (including financial, academic and personal) and how they interacted with motivation, learning and success. It points out that while access is an important issue for equality and combating disadvantage, what happens after the student gets into college is equally important. A key finding is the significance of how the student negotiates the difference between their experiential or common sense knowledge and the knowledge of the university, 'College Knowledge'. I was interested to see if there would be similar issues with students in FE.

The study used mainly qualitative methods but included some quantitative information and, unusually for the time, included the voices of the students themselves from semi-

structured interviews and focus groups. This is the approach adopted by the current study.

Conclusion

Overall, the recent literature reflects agreement on the desirability of upgrading the education levels of the adult population and promoting access, especially for non-traditional groups. There is also a focus on retention and ways of understanding the cultural, social and personal factors that impact on it. The literature also offered a way of seeing mature students in FE in the broader context of disadvantage and exclusion. Recently there have been many initiatives in Ireland and Europe to encourage greater access to higher education, yet despite the large number of students it attracts and its role in adult education, Further Education in Ireland seems to be neglected.

These studies helped to develop ‘theoretical sensitivity’ for the present work and meant that I brought into the study ideas about habitus, social and cultural capital as well as traditional definitions of social class and disadvantage. The concepts explored in ‘Where Next?’ ‘Hidden Disadvantage’ and ‘RANLHE’ contributed to my understanding of the complexities of the issues and confirmed my choice of qualitative interviews for investigating the experience of students and the meaning of education in their lives.

Chapter 4

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

I began this research with the general aim of exploring the experience of mature students in a large Further Education college. This chapter describes the epistemological stance and the overall methodological approach taken. The decision to use a questionnaire, focus group and qualitative interviews and the specific strategy of constructivist grounded theory are explained. The second part of the chapter outlines the sampling procedure and the data collection and analysis process which were done following constructivist grounded theory guidelines.

Part one

Epistemology

Thinking of this research and how to go about it inevitably prompted reflection on my own epistemology. My guiding assumption would be that social reality is not 'out there', independent of the knower but is constructed by and between personal perspectives based on experience and may change over time (Gergen, 1999). The constructionist position would therefore have considerable appeal. As a consequence, I would seek to understand the 'complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p.221). I would consider it important to be aware of the important cultural, social and historical contexts that help to shape the construction of the experience of reality and the concepts that are used to understand it. I would, therefore, favour methodologies that value the subjective and recognise the importance of context and social interaction in the construction of meaning.

Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically... they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms... (Cresswell, 1998, p.8)

A constructivist approach looks at how sense is made of the world and how it is interpreted by those experiencing it. This facilitates the exploration of individual positions while, at the same time, allowing common factors to be identified. This is a

useful way, I think, to look at people having, on the face of it, a similar experience (mature students), but for whom the meaning and effects could be very different. This approach recognises that our individual circumstances affect our perception and construction of 'reality' and that meanings may be varied and complex. It acknowledges too the role of social, historical and institutional factors in the development of experience.

Language and discourse are an important focus of critical, constructivist enquiry which recognises that the concepts used to understand the social world are themselves socially constructed and invested with meaning that is contextual and temporary. Foucault (1980) maintains that discourse establishes the basis on which we make sense of the world and process our experience. It determines the ways we can think and act and produces our assumptions about the way things are. As Ryan (2006, p.23) puts it: '...discourse, language and visual imagery do not simply 'reflect' or describe reality, but play an integral role in constructing reality and experience, the ways we know and understand the world, and what we assume to be natural or normal.' Constructivists would see the dominant discourse as just one of many possible and ask how such a situation came about and what it says about the nature of power.

Qualitative methodology

As this inquiry involves investigating the experience of mature students it is exploratory and open-ended. The voices of the participants are central. From a constructivist perspective, a qualitative strategy of enquiry seems appropriate to attempt to capture the uniqueness of the individual and quantitative methodologies are more constrained in what they can contribute to understanding experience. However, quantitative methodologies are useful for providing a view of the broad context and used with a qualitative approach contribute to a more complete understanding of individual experience.

Qualitative research allows researchers to attempt to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.12)

This echoes Mason's (2002, p.3) view of qualitative research which she says is '...broadly "interpretivist" in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced produced, or constituted.' Although qualitative research is influenced by a range of philosophies and traditions, Mason (2002, p.3) identifies a number of common factors: it is grounded in a broadly interpretivist philosophy, it is based on methods of data collection that are not standardised but are flexible and sensitive to social context, it is based on methods which involve understanding complexity, detail and context. Bryman, (2008, p.386) similarly, sees the main preoccupations of qualitative research as: seeing through the eyes of the people being studied, description and the emphasis on context, emphasis on process, flexibility and limited structure, concepts and theory grounded in data. Cresswell, (1998, p.17) suggests 'compelling reasons' for undertaking a qualitative study which seem to fit what I propose to do. The research question is exploratory and open-ended. I intend to present a detailed view of the topic and study participants in their natural setting.

Grounded Theory

Having established that a qualitative research framework is appropriate, I decided that a grounded theory methodology would be the most suitable for my research question. In grounded theory the researcher does not set about testing an existing theory but tries to allow the theory to emerge from the data. Grounded theory has been understood in many different ways since its original development by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. They were dissatisfied with what they saw as an over-reliance on quantitative testing of propositions derived from grand theories that had little relevance for a particular 'substantive' area. They aimed at generating more contextual, local theory that would work and be relevant to those being studied (Richardson, 1999, p.76). Qualitative research at the time was considered 'impressionistic, anecdotal, unsystematic and biased' (Charmaz, 2006, p.5). Even researchers who favoured qualitative methodologies acknowledged the absence of systematic guidelines that would give it rigour and greater credibility. Glaser and Strauss attempted to provide practical guidelines for the construction of theory from data. 'Grounded Theory' implied that the theory is grounded in the data and employs an iterative approach involving continual sampling, comparison and analysis. The

approach is inductive rather than deductive and participants' own accounts and their social contexts are given great attention.

The evolution of grounded theory has been described (Mills et al., 2006) 'as a methodological spiral that begins with Glaser and Strauss' original text and continues today.' Strauss and Corbin (1994, p. 283) recognize that 'a child once launched is very much subject to a combination of its origins and the evolving contingencies of life. Can it be otherwise with a methodology?'

I will be using the constructivist version of grounded theory proposed by Charmaz: '...a constructivist approach places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants' (Charmaz, 2006, p.130). Charmaz (2006, p.2) defined constructivist grounded theory as '...a contemporary revision of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) classic grounded theory that:

- assumes a relativist approach
- acknowledges multiple standpoints and realities of both the grounded theorist and the research participants
- takes a reflexive stance toward our actions, situations, and participants in the field setting, and constructions of them in our analysis

Charmaz refers to explicit yet flexible guidelines and views grounded theory methods as 'a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages. (Charmaz, 2006, p.9). However flexibly applied, grounded theory involves an inductive approach. It starts with the data, involves theoretical sampling, coding, comparison, writing memos and successive levels of analysis building levels of abstraction.

Coding

Coding is one of the fundamental processes of grounded theory. In coding, according to Bryman (2008, p.542), 'data are broken down into component parts, which are given names.' It is a way of organising large amounts of data and organising it in more manageable, conceptual pieces. 'Coding means naming segments of data with a

label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes and accounts for each piece of data' (Charmaz, 2006, p.43). Charmaz sees at least two phases of coding: initial coding which involves becoming intimately involved in the data and being open to all theoretical directions and giving each segment of data a name or label. These labels are provisional and may point to gaps that need to be addressed in subsequent data collection. The second phase of focused coding is more selective and serves to 'pinpoint and develop the most salient concepts in the data into analytic categories'. It 'requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorise your data incisively and completely'. Theoretical coding, a third phase of coding, specifies 'possible relationships between categories you have developed in your focused coding' (Charmaz, 2006, p.63). Theoretical coding leads to the development of core categories that integrate other categories and leads to theory development. Overall, the process moves from initial coding, which stays close to the data, to more abstract ways of conceptualising the phenomenon being investigated.

Constant Comparative method

The use of 'constant comparative methods' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is another fundamental feature of grounded theory which involves constantly analysing the data and codes looking for similarities, diversities and variations. This comparison is done as the data is collected and may prompt further data collection. This iterative process continues throughout the research process and concludes only when categories are saturated. 'Categories are 'saturated' when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories' (Charmaz, 2006, p.113). The concept of saturation is somewhat disputed. Dey, (1999, p.257) considers it an 'unfortunate metaphor' because he considers it imprecise and prefers the term 'theoretical sufficiency'.

Memos

Memos are informal analytic notes that the researcher makes during the research process. Writing memos is not just a method of recording thoughts but a process of interacting with the data, thinking about it and exploring relationships and emerging connections and ideas. Memos are written in 'informal, unofficial language for personal use' (Charmaz, 2006, p.80) and can serve to unblock and develop ideas, identify gaps and indicate the development of the researcher's thinking as the process

evolves. Memo writing forms ‘a space and place for exploration and discovery.’ They can assist and trace the development of more abstract categories and direct further analysis and coding.

Theory

Discussion of what constitutes theory inevitably impinges on epistemological issues and highlights some of the different approaches among grounded theorists themselves. Grounded theory has moved from its more positivist beginnings. Glaser and Strauss talk about theory being ‘discovered’ in the data, while Charmaz prefers to talk of the ‘construction’ of theory and emphasises the involvement of the researcher and the researcher’s perspectives and history in the process of representation and interpretation.

Positivist theories aim to establish causation, to predict and to emphasise generality. Interpretative theories seek to gain an understanding, which it acknowledges is an interpretation. ‘Interpretative theory calls for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon....assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as linked; truth as provisional’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.126). Objectivist grounded theory, in contrast to the constructivist approach, sees the data as independent of the social context of their production and the researcher. The differences have implications for how theory is understood. Charmaz sees theorising as an activity inseparable from the researcher’s sensitivity that can address local worlds and see them in the context of larger social structures. It involves making connections, developing insights and ways of understanding. Grounded theory studies generally produce substantive rather than formal theories. A substantive theory seeks to uncover ‘the basic social-psychological or social structural processes that are used by persons or social groups in response to specific social problems,’ while a formal theory is ‘a broader based and more generalized process that occurs in a variety of distinct, yet theoretically similar, social situations (Kearney, 1998, p.181).

My aim in this enquiry is not to discover an objective ‘truth,’ but to explore the experience of mature students in FE and to untangle, with the participants, some of the complexities and consider how they can be interpreted and understood. My initial intention was to use Grounded Theory methods as exploratory tools in the

investigation. It was later in the process, when theoretical sampling reinforced the implicit meaning of many of the themes and connections between them that abstractions and theory emerged.

A deductive approach, i.e. the testing of theory by proposing hypotheses for evaluating it, was not considered a suitable option for this work. An inductive approach was more appropriate. 'By using an inductive approach, the researcher can attempt to make sense of a situation without imposing pre-existing expectations on the phenomena under study' (Mertens, 1998, p.160).

A number of considerations in respect of adopting an inductive approach needed to be honoured:

- Not treating people as 'objects' as in some experiment;
- Showing respect for peoples' points of view and valuing peoples discrete perceptions based on individual experiences;
- Recognising that there are multiple realities based on individual perspectives;
- Realising that the researcher is not detached from the research process but is an integral part of it, as she/he is the interpretative 'instrument';
- Seeking to ensure that the interaction between the respondents and the researcher is dialectic in nature; the better to examine the multiple realities of the situation;
- That understanding may be achieved through a process of interpretation in which successive levels of generalisation and abstraction are constructed and evaluated;
- The use of inductive logic implies going from the particular evidence to a general understanding by making sense of what may be disclosed by an interpretation of the data.

I would consider all of the above considerations to be important and consistent with the epistemological position outlined. This process of analysis demands that an emergent stance is adopted both in the generation of data and its subsequent analysis.

The utilization of the grounded theory method supports this approach and, although it offers a set of guidelines, it also calls on the researcher to be creative and sensitive.

Sampling

Purposive sampling (Ryan, 2006, p.84), unlike random sampling, aims to sample data in a strategic way according to their relevance to the research question. Theoretical (or purpose) sampling, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.45) is:

the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory...

Data collection is an ongoing process and not a discrete and separate phase of the research process. Data collection and analysis is an iterative process, with further data being collected on the basis of the analysis of previous material. The relevance of the cases is important, not how representative they are. Unlike statistical sampling, the extent of the sample is not known in advance and sampling is complete when theoretical saturation has been reached rather than when a whole pre-determined sample has been studied. 'Sampling is an issue throughout the research and analysis process as decisions have to be made constantly about what sources or techniques to use or what material to interpret' (Flick, 1998, p.62). My initial sampling was the start of the general process of exploration. Later, when categories began to emerge, theoretical sampling helped test hunches and fill gaps.

Part 2

Research Procedure – preliminary data collection

My interest in this study is mature students and their experience in FE. I believed that the students themselves would provide the richest data. The college in which I teach provided a good location for research as it has a large number of mature students and I am very familiar with the environment. Initially, in order to get an overview of the mature student population in the college and to see what issues arose, I decided to administer a questionnaire and to carry out a focus group with a small group of students drawn from different areas of the college.

Questionnaire

I decided to conduct a questionnaire to gain an overview of the characteristics of the mature student population in the college and to identify issues to be explored more thoroughly in later interviews. It also allowed me to identify students willing to participate in interviews. Having first carried out a pilot questionnaire (Appendix 1), I administered a questionnaire (Appendix 2) to 100 mature students in the college. The sample surveyed by questionnaire was not representative but I did include students from each of the college's broad departmental areas. It fitted the definition of 'convenience sample' as defined by Bryman (2008, p.183) as I chose students who were available to me and whose tutors were available and willing to facilitate me. In most cases I distributed the questionnaire and waited while it was completed, having arranged with the group's tutor to have this time at the end of a class when the other students had left. This ensured a high response and no waiting for forms to be returned. Very few students opted not to complete the survey and there was no difficulty in reaching the target of 100. This approach ensured a 100% response and meant that I was present if any clarification was needed. This was especially useful during the pilot phase. It was useful too in that it provided an opportunity for discussion about the nature of the research and in some cases became an informal focus group. I took notes immediately after such discussions which contributed to the research process. In some cases, I gave the questionnaires to the tutor who asked students to complete them. To some extent I had a captive audience and as some of the students would have known me or my role in the college, and I was especially careful to emphasise the purpose of the questionnaire, its confidentiality and the completely voluntary nature of participation. I also sought permission to carry out the research from the college principal and undertook not to disclose the identity of the students, the college or the staff. In the whole process my position as an 'insider' and my personal contacts made it easy to work in the environment. McCracken (1988) points out that familiarity with the culture being studied has the potential to dull the investigator's powers of observation and analysis. It also offers the huge advantage of an intimate knowledge of the area. There was clearly a need to 'manufacture distance' and create a certain detachment to try to 'make the familiar strange.'

The development of the questionnaire took some time. There were several revisions in content and format as I was anxious that it should be as clear as possible and easily

understood (Bryman, 2008, p. 222). It was also important that it could be completed in a reasonably short period and not appear daunting. It consisted of three A4 sheets with an explanation of the purpose of the research and my contact details at the top. I would have preferred to have a single double-sided sheet, but reducing the font size and the spacing made it look cramped and unattractive. The pilot questionnaire generally went well but it did indicate that a number of questions needed to be refined. For example, the question on marital status did not initially include the category 'co-habiting'. Also on the basis of the pilot, I summarised the most common replies to two questions and asked the respondents to tick one or more from a range of options. In these cases I included an option of 'other' and invited comment. The completed questionnaires were generally satisfactorily done although relatively few were very forthcoming with comments in any of the responses where they were invited.

Although the data provided by the questionnaire was very helpful and the convenience sample makes no claims to be representative, it resulted in a disproportionate number of students on two year courses. For my purposes this was not a problem. Many of these students had already done a one year course and some would have done a preliminary return to learning one year course as well. There were no observable differences in the responses of students on one year or two year courses. As I had hoped, the questionnaire produced useful background information and ideas to follow up in interviews. The results are discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

Data collection - Focus Group

The focus group was part of the initial exploration and was made up of students I knew or who were recommended to me for this purpose. Although I had a number of issues I wanted to discuss, gleaned from my own experience, reading and informal discussions with individual mature students, they were general points to initiate discussion not lead it. I explained that I was embarking on this research and I was keen to get their ideas and insights. I was aware of the power differential between us implied by our roles as students and teacher. I had taught two of the participants a year earlier on separate courses. I was not teaching them at the time of the focus group and was unlikely to be teaching any of them in the future. We had remained friendly and frequently had informal chats. They had expressed an interest in participating in the research and I was confident that our relative positions would not

be a problem. As a teacher, I was comfortable with the focus group format and I knew that the interaction between participants can produce very useful ideas and sometimes different views. I was aware also of the danger of one participant dominating the discussion and the possibility of what Bryman (2008, p.489) refers to as 'group effects' and the tendency of members of such groups to agree with each other rather than disagree.

I had arranged for five participants. However, on the day two could not attend. I knew two of the participants but they did not know each other. There were very sociable and there was no awkwardness. I explained over an initial cup of coffee what the research was about, the timescale and how I saw the session going. I discussed how the material would be used and promised anonymity. The discussion was lively, good humoured and frank with everyone participating well but one was inclined to talk more than the others. I felt that the session provided me with several themes to pursue later in interviews. I was surprised by the strength of feeling expressed about younger students (although this was lead particularly by one individual and was not borne out in subsequent one-to-one interviews) and by how much the participants felt they had changed as a result of coming back to education. I was reluctant to ask about personal issues or potentially sensitive areas in this context which confirmed my belief that semi-structured interviews were the most suitable means of generating further data. The discussion lasted about an hour and a half. I later transcribed the session to allow for closer analysis.

Data Collection – Interviews

I decided to use face-to-face qualitative interviews as the main method of data generation. The interview allows for topics to be explored differently and in more detail than a focus group and can provide data that is not accessible in any other way. The information extraction model of interview (Ryan, 2006, p.74), where the objective interviewer seeks answers to straightforward questions, is unsuitable for exploring the complexity and nuances of lived experiences and assumes an uncomplicated relationship between question and answer. Mason (2002, p.52) uses the term 'data generation' in preference to 'data collection' to emphasise the researcher's role as someone who actively constructs knowledge. Instead of just

finding data 'out there,' the researcher works out how best to generate it from the chosen sources.

A constructivist approach acknowledges that the participants are not just a source of data waiting to be extracted and that the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee is crucial in the process of constructing meaning. It is important to remember that the interview is a construction or reconstruction of a reality and not an uncomplicated retelling of a prior reality (Charmaz, 2006, p.27).

Mason (2002, p.62) suggests the common characteristics of qualitative interviewing include: the interactional exchange of dialogue, a relatively informal style, a topic-centred, narrative or biographical approach with a fluid and flexible structure to allow unexpected themes to be developed, an acknowledgement that knowledge is situated and contextual, meaning and understanding are created in an interaction between the interviewer and the participant. The idea is to get an insight and understanding of the participant's perspective and that this may include 'the texture and feeling as well as the facts' (Franklin, 1997). The interview in this approach is an interpersonal situation and the characteristics, skills and sensitivities of the interviewer and his/her ability to establish a relationship of trust are clearly of considerable importance.

I was aware that semi-structured interviews demand careful planning (Mason, 2002, Cresswell, 1998) to ensure that relevant data are generated. With this in mind I formulated a general interview guide (Appendix 3) to ensure a focus on the research questions. This was, however, thematic and included developing a feel for responses that might be significant even if unexpected. It was informed by the insights from the focus group and questionnaire and my own sensitivity. Charmaz (2006, p.29) advocates an interview guide with 'well planned open-ended questions.' As the interview is an attempt to understand how the participants experience and understand events, it is important to be flexible enough to allow them to develop their ideas and not close off avenues prematurely. This is especially relevant when using a grounded theory approach which advocates not starting out with fixed ideas or preconceptions. The focus was on what is significant to the interviewee and I used my interview guide with that in mind.

McCracken (1988, p.24) suggests the use of a questionnaire which, he says, 'does not pre-empt the open-ended nature of the qualitative interview' but allows the interviewer to concentrate on the task in hand and pursue any opportunities that may arise. He also recognises the importance of the relationship between the interviewer and the participant but cautions against allowing 'intimacy to obscure or complicate the task at hand' (McCracken, 1988, p.26). Many authors (Bryman, 2008; Charmaz, 2006; McCracken, 1998; Mason, 2006; Denscombe, 1998,) offer useful practical advice on interviewing and compelling reasons for the interviewer to be aware of the many factors that affect the dynamic of the process.

For my initial sampling I drew up a short list of potential interview candidates based on those who had indicated on the questionnaire that they were willing to participate. Later, theoretical sampling was used to help explicate the emerging categories (Charmaz, 2006, p.100). The interviews lasted between fifty and ninety minutes. I recorded the interviews and personally transcribed them and although this was very time consuming I was glad I did it. It allowed me to develop a close familiarity with the data and preserved nuances that would have been missed or forgotten using the transcripts or recordings alone and proved to be a valuable part of the process of analysis. Some researchers suggest that taking notes is preferable to recording interviews. I think recording has several advantages. I found it extremely difficult to take notes and give the interview and the participant adequate attention. Note-taking is distracting for both and interferes with the natural conversational style of the encounter. The relevance and importance of data might not be apparent at the time. Points that later turned out to be relevant were often ignored in earlier readings and might not have been considered worth recording at the time if I had been relying on notes. I also wrote brief memos immediately after the interviews outlining my impressions of the encounter and some possible themes emerging. I found that, as the interviews went on, my technique improved and I was more willing to ask for clarification or examples or to suggest an interpretation to the participant. In most cases I had the opportunity for a second interview which was extremely valuable in clarifying or substantiating themes and impressions and getting the participants' opinions on what I had taken from their interviews. I contacted the participants again within two to four weeks of the first interview. I gave them a copy of the transcript at or before the second interview. I checked up on any points which were not clear to me

in the recording and discussed the process of the interview with the candidate and their reflections on it. All had enjoyed it and were glad of the opportunity to discuss and explore the issues. I asked if there was anything they would like to add, change or clarify and asked if they had any questions. I spoke about what I had found to be of particular interest in the interview and asked if they agreed with what I was taking from the discussion. I followed up on some significant themes that were emerging in other interviews and frequently asked ‘Can you tell me more about...?’ The second interview and subsequent conversations were extremely useful and the participants and I felt we knew each other and the process better and a relationship of trust had been established which made the conversations more satisfactory for both of us. I also had informal chats with the participants as I met them in the college which provided more data and contributed to a more complete understanding.

The interview is a unique situation and it can offer the participant as well as the researcher great benefits (McCracken, 1988; Richardson, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). It offers an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their experience in a way they probably would not normally do. It allows the interviewer to probe the interviewees’ thoughts and feelings and to get beneath surface descriptions and generally to go further and deeper than normal everyday conversational would allow. It is therefore, a situation that requires great care and awareness of the potential difficulties that it may cause for the participant. This leads to a consideration of ethical issues that may impinge on the work.

Ethical issues

I would consider it important to work with the general guideline of ‘a research ethic of care’ especially in a constructivist and emergent process where it is impossible to predict where the process will lead. Interviewing in a qualitative paradigm can put the interviewer and interviewee in potentially vulnerable positions. The nature of the process necessitates a focus on the participant and possibly an exploration of issues that may be sensitive or upsetting. The wellbeing of the participant is paramount.

I had asked students to indicate on the questionnaire their willingness to take part in an interview. Although it was not intended that the people chosen for interview would necessarily be representative of the mature student population, I wanted to have both

men and women and older and younger mature students to see what, if any, differences would be revealed. On this basis I selected a number of prospective candidates from the completed questionnaires and contacted them by phone or in person and asked if they were still willing to take part. One was chosen as he was recommended to me by a teaching colleague and he had also indicated his willingness to take part on the questionnaire. Two of those I contacted felt unable to commit to an interview due to college, work or family demands and one, having agreed, had to cancel due to a family emergency. In these cases I contact the next person on my list of those who were willing to participate. I discussed again the nature of the research and what would be involved in an interview and some of the issues I wanted to discuss with them (Appendix 4). I guaranteed anonymity and their freedom to change their mind or withdraw at any stage, even after the interview. I suggested a meeting to discuss it further. At this meeting we arranged (where possible) a suitable time for the interview and dealt with any other issues.

