Unheard Voices, Unlearned Lessons

Seeking to Belong in Adult Basic Education – a Grounded Theory Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experience of a number of adult literacy learners, in order to ascertain why they did not succeed in the learning system, although they had declared their intention to improve their literacy and made the very difficult first steps.

Through listening to the stories of this, marginalised and frequently unheard, minority of Basic Education students, a number of factors have been noted which caused them to have difficulty in the interface between themselves and the education environment. It is argued that addressing these difficulties could sustain not just this cohort, but improve the experience of many adult education students.

Long interviews were conducted and the information elicited analysed using grounded theory method, which ensured that the data gained illuminated the real-life concerns of the interviewees as they spoke about their lives and times in education and were absolutely grounded in their experience. The process of grounded theory was found to be both systematic and rigorous and at its end generated a theoretical framework, illustrating learners' needs which, if integrated into ABE provision would make it easier for learners to persist.

It was found that drop out of and isolation from education was caused where these learners did not feel that they belonged in Adult Basic Education, and this feeling of not belonging was caused by their inability to cope with situations which arose during the education process. It is suggested that the existing functional model of education , because of its rigidity, is not suitable for these learners and that a more caring, inclusive and communicative approach in adult education would ameliorate the situation. Where care is central to the learning experience, the learner is truly central with genuine equality between provider and receiver and recognition of the different roles of participants.

The information generated will have value for providers in the design and delivery of programmes which are suitable for these, fragile, learners, but will require the political will to respect and value this voiceless minority.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABE	Adult Basic Education
AEO	Adult Education Officer
ALO	Adult Literacy Organiser
ALOA	Adult Literacy Organisers' Association
AONTAS	Irish Adult Learners Organisation
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CE	Community Employment
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DALC	Dublin Adult Learning Centre
DKIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
FÁS	Irish Training and Employment Authority – to Jul-14
FETAC	Further Education Training Awards Council
GT	Grounded Theory
ILP	Individual Learning Plan
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association
NALA	National Adult Literacy Association
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
RTE	Return to Education Programme
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

'The aim was to listen to voices from the margins, to record the stories of people who are rarely heard' Linden West (1995)

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the thesis

At the end of every school year and at every level from kindergarten to postgraduate, there are celebrations of academic achievement to acknowledge the successful completion of courses of study by students. Unfortunately, students who strive and fail are not celebrated and in general the reasons for their failure are not understood.

These, marginalised learners remain voiceless and unheard, since there is no formal mechanism to capture their reasons for dropping out, and the effect that drop out has on themselves, their learning and future learning outcomes. Practitioners in Adult Education are willing to share impressions and indeed make judgements, about these, sometimes consistently, failing students, but no concrete evidence exists about the causes and effects of their lack of persistence. Thus, we have only anecdotal evidence and surmises to support our speculations about the effect that intermittent attendance and drop out has on their learning experience in ABE and possible learning outcomes.

Using grounded theory methods, this thesis offers and analyses vivid word pictures gleaned from a number of these students, to illustrate and provide empirical evidence for the validity of those speculations. In addition it offers a theoretical framework illustrating the learners' need to belong which, if integrated into Adult Basic Education (ABE) provision could provide a foundation for a model of education within which these learners would feel more welcome. Often, these students come from the margins of our society and their needs can be neglected and ignored because they do not themselves cause trouble, nor do they understand the ways in which influence can be manipulated in our society to achieve personal aims.

This thesis is about students who found that they did not belong in ABE, despite acknowledging that they needed the skills and despite the fact that the system appeared to us, the providers, to have been arranged to support them, despite the fact that the system did, in fact, support the vast majority of the students. One of the participants in my study puts it very succinctly 'I would always think there would be a chance for me for something, you know what I mean, but then it never clicked' (Alice).[1]

This, first, Chapter provides some general information about the study and discusses the wider education context within which it is situated. It is important to consider education from an historical perspective and to understand how education has been used for the purposes of power and politics and how these uses have consistently excluded minorities, such as women, colonised peoples, and the poor. I describe the genesis of adult education and the conflict between 'liberal' and 'functional' models of education and how these may also be tools of exclusion. It is important, to consider the importance of literacy education, for the individual participant and for the wider society.