Before each interview I thanked the students for taking part and again outlined the nature and purpose of the research and their role in it. I told them about myself, my role in the college and the academic work I was engaged in. I stressed that their consent to participate could be withdrawn at any time during or after the interview, or re-negotiated. I was aware that I might need to re-establish consent during the process as the conversation developed. Having discussed the research and clarifying any outstanding issues I asked them to sign a consent form (Appendix 4) and to agree to the interview being recorded. None had a problem with this. Participants were assured that they need not answer any question they felt uncomfortable with and their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality would be protected by pseudonyms, altering details that could make them identifiable and by careful storage of the data. I explained too, how I intended to use the data and reassured them that the data and the participants would be treated with honesty, respect and integrity. I re-established consent before subsequent interviews.

As a member of the teaching staff in the college and the CDVEC, there were relationships with students and colleagues to consider. I was aware of my role as a researcher and a teacher in the college and the implications of this for the interview process. With this in mind I selected for interview only students I did not know, I was

not teaching or involved with in any other way. All the interviews took place in my office in the college although I offered the participants a range of possible venues or the option of deciding on one themselves. The conversational style of the interviews helped in developing rapport and making the interviews a positive and pleasant experience for the participants and for me.

Insider research

As I was carrying out the research in the college in which I work I was aware that, in ways, I was an 'insider researcher.' Rooney (2005, p.6) defined insider research as being 'where the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting.' Traditional positivist research was based on the notion of an objective researcher producing objective knowledge. In this paradigm the researcher was, of necessity, an independent 'outsider.' Insider research would be problematic for positivists as the insider would be considered to lack objectivity. More recently, there have been 'numerous challenges to the orthodox institutionalised forms of going about research' (Loxley, 2008, p.15) and the notion of an objective researcher was challenged by new ontological and epistemological models that maintain that truth or meaning does not exist independently waiting to be uncovered, but is created by individuals through engaging with the world in specific social and cultural contexts. Objectivity, in the traditional sense, is impossible as the researcher must also, inevitably, draw from his/her cultural and personal context. Thus a conscious awareness of the role of personal beliefs and values on the research process is of central importance and declarations of positionality are now generally included by researchers (Sikes and Potts, 2008).

The increase in insider research in recent years has been attributed to these changes and the acceptance of the relevance and value of the insider experience and the corresponding increase in the number of part-time academic programmes which made insider research a pragmatic and worthwhile endeavour (Mercer, 2007a; Coghlan, 2007; Sikes and Potts, 2008).

Although there have been some attempts to define insider research, most commentators (Styles, 1979; Brewer, 1986; Hockey, 1993; Griffith, 1998; Hellawell, 2006; Loxley & Seery, 2008) reject the idea of an insider/outsider dichotomy and

agree with Mercer (2007, p.5) that the concepts of 'insider' and 'outsider' are not straightforward and are not necessarily 'two mutually exclusive frames of reference' but are better seen as a continuum. Hellowell, (2006, p.488) suggests that the continuum has 'subtly varying shades of 'insiderism' and 'outsiderism' and that there may be 'not one continuum but ...a multiple series of parallel ones'. Even binary concepts such as male and female intersect with other social categories such as class, age and race.

Merton (1972, p.22) argues that 'individuals have not a single status, but a status set: a compliment of various interrelated statuses which interact to affect both behaviour and perspectives.' One may be an insider in some aspects of the research culture but not in others and one's position as insider or outsider may shift with different aspects of the research and it is possible 'simultaneously be to some extent an insider, and to some extent an outsider' Hellowell (2006, p.490).

I was aware of moving along this continuum as I was neither a complete outsider nor a complete insider. I was an insider as I was doing research in my own college where I am intimately familiar with the culture, its workings, its 'lived experience' (Brannick & Coughlan, 2007. p.69) and many of its personnel and as a mature student myself I share many of the demands felt by my interviewees. I was an outsider in that I am not a fellow student in the college and my position as a teacher in the college and a researcher sets me apart from the group. I was not researching the organisation or the practice of colleagues and did not experience 'role conflict' or 'role duality' which Coughlan (2007) describes as likely hazards of executives researching their own organisations.

As an insider I was operating from a position of privilege. I had the practical and psychological advantage of easy access and I did not have to familiarise myself with a different college and negotiate a new environment. I knew what the students were referring to when they spoke of the structure of the courses, assessment systems and other issues to do with being in the college. This 'preunderstanding' which Gummesson, (2000.p57) defined as 'people's knowledge, insights and experience before they engage in a research programme.' also contributes to initial sensitising

concepts. Being on site meant I also had valuable opportunities for casual and opportunistic access and follow up.

However, I chose as interviewees only students I had no involvement with in any way. Although some of the students may have seen me in the college, I was not known to them until I conducted the questionnaire and so, in many ways, I was an outsider from their point of view. Not being known to the interview participants prior to the research meant that we had no preconceptions, 'baggage' or expectations based on familiarity (Hockey, 1993, p.206). However, my familiarity with the college made me aware of the necessity of creating some 'strangeness' and trying to be conscious of my own assumptions and immersion in the culture and discourse of the college and FE. As a mature student myself, I was, to some degree, an 'insider' sharing an understanding with the students of the demands on adults in education and a commonality of age. They would frequently say things like 'you know yourself' to imply this common understanding. In such cases I was careful not to rely on unspoken assumptions and tried to tease them out from the interviewees' perspective. I was aware too that unsought disclosures or references to colleagues might result in ethical dilemmas, in practice this did not happen.

Overall, I consider that my position in the college worked to my advantage and the balance of 'insider/outsider' greatly facilitated contact with the participants and constructing with them an understanding of their experience. It contributed also to the development of a valuable rapport, a reflexivity that would 'explicitly include lived experiences' (Brannick & Coughlan, 2007, p.69) and a heightened awareness of ethical issues.

Data analysis

It is important to point out that the data collection and data analysis took place at the same time although they are discussed sequentially here.

Initial coding

The process of data analysis was conducted in accordance with the guidelines proposed by Charmaz (2006) outlined above. The interviews were analysed as soon as they were completed to help understanding and justify further data gathering. The

initial coding process is ‘the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations’ Charmaz (2006, p.43). These codes stick closely to the data and allocate a label to each section that helps to separate and sort data and represents an ‘initial opening up of the text’. Charmaz recommends coding using gerunds and initially coding with speed and spontaneity using short, precise, simple codes and being open to what the text may suggest. I found it to be extremely important to remaining open to the text as initial hunches developed. It was not so much a matter of ignoring the hunches, but of remaining close to the data and not forcing it into emerging categories.

Initial codes	Data from interviews
Having a personal recommendation	... my cousin was here, a few years ago, she was saying that it was really, really good.
Being aware of age. Being anxious, not fitting in, Worried it’s too late	...I don’t think I’ll fit in, I’m 35 and I’m like...is it too late for me and all this?...really, really nervous.
Always wanting to go back Not having opportunity	I always wanted to do it but genuinely never had the chance because of the job I was in.
Becoming unemployed	I was made redundant two years ago.
Having a different self concept. Being more confident	I see myself differently...I see myself more confident as well.

Table 4.1: Example of initial coding process

The first interview offered some tentative themes that I pursued in the following interview, each interview being analysed and comparisons made for similarities and differences within and between interviews. After the first three interviews I paused to evaluate emerging themes and see what ideas needed to be followed up in the next phase. Revisiting interviews after a pause and in the light of new data lead me to new discoveries and emerging patterns became visible. Subsequent theoretical sampling

focused on the tentative ideas and emerging categories. For example in follow-up interviews I asked what ‘confidence,’ which came up strongly in the first session, meant for the individual. This led to the concept of ‘revised self.’

I was surprised initially at what did not feature in the interview data. For example the participants paid very little attention to the subject matter on the curriculum and extra support mature students might need. The strong antipathy to younger students and the belief that ‘it’s their world’ voiced in the focus group was not supported by any of the interviewees.

Focused coding

The initial coding process generated a large number of codes. Focused coding means ‘using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.57). Subsequent interviews confirmed some of the earlier trends and a more focused coding allowed the grouping of conceptually linked themes into sub-categories. The table below shows how this process of integration emerged.

Initial Coding	Focused coding Sub-categories	Category
Leaving school early. Missing out Always wanted to Feeling unhappy in work Children grown Became unemployed	Unfulfilled potential Change The right time.	Latent self

Initial Coding	Focused coding Sub-categories	Category
Feeling under pressure. Not having enough time. Concerns about family.	Juggling	Emerging Self
Not fitting in Not being able for it	Anxiety	
Enjoying it Feeling supported Academic success Growing confidence	Enjoyment Support Achievement	

Table 4.2: Example of focused coding

This phase of coding was more conceptual and involved developing ‘a feel’ or sensitivity for what was emerging. It was not a straightforward linear process and required constant re-reading and listening to the interviews, ‘constant comparison’ of data and sometimes going back to the participants for clarification. Frequently occurring themes such as ‘leaving school early’ or ‘always wanted to’ and ‘missing out,’ while not losing their individual resonance, were subsumed into the sub-category of ‘unfulfilled potential’ which seemed to capture the essence of what was going on in this data.

Theoretical coding

In this phase, sub-categories were integrated into the three major or core categories of Latent Self, Emergent Self and Revised Self which I sub-titled ‘Finding a Voice’ as many expressed their new sense of self in terms of being able to speak and having things to say. I thought that these categories captured what was happening in the data and showed the relationship between them.

Focused Coding	Needing a qualification. Children grown. Became unemployed. Always wanted to. Missed out. Liked school.	Enjoying college Social aspect Better being older Aware of age Anxieties <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Age ➤ Assignments ➤ Fitting in ➤ Fear of failure ➤ Juggling commitments Support	Confidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Academic ➤ Personal Speaking out Revised self-concept
Core concepts	Latent Self	Emerging Self	Revised Self 'Finding a voice'

Table 4.3: Example of theoretical coding

Memos

From the beginning memo writing turned out to be a vital part of the process of coding and analysis. Writing memos, however roughly, helped stimulate emerging thoughts on what was going on in the data. Early memos often took the form of rough diagrams, notes and maps linking ideas, concepts and emerging categories. (Appendix 6). The freedom and provisional nature of memos allows unexpected connections and surprising ideas to emerge. Later memos formed the basis of the analysis. ‘Memo writing forces you to stop other activities; engage a category, let your mind rove freely in, around, under and from the category; and write whatever comes to you’ (Charmaz, 2006, p. 81). Not all memos proved to be useful but even these were part of the process of interacting with the data and ideas and sometimes indicated the need to revisit data or participants. Mills et al. (2006) suggest that ‘Memoing is essentially a reflective process that also provides that researcher with an opportunity to remember, question, analyse and make meaning about the time spent with participants and the data that were generated together’. The often spontaneous and informal nature of capturing ideas in memoing meant that they were not sequential and many disparate ideas were often recorded simultaneously. Shuffling these memos was helpful in sorting ideas and relationships and facilitated what Glaser (1978) called the ‘preconscious processing’ of data and promoting reflexivity.

Reflexivity

A constructivist paradigm acknowledges the researcher's role in interpreting or constructing the subject's experience with them. 'Our subjectivity and wider cultural understanding, shape our response and interpretation' (Merrill and West, 2009, p.115). This demands a reflexivity and awareness of the researcher's own experience and background and how they might impact on the research process: '...the researcher filters the data through a personal lens that is situated in a specific socio-political and historical moment' (Cresswell, 1998, p.182). Having worked in the City of Dublin VEC (CDVEC) for many years and as a mature student myself, I did not come to this inquiry as a disinterested observer. I felt it important to examine my own motivations and see how my position, experience, views and biases might interact with the work of research to create interpretations of experiences. Part of the research task is to be able to distance myself sufficiently in order to gain an overview and remain open to new ideas. Reflexivity contributes to this by ensuring a focus on the assumptions inherent in my own approach and subjectivity embedded in the language and discursive practices of further education. Mills et al. (2006) suggest that the process of writing memos in the grounded theory approach is essentially reflective and makes clearer the 'researcher's impact on the reconstruction of meaning into theory'.

However, personal history and vocational experience as well as being inseparable from the researcher, can be helpful as it contributes to the development of sensitivity to the ideas emerging from the data. Charmaz (2006, p.16) speaks of Blumer's (1969) 'sensitising concepts' as giving the researcher initial ideas to pursue in the early stages of the research. She sees these concepts as 'points of departure' while emphasising the need to remain open to the concepts emerging from the data. More generally, Strauss and Corbin (2008, p.32) see sensitivity as standing in contrast to objectivity. 'Sensitivity means having insight, being tuned in to, being able to pick up on relevant issues, events and happenings in the data'. This sensitivity to the nuances and complexity of the data comes through an immersion in the data and the interplay between the data and the researcher's 'prepared mind.' However, it is essential to remember the primacy of the participant's perspective and the emerging data.

In a more general sense, all research decisions are filtered through our theoretical sensitivity, a 'unique combination of personal and professional experience, and your

reading of relevant literature' (Ryan et al., 2006), so the researcher is obliged to be reflexive at all stages of the research and analysis. Reflexivity can be seen as an ethical requirement in qualitative research which acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher and his/her role in the construction of knowledge. The researcher's obligation to make clear where they are 'coming from' is a fundamental aspect of the transparency and integrity of the work.

Although conscious of remaining open to the data, I embarked on this research with sensitising concepts formed from experience and reading. The story I outlined earlier about the mature student who was 'upset' by a discussion in class had prompted me to think about how learning, new information and new ways of thinking could be troubling. I had found Bowlby's ideas on attachment and the 'strange situation' as offering a useful way of thinking about this. Linked to this and the notion of the 'teachable moment,' Mezirow's 'disorienting dilemma' and the transformation of frames of reference and the concept of 'troublesome knowledge' (Meyer and Land, 2003) contributed to my sensitivity.

My view of further education as greatly influenced in its practices and policies by neo-liberal thinking also informed my thinking. Also, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, my belief that further education has an important role in addressing disadvantage in welcoming non-traditional students, and providing an alternative route to higher education. I found the concepts of class, habitus and capital to be useful tools in thinking on these issues and how social, cultural, economic and personal factors interact in decision making and educational choice.

These ideas initially were helpful in considering the study and the early data. As the research developed, some of these 'tentative tools' proved quite useful and other, different tools were called on to help in understanding new, and often surprising, emerging ideas.

Being a researcher in an area with which I am familiar also poses the danger of over-familiarity and emphasises the need to interrogate the 'taken for grantedness' of its practices. McCracken (1988, p.22) speaks of the necessity of 'manufacturing distance' so that we can observe with critical awareness situations with which we are

very familiar. He suggests that a researcher's 'deep and long lived familiarity with the culture under study', as well as having the capacity to dull the investigator's powers of observation and analysis, is also potentially a huge asset. What is needed, he says, is a 'cultural review' – a conscious reflexivity which promotes familiarization and defamiliarization which allows the best use of the 'self as an instrument of enquiry'. Eisner, (2001) speaks of the role of the arts in creating 'perceptual freshness ...also critically important features of good qualitative research'. A grounded theory approach is particularly useful, I think, in helping to avoid focusing on preconceived ideas based on familiarity.

Engaging with the Literature

In defining the components of grounded theory analysis, Charmaz (2006, p.6) includes 'Conducting the literature review *after* developing an independent analysis'. The place of the literature review in grounded theory is a matter of some contention. The argument against conducting a literature review at the outset is based on the idea that it may influence data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and force data into pre-existing categories. Charmaz (2006, p.165) suggests that the reason for delaying the literature review is to 'avoid importing preconceived ideas and imposing them on your work. Delaying the review encourages you to articulate *your* ideas'. Charmaz (2006, p.16) also acknowledges that researchers' assumptions and disciplinary perspectives alert them to look for certain possibilities. These 'sensitising concepts' are useful in providing initial ideas to pursue. However, not all researchers agree and suggest reasons for early engagement with the literature. Morse (2001, p.9) suggests that the literature should not be ignored but 'bracketed' and used for comparison with emerging categories. Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p.157) point out that the researcher who is not aware of the relevant literature is in danger of rediscovering the wheel. Charmaz (2006, p.167) finds the term 'theoretical agnosticism' apt and agrees with Glaser (1978, 1992) that the time to engage with the theoretical literature is when the categories and relationship between them has emerged.

While it is naïve to assume that the researcher is a 'tabula rasa', the current study is exploratory and prior reading was very general with the intention of providing a context and overall familiarity with the area. 'Researchers may not know which

literature is relevant until analysis is well advanced' (Locke 2001, p.124). Engagement with the literature at this stage was directed by the emerging concepts and ideas following Charmaz's advice (2006, p.164) to 'Draft your literature review in relation to your grounded theory'. In this study the engagement with the theoretical concepts that relate specifically to the research findings takes place in Chapter 7 following the presentation of the findings.

Conclusion

The decision to use a questionnaire with qualitative interviews and a focus group was influenced by some of the reports reviewed in Chapter 3. I thought the combination worked well to give an overview of the area as a context. Using a grounded theory approach to data generation and analysis proved to be very time consuming with implications for the management of the whole project. However, it proved to be extremely useful and yielded rich data which will be discussed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings from the questionnaire, discusses the focus group and presents profiles of the participants, each of which contributes to providing an overall picture of the experience of mature students and introduces in a personal context many of the ideas discussed thematically in the next chapter. In keeping with constructivist approaches, I use direct quotation from the participants in this chapter and the next to enable their accounts to remain visible in the final text so ‘that the reader can make a connection between analytical findings and the data from which they were derived’ (Mills et al., 2006, p.11).

The questionnaire

As mentioned in chapter 4, Methodology, the main focus of the study is qualitative, using interviews, however, I also decided to carry out a questionnaire to get an overall picture of the mature student population in the college and see what issues arose. The questionnaire, which one hundred mature students completed, yielded the following information:

Age

Only seven of the one hundred respondents were aged over fifty while eighty were under 41 years of age. Fifty-seven were between 21 and 31 year of age and twenty-three were between 31-41 years. This is similar to the findings of Fleming and Murphy (1997) and Watson et al. (2006). Most mature students are young and single. However, the numbers of older mature students has been increasing and with the current recession set to continue this increase is likely to accelerate. This research focuses on mature students who have been out of full-time education for some years.

Gender

Fifty-nine respondents were female and forty one were male. Nationally, the participation rates in FE are seventy percent female, thirty percent male (Watson et al.,

2006). I suspect that this ratio has changed with the economic downturn with fewer jobs available to males, especially in the construction industries. There is also some regional bias as not all areas have the same FE provision and some colleges offer courses that traditionally attract one gender almost exclusively, for example child care. In this college fifty-two percent of the total student body is male.

Marital status

Sixty-five respondents were single, sixteen were married and fifteen were co-habiting and thirty-one had children. I suspect the number of single students is somewhat misleading as many in long-term relationships would tick 'single' as they are unmarried, whether co-habiting or not.

School leaving age

Twenty-four left school at 16 or under, the rest at 17 or 18. This supports the idea that many mature students are 'delayed entrants' having put off the decision to progress immediately after school, lacked the necessary leaving certificate results or those who became unemployed having started working immediately after school. FE is an important provider of 'second chance' education and alternative progression routes to those who left school early or who were not qualified to apply to Universities or Institutes of Technology.

Secondary School Programmes Completed

Nine of respondents left secondary school with no qualifications, eight had Junior or Intermediate Certificate only and seventy-eight had Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or Leaving Certificate Applied. This reflects the age of the cohort surveyed. Older students are more likely to have left school with no qualifications (Watson et al., 2006).

Course in FE

Eighty-five of the respondents were doing a two-year course, forty-seven were in year one, fifty-three in year two. Sixty-seven had previously done a Level 5 course. Seven already had a Level 8 qualification. Eighty-two of the one hundred intended to progress to another course.

Parents' educational qualifications

Twenty-two of the respondents' mothers had left school at primary level and twenty-three of fathers.

Socio-Economic Group		Father Percentages	Mother Percentages
Employers and managers	A	3	1
Higher professional	B	6	1
Lower professional	C	1	8
Non-manual	D	22	29
Manual skilled	E	21	1
Semi-skilled	F	5	1
Unskilled	G	8	7
Own account workers	H	15	8
Farmers	I	2	1
Agricultural workers	J	0	0
All others gainfully occupied and unknown	Z	0	0
Left blank/not applicable/none		17	18
Housewife / homemaker		0	25
Total		100	100

Figure 5.1 *Father's occupation and mother's occupation* [by percentage in the various socio-economic groups]

It could be argued that parents' occupations are less relevant when discussing mature students, especially older mature students. However, this questionnaire was part of the initial exploratory research and was done to get an overview of the entire mature student population and to see what issues arose.

I used the categories A-Z outlined in the Central Statistics Office's (CSO) 'Census 2006. Appendix 8. Occupations' and added the category of housewife/homemaker and a category for those who did not answer this question or said 'none' or n/a.

The single largest group is non-manual, which as is pointed out in 'Hidden Disadvantage?' (McCoy et al., 2010) is diverse, composed of a large range of occupations from relatively high status positions to lower level service workers. The

‘other non-manual’ section of the group share many similarities with lower manual groups across a range of educational characteristics.

These findings, although not broken down into intermediate and other non-manual, also support the contention in McCoy et al. (2010) that ‘clear socio-economic disparities exist with the high levels of entry into this form of post-school education evident among young people from other non-manual backgrounds and skilled manual backgrounds’ (2010, p.137). It is interesting that this applies to mature students also, although many of this sample are younger mature students who would share most of the characteristics of students a few years their junior. It would be interesting, but beyond the scope of this work, to look at the distribution of various social groups among different courses in FE. There is great demand for some courses and entry is quite competitive. Others have less exacting entry requirements, especially when students are needed to fill classes. As well as my own intuition and anecdotal evidence, there is some research which suggests that ‘those from lower socio-economic groups are concentrated in courses which are less prestigious and consequently those which offer lower occupational status prospects’ (Lennon, 1998).

Financial support

Twenty of those surveyed said they work part-time, eight mentioned parental support, ten were supported by a spouse and twenty-nine were on VTOS or Social Welfare, including the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). Many of the younger mature students live with their parents. I suspect that some do not consider this support. In general, there are fewer students working part-time now than during the boom years. One student claimed to be working full-time while at college. VTOS and BTEA are essential supports and their availability is often a crucial factor in decisions to return to education.

Reasons for coming back to education

Twenty cited interest as their reason for taking their course. Seventy said they came back to get a qualification.

Although a qualification was the stated motivation of seventy of the respondents, this is not the whole story as many other motivations and circumstances impact on the decision to return. This is further examined in the interviews.

Reasons for coming to a Further Education College

Nineteen of the respondents said they wanted to do a specific course only available in FE. Six said they wanted to try out education having been out of it for a while and sixty-eight gave the level of the course and the structure of FE as their reason.

FE offers many courses not available in other sectors or courses with a specific vocational orientation. Colleges are often known for certain vocational areas such as animation or theatre and attract students because of their reputation. Fees in FE are considerably lower than HE or private sector providers. Many occupations now require a qualification where formerly they did not. For example workers in crèches now need a level 5 award.

The vocational approach of FE courses suits many students and employers and in many cases offers progression to HE if this is wanted. Some FETAC one-year courses, although vocational in structure and intent, are not, in many areas, sufficient preparation for direct entry to the workplace. Many students, especially mature students, do a one year course because they lack the requirements for a two year course or because they want to see how they like the subject area and see how they get on.

Included in the sixty-eight students who cited the level and structure of the course as their reason for coming to FE would be a considerable number who did not have the qualifications to go to HE directly and those who saw FE as an intermediate step in progressing to HE. These students wanted to see how they got on in FE and felt the experience would give them more confidence and they would be better equipped to cope with HE when they got there. Many school leavers who are qualified to go to HE come to FE for the same reason. This supports the findings in 'Hidden Disadvantage' (2010, p. 138) which also mentions that there are serious issues over the opportunities to progress from FE to HE. Many see FE as more 'user-friendly' and less intimidating than HE. It represents less of a time commitment and smaller financial investment. FE

is perceived as being more personal and supportive than HE. There is often less cultural distance as the colleges are often familiar to students from the area and they would have known people who attended and in some cases would have done their Junior and Leaving Certificate there themselves (see question below). Those who attended a vocational school are two and a half times more likely to participate in FE (McCoy et al. 2010, p.122). Put another way, the habitus of the colleges are not as foreign to them as the institutional cultures of HE.

Reasons for coming to this particular college

Sixty-one of the one hundred students surveyed said the reputation of the college, twenty-five said a friend recommended it. Seventeen mentioned convenience as a factor. The interviews confirmed the importance of personal contacts, being aware of the college in the neighbourhood and its convenience. Only twelve mentioned career guidance which I found surprising given the large number of younger mature students and effort put into promoting CDVEC further education colleges among guidance counselors in secondary schools and elsewhere.

Experience of FE – most enjoyable aspects

Sixty-five of the respondents said the course was the most enjoyable aspect of being a student in FE, forty-five said the social aspect. Thirty-one said the pleasant atmosphere and thirty-four said the friendly and approachable staff. Many students from the other non-manual group are more likely to have disengaged from secondary school and left unsure of what they wanted to do. When work was available during the boom years, this was an attractive option. Becoming unemployed is crucial in the decision to return to education. The climate of FE is significantly different to secondary school and many younger and older mature students find this a welcome surprise. First names are used for students and staff and the atmosphere is friendly, supportive and encouraging. This is mentioned repeatedly in the questionnaire and interviews as being very important in the decision to come to FE and stay.

Experience of FE – least enjoyable aspects

Thirty-six of the respondents said lack of money was the least enjoyable aspect, twenty-eight said juggling other commitments, twenty-one said assignments and ten said younger students.

Some students had left jobs to come back to education, most came because they had become unemployed. It is likely that they are comparing their financial situation now with when they were working. Students on VTOS and BTEA keep their benefits and receive other allowances. They are not worse off because they are in education.

Summarise your experience of FE

The respondents were overwhelmingly positive in their comments on their experience of FE and their decision to return. Only one was disappointed.

Conclusion

The questionnaire was very useful in giving a broad overview of the mature student body in the college and the issues affecting them. It is, inevitably, interpreted in the light of my own experience, knowledge and sensitivity. The stories of individual students that unfolded in the focus group and interviews provide a more personal account of the experience of being a mature student.

The Focus Group

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, I conducted a focus group made up of students I knew or who were recommended to me. This was part of the initial broad exploration of the area 'to see what came up.' I had some general issues from my reading and experience to prompt discussion if necessary and I hoped the interaction within the group would provide issues that could be followed up later in individual interviews. I started by explaining that I was conducting some research on the subject of mature students and I was hoping to hear what they considered important issues and something of their own experience. In this section I want to give a brief account of the conversation and the main issues that arose. There is a more detailed discussion of these topics in Chapter 6

The participants were: (Pseudonyms are used)

Lisa A 29 year-old woman who had just finished a two year diploma in Social Studies, a single parent with two children.

Brenda A 48 year-old woman, married with grown up children who had just finished a two year diploma in Radio having previously done a one year Return to Learning course. About to progress into year 3 of a degree course.

John A 42 year-old man who had just finished a one year FETAC Art course. He is not married and has no children. He intends to progress to another course next year, if he continues to get the Back to Education Allowance.

Only one of the three had come back to education with a particular vocational goal in mind, and that had changed since. They all had a long-held desire to come back and all said they loved the course they were doing. For Brenda, the poor economic situation and her children being independent gave her the opportunity and incentive to come back. She did the Return to Learning course as she had been out of education for many years and wanted a gentle introduction. She had not, at that stage, envisaged continuing. John had been feeling unhappy in his job and had been saving for some time with a view to returning to education. Like Brenda, he did not have a particular vocational focus but decided to take a course that he thought would interest him. Lisa wanted a specific course as she knew the general area she wanted but changed the specific focus during her time on the course. Two spoke of the financial hardship, having to work part-time, and take care of children and all talked of the necessity to manage their time well. Lisa worked part-time 16-24 hours a week. Responsibilities and financial issues were two of the major issues they saw as separating them from younger students.

It's one of the drawbacks of waking up a third of the way through your life and saying 'I think I'll go back to school'. What'll the bank manager think?
(Lisa)

Lisa, who has children in school, said that balancing domestic and college responsibilities was a big issue and that it was impossible to separate from concerns about children and this often impacted on college life.

It's the responsibility as well. You could be sitting here and much as you shouldn't have your phone on, you have to keep it on. You might have to leave. (Lisa)

She also felt guilty about depriving her children of her time and attention and decided to postpone her place in HE.

I owe my children two more years. I was offered a place in Maynooth and I actually turned it down because my daughter is ten and she would be going into first year when I'd be doing my final exams. It's her turn now. (Lisa)

She was particularly critical of younger students, and had the support of the others.

I found the younger people in my class drove me insane. They drove me absolutely crazy to be honest and I'd say I speak for all the mature students. The young people in my class, they drove me nuts. (Lisa)

There were quite a few people there just to waste the time, basically.
(John)

They found that many young students lacked the focus they had and many were badly behaved.

I have to be honest, I felt like a freak...when you're around young people...totally different attitudes, different outlooks...(Brenda)

They agreed that their experience and knowledge of the world and the workplace set them apart from younger students. When prompted they agreed that an age balance was probably a good thing and there were aspects of younger students they enjoyed and ways they learned from them.

I found there were a lot of younger people in my class so you feel like you're taking care of them ...but I ended up learning a lot from them. Because I wasn't as up to date on computers as they were...they were whizz kids, like computers were second nature to them. I did, I learned a lot from them. (Brenda)

Another topic they all agreed on was that this (college) was their world that they were invading.

But isn't it their world though? We're invading it ...this is the natural progression for people of their age. We're coming back...they're straight out of school going to college...this is their world. (Lisa)

Absolutely...because. like I mean...when I was...when I got the course I was...at the back of my mind I was thinking ..God, you know I've probably taken a child's place. (Brenda)

I was surprised that his had arisen and that there was such unanimity and strong feelings. I pursued this later in the individual interviews and none of the participants shared this view. Neither did I come across such strong feelings about younger students more generally. It was acknowledged that while they could be annoying, it was just their age and you couldn't expect them to have the same outlook and focus as older people. Similarly, none of the interviewees agreed with the focus group's suggestion that it would be a good idea for mature students to have a special room set aside for them. They saw this as unnecessary and potentially divisive.

If the mature students had their own room like you could go up...not all the time, just sometimes. (Brenda)

Yeah, and if there was someone there you could talk to. We'd know why that room was there like...(Brenda)

They all agreed too, that they had found the college very supportive. They enjoyed college enormously and benefited from it.

It was better than I thought it was going to be. I'm really happy that I did come back. (Lisa)

I suppose it's just being confident about myself ...it's made me believe in myself I can accomplish ...I'm not so stupid like (laughs) (Brenda)

I learned so much about who I was. (John)

yes, it has changed me, I'll never go back to the person I was before I started college. (Brenda)

The focus group was useful in that it raised issues that I explored later in the interviews. The idea of 'unfinished business' was prominent and a long held desire to revisit formal education as well as the vocational motivation, however vague and unformed in some cases. Certainly all the participants felt they had enjoyed being in further education and had changed as a result. This was expressed largely in terms of confidence, self image and 'seeing things differently.' This tended to be a general feeling not connected to any specific new skill or competency.

Time management and finance were issues especially for those with children and there was agreement that mature students were more focused. The strength of the feeling of

annoyance with younger students surprised me as did the notion that they were ‘invading their world’.

The focus group format did not allow for in-depth exploration of topics as I was conscious of not asking about personal issues or probing deeply in this context. The participants said they were glad of the opportunity to discuss these issues and found the exercise beneficial.

Profiles of the participants

In this section I want to give a brief biography of three of the mature students I interviewed, two others, Peter and Caroline, are discussed in greater detail. I believe their stories contribute to understanding some of the diversity of mature students in further education and some of the themes they share. The first three students, James, Vera and Daniel, were selected at random and Peter and Caroline as, by chance, I had more opportunities for discussions with them.

Where possible I have tried to use the students’ own words to tell their stories. I was anxious that the wholeness and integrity of the stories would demonstrate the complexity of their histories and experiences and the many personal and structural factors that contributed to shaping them. It is not intended that these profiles contribute to generalisable conclusions but that they offer personal accounts and insights and make real the sometimes abstract discussion of ‘mature students’ and the factors that shape them and contribute to the overall aim of exploring their experience. I was extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity of a second interview with most and other conversations to clarify points and work with the participants on interpretations of the material. I have been careful that the participants would not be misrepresented, however, as West (1996, p. 32) points out, ‘an understanding of these learners and such experiences requires more of an imaginative empathy than a cool detachment: an ability to immerse oneself sympathetically in another’s world in all its messy and contradictory confusion.’

At this stage I tried to avoid overly interpreting the accounts or engaging with the literature as the intention is to remain close to the personal accounts of the participants. Their stories introduce in a personal context many of the themes discussed later.

Name	Age	M/F	1or 2 yr course	In year 1or 2	Course	Previous courses	Trigger
Caroline	35	F	2	1	Social Studies	None	Became unemployed
James	56	M	2	2	Business	RTL FETAC	Became unemployed
Vera	49	F	1	1	Return to Learning	None	Became unemployed
Peter	55	M	-	Now in HE	Ex-Social Care	FETAC BTEC	Unemployed and opportunity
Maeve	50	F	1	1	Art	Various	Children independent
Abbey	35	F	2	2	Social Studies	FETAC	Time was right
Aoife	32	F	1	1	Return to Learning	None	Became unemployed
Daniel	53	M	1	1	Business	FETAC	Became unemployed
Jason	61	M	1	1	Business	FETAC	Became unemployed

Figure 5.2 Interview participants

James

James is a fifty-six year old local man who had worked in the same business since he had left school at sixteen until a few years ago when the firm closed down. He is single and lives locally. He liked school and was told he was good at it but ‘didn’t get a chance to finish.’ He says he came back to education because he got the opportunity. An advisor in Obair, who he knew through football, recommended he come to the college and this was the first time he had considered it and thought ‘it might be interesting.’ He had often passed the college but had never been in it. He found the college welcoming and enrolled on the Return to Learning course. He saw this as ‘a chance to finish what you didn’t get a chance to do at the time’. He enjoyed the course very much and was particularly pleased to develop a competence with computers. At the end of this course he was keen to progress and was accepted onto a FETAC

business course and from there went onto a two-year BTEC business course. He finds the course demanding but likes it very much. Part of the difficulty was overcoming the barrier of the terminology.

...getting used to all that terminology, I think that's what it is, it's getting used to all the terminology..if it was all written in plain English I could understand it better.

He is extremely positive about his experience of FE which has exceeded his expectations, and he spoke particularly about the social element, the importance of being known in the college and the supportive staff. He feels that his horizons have broadened considerably since he came. He felt confident enough to get involved with the local community radio station and he now has a regular sports programme of which he is very proud. Overall he feels his social circle and competencies have broadened and his social and cultural capital have increased in ways he had not envisaged.

Confidence, yeah. And doing those programmes on the radio has helped and the course, meeting all the people in the college, all of that has helped, I suppose, to bring out the real me.

When I asked about 'the real me' he spoke of being at a 'bit of a low ebb' before coming back. Now he says he's 'back to what you could call me, and a little bit further.'

He is tolerant of younger people although he feels some are immature, the mixture can be very good.

James is thinking of progressing to an IT when he finishes, which was not part of his thinking when he was coming into the college. He frequently mentioned 'taking one step at a time' but now he is aware of possibilities that never occurred to him before.

Vera

Vera came to do the Return to Learning course when the local business she had worked in for many years closed. She is very focused on getting work, 'more of a career rather than a job' and sees this as a step towards that. She came to the college

when it was recommended by an acquaintance and had not been aware of such courses anywhere.

Vera grew up in Dublin and left school at sixteen to do a secretarial course with a view to getting a job. This was the norm for her at that time. 'You weren't really geared towards a career, especially with girls.' Of six children, only one did the Leaving Certificate, the others did apprenticeships. Vera did reasonably well in school but was keen to get a job.

I never would think of going on to college, at that time, I didn't think I'd want to be a teacher or a nurse or anything like that. It just never entered my head that that's what I'd want to do or think about doing.

She always wanted to go back to education especially when she saw how her children were being taught in school compared with her experience, 'It was just so different and enjoyable'. She also felt uninformed and when the business closed she wanted to have 'something on my CV'. She had hoped to come back the previous year but took the year out to recover from illness. She was nervous about coming back and conscious of her age and being 'older than the teacher' and feels that her classmates are asking the same question she is, 'what's she going to do with this?' Not to 'do something' with it would be a waste for her and she was hoping to progress to another course next year and was taking it 'one step at a time'.

She's enjoying the course and once she got over the hurdle of the first assignment felt a sense of achievement and confidence.

I know what I'm doing, this is brilliant, I actually know what I'm doing, the answers are flowing out, and the words are flowing out...

Her family and friends are encouraging and she thinks her 'dinner table conversation has improved'. She is not irritated by younger students, 'I've five of my own, it's like home from home', but she does consider herself more focused and diligent than the younger mature students in her class and thinks they might see her as 'a bit of a swot.' She sees the course as 'a bit of a luxury' but at the same time, a necessity, if a better job is to come at the end. Being without income is a sacrifice but she is enjoying the

course more than she expected. “You kind of feel a little bit guilty. You know, I say ‘I’m loving this’ at the same time.”

Vera sees becoming a grandmother and coming back to education as having changed her outlook. She is now conscious of her legacy, ‘I want to leave something behind’ and feels her education allows her to do this differently. ‘It wouldn’t be there without the education...it would be just the usual passing on motherly and grandmotherly things.’ It seems as though she does not value these ‘grandmotherly’ ways of knowing very highly. She feels more confident that that knowledge is now validated. ‘It’s nice to know that sometimes your instincts were right’. She also feels she can relate to her sons differently.

I even know now, having a conversation with my sons, the older ones especially, that I’m more in tune with them and I can talk about things that I wouldn’t have talked about before. They would have been just mother things, you know, now it’s more.

Vera’s stated motives for coming back were entirely vocational and that is still her main focus, ‘I genuinely have to get a job. That’s the priority’ she was surprised at how much she gained from the experience.

I didn’t think I’d have the appetite I have for the education. I thought it was just a means to an end, that’s the way I was looking at it in the beginning.

Daniel

Daniel left school at sixteen. He is now fifty-three. He was made redundant from his job and did a two-year night course in an IT and then a one year FETAC course. He was hoping to get a job in a similar area as he had a lot of experience but realised he would need ‘some papers as well.’ He had a bad experience of school with ‘the brothers’ and for secondary school he went to the ‘Tec’ which was a considerable improvement. He left after the Group certificate.

He came back ‘to up-skill’ but found the social side of college hugely important. One of the main disadvantages of being unemployed for him was the lack of contact with others, ‘it’s just like a silence...and I just hate that.’ He enjoys college greatly although he finds some of the subjects difficult and frustrating and thinks that extra subject support for those in difficulty would be of special benefit to mature students.

He feels his ability is improving and his academic ambitions are growing, 'I haven't got a distinction yet, I'd love a distinction.' He prefers to get work done in college and stays late to avoid bringing assignment home. 'Like a nine-to-five job: this is my work'. He thinks a lot of the younger students are 'there for the laugh' but is very tolerant; 'you understand that's their age, we were all like that at one time.'

Although he wants to get a job, he would not consider his time in education wasted if this were not to happen 'education is never a waste of time.' He finds he knows 'what's going on' and can understand current affairs very much better and has more interest in them.

When I hear people talking about why they're doing things...like the elections there...you might be sitting in front of the TV and you'd understand what's going on, that's important. You know what's going on.

Another example of his new confidence, he said, was his willingness to question and challenge things he just would have accepted previously. Daniel is not considering progressing after this course as his priority is to get a job. He feels he is much better equipped to do so now.

Profiles: Caroline and Peter

Caroline

When I spoke with her to arrange the interview, Caroline struck me as a confident, pleasant, direct woman. The interview took place in my office in the college. Caroline is 35 years of age and had been made redundant from her job with a government agency. She felt she had been quite good at school and had liked it. She left early because she was offered a full-time job in a supermarket and the family needed the income. She worked there for eight years before going into the care area. She wanted to continue to work in the care area and realised she needed a qualification to do this. She is very committed to care work and had done voluntary as well as paid work with various organisations catering for homeless men, the elderly and people with disabilities.

I've always worked with people, you know? I don't know why the care area, I think it's because there are so many vulnerable people

She was familiar with the college as she lived in the area and had started studying for the leaving certificate there before she left to work and felt she had a good experience in the college. She has two children of 12 and 14. Her family, especially her father, valued education and praised her achievements at school.

We were always very encouraged with education, from me father, like you know, he was devastated that I'd left school. His emphasis was always on education.

Her father had been prevented taking up a scholarship to secondary school because of poverty, but had always maintained an interest in education. He was an avid reader and had a range of friends that Caroline thought was unusual for a man of his class. He clearly had a big influence on Caroline.

My father was very very intelligent, you know...I mean he was fluent in Irish and he still, he read books right up to the time he died. He was very aware socially...

I asked Caroline if getting a qualification was the only reason she had come back to education.

It was always something I said I was going to do. To be honest with you, I feel that if we had been pushed more in schools back then, to stay in school, and we had've been made more aware of what the benefits of staying in school were, you, ..You know, maybe it would have...

This was a significant and common theme in the interviews. Some felt they had 'missed out' by not having the opportunity to continue in education at the time or said that they had not been encouraged by schools that had limited expectations for children from their area. Some had bad experiences in school. Common also was the coming together of external factors and internal motivations creating 'the right time'. Caroline had the internal desire to come back to education and this coincided with being made redundant and her daughters being at an age when they were both in secondary school giving Caroline the opportunity to avail of full-time education. '

Despite feeling she had missed out, Caroline was adamant that she benefited more from education by being older and appreciated it more. Unlike younger students who, she thought, see assignments as a pain, she saw them as a 'learning opportunity.' She

felt that some of the younger ones did not appreciate the opportunity they had. In general she thought the various age groups mixed well and was against any special facilities being provided for mature students as it might lead to separateness. She felt too, that having experience in the care area she had an advantage and the academic discussions of policy meant a lot more to her.

... the likes of policy and procedure...like some of the care areas I did work in, we wouldn't even be told, do you know? I think it's really opened me eyes, definitely.

Later, when speaking about her work experience and college studies about addiction:

Well, seeing things differently, definitely, em ... it has definitely changed my attitude, it's definitely been a big, big eye-opener.

She also felt she had developed greater empathy and more social awareness. She feels her daughters have benefited too.

I think another point is that my children being the age they are, I can share my knowledge with them and it has greatly benefited them also, it has made them more aware and more empathic as well.

Although Caroline found the college hours fitted in well with her children's school times, there were occasions, particularly to do with work experience, when there were problems. She developed the strategy of involving her daughters with her work and prepared them for when her busy times or assignments are coming up. Like many mature students with young children, she waits until they are in bed before starting her college work.

I wait till the kids are in bed before I start, because I don't want to be sitting there on a computer all day...the only disadvantage is that you can get carried away and sit up till half four, not realising I was up in three hours...

This has obvious disadvantages and creates its own stresses and despite the good timetable in college, juggling was still a problem. In a follow up interview Caroline was more direct about the difficulties.

I feel I'm failing as a parent because. ...I'm trying to cram in assignments too. I'm not putting as much dedication into the kids as I normally would.

All students with young children admit to a degree of balancing. Many have to drop children to school and are late for college. It is common for many students, of all ages, to miss days or have to deal with issues to do with children. The Return to Learning course, which caters specifically for mature students, starts classes later in the morning to facilitate the school run. Students in other courses who have children have to make their own informal arrangements with individual teachers or course tutors. Many put off coming back or progressing until children are older. Caroline felt that mature students should have an input into the organisation of work experience as this could prove especially difficult to balance. In general, though Caroline felt that there was great support from the tutors in the college.

Well, I feel there's great support here, to be honest with you. I find that if you've any problems at all, like if you go to M (course co-ordinator) or N (tutor) like, they're great; I think there is great support.

She sees the support and the general atmosphere as a key component in learning. She contrasts her experience of FE with her own strict schooling and with friends who went to UCD where she thinks she would have been 'in way over my head.' Other mature students speak highly of the support and encouragement in the college. They speak of the overall atmosphere and the college as a place they enjoy coming to. They frequently mention being able to talk to tutors and felt that being known and addressed by name was a major factor in facilitating their learning and greatly enhanced the overall experience. They are aware that the same level of support and recognition may not be available in HE. Care and support are significant themes that will be examined later.

Academically, Caroline is now confident and like many mature students saw the first assignment as a major hurdle and landmark in her career in college. Although she had plenty to say, it was not knowing exactly what was expected and structuring of the work that caused her great anxiety.

...although I'd be really good at writing words, you know like, it was putting it together, the structure of it, quite challenging, in the beginning because I was so unsure of myself as well, constantly asking myself 'is this going to work?'

The first assignment in college is very significant for mature students. An assignment is graded and carries with it all the connotations of being assessed and judged in what

for most is a strange or new area demanding different skills they feel they have not got. It is generally a written piece produced on a computer, which can in itself be a big challenge, and many feel that they are exposing what they consider their weaknesses in this area. It can cause great anxiety and can be important in determining whether a student, of any age, will continue. This is so even in the climate of encouragement and support that was mentioned. It can also be, and generally is, a major confidence booster and most students, like Caroline, are pleasantly surprised by how well they do.

and when I'd be getting them back I was getting all distinctions, I think I was kinda shocked to be honest with you, em ... really pleased, but shocked, like I'd really underestimated my own ability.

This success marks an acceptance into the student role and a feeling of entitlement to be there. The new confidence in academic prowess carries over in other areas of students' lives and is the most often cited benefit of returning to education. Caroline said she came to the college because she wanted a qualification to work in the care area. She feels much better equipped for this but acknowledges that the benefits go beyond the immediate vocational motivation.

... even if I didn't work in the social care system, it's not something I'd regret. It's definitely something that I feel has kinda opened my eyes to people in general, it does make you a better person.

Peter

I interviewed Peter in my office in the college. He is a pleasant, good humoured thoughtful man of fifty-five and is currently doing a course in a HEI having spent three years in the college. He did a one-year FETAC course followed by a two-year course in Social Studies. He was the eldest child and grew up in a large town in the south of the country where his parents were well known and respected business people. They ran a family firm which had existed for generations. His father had been studying law but gave it up to run the business when his father died. Peter said the business demanded much of his parents' attention and as a result his upbringing was 'difficult'. After a very unhappy initial education with the Christian Brothers he was sent to a well known boarding school in Dublin. He had a good relationship with his father, 'a thoroughly decent nice man' but not with his mother, 'a matriarch'. Peter was dyslexic, which was then unrecognized, and he had a very bad experience in school where he was physically and psychologically abused and written off as a

‘dunce’. His family, especially his mother, had a strong work ethic and were equally unsympathetic. ‘Because my results were poor it was my fault. I was getting it from two sides’ He was taken out of school at sixteen and went to Kevin Street (Dublin Institute of Technology) where he did a diploma to acquire skills that would be useful in the practical aspects of the family business. He was surprised he got through as he was ‘completely unable to read or write.’ He described his school and college career as ‘a nightmare’. He knew he was not fitting into the expectation of his family and class where it was presumed that he would go to college. At home, his illiteracy prevented him from doing anything other than manual work and he was treated as ‘the lad at home, the boy.’ His position was made worse when contrasted with the academic and business success of his younger siblings.

...people who qualified were treated better because education was looked on as something; it was valued, and the fact that I couldn't accomplish it...I was undervalued as a result of it.

Peter worked very hard, ‘often sixteen hours a day, six days a week’ in this capacity in the business for nearly thirty years. In the first interview he glossed over this in a sentence and moved on to the next stage of his career. In a follow up interview I asked him about this and he explained how his life had been affected by his illiteracy, and family dynamics and expectations. ‘I glossed over it because I wanted to leave it behind me.’ He felt his choices were curtailed by his lack of education.

Education gave people the freedom to move, to make choices. I didn't have that. I was stuck.

Peter was very aware of his lack of education and the cultural and social capital that went with it. His sense of being stigmatised was made worse by thinking that he had had opportunities but did not or could not avail of them. When the business closed Peter felt he lost out in the division of assets ‘because I was seen as not deserving of it’. He felt his status as a single man further added to his marginalisation. He went to work part-time with a relative in his business as a temporary measure where again his illiteracy limited his role.

Although this subject matter was painful and difficult, Peter was willing to talk about it. He had acquired some perspective on his situation and mentioned some insights he

had acquired, through his study of psychology and sociology. He was aware that his account was partial and that his siblings could have a different account of what went on in the family. He recognised too, that despite the unsatisfactory aspects of his circumstances, when the business closed, 'it was like a bereavement.' His status, relationships and daily contacts had gone. As with many other mature students the trauma of being made redundant started a process of evaluation and was a catalyst for further change.

Peter was diagnosed with dyslexia when he was twenty-five but continued to disguise the condition. 'I was always ashamed I couldn't read or write...you tend to disguise it.' Five year ago he heard a radio programme on the subject of dyslexia and applied for a course they mentioned. Altogether he spent fourteen months on the course which was run by FÁS and the dyslexia association and made considerable progress. Learning to type and to use the spell check was a breakthrough, 'it opened a new world to me.' He was encouraged to continue in education and as ideally he would like to be either a nurse or a teacher, applied for a one year course in the college. He was not fully aware of the nature of the course and was shocked when he realised how heavy the workload was. This caused him considerable anxiety. However, he did extremely well and finished with the highest grades in all subjects and progressed to the two year diploma course in Social Studies where he did equally well. He was pleasantly surprised and delighted with his success and considers it a major achievement. 'I got all distinctions. That never happened for me in school. It was brilliant.' He found it a major challenge coming to FE from the more relaxed course he had done 'learning how to spell and write and the computer.' He frequently thought of giving up. However he persevered with the help of what he considered great support.

The classes were small, which was great, you know the lecturers on an individual basis, they know your name and you can talk to them...there was an understanding of the problem.

Although he did not focus on it to a great extent, it was clear that being a mature student in a college with mainly younger people, was an extra source of stress. Although he made an effort to engage with everyone, he recognised, as most mature

students do, that an eighteen year-old naturally has different interests to someone of his age.

when you get older your interests gravitate to something else. Then you stick out like a sore thumb in a classroom and you're aware of that too, well aware of that.

Peter also had a scribe who was also a reader but found learning difficult.

My modus of learning is very primitive, it's basically regurgitating stuff, I know I understand it, but it's memory, There was a period of time I was just going to throw it in, but I stuck with it and came away with all distinctions which was very very good.

Despite this success and support he finds college something of an ordeal.

'I found it a struggle...I wish I didn't have to do it...I always go to college in a state of anxiety. College always fills me with fear, even at my stage now and the idea of, you know, what happens to you when you're young has a bearing on...you know, Freud... into your latter years...you can see it with dyslexia anyway...'

He is strongly motivated by a desire to work in nursing, teaching or the care area and sees college as a necessary step on the way.

I wish I didn't have to do it...I wish it was the other way round that I had the qualification. To get work I need a qualification, badly, so that's what I'm aiming for. That piece of paper is important.

His preferred career is in disability nursing or, if that does not work out, social care working with people with disabilities. He altruistically wants 'to give' and works part-time, voluntarily caring for people with severe disabilities.

I'd have to be a social care worker with people with disability, I would gravitate towards them, I can empathise more...I suppose that could be a subliminal reason...From my point of view, it would be a waste if I couldn't help someone with my skills and if I get paid for it well and good. That's the idea of it. I know it's a bit late in life, but anyway...

The idea of *having to use* his education came up a number of times in our discussion. I asked what if none of these career plans worked out.

It would have been a waste. And if I couldn't get a job and I couldn't give, I'd feel it was an enormous waste of effort and time and ...I would, I have to say that.

He recognises that at his age he may well not succeed in getting paid work in the area. Despite these comments and feeling that his time in college was a daily struggle, he clearly has quite mixed feelings, which he acknowledged in subsequent conversations, about his more recent encounter with the education system. He considers it 'time well spent' and in common with many other mature students feels 'it's a pity it didn't happen earlier.' When I asked him what he got from his time in FE, Peter said

'I enjoyed my time here, that's what I have to tell you, I got a lot of self-esteem.' My self esteem has gone up enormously and my idea of who I am as a person ...I value myself more, do you understand?

The struggle clearly had rewards and self-esteem was a huge benefit to Peter. He also felt he gained recognition from others too and saw his qualifications as a manifestation of this.

By doing the course here, by getting the pre-nursing, by getting the social studies diploma it meant that I had a qualification, to work, with high value, you know what I mean? And that's what this college gave me, if that explains it to you.

I'm able to put expression to the knowledge I've acquired which is important to me. I can talk to you about what I've learned and I can discourse with other people on psychology or sociology in a way I couldn't before.

In discussing the difficulties and anxiety involved in doing the course, Peter later said,

What's for you if you don't do it? You're probably sitting at home drawing the dole. That's worse. The alternative is worse, I'd have remained the same.

Peter here recognizes with Marcia (2010, p.27) that 'Change or die is true both evolutionarily and psychologically.'

Peter always liked learning but felt cut off from education by not being able to read and write. All his information was acquired aurally. Learning to use the computer, an important milestone for many mature students, was a major breakthrough: 'I could type...it was marvelous...the words and the spelling correction... Without that, I think education would have been closed to me.' He frequently said he like the subject matter and learning and used the telling phrase 'it's a pity I couldn't enjoy it.' indicating the cloud cast by the daily grind of working with dyslexia and the burden

he carried. He also, interestingly, remarked ‘education can give you the tools to deal with the past.’

It was always in the back of my mind I failed somehow - I failed their expectations (his parents) and my expectations.

He acknowledges the element of chance in hearing the radio programme that started his journey.

I'm getting my education at the end of my time...that's how the opportunity presented itself, the programme on the radio, otherwise I wouldn't have gone back to education, I'd probably be stacking shelves in Dunne's Stores or something like that.

It was fortunate that Peter happened to hear the programme. However, this had to coincide with his receptiveness. Clearly he was at something of a crossroads, his part-time job was temporary and unsatisfactory and he was open to change. ‘The time was right’ for Peter. He saw his academic career so far as a considerable achievement.

Of all the achievements that I've done... all that I've done in life...this would top it.

During my two interviews and many casual conversations with Peter two other aspects of importance in his life emerged. The first was that during the decades of working unhappily in the business he had developed a hobby which gave him great satisfaction and a social outlet. He bred and trained dogs on a very small scale and had some significant successes. This ‘passion’ which he shared with his father and contributed to the bond between them, he saw, in retrospect, as developing the nurturing side of his personality as he had an ‘affinity with animals’ and allowing him a focus away from his other concerns.

He also said he now ‘has someone’ who supports and encourages him, *my rock* without whom he said he could not do what he’s doing. He feels he is now getting the kind of support that was not available to him as a younger person.

As well as the personal side to the story, Peter was aware of himself as ‘a middle class person’ enmeshed with middle class values, expectations of education and status

which he recognises are ‘part of the mix.’ Class expectations appear, not always as explicitly, in the accounts of other mature students too.

For Peter, the three years he spent at a further education college was part of a progression that began with the course targeting his dyslexia. He has since progressed to a course in a third level institution now where he is now doing very well having been presented with a new set of challenges. Larger classes, lack of supports and accommodations and the remoteness of teaching staff ‘you have to email them, for someone like me, that’s a barrier’ contrast with his time in FE.

The support he received along the way has been critical for Peter and although his motivation for returning to education was stated as vocational, there was clearly much more to it than this.

Conclusion

Some common themes and tentative findings emerged from initial data collection and participants’ stories which were explored in further interviews. The idea of the appropriate time to return to education arose. In many cases this was characterised by an opportunity presented by the end of one role, such as a job or being a full-time carer, and a need to retrain or to act on a long-held desire to make up for ‘missing out.’ The influence of class and gender expectations was also evident in these accounts, as were the challenges that the mature students had to deal with. There was agreement on the importance of support both within the college and from significant others. It was clear too, that ‘confidence’ was a major benefit of participation.

Johnston and Merrill (2004, p2) suggests, ‘particular life stories demonstrate how learning experiences are shaped by the dialectics of agency and structure.’ The profiles of the participants were presented to give a sense of the reality and authenticity of the experience of these students and to illustrate the complexity of their lives and identities and what education means to them. These stories are discussed more thematically in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

THEMES FROM THE RESEARCH

Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the themes that have emerged from the data as a result of the analysis and make up the three categories of Latent Self, Emerging Self and Revised Self. The methodology chapter outlined how these themes emerged.

I draw here on Baxter and Britton's research (1999) and their notion of the 'latent self,' a term they use to describe feelings of unfulfilled potential, feeling capable of more or feeling unhappy in their career expressed by the students in their study. I use it here as an umbrella term to describe the student on entering further education and the circumstances that lead to the decision to come. It includes a number of extrinsic and intrinsic factors that came together and impacted on the decision. It describes the feeling that many of the students expressed in the interviews that an aspect of their personality was neglected. This concept is explored further in the following chapter which takes a more theoretical perspective.

In keeping with a grounded theory analysis I have grouped the key initial codes into concepts. Groups of similar concepts have been organised into categories.

Data	Initial Coding	Focused coding. Themes Sub-categories	Concept
I left school at 14.	Leaving school early.	Missing out.	Latent self
I always wanted to go back.	Missed out	Right time. Needing a qualification	
My kids were older.	Children grown.		
I lost my job.	Became unemployed	Change /opportunity	
Needing a qualification	Needing a qualification		

Data	Initial Coding	Focused coding Themes Sub-categories	Concept
It's hectic I want to get a Distinction It's given me confidence	Difficulty managing everything Wanting good grades Confidence	Anxieties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Juggling commitments • First assignment • Computer competence • Fear of failure Ambitious Benefits of being older Supportive staff Confidence	Emerging self

Figure 6.1 Initial and focused coding

Latent self

In this section I will deal with the three subcategories of this concept:

- The Right Time
- Always wanted to go back/Missing out
- Needed a qualification

These emerged from the coding and they come together to give a fuller understanding of what I mean by ‘the latent self’ as a key finding.

The right time

Many of the participants said things that are best brought together to make a theme indicating that returning to school happened at the right time. It was primarily a sense that one’s time had come as a result of a coalition or confluence of events. There was a sense of an opportune moment or an opportunity in the life story, usually filled with work, rearing children and other activities, that now this is ‘my time.’

Many said that becoming unemployed was the immediate trigger that made them consider returning to education. This was usually combined with a number of other factors that together resulted in the decision to enroll on a course. In a number of cases it was a chance encounter or recommendation that planted the idea of becoming a mature student. Others had previous experience of the college or knew of it from living in the area or knew someone who had attended. Only one of the participants

had decided on the course and the college by searching for what she wanted on the internet.

Many used the phrase 'it was the right time' to express this coming together of motive, means, opportunity and desire. There may be some common elements in what makes the time right, but it varies greatly from individual to individual and it is not a feature of exterior events alone. The 'right time' for Aoife was a culmination of simmering thinking over a long time and reassessment of what she wanted in her life personally and vocationally.

... it was something that I always wanted to do... I'd been thinking about it and thinking about it I decided yes, I will do it now...and this seemed like the right time. Aoife

Some (mostly women) considered it as an opportunity for some 'me time' having devoted many years to child rearing or paid work or both and saw coming back as something of an indulgence.

I was busy nurturing him over the years...it was time for myself. Maeve

My daughters were grown up and that so I had the time, you know. With the recession as well too, you know, there aren't that many jobs out there so it was a great chance for me to go back to college. It was just actually the right time for me to go back. Brenda

Always wanted to/Missing out

Many said that they had 'always wanted to go back' to education, most had liked school, or at least some aspects of it and felt that they had 'missed out' by having to leave school early. There was a feeling of 'unfinished business' a vague sense that things might have been different if they had continued or that they would have seen themselves differently if they had done the Leaving Certificate or followed a different career path. Clearly it was an important issue for the individuals who felt that an aspect of their identity had been neglected.

Circumstances at the time meant I didn't get the opportunity to finish. Maybe I could have gone on. Maybe I could have been working at something different.. (James)

Well, to be honest with you I think I always kind of felt like I'd missed out kind of by not going back to school, and only as I got older that I realised, you know? (Caroline)

This feeling of missing out, often combined with the opportunity presented by becoming unemployed and a recommendation or discussion with a contact made returning to education a real possibility rather than a vague aspiration. For others, children growing up and becoming independent provided the opportunity, some having postponed returning while their children were young. Some had always wanted to work in a different area (Caroline, Maeve, Abbey) and decided that the time was right for them to do it now. James felt he missed out but was happy enough in his job and it was only when he became unemployed, and it was suggested to him, that he came back.

Needing a qualification

The need for a qualification or 'something for the CV' was frequently mentioned. Some felt that although they had acquired knowledge and experience in previous work, they needed certification, 'the piece of paper' to seek another job or get employment in the area they wanted. A career change was seen as offering greater levels of satisfaction and some had a specific career and a specific course in mind sometimes involving progression to HE before they come to the college, others had a more general desire for a qualification that would make them more marketable. Some wanted to 'try it out' or thought 'it could be interesting'. Further education is often recommended by Obair and Social Welfare and the VTOS and BTEA schemes ensure that there is no loss of benefits and other incidental expenses are met. Whatever the stated reasons or incentives to come back, all of the interviewees wanted change of some kind which prompted them to take action.

Many of the participants said they came to the college because they needed a qualification to enable them to get another or different job. Or they realised that, having worked for many years, they now needed to upgrade or change their skills or to gain accreditation for the skills they had. This instrumental motivation is clear and reasonable and was often the first thing that the interviewees said to explain how they came to be in the college. Some had clear career paths in mind and were attending the course that would equip them for work in their chosen area or lead to specific further

courses. For most, however, it was not so straightforward. The decision to return had been less direct. They had become unemployed but going back to education had not been uppermost in their minds and they were acting on a suggestion, idea or a recommendation that had been smoldering within them for some time. They had a general and somewhat vague aim of getting a qualification or being seen as someone who was keen to up-skill and go to college rather than do nothing. They hoped that during the course of the year or two, their options would become clearer, which often turned out to be the case. Others had a stronger, more active desire to revisit education but with no specific course or career in mind.

In some cases the qualification was needed for more than vocational reasons. It represented something important to the person and gave a degree of recognition they felt they lacked. The vocational motivation came easily to mind when they were asked, but clearly there were many other motivations associated with it for the individual. This is discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Although many mature students hoped to be able to get a better or different job after college they were adamant that if this were not to happen they would still consider their time well spent. Some, however, believed that if they could not use their new knowledge and skills that it would be 'a waste'. 'Using' it meant using it to get work or in work

You get a lot from it, you feel that you're stretching yourself a lot more, you feel you're gaining information and knowledge, but at the end of the day if you can't apply it in work it's been kind of wasted. (Peter)

Peter made this point several times during our conversation and acknowledged that his views were somewhat contradictory. Although he considers that he benefited enormously from returning to education, he says he found it an extremely difficult process and he saw it as a means to an end. He wanted to get a qualification that would allow him to work in the social care area or to progress to nursing. Unlike the others, he said he felt he could not enjoy the process because of his dyslexia and history: 'The pity about the whole thing is that I couldn't enjoy it'. Later in the same interview he was more positive:

And, em...I enjoyed my time here, that's what I have to tell you. I look on it as time well spent. It's a pity it didn't happen earlier. It's been a metamorphosis. (Peter)

All the participants were keen to find employment some though were pessimistic about finding work because of their age or the recession.

I know I'm at a stage that even if I get qualified it may not be much good to me really, I kind of know that. Jason

In saying 'it may not be much good to me' Jason is using an instrumentalist discourse although he is aware of the 'good' it has done him in other areas. He is keen to progress to HE if he can afford it.' Finance is the only problem. 'When I'm finished this course, if I can afford to go further, I definitely would'. It was not uncommon to have a number of different discourses going on within the same interview showing, perhaps, the complex, sometimes contradictory motivations within the one individual. A conversational style interview is not necessarily going to produce logical, consistent reasoning. The respondents are often working out their thinking during the course of the discussion and the interpretation is constructed during the course of the dialogue. It is not a case of 'earlier you said something totally different' but recognising that someone may hold contradictory positions simultaneously.

Four (Abbey, Caroline, Patrick, Jason) said they would work in a voluntary capacity if they could not find paid work in their area and some (Jason, Patrick, James, Caroline) are already engaged in work in their communities. The focus was not entirely on traditional notions of work and their motivations more complex than 'I needed a qualification' on the questionnaire would indicate. This supports the finding in the report 'Where Next?' (McCoy et al., 2010, p.117) where mature graduates saw their degree primarily as a personal achievement.

Change

All of the students involved in this study had undergone change. Through becoming unemployed or their children growing up and becoming independent or through a decision to change career. Some had experienced other changes as well such as illness or bereavement. They had experienced loss; loss of aspects of their previous identity and loss of the way of life and connections that went with it. Their roles and sense of

self had already altered and created a need or openness or desire to return to education where the process of change would continue.

Emerging self

By the concept of the 'emerging self' I mean the processes that contribute the changes experienced by the individual during their time as a student to bring about a revised sense of self. I discuss here a number of issues which arose from the data and can be seen as challenges, developmental tasks or crises which, with adequate support, are successfully negotiated leading to the changes described by the students.

There are a number of subcategories to this concept:

- Becoming a mature student
- Juggling commitments
- Fear of failure – Am I up to it?
- First Assignment
- Support, enjoyment

Becoming a mature student

For mature students coming to FE is a major change and is usually accompanied by some feelings of apprehension and anxiety as well as more positive emotions. For some, their previous experience of education was not happy and their knowledge of FE and the structure of the education system generally is limited. Some passed by the college every day but had never been inside. There are also concerns about the subject matter and their ability to cope in what is a strange situation and new challenges. Many worry 'is it for me?' and that they will not be 'able for it' and fear showing themselves up. It is an area where some consider themselves somewhat alien as they see it as the preserve of young people who they see as more competent and familiar with the demands of education. Becoming a mature student is a non-normative transition which is an added stress and the support of peers and family may be lacking or muted. These can be major obstacles to overcome with considerable implications for the student's experience and the colleges.

At the beginning you do get a sense of overwhelming...will I be able to achieve this? Vera

When I saw the young people going up and down I said 'is this for me? am I doing the right thing?' Because I was going back to college, even though I felt it was a good idea....I just felt I didn't belong there. Daniel

Such feelings were not expressed by all and some did not experience any anxiety and were just keen to get in and start learning. All agreed, however, that what initial fears they had quickly vanished when they started their course. Anxiety about assignments and exams lasted longer for some, however.

Despite some degree of anxiety about coming to an FE college it did not take any of the participants long to settle in. All spoke of the supportive staff, pleasant atmosphere and how much they were enjoying the experience. Some spoke of the difficulties they were having with the workload or the subject matter but this was not presented as a major issue. Some questioned their abilities again when progressing to another course at a higher level within the college or elsewhere, but were generally quite confident at that stage. In considering teaching and learning, none of those interviewed thought mature students needed any special attention or different practices. Two suggested that extra tuition would be of help to those struggling in some subjects but stressed that this was something that would be of benefit to all, not just mature students.

Juggling

It is difficult to imagine any of the students I interviewed not juggling. This refers to the complex set of responsibilities and activities that go to make up the commitments and things that must be done as part of an adult life. They include taking care of a child or children, earning a living and negotiating relationships with partners and friends.

For many mature students, especially those with young children, the main difficulty lies in combining their role as a student with other roles as parent, carer or partner. This is not just a matter of having the supports in place for child minding and collecting from school, as there is a feeling of being constantly on call especially if a child is unwell or arrangements do not work out. For many, such concerns are 'running in the background' while in college and it can be hard to switch off and give all the attention to college matters. There are also, inevitably, times when college is

missed because other responsibilities take priority. It can mean 'rushing in and rushing out' with little time for conversation or cups of coffee with other students which are a huge source of support and satisfaction for mature students. For students with other demands, domestic or work, there was a necessity to use their time well and to try to make sure that children did not lose out. Some think that this can make them more focused and less tolerant of time wasters. They often have to do assignments after children went to bed and work late. Some felt guilty about not being as available to their children as they were before becoming a student. However, all the participants found their families very supportive and commented especially on the benefits for their children in terms of greater organisational ability and the knowledge and enthusiasm for learning they had passed on. All found the college and tutors understanding and accommodating.

Only one of my interview participants had young children and one member of the focus group. Most were either childless or had grown-up children. As mentioned above this for some was part of the time being right to come back. Thirty one of the one hundred who responded to the questionnaire had children. However, many students, not just those over 21, have children and these issues are very much part of FE.

Fear of failure

Most mature students are unsure of their ability to perform adequately in college. Many have not been in education for many years and are not familiar with requirements or standards and worry that they may not 'be up to it.' Academic failure could mean that the whole idea of coming back to education was a mistake, 'a waste of time' with consequences for the student's confidence. This is part of the risk involved in coming to college.

The first assignment

The first assignment is a major landmark for most mature students. An assignment is graded and carries with it all the connotations of being assessed and judged in what for most is a strange or new area demanding different skills that many feel they are lacking. It is generally a written piece produced on a computer, which can in itself be a big challenge, and many feel that they are exposing what they consider their

weaknesses in this area. Some spoke about knowing the material but being worried about expressing it properly. The ‘language’ of assignments and academic work generally took some getting used to. Students on the Return to Learning course have a more gentle introduction to assignments although the first one is still seen as very significant. Students on other courses sometimes feel dropped in the deep end where aspects of language, presentation and even formatting are taken for granted. The first assignment can be traumatic and can be important in determining whether a student, of any age, will continue. This is so even in a climate of encouragement and support.

It can also be, and generally is, hugely important in boosting the confidence of mature students who are generally very pleasantly surprised at how well they do.

In the beginning I was so unsure of myself, constantly asking myself ‘is this going to work?’ ...and when I’d be getting them back I was getting all distinctions, I think I was kinda shocked to be honest with you. Caroline

When I did so well so well in that (first assignment) it made me excel at the rest of them. I felt confident, more confident ... When I was doing it I was so unsure, am I doing it right? Maeve

The exam terrified me. To sit in a room with just a single desk in front of you I thought was unbelievable ...Jesus, I was terrified. I’d never done an exam before. Jason

Success in assignment and exams validates their academic abilities and is seen as an acceptance into the student role and student identity and bestows a feeling of entitlement to be in college. It also develops and affects other aspects of students’ lives.

Keen to succeed

As well as being conscientious, many mature students were surprised at how they became ambitious to do well in college work, especially having done well in the first assignment.

I was getting merits on several subjects...merits, this is alright! I haven’t got a distinction yet, I’d love a distinction. Daniel

I don’t want to just pass. I didn’t think I had that in me, I thought it would be just ‘right we’ll get through this’. From the first assignment on I wanted to

do it as expertly as I can. The feedback I'm getting has been fantastic, very encouraging and it just encourages me to do it more than ever. Vera

This ambition to achieve, and the focus and dedication of mature students, contributes to the discourse of 'the ideal student' found in some of the literature. Most teachers would agree that mature students are usually more willing to contribute in class. They are conscious of this and would often apologise saying they don't want to take over, but are aware of the silence of their classmates. Some, especially those with young children, have less time and are conscious of being focused and having to use their time well and are less tolerant of time wasters. Those with progression or a definite career in mind are motivated by achieving this goal. Many spoke of the importance of finishing and getting through and were determined to complete.

Computer competence

Some mentioned the importance of developing computer competence and, apart from those like Peter, for whom computer competence had a particular significance, this was seen as allowing participation, for writing up assignments and researching and represented competence in an area where younger people are generally seen to have an advantage and familiarity from having grown up with them. The advantages of computers were enthusiastically embraced once initial difficulties were overcome.

I felt more confident when I got the hang of using the computer...and when I got the hang of doing spell checks and when my second assignments came up and they were fonted right and justified right, I seen the difference and as I say...even the achievement... it was a success...I felt I didn't do too badly. Jason

I'm achieving a lot more because I'm simply pressing buttons. The computer, they (younger people) would have used a computer, known about a computer, known what it could do. I'm only learning the benefits of that now. Vera

Digital literacy is now seen as an essential requirement for social as well as economic participation and access to a wide range of everyday services and information. Those with low levels of education are less likely to have computer skills and educational disadvantage is exacerbated (Casey, 2009). It is unsurprising then, that for students who lacked digital literacy, acquiring these skills had important symbolic as well as practical importance.

Benefits of being older

Despite regrets expressed about not completing their education earlier, all the participants that they benefited more or differently from it now that they were older.

Some students are coming out of necessity or need, I'm coming because I like it, that's the other thing. Daniel

I think mature students...there's something in the back of their heads that asked them to come back and they're eager to learn something that they never learned. They're coming out of...maybe not them all, but I know from myself, they're coming out of the love of it more so than anything else, you know? I don't go home depressed from it every day, you know? Jason

All reported thinking that being older and having more experience of the world and in some cases specific areas, business or social care, gives an advantage by having a context to frame new information and another layer of understanding. All thought too that mature students are more focused and dedicated than their younger classmates.

'I couldn't get over how lax some of the younger students were.' Jason

Some found them ill-mannered and loud but none echoed the strong antipathy to young students expressed in the focus group. In general the lack of dedication displayed by younger students and their behaviour was viewed tolerantly as being 'their age.'

I just see them for what they are and that's immature, they just haven't grown up like. Caroline

Some were aware of being seen as more conscientious and anxious to meet deadlines than their younger classmates. This was true even in the Return to Learning class dedicated to mature students where the younger 'mature students' were seen as different, in this regard, to the older mature students. Older students and younger socialised together within the college but, except for special events, none of the mature students socialised with younger colleagues outside of college hours. They just thought it was natural that they would prefer the company of people of their own age and none, even the younger mature students, were fond of the traditional students' nights out involving drinking and late nights.

Support

Another key factor in the students' experience mentioned by all the participants was the support they received in the college from course co-ordinators and teachers. They found the relationship very positive and based on mutual respect. They commented on the accessibility, friendliness and encouragement of staff and many said they were aware that this may not be the case if they progressed to Higher Education. It was important to them that they were recognised by staff and others in the college and known by name. They felt part of the college and valued. The flexibility and understanding afforded them with deadlines and assignments when they were having difficulties in college or home was greatly valued and in many cases is vital in their decision to stay.

*Well, I feel there's great support here, to be honest with you... Vera
Enjoying it*

Many mentioned the atmosphere of the college and that they enjoyed coming in. The social side of college life was very important. This was mentioned especially by the men, but important to all.

The social side, meeting all the people from the other classes...you'd meet them and they'd stop and have a chat. James:

The idea of college being treated as work came up with some. It told of a certain business like approach and the idea that it was an occupation that offered some of the other aspects of work such as social interaction and sense of purpose. The enjoyment of learning, finding out new things and relating new knowledge to experience was a feature.

I'm not working now so this is something I'm concentrating on, this is my work, it's like a nine-to-five-job. Daniel

It's my job now. Jason

I love each and every subject as much as I can. I'm enjoying each and every subject and getting something out of it. Vera

Although some mature students have a definite career or progression route in mind when they came to FE many do not. Even with those who do, it is not unusual for their plans to change as they become aware of other possibilities or discover other interests.

Many, especially those who in to the Return to Learning class or one year FETAC courses, wanted to see how it would go and had no plans to progress at that stage and were taking it 'one step at a time.' James is in his fourth year in the college now and is considering going to an IT next year where he can get into the second year of a degree course. His plans evolved as his success in the Return to Learning course encouraged him to go on to the FETAC and from there he went on to a BTEC two year business course. James is typical of many students who surprise themselves by progressing much further in education than they would have thought possible when they came in. Further education thus offers an important alternative route to higher education for mature students and others who lack traditional Leaving Certificate admission requirements.

I didn't know what I wanted to do, so that course, RTL (Return to Learning) was there so I did that. Aoife

No, that didn't enter my head (progressing to an IT). James

My participants included students who had been in the college for only four months and some were in their second, third or fourth year. All of interviewees spoke about how much they enjoyed being on the course. Even a few months into the course Aoife, Vera and Maeve were enthusiastic.

It's good, I'm really enjoying it. I don't want to leave. Aoife:

So far so good. I am enjoying it. I'm enjoying what I'm learning, definitely. Vera

I love every aspect of it. It's a great college, the tutors are so helpful. I'm just soaking it up like a sponge. Maeve

Most admitted that they had not expected it to be so enjoyable and were surprised that they were enjoying it so much.

I suppose I'm surprised at the way it's gone so well. I'm enjoying it so much at times I forget I'm actually an older person. James

When pressed about what was enjoyable, it seemed to be 'everything' the academic side and the social. It was clear too that there was a sense of achievement and pride

I think just having ...maybe....you're doing something for yourself, you have a goal, you're getting up in the morning, and I really enjoy doing all the assignments. Aoife

I'd say I got great benefits out of it, I can't really put my finger on it, other than, I'm not bored. I'm happy to get up in the morning, happy to come in, happy to go home, happy to come back in the next day Jason

Of all the achievements that I've done... all that I've done in life...this would top it. Peter

Revised self – finding a voice

The 'revised self' is a core concept that emerged from how the participants described the change they had experienced as a result of their time in the college.

When asked to summarise what they had got from coming back to education in further education by far the most common response was 'confidence.' Confidence came up first when discussing academic work and assignments but it was soon clear that it extended beyond college work. It was apparent quite early that confidence was going to be a significant theme and in subsequent interviews I asked the participants what confidence meant to them and how it manifested itself in their lives. As so many responses explained their confidence in terms of speaking, saying things and having things to say, I developed the core category 'Finding a Voice' as a 'conceptual label' (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.121) to describe this revised self.

Confidence, a hundred percent. Not afraid to speak up or ask questions. Jason

I can voice a viewpoint that I wouldn't have voiced before. Vera

Some mentioned have more knowledge in a particular area, for the most part, there was a feeling of general competence and seeing themselves as people who not only have knowledge but the ability to acquire it as well.

I'd have no problem tackling something, I'd have a go at it and not be afraid to make a mistake on it. It would give you confidence, at least now I know if I had to do something where I have to go and read up on it or whatever, I wouldn't be afraid to tackle it or open a

book to look at it. Where before I never dreamt of opening a book just to read up on something. Jason

Confidence means me being myself and doing what I want to do. I think I have the confidence to move on, even though there is the possibility that I might not be able to follow through on it. Caroline

The kind of confidence mentioned in these quotes again imply a greater sense of control and being able to impact on conditions not just be subject to them. They display a self-assurance to cope with making mistakes as opposed to being afraid to take a risk. It is reminiscent of a comment Peter made about education: 'Education gave people the freedom to move, to make choices.' For many, their participation in FE brought about a change in their self-concept, self-respect and their sense of identity.

I see myself differently...I see myself more confident as well. Daniel

Well, seeing things differently, definitely, em ... it has definitely changed my attitude, it's definitely been a big, big eye-opener. Caroline

My self esteem has gone up enormously and my idea of who I am as a person ...I value myself more, do you understand? Peter

Confidence seems to have come from the culmination of dealing successfully with a new situation, academic success, being recognised, supported and valued by tutors and peers and others leading to an improved self-concept and greater readiness to take risks without fearing the consequences of failure for a delicate self image.

All recognised that they had changed since starting their course and most say 'it's a pity it didn't happen earlier' but recognise that they are different now to earlier and that for many unemployment was the unwelcome start of the process of change and that without it, the opportunity may never have arisen. They were surprised at the change in themselves having come to the college expecting to acquire more or different academic knowledge or skills to enhance their CV or prepare them for employment. These things came as well, but the personal changes were more significant and were manifested in the willingness shown by the students to progress to another course or to HE which they never would have thought themselves capable of before, or to made other significant career changes or changes in their personal lives.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined how the students came to be in FE and the process of change experienced by students before coming to college and while there. It suggests that by far the most significant result for them was the sense of greater confidence, awareness and agency. This was not a straightforward or linear process and was the result of encountering a number of milestones or challenges. These concepts are discussed more theoretically in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

Discussion

Introduction

The previous chapters described the development of the categories of ‘Latent Self’ and ‘Emerging Self’ and the core concept of ‘Finding a Voice.’ These chapters stayed close to the voices of the participants. This chapter uses some perspectives from the literature to help illuminate these stories and develop a fuller understanding of the issues that emerged and place them in the context of existing knowledge.

The chapter is divided into three sections according to the themes that emerged in the previous chapter.

1. The first section, deals with the concept of the ‘latent self’ (Baxter and Britton, 1999). This concept came from a number of categories describing the various circumstances and the decision making involved in the students’ return to education. It also looks some perspectives that offer ways of understanding motivations for participating in FE.
2. The second section discusses the challenges facing mature students and their role in the ‘emerging self.’
3. The final section deals with revised self and the concept of ‘finding a voice’

Section 1

The Latent Self

The previous chapter discussed how the concept of ‘latent self’ emerged to describe the students, and the circumstances that lead them to enroll in a full-time course in the college. The students I interviewed seemed initially to fall into roughly into three categories.

1. The first group consisted of those who wanted to move from unfulfilling jobs. They knew what they wanted to do and sought out a particular course that would lead to realising this ambition. The time was right for them to make the change even though it sometimes involved financial sacrifice, working part time, availing of savings or the support of a partner. This group tended to be confident of their abilities and had recent positive experience of education and did not share many of the anxieties about returning to college or assignment expressed by the others.
2. The second group was less definite about their ambitions. Education had not been prominent in their minds. Most were hoping to enhance their employment prospects by up-skilling and were acting on a suggestion or recommendation by 'trying out' education. This second group came back to college through 'a happy accident' the components of which were becoming unemployed, a desire to do something (develop skills, social interaction) a suggestion that they should consider returning to education, and being aware of the specific college or knowing someone who was a student in the college or who recommended it.
3. The third group had a long held and definite desire to return to education but with no clear career path in mind. They wanted to try it and see where it would lead. Common to all three groups was an affinity to education, sometimes strongly expressed, or at least not an antipathy to it. The interviews revealed however that their motivations to return were more complex than the first explanation and that education had multiple meanings for the participants.

Missing out

A feeling of 'missing out' was a common feature of the 'Latent self' (Baxter and Britton, 1999). The affinity for education and a belief in the value of education seem to have developed quite early. All spoke of their parents' encouragement to go to school and being encouraged to do well even though circumstances and culture often meant that employment was a priority and often a preference. 'I was always quite good at school. My father was devastated when I left' (Caroline). Many felt that they had not been 'pushed' enough in school and that staying on in school or going on to

higher education was not seen as an option for people from their background. The report 'Hidden Disadvantage?' (McCoy et al. 2010) reviewed earlier, pointed out that retention in secondary school and progression to HE are highly patterned by socio-economic background and teachers are often seen as having low expectations for disadvantaged groups. Most of the participants liked learning, although they may have disliked school, and felt they had some academic potential which was undeveloped and contributed to the feeling of 'missing out' which was mentioned by most of my participants, men and women, and indicated that they believed that things could have been different for them if they had remained in education and that they had ability that had remained untapped. Many said they 'always wanted to go back' indicating a long held feeling that they felt somewhat incomplete. James spoke of wanting to 'finish, complete' suggesting an 'incompleteness.' Work or a focus on family took over and the need to concentrate on these issues pushed education or a different career into the background. 'I always wanted to do it but genuinely never had the chance because of the job I was in.' (Vera). Peter said he had 'always wanted to be a nurse,' Maeve had 'always wanted' to do art and Caroline and Abbey 'always' wanted to work in the care area. Important aspects of the self were being denied or not fully used and the opportunity for reassessment and change came through unemployment or the time being right. This is supported by Baxter and Britton (1999, p.185) who refer to the 'latent or submerged self' wanting to be reclaimed and suggest that here education is not seen instrumentally, but as a means of 'realizing the self or becoming the self one always was.' Mercer (2007, p26) speaks of 'reclaiming a part of the self that had not been developed earlier in the lifespan.' Similarly, Dawson and Boulton (2000, p.168) speak of such motivations as 'imbalances' which they describe as 'situational' or 'dispositional.' This includes unhappiness in a job or dissatisfaction with their image of themselves and a desire for another 'possible self.' This could include the self as the artist instead of the salesperson or seeing themselves as academically competent and recognised as such. The desire to return to education they see as a desire to restore balance. They conclude that if people are happy with their lives and work, they have no motivation to return to education.

The importance of the affinity for education is supported by Courtney (1992) who cites Love's early study (1953) which sees participation in education not as a single decision or action but a series of actions, each stage of which is accompanied by

reflection. It suggests that before deciding to enroll in education an adult must have an awareness of education as a positive value in the solution of problems and must equate education with success and happiness. To participate a person must have (a) a current problem for which he or she seeks a solution and that problem must be acute and well defined; (b) be aware of a specific course or field of study; (c) be directed towards specific schools or programmes; (d) actually enroll. He thus connects the underlying orientation to learning and actually coming to the college to sign on for a course. In this way the personal psychological factors which produce an inclination to learning interact with the social factors that convert the inclination into action. The personal factors could be the 'transitions' mentioned above such as the divorce, the death of a loved one, or more commonly in this study, becoming unemployed. It also draws attention to some of the barriers mentioned later and the need to consider how the provision of information on courses, the availability of supports such as child care and factors such as personal contacts and friends who participated, the proximity of colleges and local knowledge impact on the decision to take the step of enrolling.

However, the first condition in Courtney's study above – 'that the problem must be acute and well defined' would not apply to all my participants. Some had only a vague notion of 'the problem' and in some cases came to education because 'it might be interesting' or because they had nothing else going on. They would not all meet the second condition either, as they were not aware 'of a specific course or field of study'. Some certainly wanted a specific course, others just wanted to come back to education and were guided in their choice by the college. They were trying it out and wanted to see what they liked.

An important insight from Courtney's work of particular relevance to this study, is that for adults to return to education, there must be an underlying orientation to learning which portrays learning in a positive light and predisposes the individual to participate. Education is a positive force and equated with happiness. While my participants certainly had this affinity for education, this relationship to education was not as straightforward or necessarily obvious to the individual as Courtney's account might suggest.

Houle's Typology

Another perspective on these students is offered by the theory of motivational orientations which came largely from Houle's (1961) classic typology of learners. This was based on in-depth interviews with 22 learners and was elaborated by others (Boshier, 1971, 1976; Morstain and Smart, 1974). The three classifications of 'goal-oriented,' 'activity-oriented' and 'learning-oriented' try to account for the origin of the need to learn by looking at the personality traits. Goal orientated learners use education as a means to an end and want specific things, the activity oriented who take part for the sake of the activity itself and the social interaction and learning oriented are seeking knowledge for its own sake. Houle's approach is highly generalized and assumes that learners can be easily categorised and that their reason for participating does not change. It also ignores the impact of the adults' circumstances and how these impact on decision making. It assumes too, that the respondents are able to identify and articulate their reasons. Morstain and Smart (1974) extended Houle's three categories to six, adding External Expectations (complying with authority), Social Welfare, (altruistic orientation) and Escape/Stimulation (alleviating boredom or escaping home or work routine). They also allowed for learners to have multiple reasons for participation. Of my participants two, Maeve and Abbey, would fit the category of 'goal oriented' as they sought out a specific course to meet their needs. Another, Daniel, fits the 'activity oriented' category as the social aspect of college was very important to him. However, these and all the others, have elements that would qualify them for many other categories as well as having other more complex motivations and circumstances.

Cross (1981) acknowledged the usefulness of Houle's three-way typology and maintained that most adults were 'goal oriented'. 'Learning that will improve one's position in life is a major motivation. Just what will 'improve life' varies with age, sex, occupation and life stage in rather predictable ways' (p.6). She also acknowledges, however, that question about why adults participate in education are not going to be answered by applying any simple formula. Addressing the imbalances referred to earlier could be seen as improving one's life although such motivations might not be easily uncovered by surveying students.

Blair et al. (1995) suggest that conceptualisations of motivation based on quantitative studies of reasons, motivational typologies, life transition models and studies focusing on the institutional and social context offer incomplete explanations of participation in education. They point out that the predictive power of these approaches is weak and that adults in similar circumstances often make very different choices. Their 'new conceptualization' attempts to integrate motivational typologies, life transition models and ideas on barriers to participation. Their model considers the interaction of goals and conditions which determines participation. Adults must have goals that they feel can be realized through returning to education and the conditions (their circumstances) must be such that a return to education is possible. Goals may be vocational or personal, proactive or reactive. Conditions include the availability of information and suitable institutions, child care, previous experience, family situation and a supportive culture. Participation, they maintain, results when education is both desirable and possible.

They do recognize, however, that participation in education is not always the result of logical decision making and that strength of an individual's goals may overcome unfavourable conditions and similarly, conditions and circumstances may draw people to education even if they seem to have no educational goals. Such conditions might be joining in with a group of colleagues who decided to do a course or acting on a friend's suggestion to do something to get out of the house. This fits with some of the people in my study.

Barriers to participation

Motivational typologies and some life cycle theories see adults' decisions to return to education in terms of their individual psychology and with little reference to the social and structural factors that can affect these decisions. In trying to understand why some adults do not return to education many writers discuss 'barriers to participation' (Johnstone and Rivera, 1965; Cross, 1981; McGivney, 1991). Blair et al. (1995) outline some studies which consider the institutional and social contexts which they consider as barriers to participation.

Firstly, there are situational barriers which arise from individual's circumstances and may include issues such as lack of money, family circumstances and work situation. There are times when attending a full-time course is not possible because of work or other commitments that would preclude full-time attendance. 'The right time' referred to earlier usually included being free of these other constraints. However, not everyone can devote themselves exclusively to education. Most mature students have other concerns and demands. Managing or 'juggling' these roles and the role of student can be a major challenge and is considered the second section of this chapter.

Secondly, they consider dispositional barriers which include negative attitudes to education or classroom learning and lack of self-confidence. As mentioned earlier, all of my interviewees had some affinity to education which they were keen to pursue in circumstances that were better than their first encounter when they were in school.

Thirdly, institutional barriers (Cross, 1981) which are the alienating features of the education system and include things like difficulty in accessing information, lack of facilities and the elitist image projected by some institutions. Finally, sociocultural barriers, the most important of which they identify as social disapproval where there is an environment where education is not considered important or useful. This was not an issue for my participants.

Other versions of barriers to participation have specifically included lack of confidence, lack of support systems, lack of interest and what Hall and Donaldson (cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999) term 'lack of voice.'

The way a woman feels about herself, her self-esteem and self confidence, and the way she can express herself are significant elements in her decision about whether to participate in adult education.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) point out that while looking at barriers to participation can be useful, it focuses on the individual and so only tells part of the story. They point to other research that sees education as part of general social participation which, they say, has implications for marketing and recruitment. They cite Benn (1997) who suggests that adult education providers should advertise through social groups and organisations.

Other perspectives emphasise class and gender issues. Adult education and especially higher education is seen as a middle class activity where working class adult students bring different social and cultural capital to that of younger students and the institution Merrill (2007). Students who were successful in school are more likely to participate in education as adults and success is largely determined by class, age, gender and educational background. From this perspective, improving participation is dependant on more fundamental social change (Merriman and Caffarella, 1999, p. 60).

Many FE colleges are well established and familiar features of local areas and do not carry connotations of elitism that can be associated with universities and other higher education institutions. The RANLHE report (2010) discussed earlier, referred to non-traditional students being like ‘fish out of water’ in HE. FE colleges are local and the level of the courses is seen as less formidable for those who have been out of education for some time. Liaising with the local community is considered important by FE colleges and special efforts are often made to accommodate people from the local area. For most of my participants a personal contact or previous experience of the college was the reason they came. They were often dealing with a person they knew or had been put in touch with and not a ‘faceless institution’. They were all ready to come, even though some were very apprehensive and lacking confidence in their academic abilities. For many, the initial contact and interview are crucial in reassuring them and advising them on which course to take. However, there are those for whom returning to education, even in FE is a very forbidding prospect. Previous associations with education, lack of skills, whether actual or perceived, or lack of confidence prevents them making the initial contact. These potential students need to be addressed differently.

Lifestage Theories

Accounts of adult development have attained a certain status among adult education practitioners and in the broader society (Tennant, 1988). The terms ‘midlife crisis’ and ‘identity crisis’ are often used in popular parlance and other stereotypical views of adulthood have taken hold as a look at birthday cards for 30, 40 and fifty year olds and so on will testify. Such outmoded views still carry a certain currency and general acceptance even in an age of rapidly transforming ageing patterns and social change.

Traditionally developmental psychology focused on childhood and the importance of these formative years. More recently adulthood has been considered as a time of development also with various 'stages' of fairly predictable challenges from adolescence to old age (Coon & Mitterer, 2007, p. 138). Central to these changes is the idea that the sense of self can and does change, that identity is not fixed but dynamic.

There is no universal agreement among lifestage or adult development theorists on the number of stages or whether they are determined by age or developmental tasks. They assume that adulthood evolves through a series of phases of crises and resolution or stability and change. Each stage of the life cycle has specific tasks. The developmental changes in the life of the individual create needs, especially during periods of transition. These needs are translated into a need to learn new knowledge and skills to adjust to these changes.

Aslanian and Brickell (1980, p.34) drawing on lifespan theorists, maintain that during periods of transition adults can experience disequilibrium requiring new learning, 'new knowledge, new skills, and/or new attitudes or values'. Some events are identifiable and trigger a desire to learn at that time. Events such as becoming unemployed, changing job or getting divorced are such triggers. In their quantitative national study of American adults who returned to education, Aslanian and Brickell found that eighty-three percent of their sample of 2,000 said their learning was associated with a change in their lives. Fifty-six percent of these changes were related to career, and only seventeen percent said they were motivated by learning for its own sake. Cross (1981, p. 95) is somewhat critical of this study and says it 'demonstrates one of the problems of field research designed to test hypotheses: that investigators are likely to find what they are looking for'. The terms 'turning point' (Crossan et al., 2003), 'fateful moment' (Giddens, 1991) and 'epiphany' (Denzin, 1989; Merrill, 2007) are useful in revealing the importance of critical incidents but carry connotations of a sudden singular event, whereas deciding to return to education is more likely to be a much longer process involving the coming together of many internal and external factors. This coming together of factors is seen in my participants' stories and captured by the notion of 'the right time.'

Adult development theories suggest that adults go through periods of stability and periods of transition. Each period or stage has specific tasks (Havighurst, 1948) that distinguish it and affect subsequent development. Most recognise the influence of external cultural and social forces and how they interact with the individual. In any society people may experience a number of significant life changes at roughly the same age, but development is not necessarily chronological or age related. There will also be considerable differences in how changes are experienced and the individual responses to them. The social and cultural influences also vary greatly and change with time. It has been suggested (Neugarten and Neugarten, 1987; Sheehy, 1996; Arnett, 2004; Sugarman, 2001) that patterns of work, education and family have significantly changed even within a generation altering the shape of the life cycle.

In the space of one short generation the whole shape of the life cycle had been fundamentally altered. People today are leaving childhood sooner, but are taking longer to grow up and much longer to grow old. (Sheehy, 1996)

Tennant (1991) cautions against subscribing to rigid views about the 'proper' course of development and acknowledges that people chart their life course in diverse ways which may not fit in with any pattern or theory. Perceptions of age have changed as people live longer and are enjoying better health for longer. Marriage may be postponed, co-habitation is common and re-marriage and second families are not unusual. People often change careers and participate in education after 'retirement'. To some extent these theories are a product of their time and appear somewhat normative. Individual experiences vary greatly and age is just one factor that influences development. Neugarten and Neugarten (1987) stress that personal and sociohistorical circumstances must be taken into account and age is becoming less relevant to significant events in adults' lives.

Tennant and Pogson (1995) also point out that the life course is socially constructed and is, therefore, a social as well as personal phenomenon. Different social and historical contexts impose their own forms of life structuring through available discourses and norms. Importantly too, socially prescribed age categories and behaviours become embedded in the psychology of individuals who deal with adapting to or struggling with these established norms. Mature students have the

added challenge of dealing with what is often seen, by them and others, as a non-normative transition. My interviewees were aware that they were coming to education at an unconventional time ‘doing it the wrong way round’ (James) and in what is seen as a young person’s environment. Neugarten (1976) suggests that such non-normative events cause potential crises, not events that occur as expected or at the ‘right time.’

Gilligan (1977) points out that development theories that stress the development of individual identity, independence and separateness, reflect a gender bias common in the literature. Males are taken as the norm and women are considered ‘as either deviant or deficient in their development’ (p.482). Women develop differently and have qualities that are undervalued in the literature (she cites especially Kohlberg’s stage theory of moral development). Erikson has been criticized for his reliance on Freud and the idea of the biological distinctiveness of men and women. Gilligan found that women develop differently and define their development mostly in the context of connections rather than separation. Women do not deal with identity issues during adolescence in the same way as men (Josselson, 1987) and may postpone dealing with concerns of personal identity while prioritizing the achievement of intimacy (Chodorow, 1978). Lowenthal et al. (1975) found that women were more likely to make more changes in mid-life than men. This coincides with children being reared and the possibility of other roles and opportunities to address deferred identity issues. Many middle-aged female mature students in my study referred to returning to education as ‘me time’ or ‘it’s my turn now’ implying that they had given themselves over to other concerns, childrearing and homemaking, until now. They spoke too of the cultural norms of the time and their class when they were leaving school where the emphasis was on getting a job rather than progressing in education ‘especially with girls’ (Vera). Many who felt they were good at school or who felt they had ‘missed out’ on education wanted a chance to fulfill their potential and maybe develop a different career or role. These participants’ stories illustrate the influence of gender and class and how they can intersect with development issues to influence decision-making.

Lifespan theories include the idea of crisis or conflict as a necessary element in bringing about development. As we have already seen, the mature students in my study encountered change or a number of changes and experienced ‘disequilibrium’

(Aslanian and Brickell, 1980, p.34). This presented them with an opportunity or a necessity to consider other options and which resulted in them, sometimes indirectly, returning to education. However, for most, these changes and developments were not age related. The significant event of becoming unemployed was a trigger for most.

Bearing in mind their limitations, lifespan theories provide a way of seeing adult development and the position of the individual within it and how this might affect decisions to return to education. They also highlight the importance of early experiences for the construction of the framework within which we operate as adults, often unconsciously, and have implications for how we engage in the development tasks of adulthood.

The idea of a ‘moratorium’, suggested by Erikson, Marcia and Arnett has particular relevance for mature students.

Moratorium

Erikson’s psychosocial account is heavily influenced by Freudian developmental thinking and suggests that the adult goes through a number of developmental stages, each characterised by particular concerns and requiring a balance between opposing elements. The adult is seen in the context of the social system with which he/she interacts. The psychosocial stages are produced by the interaction between the individual and the social context. In Erickson’s theory eight stages of development unfold as we go through life. Each stage presents a unique developmental task or crisis that must be resolved. Development occurs through resolution of these crises. This crisis is ‘not a catastrophe, but a turning point marked by both increased vulnerability and enhanced potential’ (Santrock, 2009, p.23). After adolescence and the development of identity, the main task of early adulthood is becoming intimate with another person (intimacy v isolation) which usually happens, it is suggested, in the twenties. The next stage is dominated by the tension between generativity and self absorption (stagnation). This involves moving the focus from the self and becoming concerned with others, society and the world and one’s legacy. The final stage, (integrity v despair) involves the task of looking back over ones’ life and either accepting and being content with it, or despairing.

For Erikson development is age related and sequential and the outlined stages are cumulative. The outcome at each stage will influence the next so the capacity to form intimate relationships depends to a large extent on outcome of the previous stage, the identity crisis of adolescence. Although identity is generally formed and integrated in adolescence, it is renegotiated through adulthood as events such as divorce and bereavement force a readjustment. Erikson suggested that to assist in the process of identity formation, adolescents needed a psychological moratorium, time out from the world and their other activities, to explore different identities.

Marcia (2010, p.27) suggests that Erikson's stages are not straightforward and the suggestion that if a stage resolution is missed the individual's life will be flawed developmentally, is not necessarily the case. Marcia points out that every stage occurs at every other stage and allows for the remediation of uncompleted stages and 'the precocious resolution of normally unexpected ones.'

Marcia, drawing on Erikson, suggested that for adolescents to establish an identity there must be an exploration and a commitment to an identity, values and roles. If there has been no exploration or crisis and no commitments made this results in diffusion. Adopting the values of family or others without any exploration results in a state of foreclosure. Identity moratorium is actively exploring and questioning but not yet making any commitments. This is the stage of typical adolescent experimentation and uncertainty and is necessary for the resolution of this stage of development.

Fleming (2009) points out that in our society; some privileged young people get a state sponsored opportunity of a few years in third level education which offers the security and time out to address these issues. This moratorium offers an opportunity to grow and is denied to other less privileged people. Early school leavers and others who take up adult roles early do not have this period of development or the foundation needed for subsequent stages of development. Poverty and exclusion can therefore be seen to be damaging for development with consequences for the individual, their relationships and careers. Fleming cites Rubin (1976) who maintains that poverty is more likely to lead to a negative resolution of crises at each of Erikson's developmental stages. The moratorium, Rubin says, is 'a luxury of the affluent middle

class.’ Most of my cohort would not fit into the category of ‘the affluent middle class’ and did not have the opportunity for a moratorium as adolescents or young adults. West (1996, p.9) suggests that ‘Damage, even of a basic primitive kind can be repaired through good enough relationships in later life. Some people turn to therapy but reparation might also be possible in educational settings through contact with people who respect, care and empathise with us.’ This is not to suggest that my participants did not achieve a sense of identity in adolescence or that they suffered damage of any kind. Identity needs to be worked on throughout life and most of these students had experienced major change and were in the process of discovering new roles professionally and personally.

Arnett (2004) also speaks of a moratorium. He observed that the road to adulthood has become longer in recent decades. Traditional markers of adulthood such as getting married, embarking on a career and having children are now occurring later. He uses the term ‘emerging adulthood’ to describe the period of roughly age eighteen to the late twenties which he sees as a distinct stage of life, not just a prolonged adolescence, characterised by identity exploration, instability, self-focus and a ‘sense of possibilities.’ Arnett does not see this as a universal phenomenon and points to cultural conditions which facilitated its emergence in recent times in Western countries. They include longer periods being spent in college, fewer entry level jobs, less need or desire to marry because of social acceptance of alternative arrangements, easy availability of contraception and having children later. These young people are sometimes referred to as ‘Kippers’ (Kids in Parents’ pockets Eroding Retirement Savings), in Italy they are called ‘Mammone’ (won’t give up on mother’s cooking) and in Germany they are ‘Nesthocker’ (nest squatters) (Coon and Mitterer, 2007, p.135). Arnett admits that in the developing world and in less affluent parts of other countries people have to grow up fast and do not have this opportunity for development. He acknowledges too that this moratorium, like Marcia’s, is something of a luxury as these ‘emerging adults’ often need financial support which is not available to the less privileged who often have to assume adult roles without the chance to experiment.

Some⁴ see ‘emerging adulthood’ simply as a by product of unemployment, high house prices and more time spent in education. It could also be seen as a manifestation of the changing timetable for adulthood and postmodern fragmentation, impermanence and the dilemmas posed by a bewildering range of choices.

This idea of a moratorium is relevant when considering adults in further education. Identity development is not just a task of adolescence and adults continually reconstruct their identities over time and in response to different circumstances, demands and ‘normal expectable disequilibrating events associated with each of the succeeding adult life cycle stages’ (Marcia, 2010, p.27). Many adults return to education having experienced a change in their lives, their roles and their sense of identity. Unemployment and grown children leaving home were cited by many of the adults in this study. Time in the college offered them many of the characteristics of a moratorium. West (1996) too suggests that education can offer space for adults to experiment with their identities. It is seen as an enjoyable, if sometimes fraught, opportunity for time apart, ‘me time’ which allows for questioning, learning, discussion with other adults and discovering or reclaiming aspects of the personality that had been neglected or submerged. This moratorium provides a liminal space for the latent self to develop and emerge. This is not a straightforward process but involves several stages or ‘crises’ the successful resolution of which mark progress to the ‘revised self’. This takes place in a supportive environment which affords respect and safety.

Post-modern uncertainty

Importantly for our current post Celtic Tiger Ireland, West (1996, p.8) locates personal situations in the wider context of late modernity which ‘constantly precipitates crises of, as well as opportunities for, self.’ With the major changes in traditional certainties and biographical trajectories, ‘individuals have to make more of their own choices and construct more of their own meanings and biographies’ (West, 1996, pp.8-9). The lost of faith in social institutions, the financial crisis and seeming loss of control over our destiny have created a society characterised by anxiety with none of the traditional metanarratives to offer support (Beck, 1992). West suggests there are two possible responses: a fluid and generative creativity, or a pathological

⁴ The majority of bloggers responding to an article on Arnett’s ideas in the New York Times.

defensiveness against change. The former implies a 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991) sustaining a coherent yet continuously revised biographical narrative. For West, the strength of the self determines if one is secure enough to cope with the opportunities for experiment with identity in this fragmented and uncertain context.

Ahl on motivation

Cross (1981, p.106) comments on the difficulty of accurately estimating the importance of dispositional barriers to participation. It is more acceptable, she maintains, to say you are too busy to take part in education than to say that you are not interested. In the neo-liberal context discussed earlier (chapter 2) this could be seen as a manifestation of the hegemony of dominant discourses of lifelong learning emphasising the responsibility of the individual to up-skill and be flexible and able to accommodate the demands of globalisation and changing work practices. Lifelong learning is an individual imperative for citizenship and social inclusion (Harvey, 1989).

Ahl (2008) suggests that from a Foucauldian perspective, knowledge is any discourse that has been deemed 'truth' and can be used to support or justify actions and ignore or marginalise other versions. Truth is historically contingent and may be an unconscious process and embedded in the taken for granted and unquestioned assumptions that constitute our frame of reference. Motivation is a social construct and, Ahl maintains, is seen from a Western and male perspective.

Early theories on motivation (Mayo, 1933; Herzberg, 1966), Ahl suggests, are based in industrial psychology and prompted by an interest in what motivates workers. These theories see motivation as always latent, temporarily hampered by dispositional, situational or structural factors. Remove barriers and motivation will resurface. This assumes that an entity called 'motivation' exists, that motivation causes behaviour, that it is possible to affect motivation and that motivation resides with the individual. In this way the focus is on the individual who is seen as deficient and held responsible for social problems. The role of government and policy is made invisible. The solution is seen to lie in the individual, not in social change or government action. The unwilling learner is the reason for, and the solution to, social problems. Ahl sees motivation as a relational concept. Motivation is not seen as residing in the individual

but in the relationship between those who are not motivated and those who think they should be. People who value things other than education draw on other discourses that produce other subject identities than the discourse of lifelong learning. Sargant, (1990) cited in Jarvis (1995) raises the moral question of how much non-participants should be persuaded to learn.

Conclusion

Although a number of these studies are somewhat dated and very much of their time, they highlight some of the methodological and design difficulties in getting a complete picture of motivation (Cross, 1981, p.107). However, they provide useful ways of looking at the reasons adults give for their decisions to participate in education and offer a lens through which to view the individual stories of my participants. A limitation of many studies on motivation, especially quantitative studies, is that they do not take sufficient account of the subjective emotional factors and look at the individual and individual change without adequately considering how socio-cultural positioning interacts with individual biographies in determining motivation to return to education.

Adults generally have not one, but many reasons, often inter-related, for returning to education. The decision is influenced by a range of psychological, social, vocational and emotional aspects that may be masked in the constraints of replies to a survey. West (1996) looks at motivation in the context of the students' biographies and their socio-cultural circumstances. Using biographical methods, his study interviewed thirty students in the UK over a period of three years as they progressed from Access or Foundation courses to higher education institutions. Biographical approaches (West, 1996; Merrill. 2007) offer ways of exploring personal accounts, attitudes and feelings. West (1996, p.1) suggests that 'understanding of student motivation is limited precisely because learners themselves have rarely been asked or encouraged to reflect in unstructured and longitudinal ways on their reasons for learning in relation to personal histories.' Cross (1981, p.97) recognized the inadequacy of simplistic explanations for participation. 'Motives differ for different groups of learners, at different stages of life, and most individuals have not one but multiple reasons for learning.' Although instrumental reasons are often cited for returning to education, this does not always tally with the choice of course and does not take account of the

meaning this has for the individual. Available cultures and discourses influence how learning choices are explained. Vocational motivations are often the most immediately accessible and acceptable reply to a direct question about motivation for the respondent. Vocational motivations do not preclude other motivations. Even if people know why they act as they do they may be unable to explain it. Unpacking such motivations is time consuming and demands effort and commitment from participant and interviewer and can not be done within the confines of a survey response. McGivney (1991, p.17) points out that adults ‘may find it simpler to express a simple, concrete and easily understood purpose for their involvement than to disentangle the mesh of inter-related and perhaps not fully recognised motives that have led them to this step.’ Motives for coming to education and reasons to stay may be different. Even if the initial motivation was vocational, other interests, goals and motivations can develop as a result of participation these can include a sense of achievement, personal satisfaction, enjoyment confidence, an enhanced self concept, and can be a major factor in the decision to continue.

Section 2

The Emerging Self

This section looks at the challenges facing mature students and their role in the ‘emerging self.’

Many of the students in my study experienced a change in their sense of who they were by becoming unemployed. Others wanted to address a felt lack in elements of their identities by returning to education or changing careers. Other aspects of their biographies, personal circumstances and the broader social climate contributed to their decision and their ability to act on it. It is suggested here that the experience of being a mature student involves a continuing process of change for the individual. This transformation is not immediate or straightforward. It is characterized by encountering and dealing with a number of developmental tasks. Successfully dealing with these crises marks stages in the development of the transformed identity described as ‘the revised self’ or ‘finding a voice’. This section looks at some of these anxieties and their role in the process of identity transformation.

Becoming a mature student

Mercer and Saunders (2004) and West (1996) suggest that the process of change in mature students in higher education is not straightforward or linear and involves losses as well as gains and periods of conflict and imbalance.

A fragmentary, even fragmenting process in which the self becomes divided..... between private lives (as parent or partner) and public spheres (as student in higher education); and between experiential ways of knowing (personal, subjective, emotional and academic knowledge (objective and abstract) (West, 1996, p.ix).

The students in my study also spoke of difficulties they encountered on their journey to a revised sense of self. Only two of my participants, Maeve and Abbey, (both goal oriented) said that they did not feel any anxiety returning to college. Both had recent and positive experience of education and were keen to get on with what they saw as a means to the goal of working in their preferred area. Transitions to full-time education are major life changes and are stressful for most students of any age (Palmer et al., 2009). Transitional periods are, of their nature, stressful as they involve change and greater reflexivity. Stressful events, however, 'are not necessarily negative [they are] inevitable ...without them there is no growth' (Marcia, 2010, p.33). Mature students are embarking on a major change of role and identity. They are conscious of the non-normative nature of their move and most see themselves as being like 'fish out of water' where their age and cultural and social capital set them apart. Most are not familiar with the system and presume that younger students are faster learners than they are and that they know how to study and negotiate the demands of college. These adults find themselves in unfamiliar territory occupying roles associated with 'youthful dependency' (Crossan et al., 2003). Illeris (2006) observed that adults often slip into the traditional role of pupil and surrender control to the teacher although, paradoxically, they have a hard time accepting the lack of responsibility that this role entails. The first few days in college can be a major hurdle.

I suddenly just stopped and said, 'what am I doing here?' I was ready to walk back out. Daniel

When I saw the young people going up and down I said 'is this for me? am I doing the right thing?' ...I just felt I didn't belong there.' Jason

Although most quickly overcome these initial difficulties, the first few days can be a 'make or break' ordeal with implications for induction programmes and retention. In core VETOS or Return to Learning courses more attention is paid to the specific needs of older students. With other courses, mature students are not afforded any special treatment and many feel 'thrown in the deep end'. Successfully negotiating this transition into further education and the student role is an identity shift and a major landmark on the road to a changed self concept.

Home culture and college culture

Reports of non-traditional students in higher education often refer to the difficulties caused by the disparity between the culture of the home and that of college (Reay et al., 2002; Mercer and Saunders, 2004; Tett, 2004; Brine and Waller, 2004). While my participants were aware of how their experience of education had been shaped by their culture and class backgrounds, they did not see this as a problem. All spoke of the support and encouragement they received from family, friends and significant others in their lives and they were proud of their status of student. While the nature of further education is often not completely understood, it is generally recognized as part of the VEC and looked on as something familiar, accessible and not separate from the local community. Doing a course in 'the college' is not uncommon in the area. University, however, has well established, if changing, connotations of greater elitism and cultural difference. Even so, for adults who have been out of school for many years and for whom education often carries mixed feelings, coming to the college is a major step. Tett (2004) suggests that 'There is considerable evidence that working-class students 'choose' HE institutions where they are more likely to be with people that are 'like me' in terms of class, 'race, gender and so on'. While this is not always true and some students from disadvantaged backgrounds do go to 'elite' colleges, this could be seen as a reason why these students choose FE rather than university. While it would appear reasonable to seek the security of the familiar in such circumstances, many other factors impinge on the choice. The location of the college, the courses on offer and the level were important factors for the students in the survey. Most did not see themselves as university material and some wanted to 'try it out' with a one year course. The perception of FE as accessible is one of sector's great strengths. While most did not see themselves progressing past FE when they enrolled, most now see themselves as having the educational and cultural capital to do so.

Baxter and Britton (2001) suggest that to be 'educated' is to stake a claim to a new identity which has implications for relationships with family and friends. The new identity can be threatening to one's own sense of self and to others. These risks they see as especially relating to gender roles in the family and risks accompanying the move away from working class habitus which they see as 'an inevitable consequence of being in higher education' (p.87). They see mature students in the context of postmodern fragmentation (Beck, 1992) as leaving behind the certainty of their old identities in an attempt to forge new ones. These new identities have to be negotiated in the classed and gendered lives of the individuals. Although they were conscious of the changes in themselves and aware of their class positioning, none of the students in my cohort spoke of any difficulties with partners, friends, colleagues or class identity. None spoke of conflicts of identities or of having to compartmentalise their lives or others not understanding what they were doing and why.

Juggling roles

Older students are likely to have more established roles, obligations and demands on their time and attention than younger students. Many have children, part-time work or elderly parents to consider. Lack of time is frequently mentioned, especially by those with young children, and study and assignments have to be organised at the times least disruptive to family life, often late at night. There is also the awareness that illness of a child or a breakdown in arrangements will result in having to take time off college. A number of periods of unavoidable absence and consequently falling behind are, in my experience, often cited by adults as the reason for dropping out or deferring (Where Next? 2010, p.115). Some spoke of 'not being able to switch off completely' and having to have their phone on, 'just in case.' Feelings of guilt for not being available to children are common. Also common, however, is the recognition that the children benefit from their mother's or father's participation, and the role model it provided. Mothers are commonly cited in the literature as feeling the demands of childcare differently to fathers (Reay et al., 2002; Edwards, 1993). Some expressed guilt for being in college with the long-term goal of a better career and enjoying it so much, when they could have had a 'basic job' (Vera). Managing multiple roles is another stressful challenge that is part of being a mature student. Adult relationships can be strained by such re-negotiation of roles and the change and development in the

individual brought about by education has implications for the student, partners and relationships.

While mature students with children complained of not having time for everything and their social life being curtailed, others without such responsibilities said they had no problems keeping up with friends. Some spoke of treating college 'like a nine-to-five job' (Daniel). Daniel often stayed late in college to do course work and this, for him, enabled the separation of college and home and minimised disruption to long established domestic routines. Most were not able to make such clear distinctions. Many men spoke of college giving a structure to their day and providing valuable social contact which they greatly missed since becoming unemployed. The social aspect of college was important to all the interviewees and most enjoyed mixing with younger students although some found them to be 'messers' and not serious students, they were tolerant and understanding of their perceived failings and immaturity. 'It's just their age.' The antipathy of my focus group to younger students, echoed by Keane (2009) was not borne out in the interviews. Although they got well and were friendly with everyone, mature students tend not to socialise with younger ones outside of college. This was partly lack of time but also not sharing the same idea of what constituted a good night out. Bean and Metzner (1985) note that the campus environment and socialising is not as important for mature students as it is for younger ones. They have already established networks and relationships. My participants felt it was natural to form closer alliances with others with whom they shared the commonality of age and circumstances. This was true especially of the dedicated 'Return to Learning' class. Mature students see themselves as more focused, being there because they want to be, and being able to appreciate it better. This fits with Warmington (2002) who speaks of studenthood as a surrogate occupation among mature students. The group he studied, which was very similar to my students, constructed themselves into a group that had many of the characteristics of 'a self-sustaining closed occupational community' (p.584). A feeling of solidarity was engendered by the shared experience of being on a programme whose demands and trials were not understood by others. This had an instrumental value in providing useful support and helped create a shared work ethic in striving towards the ultimate goal of qualifying and eventually a more satisfying or rewarding occupation. It also had a discursive value in that it contributed to the construction of the celebratory

discourse of 'maturity, motivation and commitment' (Avis, 1997; Keane, 2009) that contributed to the identity of the group and provided support. This did not appear to contribute to 'othering' or an 'us and them' attitude among mature students or the younger ones.

Am I up to it?

Most mature students coming back to education wonder if they are 'up to it' whether they will be able to cope with the academic demands of the course. Many of these fears centre on the first graded assignment which is another crisis or anxiety and a major landmark on their journey. People who have been out of education for many years, often with unhappy associations, are worried about their ability to perform in this environment. Assessment is a risk and carries connotations of being judged with consequences for self-esteem and confidence in what is still a new environment. Knowles (1998, p.88) said 'Nothing makes an adult feel more childlike than being judged by another adult'. Young (2000) suggests that response to feedback on assignments is related to the student's self esteem. Students with high levels of self esteem receive feedback of any kind positively, whereas those with low self esteem can see even positive comments as being negative and a judgment of their ability rather than suggestions for change. Assessment also contributes to students' self esteem and self confidence. By being recognised by the tutor and given official confirmation of their abilities it marks an important transition in their recognition of themselves as entitled to be in the college pursuing this activity and able to meet the demands put on them. It is part of the reconstruction of the self.

At the beginning you do get a sense of overwhelming...will I be able to achieve this? and that risk is there... Was it a wasted year? Before, up to now. I mean I know myself I can do this now. Vera

Similarly, Palmer et al. (2009) speak of the first feedback as a key turning point in first year students feeling full members of university life. These students are in a 'liminal' space not yet fully integrated in their new student life. A turning point is defined as 'an event or an experience...that stands out, and which triggers and results in the student developing (or not) a sense of belonging to university life'. Students speak of coming to grips with the language of assignments and of working out what is expected of them. This represents the acquisition of new forms of cultural and

educational capital which is carries with it a revised sense of themselves as capable learners and being able to operate in this environment. Similar anxieties arise when a student moves to a higher level course, although they report that the very first assignment is the most significant for them.

Risk

The concept of risk is useful in looking at mature students. Going to college for them is a non-normative transition which carries extra burdens by being out of step with their peers. Further education and its practices for most are unknown territory and there is the possibility that it will not work out or they may find themselves 'not up to it' – the risk of failure with consequences for self esteem and identity. There are also risks to relationships and family and not having time for other things in life. New learning and questioning can be threatening to established views and frames of reference and carry risks of disturbance. There is the risk that it may not bring the desired result in terms of employment, progression or otherwise.

Davies and Williams (2001) see the risks to mature students in higher education in five broad categories which encompass most of those above: Future rewards – what if no job results and if I accrue enormous debt? Personal achievement – what if I fail? Finance – what if I cannot afford to live and /or support my family? Time-what if I cannot maintain existing obligations or my family relationships suffer? Resources and services-what if the institution won't accept me or if there is insufficient support?

Davies and Williams (2001) suggest that mature students see the decision to go to university as an investment with risks attached. They wanted a 'better' job, but what this meant varied considerably. Some of my group came with the idea of working in a specific area (Caroline, Peter, Maeve, Abbey) some were less specific in their goals although they hoped to find interesting work (Joe, Vera, Aoife, Daniel, Jason). Even those most focused on a career when they started would not consider that their time was wasted if they did not find a job. They knew their age and the current economic downturn made finding employment difficult. However, they felt they were more employable and had experienced great personal benefits; their risk paid off even if not in ways they had anticipated. Most had started in FE on one-year courses. VTOS and BTEA meant there were no fees or loss of income for those on social welfare. Some

needed to find a better paying job and were anxious for a more satisfying career (Vera, Daniel) even if this meant more time in college. Five were willing to do voluntary work in the community if paid work was not available in their chosen area. This indicates that the focus was not entirely on individual financial improvement but on expressing aspects of the self.

Davies and Williams (2001) point out that in terms of time commitment, even part-time courses often mean that students complain 'I've had to put the rest of my life on hold'. This and other issues to do with time have greater impact on those with children. This is true of my cohort too. Those without young children generally found they could manage to balance college and other parts of their lives. This was much more difficult for those with children. Davies and Williams also point out that these issues inevitably are linked to the willingness of others, usually family, to bear at least some of the costs. Individual circumstances, reactions and resources of intellectual, social and emotional capital vary greatly. Students' biographies impact on decisions and responses to risk in ways that may not always be available for conscious consideration. As West and Holliday (2010, p.13) point out, "Present anxiety – 'are we good enough?' -May feed on deeply embodied past anxieties."

Attachment Theory

Sheehy (1996, p.513) observed that growth has potential for pain and 'growth demands a temporary loss of security'. The development of the new sense of self is brought about by encountering risk and successfully negotiating these crises. Bowlby's attachment theory offers a useful way of looking at adults' readiness to surrender security, undertake these challenges and engage with risky situations.

Like Erikson and other developmental theorists, Bowlby demonstrates the importance of early experience for later development. His theory of attachment (1979) proposes that the early bonds formed by children with their caregivers impact on relationships throughout life. Children who are confident of their caregiver's availability establish a sense of security and have a secure base from which to explore the world. Such security is necessary for 'normal' cognitive, social and emotional development. Attachment has a biological and evolutionary component also. Strong bonds between parents and child are necessary for the child's survival and lack of interaction and

stimulation prevents normal development of the brain. Securely attached children see themselves as loved and happy to explore and grow towards autonomy. The response of the mother or other caregiver leads to the establishment of patterns of attachment and internal working models which affect later relationships. An internal working model is a set of expectations about relationships based on early experiences with the primary care giver. The child's experience of attachment strongly influences subsequent reactions to stress, to relationships, self-esteem, sense of security and identity (Fleming, 2008b).

...the quality of the child's experience with his/her attachment figures plays a central role in personality and social development, and in the intergenerational transmission of caregiving quality (Byrne et al., 2005, p. 118).

The implications of attachment theory for adult learners are significant if we accept that early patterns of attachment can influence the adult student and impact on how they cope with new situations, risk and new information. It may affect their ability and willingness to expose themselves to such situations in the first place (Fleming, 2008b).

Involvement in new situations with new people can be somewhat stressful for most people. Using Bowlby, we can understand that an adult who is insecurely attached may be unwilling to put themselves into positions which will cause anxiety or feelings of inadequacy. Such individuals will find these situations stressful and threatening and they will not be optimistic about their ability to cope. For some students even coming into the college or the class may have required overcoming negative feelings and their active and cheerful participation in the learning situation can not invariably be expected.

Adult students are not homogenous and they may not be able and willing to absorb the teacher's input and behave reasonably according to expected social norms, to ask questions when perplexed and participate with others in an open co-operative manner. A student who fails to do so can often be considered awkward or difficult. The material being taught is usually seen as neutral and that the students can absorb it rationally and impersonally. Attachment theory, however, makes us aware that an adult learner may well have strong emotional attachments to previous knowledge or

ways of seeing the world. Lisa, the student mentioned in the introduction who was upset by a discussion on romance which challenged her psychological and cultural assumptions. She took a risk that resulted in growth. Any such challenge to a world view, or exposure to discussion of it, can be threatening and even if accepted, can involve a genuine sense of loss and a period of adjustment to the new reality. Their reaction to this 'strange situation' and the ability to cope with it is influenced by attachment styles (Fleming, 2008b). 'The meaning that learners attach to their experiences may be subjected to critical scrutiny. The teacher may consciously try to disrupt the learner's worldview and stimulate uncertainty, ambiguity, and doubt in learners about previously taken-for-granted interpretations of experience' (Tennant, 1991).

For Fleming (2008), attachment styles and internal working models are examples of psychological filters that affect ways of feeling and acting in adulthood. The process of transforming a frame of reference begins with a 'disorienting dilemma' – similar to the 'strange situation' in which what was taken for granted does not hold any more. Questioning assumptions or long held ideas can cause considerable discomfort (Cranton, 1994; Andreotti, 2010). For a student who has a secure attachment style, this causes less anxiety and less likelihood of avoiding the situation. By engaging with the strange situation or disorienting dilemma, a transformed, better frame of reference results and a more secure attachment style, making it more likely that further strange situations (learning, relationships, social) will be met more confidently and so on (Fleming, 2008b).

Similarly, Atherton (2010), in considering failure to learn, looks at the 'cost' of learning and suggests that learning can be traumatic especially what he refers to a 'problematic supplantive learning' and 'troublesome knowledge.' Such learning involves the replacement of existing knowledge, not just adding to it, and can be particularly difficult when it touches on sensitive areas such as politics or religion where there might be a considerable emotional attachment to the established learning and ways of thinking. This learning is as a process of personal change and involves a degree of loss, (the cost) with implications for the student's self-concept. This involves risk for the student and a potentially difficult transition in assimilating the

new knowledge. A student may not be willing to pay the cost of such learning resulting in a 'failure' to learn.

Being a mature student involves risk, and one's attachment style affects how willing one is to encounter risk and how the associated stresses are dealt with or avoided. The tutor's ability to provide a secure base for learning, exploration and adaptation is of key importance. Tutors' own attachment style also impacts on the situation and their ability to form supportive learning relationships. West (1996, p.x) suggests that education can offer 'a supportive space during periods of profound change and uncertainty' where adults can explore their identities and possibilities of new lives.'

Finding ways of encouraging mature students, especially those whose attachment style make them risk avoidant, to take the first step and ensuring that the first step is successful, is clearly vital for those engaged in the education of adults. Also recognising how attachment styles may impact on classroom relationships and participation as well as encountering new ideas and possibilities, offer ways of understanding the mature student. Learning occurs in ideas encountered in the classroom and in meeting the challenges of being a mature student. My participants reported the unsettling effects, disorientation and questioning that participation in education can (and should) produce. Bowlby's ideas help focus on the importance of a supportive environment and people who can offer a 'secure base' for learning and change.

Attachment theory clearly has much to contribute to discussions on how adults encounter new experiences and risks including those of being involved in an educational setting (Fleming, 2008b). Ideas on children and childrearing are also part of a wider socio-cultural context and as parents' behaviour is influenced by their own experience of being parented, the process can be seen as an example of cultural reproduction. This can intersect with thinking about class, habitus and cultural capital which reinforce how individual psychological processes are impacted by social and cultural practices.

West (1996) maintains that the cultural and social impact on individual psychology and stresses the need for satisfactory relationships and a supportive environments for

the development of the self. Without adequate support and relationships, a false self may emerge, experienced by adults as meaningless, inauthentic and empty. He suggests that early damage to the emergent self can be repaired through 'good enough' (Winnicott, 1971) relationships in later life and that education might offer such an opportunity for reparation through contact with supportive, caring people. Education, he suggests, is 'potentially a space in which to manage and transcend feelings of marginalization, meaninglessness and inauthenticity in interaction with others; in which it is possible, given their support and encouragement, to compose a new life, a different story and a more cohesive self' (West 1996, p.10). This aspect of education helps to illuminate the emotional and relational needs of adult learners in unstable times and the processes of change in the emerging self and resonates with the experience of my group of mature students. The college offered a safe place and a moratorium that facilitated risk taking, learning and development.

Recognition

Honneth (1995) tries to overcome the separation between psychological and sociological approaches to the development of identity. His theory of recognition emphasises the importance of intersubjective processes in personal development and offers a way of seeing some of the students' biographies. Honneth suggests three types of relation to self: self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. In the first, an individual's self-confidence is established in relationships of love and friendship. The child's growing trust in the continuity of the mother's care eventually allows it to see him/herself as separate from and independent of the mother and develop 'the capacity to be alone.' This is reminiscent of Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Fleming, 2008b) and the idea of a 'secure base.' Recognition, in the form of love and care, is necessary for the formation of self-confidence and individual identity and is a prerequisite for the development of self-respect and self-esteem.

Self-respect involves recognizing a person as capable of acting on reason. To have self-respect, then, is to have a sense of oneself as a person, that is, as a 'morally responsible' agent or, more precisely, as someone capable of participating in the sort of public deliberation that Habermas terms 'discursive will formation' (Anderson, 1996, p.xv). Fundamental to this is the idea of self-respect is the notion that this

recognition and the facility to exercise it, is enshrined in legal rights. Respect is shown to others by recognizing them as having legal rights.

Self-esteem is the third form of recognition which is built through the respect one earns through work and involvement with others. The conditions for this kind of recognition are determined by what is considered worthwhile contribution in that society. Mutual recognition of work creates a feeling of solidarity in the community.

Using Honneth's (1995) idea of 'Recognition,' Peter's story (Chapter 5) can be understood as 'mis-recognition' where his dyslexia and perceived lack of academic ability meant he was not recognized, and did not recognize himself, as someone capable of equal participation. With no recognition of his self worth his personality could not fully develop. Being seen as 'the boy' implies the idea that he was not fully an adult deserving of equal status or afforded equal rights. He saw education as a way of achieving recognition.

People who qualified were treated better because education was looked on as something, it was valued. And the fact that I couldn't accomplish it...I was undervalued as a result of it. Peter

My self esteem has gone up enormously and my idea of who I am as a person ...I value myself more, do you understand? I've achieved academically. Peter

Education is a form of public recognition and respect and is an important part of identity development. This notion expands what is meant by 'needing a qualification' beyond simply meeting the demands of the labour market.

For James, literally being recognized in the corridors of the college was important to him. People knew him (he is in his fourth year in the college) and knew his name and he saw himself as a valued member of the class and the college community. He received very positive feedback for his work in the local community radio station. He saw these interactions and affirmation as vital in bringing out 'the real me.'

Other participants' stories underline the importance of being recognized as capable students and how seemingly causal words of encouragement were vital, especially when confidence had been damaged by previous experience. The adult relationship

with tutors also reflected a relationship of respect and support which created a 'good enough' space for growth (Winnicott, 1971). The concept of recognition is a useful way of seeing both the student's motivation to come back to education, their reasons for staying and the process of transformation in the 'emerging self'.

Walters – 3Rs

Walters (2000) suggests that many mature students' journey into and through higher education follow a similar route. The 3Rs framework she formulated is located in the context of adult development and psycho-social transitions. The 3Rs stand for Redundancy, Recognition and Regeneration.

The first concept, 'redundancy' she sees as a common and major motivating factor in motivation. She sees redundancy as positive and part of the dynamic process of continually restructuring the past and reinterpreting it as perspectives change and the old perspective becomes redundant. Perspective change is brought about by 'life dilemmas' often involving changes which can be upsetting as they precipitate a change in the self concept, questioning and a restructuring of one's frame of reference. Unemployment or children growing up involves such a change involving the redundancy of role and skills and prompting a search for a new identity. Walters suggests that the process of questioning may have already have begun, but whether the process is reactive or proactive, redundancy is still the issue. Redundancy can refer to, socio-economic circumstances, relationships, a frame of reference or a self-concept which one wants to change.

The second concept 'recognition' is essential for progression. Recognition means recognising the reality or desirability of change or the possibility of change. However, recognising the internal process as well as the external event, for example unemployment, is crucial. Walters quotes Mezirow (1978, p. 105):

...this is not simply role taking for it also implies a conscious recognition of the difference between one's old viewpoint and the new one and a decision to appropriate the newer perspective as being of more value.

Recognising appropriate action and revising behaviour if necessary may be assisted by the recognition of a suitable role model or support embodying the new perspective. This can be a teacher, friend, organisation or fellow students.

Regeneration is the third concept, and following the previous two, is the outcome of the developmental process. Again, drawing on Mezirow, having restructured one's frame of reference to one that is more appropriate and satisfying, one participates again in society on new terms defined by the new personal meaning perspective. Education offers the opportunity to be challenged and to rethink present knowledge and values. Walters maintains that the content of education is unimportant; what matters is 'the opportunity to examine one's attitudes and behaviour-to reflect on one's life history' (Walters, 2000, p.7). While it could be suggested that studying psychology or sociology encourage a more direct reflection and a different perspective (Mercer, 2007; Guiffrida, 2009) all students I interviewed reported a revised sense of self, underlining the idea that 'it's not what's done that is important, but how it's done.'

This framework offers a useful way of looking at the students in my cohort. They all experienced redundancy of some kind. For some their role changed or they recognised a disparity between the way they were and other 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1985). For some, circumstances allowed them to act on a long held desire to go back to education. Although some mentioned how acquiring new knowledge was interesting and relevant to them, the actual new information or subject matter was given very little attention. They saw themselves differently, as people who had more information and who had the skills to acquire it. The real change was in themselves, their sense of identity, confidence, self esteem and control.

Mezirow speaks of perspective transformation being 'epochal' where an individual faces a sudden crisis and is forced to take stock of their lives as previous perspectives are inadequate to deal with the new situation. Becoming unemployed or the death of a spouse can be such changes. For some, especially for students dealing with social or psychological ideas, a change had resulted from an encounter with subject matter that exposed them to new insights. For example, in media analysis, the concept of 'ideology' is a 'threshold concept' that can go beyond the subject and deeply affect the student's way of seeing the world. He also sees the possibility of a more evolutionary change or 'a cumulative progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in point of view and leading to a transformation in habit of mind.' This

change comes about 'by a series of transitions which permit one to revise specific assumptions about oneself and others until the very structure of assumptions becomes transformed' (Mezirow, 1981). This seems particularly relevant to the students in this study and their progress to a revised sense of self.

Support and care emerges as a critical element in dealing with transitions and the development of a new sense of identity. It is also addressed by the mature students in my group who acknowledged the key role of family, friends and tutors in the college and the general atmosphere in which they felt comfortable, welcome and respected. The literature suggests that a supportive environment is not just a fortuitous pleasant extra, but an essential aspect of negotiating the transition to a revised self. Noddings' observation (1992, p.27) that 'caring is the very bedrock of all successful education' is particularly relevant in this context and implies an obligation to provide 'a safe place' and attend to the emotional as well as intellectual needs of adults.

Section 3

Finding a Voice

The core concept of 'finding a voice' represents the 'revised self,' the outcome of the process of change for the mature students in this study. The quotations from the students in Chapter 6 show how forcefully and positively they expressed their conviction that they had changed as a result of their time in the college. They had a revised sense of self. 'Voice' is used here to include not just the act of speaking but a sense of agency, respect and entitlement to participate.

Greater confidence came about as a result of doing well and receiving positive feedback on assignments, especially the first one. This is an obvious and recognised rite of passage for many students with special associations and anxieties for those who are older. It is also an important form of personal and social recognition. Doing well acted as a motivator and created a desire to do even better. Similarly, developing a sense of being confident with computers marked another significant achievement and a major landmark for some. It is clear, however, that the feeling of confidence extended beyond academic competence into other aspects of the students' lives and was largely responsible for the 'revised self' they reported. Mercer (2007), from her

study of mature students, also suggests that academic and personal growth are not mutually exclusive categories, but inter-related. She points out that researchers consider personal and academic growth as separate and have not considered personal development an integral part of the process. She speaks of a 'dual process between personal and academic growth' which supports what emerges from my study. It is clear, in the comments of the students, that the two are inter-related. New knowledge is not much mentioned, although it is welcomed as offering a new understanding. Of much greater importance is a more general feeling of knowing more, being more aware and 'knowing what's going on.'

You're filling yourself up with something and it does show in everyday things, no matter when you're at home or whatever. Simply just in conversation.

Aoife

When I hear people talking about why they're doing things...like the elections there...you might be sitting in front of the TV and you'd understand what's going on, that's important. You know what's going on. Daniel

Personal as well as academic development that shows 'in everyday things' and the general feeling of being more informed and competent is evident in these quotes. Knowing 'what's going on' also carries with it a sense of involvement, inclusion and acceptance.

Academic achievement is also significant for many mature students as their previous experiences may not have led them to see themselves as competent in this area. Going back to education may have been the fulfillment of a long held wish and realise a part of the self that had not been addressed earlier. Mercer (2007, p.26) calls this 'resolving the past' and she sees this as reclaiming a part of the self that had been missing and having a central role in the renegotiation of a revised identity. Unfinished business was certainly a factor for some of my group. This could be seen as resolving an imbalance between an actual self and a desired 'possible self'. For some, this included a self that was recognised by others as well as themselves.

The successful negotiation of challenges and the accompanying risks in the transition to becoming a mature student and while in the college also offered the potential for

growth and contributed to developing self confidence and a different perception of self.

Confidence is also experienced in relation to others. As mentioned in Chapter 6, when asked to elaborate on what their new confidence meant to them, most of the students referred to speaking, being able to speak and having things to say. I called this concept 'finding a voice' as it has metaphorical connotations of not having had a voice, of speaking up after a long silence and finding that you have something to say. It also implies speaking up for yourself, asserting a claim for recognition and a right to participate. It is not only a personal development but it is also social as it manifested in dealings with others. It describes and symbolises the transformation described in the students' narratives.

Em, well yeah, I'd say confidence. I suppose yes, confidence wise and then you know sometimes especially when you're coming from an area... and you feel you haven't completed your education and somebody tries to have a conversation with you about something academic, you're kind of saying 'I'm not opening my mouth here, in case you make a thick out of yourself' or whatever, but like I don't feel that as much, like I never really did feel it hugely, at the same time I'd probably go 'I wouldn't be too sure about that' so I wouldn't ...I'm not going to argue a point with somebody even though in my mind I'd be saying 'I don't think that's right.' Caroline

Vera spoke about having a wider range topics of conversation and being 'on a par'.

I'm on par with them to a certain extent and I can voice a viewpoint that I wouldn't have voiced before. I wouldn't have had the knowledge, you know?
Vera

Feeling 'on a par' implies feeling unequal previously. She can now engage on an equal footing. There were many more comments of this kind. Many relate to greater social confidence and competence and being able to take part in conversations that that they would have felt excluded from or unable for before. Some of the comments relate to questioning. Daniel queries his bills and looks for a better deal, Jason can ask questions, and some speak of having things to say. Having confidence and being able take part in conversations in ways they felt unable to previously indicates a new sense of agency, assertiveness and social participation. Caroline's comment above reflects the influence of class 'coming from an area' and her feelings about leaving school

early which resulted in an unwillingness to be part of a conversation despite her instinctive feelings. Finding a voice enables participating from a position of equality

Many spoke of previously being unable or unwilling to speak in certain situations 'afraid to say something wrong' and being afraid to speak in case she made 'a thick' of herself, not challenging bills and not being an equal conversational partner with her children, or not being able to express themselves. Bourdieu (1992, p.127) described habitus as 'a socialised subjectivity'. It is found, not just at the level of the conscious, but in unconscious, unthinking behaviour. Language is key part of the embodied habitus in its codes and registers and in its use or non use. Mastering the language of assignments and academic language generally is a major step for students. Being able to use language differently, in different contexts marks a change in the habitus. The change experienced is expressed in very strong and emotive terms: 'a metamorphosis'. 'It's like a weight lifted off your shoulders,' 'not afraid to speak up'. None of these people were 'shrinking violets' before they came to college. They were competent and sociable and yet felt intimidated and unable to participate adequately in certain circumstances.

Belenky et al.(1986, p.14) suggest that while visual metaphors imply distance and separateness, whereas voice implies connectivity, proximity and relationship. It acknowledges subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

Voice is a fundamental feature of being human. Talking to others is a way of telling yourself what you think, 'I know what I think when I hear what I say' (in Tarule, 1996). Opinions are often worked out in the act of discussion and this is dependent on an ability and willingness to take part in such discussions. The students are talking about being able to take part in discussion and opinion forming without the feelings of inferiority that they were conditioned to.

For Belenky et al. (1986, p.44) Dialogue or 'real talk' implied 'real listening', exploration and the conditions that mean 'half-baked or emergent ideas can grow.' 'Connected Knowing' is marked by 'really listening'. It involves the 'capacity to attend to another person and to feel related to that person in spite of what may be enormous differences (Belenky et al., 1986, p.143). Likewise, for Belenky et al.

separate knowing is knowing at a distance and involves ‘the doubting game’ (Elbow, 1973, in Belenky et al., 1986, p.104), it is adversarial and seeks to find fault. Connected knowing, on the other hand, demands intimacy, equity and empathy rather than judgment. Instead of ‘the doubting game’ it involves ‘the believing game’ (Elbow, 1973, in Belenky et al., 1986, p. 113) and seeing the other in their own terms. Similarly, Brookfield (1987, p. 238) speaks of the importance of ‘learning conversation’ for developing critical thinking. Such conversations involve reciprocity and an acceptance of disagreement, diversity and a multiplicity of interpretations.

Dialogue with oneself, ‘talking to oneself,’ is a reflexive process that involves the interpretation of ourselves to ourselves and the construction and reconciling of our various identities. We define ourselves through our narratives and their interaction with the narratives of others. As McIntyre (1981, p.194), says ‘The narrative of anyone’s life is part of an interlocking set of narratives’. Voice is therefore fundamental to our construction of identity. It carries with it the idea of being listened to, afforded respect and recognised (Honneth, 1995). Taking part in discussion is fundamental for the individual and for social interaction, involvement and change.

Couldry (2010, p.1) suggests that ‘voice is the capacity that humans have that enables them to ‘give an account of themselves’ Neo-liberalism, he maintains, as a discourse that has come to dominate the world, denies that voice matters. Through ‘a reductive view of politics as the implementing of market functioning’ (Couldry, 2010, p.2) he suggests that there is a ‘crisis of voice’ under neoliberalism. He also uses ‘voice’ as a ‘connecting term’ that challenges neoliberalism’s claims and enables an alternative view based on people’s capacity for social cooperation based on voice. Dialogue, for Freire, was necessary to develop critical consciousness and an ability to question and change the status quo.

To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection (Freire 1970 b, p.69).

For Freire, the word involved action and reflection and praxis was about balancing both.

Harre and Gillett (1994, p.175) also stress the importance of discursive skills. 'As human beings extend their discursive skills, so they expand their consciousness; that is, they extend the range of matters to which they can attend and of which they are aware'. This 'new awareness' came across in the interviews. 'Seeing things differently' implies an awareness of other possibilities and changed frames of reference. Having a voice allows a questioning of conventional wisdom.

Finding a voice, speaking up, questioning, knowing what's going on are crucial for the fulfillment of the individual and imply a greater ability for meaningful interaction with others and engagement in society. For Belenky et al. (1986, p.134) to be silenced is to be voiceless, selfless and mindless, subject to the authority of others. It is fundamental for reflexive learning (Habermas, 1975) and fostering co-operative discussion, communicative action (Habermas, 1984) and a revived public sphere. It is fundamental too, for an ability to participate in discussions about differences and develop new understandings that are not determined by the experiential context and the ideologically predetermined (Brookfield, 1987, p.357). This implies a respect for difference and a willingness to subject our own views, as well as those of others, to critical scrutiny. Tarule (1996, p.276) sees voice as an 'indispensable aspect of knowing and thinking' and dialogue as 'making knowledge in conversation.' Finding a voice means being able to participate in discussion and 'making knowledge.' It is fundamental too for countering a system of education and world view that promotes a 'culture of silence' Freire (1970b) in which preparation to work within the system minimises critical questioning and awareness.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at the concepts of Latent Self, Emerging Self and Revised Self from a more theoretical perspective. 'Finding a voice' was used to describe and symbolize the 'revised self' and personal development described by the participants which was the most important, if unexpected, part of their experience. It is not just an added bonus of the instrumental learning and training in FE but the main benefit with significant implications for the students themselves, their families and society more generally.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

It was suggested in the introduction that the further education sector is a major provider of adult education. The history of FE in Ireland, its status of part of VEC provision and the climate of neo-liberalism in which it emerged is the important context of this study. The aim was to explore the experience of mature students, their reasons for coming to an FE college and what they consider the benefits of participating. I sought to explore the issues and themes through the voices of students largely neglected in the literature. Although the majority of students in the sector are now over twenty one and classed as mature students most of these are younger mature students and this study focused on those who had been out of education for some time. It is not suggested that mature students have more difficulties than younger students, but that they are different and that they are attending institutions that, despite the growing number of older students, were established for school leavers and usually still seen as the prerogative of younger people.

The findings

The findings indicate that for mature students FE is a site of significant learning that goes beyond vocational preparation. The students in this study felt they had changed significantly as a result of their participation.

Virtually all the students surveyed and all of those interviewed were very glad they had come back to FE and said that they had a very positive experience despite difficulties with lack of money, juggling other commitments and assignments. Most came to FE because of the level and structure of the courses or because they wanted a particular course that was not available elsewhere. Some just wanted to come back to education with no particular course or career in mind. FE is available to those who would not have qualified for HE directly and offers progression to many third level courses. It is therefore important in providing alternative routes to HE and in providing alternatives to HE and in offering 'second chance' education. It is also seen as convenient, accessible and relevant to those who do not see themselves going to HE.

Not having work or being in an unsatisfying job, becoming unemployed and a desire for a qualification were commonly stated reasons for the decision to go back to college. There were also other factors such as children being grown up or starting school that allowed attendance at a course made it 'the right time' for the individual. A personal contact or recommendation often provided the immediate spur and helped decide on the particular college. Significant too was some affinity for education and learning and, in many cases, a long-held desire to go back and a feeling that they had missed out by not pursuing education earlier. The interviews, however, revealed that there were other complex motivations best understood in the context of the individual's life.

For nearly all, a process of change had already started as their roles and sense of self had altered as a result of becoming unemployed or their children growing up. The 'emerging self' is the name given to the process of change in FE characterized by a number of milestones or developmental stages. Often there were other personal changes and adjustments too. Adjusting to being a mature student and developing a sense of academic competence is part of this process. The successful negotiation of these stages, which is not straightforward or linear, contributes to the identity shift described by the students. The supportive environment described by the participants is a key factor in the process.

I used the conceptual label of 'Finding a voice' to describe the revised self or changed identity the students claimed. When asked what they had got from coming back to education, all said 'confidence.' I was surprised by how general this was and how strongly expressed it was by most. This went far beyond academic confidence and extended into other personal and social aspects of their lives. It was not just a matter of feeling able to speak up in situations in which they would have been silent before, it combined a sense of having something to say and a more general competence that involved a greater awareness and 'knowing what's going on' and a feeling of entitlement to engage and question. For the students this development was unexpected and they were pleasantly surprised by it. All, whatever their initial reasons for coming, felt they had changed during their time in college, most very significantly. They were surprised too by their enthusiasm for learning and how enjoyable their experience was.

Finance is a major issue. Some students were supported by partners, savings or part-time work. VTOS and BTEA are vital supports without which returning to education would be impossible for many. The participants in this study also had the vital emotional and practical support of their extended families.

Implications

The students in this study found their time in FE enjoyable and beneficial; however, the results give rise to some comments about the system.

The increase in numbers of mature students in FE occurred by default, much like the growth of the system overall, without any stated policies or target quotas. This needs to be addressed in the context of a review of the role and purpose of the sector.

At present, while FE generally is inclusive in its policy and practice, there is no consistency between colleges, even within the one VEC, or within the same college. This in effect leaves it up to the course co-ordinator or those interviewing prospective students to interpret admission policies. In a time of high demand for places and in a system whose main stated purpose is to prepare students for employment, mature students, especially older mature students, may be seen as less 'worthy' of a place than younger applicants. In this context, it is important to ask how we in FE can formalize a commitment to improving access and success and enhancing the experience of non-traditional students. This could involve looking at targets and quotas and liaising with community education facilitators and adult education organizers who are also under the remit of the CDVEC. However, these sectors operate separately with very little attention given to co-operation or encouraging student progression. This needs to be addressed with a view to developing the successful 'Return to Learning' courses already operating and enhancing the routes into FE and progression within FE and beyond.

FE offers progression routes to third level education which is especially important for those who lack traditional Leaving Certificate admission requirements. Many mature students do not come to FE intending to progress but, having attended FE, many feel able to and want to. However, some come with progression in mind. This is a

significant access route for non-traditional students with implications for equality and widening participation in HE, especially among groups who are under-represented in third level education. The report 'Where Next?' (2010) affirms the importance of preliminary courses for mature students in HE. However, by requiring applicants to have achieved all the components of a full FETAC award in one session and by greatly limiting the number of places available to FETAC applicants, many HEIs are putting obstacles in the way of non-traditional applicants. Greater co-operation between the FE sector and the HEIs clearly need to be developed. This could include the expansion of specific access courses or looking at arrangements such as those in Warwick university in the UK whose 2+2 degree offers adults who lack formal qualifications an opportunity to study for a degree by spending two years in an FE college (the equivalent of 1 year of a traditional degree) and the final two year in the university.

Although there have been policies in place for many years at government and college level which encourage access to HE by non traditional groups, no such policies exist for FE. Access offices and designated support officers for mature students have been successful in attracting mature students and supporting them in HE. FE has not been included in these developments. This reflects FE's second level status and the unsuitability of these structures for what happens in the sector. The implementation of the changes called for in the McIver Report (2003) would be extremely helpful in addressing these deficits and allow for the expansion of non-teaching roles and supports. Similarly, traditional timetabling and the scheduling of the 'school' day imposed by the DES greatly limit FE in the flexibility it can offer which seriously curtails the provision of part-time courses and the accumulation of modules or credits over a number of semesters or years. This prohibits the participation of adults who can not commit to full time attendance. This needs to be addressed with the DES by the CDVEC and the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA), the national representative association of Ireland's Vocational Education Committees. Even without structural changes at government level individual VECs and colleges can introduce and implement policies that foster inclusiveness as an agreed aim.

At the college level supportive and encouraging attitudes of teaching staff and others were considered of key importance by the students and vital to their success. Support

meant being treated with respect, as an adult and feeling that their situation and issues were understood. This was particularly important when things got difficult. Support systems failing, or the illness of a child or parent often involves missing classes and work piling up. At such times the support of the staff and flexibility with deadlines often makes the difference between staying and dropping out. Having easy, informal access to staff who were willing to give their time and listen was very highly valued. The course co-ordinator, who has overall responsibility for the class, was generally seen as a key source of support.

Although it is impossible and undesirable to prescribe for all aspects of inclusion, and most teachers' sensitivities serve them and all their students well, there are aspects of good practice that contribute to inclusion that could be cultivated and disseminated. Very often this good practice applies to all students with some awareness of the particular characteristics of various groups. For example images in publicity material and brochures can create a sense of inclusion. Particular care for the sensitivities of those who have been out of education for some time is especially important at the initial contact and at interview. Likewise an awareness of the difficulties that such students can face in the initial period of adjustment and other 'strange situations' and with the first assignment can be particularly helpful. This highlights the need for appropriate training and recognised qualifications for those working in the sector. Individual colleges can, however, do much to increase awareness of these issues. Staff meetings and local in-service sessions, as well as disseminating good practice, can be used to highlight inclusiveness and make it a stated policy in colleges' mandatory quality documents and putting procedures in place to ensure implementation of these policies. This stated commitment to mature students and other non traditional groups may require a re-examination of admission policies and entry criteria which again raises the question of the role of FE. This question is of particular importance now as legislative change in 2012 will mean major transformations in the sector as a new Further Education and Training Body, Solas, will be established. It is vital that the FE sector, the CDVEC and individual colleges have a clear vision of their purpose and value and a strong voice in these significant developments in Irish education.

Limitations of the study

Not all mature students do well in further education. It is one of the limitations of this thesis that it did not include a focus on students who left. This would be interesting work for a further study. There is no co-ordinated disaggregated information available on non-completion in FE, and while non-completion is not necessarily a bad thing, knowing why students do not complete could enable better preparation and provision to be put in place. Hidden Disadvantage (2010) found considerable variations in drop out rates in HE with those from lower socio-economic groups more likely to drop out. Anecdotally and from my own experience, mature students are less likely to drop out than their younger colleagues. There are a number of factors that contribute to non-completion by mature students in FE. These include: students feeling that they are doing the wrong course or the course not being what they thought it was, the course being more academically demanding than expected, the first assignment proving too stressful and falling behind with coursework, often as a result of domestic demands requiring absence from college. This usually applies to women with younger children. Most of these could be addressed with more concerted planning, monitoring and advice. Students sometimes drop out because they feel they are not being noticed, they do not feel involved in the college or their concerns are not being taken seriously. This highlights the need for awareness, sensitivity and timely feedback and consultation. Similarly, a follow up study some time after graduation would provide information on the longer term outcomes for the students.

Competing discourses

There are two discourses operating side by side in FE. One is characterised by the neo-liberal discourse of individualism, accountability and servicing the needs of the economy described in Chapter 2, and the other provides the supportive environment and individual care that is fundamental to the changes described by the students. The neo-liberal influences at the official and policy level are being mediated by the staff of the college who deals directly with the students and who exercise a degree of flexibility in interpreting regulations, guidelines and course content. Perhaps this is unsurprising in a system that owes its existence to stretching official boundaries and continues to have an ambivalent relationship with the DES. The practice on the ground, in general, reflects a belief in an ethos of care and a broader vision of education. This vision includes a concern for the development of the person, the encouragement of a questioning critical approach that goes beyond the transmission of

skills and competencies and meeting outcomes. However, much of this depends on individuals and all teachers in FE do not operate in this way. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there is some evidence that this ethos is being eroded with more teachers coming from industry and changing practices. This highlights the issue of the lack of a shared vision of FE and the need to support present good practice and make it explicit in policy and the training of those working in the sector.

The benefits of participation in FE are not just for the individuals and their families. Interestingly, in the context of the dominant neo-liberal climate, the increase in confidence, sense of agency and ‘knowing what’s going on’ mean that these students have a greater ability and willingness to participate in the community and contribute to an enriched public sphere. ‘Finding a voice’ implies a greater capacity for discussion and the development of a more critical aspect to their reasoning that enhances their functioning as active citizens to the benefit of society more generally. Teaching and learning knowledge and skills for employment are an important part of the work that is done well in FE. It is important to recognize the other significant benefits as well as these economic, employment-related aspects that dominate discussion of FE. The students felt they were more employable, although they were all too aware of the difficulties of getting employment in the current climate and at their age. They also felt more able and inclined to question established practices and systems. This study demonstrates the limitations of the neo-liberal customer oriented model of education as responding to students’ needs. Many of my cohort recognised they were unclear of what their precise needs and were surprised by the eventual result. In a system dominated by outcomes, it is a reminder that the process of education is as important as the product. The development of discursive skills allows the type of conversations through which, for Habermas, real needs can be discovered. Our frames of reference are constructed in part by the socio-cultural conditions of neo-liberalism and the reclaiming of reason from this distortion is an adult learning project (Fleming, 2008a). These students are better equipped to engage in this project. Their stories show that learning for living and learning to make a living need not be incompatible.

A final thought

From a personal perspective, as a mature student myself and sharing many of the concerns and experiences of the participants, I found it easy to empathize and identify with the students' stories. I tried to be a participative and collaborative enquirer and to be mindful of the need for reflexivity and an awareness of how the research was impacting on the participants and on me. The interviews asked the students to reflect on their experience and to explore and articulate their thoughts and feelings in a way that they would not normally do. They said they found the process beneficial and interesting and were glad of the opportunities it offered to develop their awareness and personal insights, as I was myself. I felt my skill as an interviewer improved during the course of the research and the use of the participants' voices lend authenticity and credibility to the findings. Overall I think the methodology worked very well to produce rich and insightful personal accounts of experience. These accounts offer a way of understanding FE as facilitating a process of change for mature students.

As a researcher and as someone working in the area, the process offered an opportunity to reflect on my own career, teaching in FE and the role of the sector itself. I was surprised by the findings. I had expected that there would be much talk about subject matter and its relevance to the world of work, classroom and assessment practices and learning as an older person. These barely featured as the other themes emphatically emerged. I was surprised too, by the complexity of the motivation to return to education and what becoming a student meant in the individuals' lives. Most surprising was the unanimity and strength of feeling the students reported about the changes they experienced. Overall, for me, the study offered a chance to see FE from a different vantage point. It succeeded in 'making the familiar strange' and made me aware of aspects of FE and its students that had become unnoticed through familiarity and dealing with the constant immediate demands of daily practice. It renewed and increased my admiration of what the sector can do and the importance of preserving what it does well.

This is a small study with no claims to generalisability. It uses the participants' own stories and grounded theory analysis to illuminate the experience of a group of adult learners and to increase understanding of the factors that contribute to it. It is hoped that this will contribute to an understanding of what goes on in further education and

what it offers mature students and its important role in education in Ireland. It is hoped too, that in the face of policies that promote individual learning for the workplace, that this other important learning might be recognised and valued.

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APPENDICES

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Pilot Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a research project on mature students in further Education. Thank you for agreeing to take part.

1. Age _____
2. Male _____ Female _____ (*please tick*)
3. Nationality _____
4. Marital status (*please tick*)

Single ____ Widowed ____ Married ____
Separated ____ Divorced ____

5. Do you have children? Yes ____ No ____

Please indicate the number of children and their ages:

Age	Number of children
Under 5 years old	_____
Between 5 and 10 years	_____
Between 11 and 15 years	_____
Between 16 and 20 years	_____
21 years or older	_____

6. At what age did you leave secondary school? _____
7. Please tick which, if any, of the programmes below you completed.
The Leaving Certificate ____
The Leaving certificate Applied Programme ____
The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme ____
Other final secondary education qualification ____ *Please give details*

None _____

8. Are you doing a one or two year course in further education?
Please tick
One year _____ Two year _____
9. If you are doing a two year course, please indicate what year you are now in.
First year ____ Second year ____
10. Please list any other courses you have undertaken since leaving secondary school.

11. What is your mother's highest educational qualification?

12. What is your father's highest educational qualification?

13. What is your father's occupation? _____
14. What is your mother's occupation? _____
15. Did any of your siblings attend further or higher education?
Please tick
Yes _____ No _____ Not applicable _____
16. When you finish your present course do you intend to go on to another course?
If yes, please say which course.
Yes. _____
No. _____
17. Between the time you left secondary school and came to further education, what was your main occupation? (*If you had several different occupations, please write 'various' and indicate the type of work, e.g. manual, shop work etc.*)

18. Please indicate how you support yourself financially while at college (*e.g. part-time job, parental support, spousal support, VTOS etc.*)

19. Why did you come back to education?

20. Why did you come to further education rather than another type of course e.g. university?

21. What do you consider to be the most enjoyable aspects of being a student in further education?

22. What do you consider to be the least enjoyable aspects of being a student in further education?

23. Overall, how would you summarise your experience of being a mature student in further education?

24. Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. The research project will also focus, through interviews, on the experiences of mature students in further education. Would you be willing to take part in an interview?

Yes_____ No_____

If 'yes' please give a contact number or email address.

Thank you

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a research project on mature students in further Education. Thank you for agreeing to take part.

1. Age _____
2. Male _____ Female _____ (*please tick*)
3. Nationality _____
4. Marital status (*please tick*)
Co-habiting ___ Widowed ___ Married ___
Separated ___ Divorced ___ Single ___
5. Do you have children? Yes ___ No ___

Please indicate the number of children and their ages:

Age	Number of children
Under 5 years old	_____
Between 5 and 10 years	_____
Between 11 and 15 years	_____
Between 16 and 20 years	_____
21 years or older	_____

6. At what age did you leave school? _____
12. Please tick which, if any, of the programmes below you completed.
The Leaving Certificate _____
The Leaving certificate Applied Programme _____
Junior Cert _____
The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme _____
Other _____ (*please give details*)

None _____
13. Are you doing a one or two year course in further education?
Please tick
One year _____ Two year _____
14. If you are doing a two year course, please indicate what year you are now in.
First year _____ Second year _____

15. Please list any other courses you have undertaken since leaving secondary school.

16. What is your mother's highest educational qualification?

12. What is your father's highest educational qualification?

13. What is your father's occupation? _____

14. What is your mother's occupation? _____

15. Did any of your siblings attend further or higher education?

Please tick

Yes _____ No _____ Not applicable _____

16. When you finish your present course do you intend to go on to another course?
If yes, please say which course.

Yes. _____

No. _____

17. Between the time you left secondary school and came to further education, what was your main occupation? (*If you had several different occupations, please write 'various' and indicate the type of work, e.g. manual, shop work etc.*)

25. Please indicate how you support yourself financially while at college (*e.g. part-time job, parental support, spousal support, VTOS etc.*)

26. Why did you come back to education?

27. Why did you come to further education rather than another type of course e.g. university?

28. Why did you come to this college specifically?

Its reputation ____ Career Guidance advice ____
A friend recommended it ____ It's convenient to where I live ____
Another reason ____ (*please give details*)

29. What do you consider to be the most enjoyable aspects of being a student in further education?

The course ____
The social aspect ____
Pleasant atmosphere ____
Approachable staff ____
Other – (*please give details*)

30. What do you consider to be the least enjoyable aspects of being a student in further education?

Assignments ____
Facilities ____
Lack of money ____
Juggling other commitments ____
Younger students ____
Other – (*please give details*)

24. Overall, how would you summarise your experience of being a mature student in further education?

- 25 Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. The research project will also focus, through interviews, on the experiences of mature students in further education. Would you be willing to take part in an interview?

Yes ____ No ____

If 'yes' please give a contact number or email address.

Thank you

Interview schedule

How did you come to be a student here in the college?

How did you feel about coming back to education?

How do you feel about it now?

What was your experience of school?

Has it affected your life? In what ways – positive, negative? – Family, friends?

What would be a good day in college for you?

What have been the best / worst aspects of being a student?

What do you like most / least about being a student?

What do you think of the younger students? How do you get on with them?

What could be done to help mature students in the college?

How did you find the academic demands? Studying? Time management?
Assignments?

What did you get out of being a student?

What would you be doing if you weren't a student now?

What do you hope to do when you finish here?

What advice would you give to someone thinking of coming back to college?

Is there anything else that you'd like to say about being a mature student?

Is there anything you'd like to ask me?

Thank you very much for talking to me.

INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

Research Project on Mature Students in Further Education

I want to find out about the experiences of adults who have returned to education in a Further Education college. The aim of the study is to understand why mature students come to an FE college, and how they get on in further education. My report will be part of a thesis for a Doctorate in Education in NUI Maynooth.

Interview

If you agree to take part I will meet you for a one-to-one interview, where we will discuss your background and your experience of further education. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. I would like to meet you a second time to give you a copy of the interview and to get your opinion on the points I have taken from it. The first interview will take about an hour to an hour and a half, the second will be shorter. If you decide to take part, you are free to change your mind and withdraw from the research project at any time, even after the interview. During the interview you do not have to answer question if you do not want to.

Anonymity

In any reports or publications resulting from this study your identity will remain anonymous. Your name and anything else that might identify you will be changed. Your name will not be used or disclosed to anyone.

If you need to speak to somebody during or after the study or if you have any concerns or questions regarding this study please feel free to contact me at any stage.

Fergal Hardiman
The College

Participant consent form

Please tick your response.

1. I have read and understood the Participant Information.
Yes ___ No ___
2. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study..
Yes ___ No ___
3. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.
Yes ___ No ___
4. I have received enough information about this study..
Yes ___ No ___
5. I agree to take part in the study.
Yes ___ No ___
6. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.
Yes ___ No ___
7. I agree to have my interview tape-recorded.
Yes ___ No ___

Participant's Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Memo

Some thoughts after initial interviews

Redundancy – unemployment- loss of role –mourning? Loss of contacts, friends, daily contact – more of a problem for men it seems – Daniel, James – ‘the silence – I hate that.’ -Important social aspect of FE, also importance of informal chats, coffee, work groups, - MS stay together? Being known – in the college.

What’s this – enjoying what? Social ? achievement? doing well? Computers- more on this** College – James loves coming in! college as a social outlet ? belonging, achievement. All are enjoying it - surprised to be enjoying it so much. –they’re respected, part of something, working with people.

Loss of role, job, children? Identity? Change of role? Who am I now? – I’m a student – Daniel, College as a job? – Warmington, - Daniel? Need to change –

Need to retrain, get ‘something for the CV’ Vera, Daniel, James – why FE? Other options ? – knowing someone, recommendation, level and structure of course, FE.

In some cases coming to college was an afterthought – recommended by someone else, but the idea was not unacceptable? Why? – previous experience of ed? - ** most seemed to like school (mostly)

All appreciate the support and this seems to be a key factor – personal contact with teachers, tutors, Friendly atmosphere. Feeling understood- even in general classes. Respect, belonging. – very important.

Feeling terrified – not all - Abbey, Maeve- used to education, - Abbey in education all her life- never left-

A major issue for others? – fish out of water?

Assignments – fear, not knowing what was expected, doing well, confidence.

It seems that although unemployment is often the trigger to come back to education, it is also seen, at least in retrospect, as an opportunity. Everyone seems very happy to have come back and wouldn’t have done it if the job hadn’t ended. Some (Brenda, Caroline) always wanted to come back. The opportunity came for them and they took it. They felt they missed out by not continuing in education. A vague feeling that their lives could have been different (James) or can be different.

So far all are enjoying it.

Confidence coming up as a major thing with all. ‘more confident’ ‘it’s changed me.’ What’s changed them? – the subject matter? Knowing more? Not feeling inadequate because of lack of education? - more on this.

What is confidence? How has it changed them? Is this a question only for mature students? What about younger ones?

Memo after 3 interviews

James	Caroline	Vera
Job finished	Job finished	Job finished
Local to the college – Obair connection.	Local	Always wanted to go back Wanted a better job
Always wanted to go back	Left school for a job Good at school	Needed a qualification Good at school, left to get a job
‘Finishing education’ ‘coming full circle’ ‘didn’t get a chance’ Importance of ‘finishing’	Felt she had ‘missed out’ Always wanted to come back	No expectations of staying in school or progressing at the time
Good in school Family encouraging	Needed a qualification Kids older – ‘time was right’	Wanted more education – to be better informed.
Confidence Recognition Pride	Family encouraging	Needing it for the CV
‘the real me’	Better being older	Not being ‘on a par’ Wanting to ‘do something with it’
Surprised it’s gone so well Aware of possibilities now – progression – IT	Seeing things differently More empathy More socially aware	One step at a time.
One step at a time	Confidence Being able to speak ‘opened my eyes’ ‘makes you a better person’	Enjoying the course very much
Meeting people Social interaction Support from staff Better as a mature student Enjoying it so much	Great support from staff Age balance important	First assignment stressful but pleased at result and won ability.
More confident	First assignment – hard Pleased at doing well – milestone	Being a better conversationalist – being able to have conversations.
The real me. Language of first assignment a problem – Better now.	Benefits for the kids	More self worth. Enjoying it. Feeling a bit guilty. Appreciating it more as a mature student. Being more focused. Importance of social aspect. Surprised at enthusiasm for education. Wish I’d done it years ago. Seeing things differently

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ACRONMYS

APL	Accreditation of prior learning
BTEA	Back to Education Allowance
CAO	Central Applications Office
CDVEC	City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DES	Department of Education and Skills
FE	Further Education
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GATS	General Agreement on Trade and Services
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutes
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IT	Institute of Technology
LC	Leaving Certificate
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied Programme
NCVA	National Council for Vocational Awards
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate Courses
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
WTO	World Trade Organisation