In particular, I want to describe how it was that my experience as an adult learner, tutor and administrator, brought me to recognise attrition in adult education and to seek to discover whether the commonly held view, that the 'fault' was with the learner was correct, if the responsibility is that of the provider, or if the difficulty arose in the interaction between the learner and the learning experience.

The difference between this study and other studies conducted into ABE in Ireland is that I was able, through my particular circumstances, to investigate people who actually had a history of non-completion on programmes and, by using long interviews and grounded theory method, I was able to listen to their stories in order to uncover the contributing factors. In my initial thesis proposal I hoped that my study would 'capture the reasons and feelings of this small number of people' and I believe that it has done so. It has shown that feelings which have been part of the discussion among literacy tutors and organisers have basis in fact.

[1] All names have been changed

Rationale for the study

Any practitioner in ABE will have stories about 'lost' students and in this research I have listened to stories told to me by students who dropped out of ABE , sometimes on a number of occasions, in order to see what patterns exist to explain why they dropped out, and when and how intervention might have increased their chances of success.

As part of the provider network, I would also describe lack of completion as a failure, but as I have said the purpose of this thesis is to discover from the learners themselves how they perceive it, and factors in their lives and our provision which could have facilitated their completion of programmes. Carpentieri (2007) suggests the term 'persistence' be applied to adult education within which learners are enabled to access formal education 'dipping in and dipping out' to satisfy their requirements. He says 'whereas retention is a provider centered concept, persistence puts the learner at the centre of the equation – turning retention inside out'. (p.20) While understanding that providers may well see non-continuing learners as dropping out, from a learner centred focus he maintains that the learners may merely be 'dipping out' for a while, because of other responsibilities. 'A system that seeks to facilitate persistence and progression needs to be able to accommodate such an "irregular" or "inconsistent" journey.

Discussions among all the members of provider teams, Adult Education Officers (AEOs), Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs) and tutors, nationally and locally recognise and report the problem but in general, cause is attributed to the learner. 'For decades, low participation in literacy education has been seen in the political perspective as a problem inherent in the low literate himself or herself' (Quigley ,1997:193). The position of this thesis is to listen to the voice of the learner and to understand where *they* think problems arise.

Because of social stigma and prejudice, it is very difficult for people who have poor literacy to acknowledge their problem and to ask for help, so the first step into remedial education is often extremely difficult. It is surprising, therefore, that many who take this huge step still do not complete what they have undertaken to do. As Angela (a research participant) explained 'I thought that, maybe I am stupid, maybe I should not finish the course'. They are a silent cohort for whom the increasing

expertise of the providers and increasing budget applied to literacy by the Government does not seem to have had a beneficial effect.

As an ALO in County Louth VEC for seven years, this was my experience and I was aware, through my links with other ALOs that this was not just a problem with County Louth, but that it was typical of ABE provision throughout Ireland. There are many stories from other education providers, that this dropout is not just relevant to ABE provision, nor just to Ireland, but internationally and continues throughout education, from primary to secondary school, from secondary to third level and during the third level experience. However, my particular interest and experience is in the area of ABE, and this is why I have chosen it as the focus of my research.

My purpose, therefore, is to listen to the voice of these people, which has largely been ignored since they do not stay the course long enough to be researched - and to discover from them precipitating causes for their difficulties and the points in their lives where these difficulties arose, so that we might all become more aware and perhaps develop mechanisms which would support them and help to make the literacy service more accessible. Moving between my prior role as ALO and researcher, I had to learn not to take what they said, personally, when they described a problematic situation, I had to recognise that this was *their* experience, even if it was an unintended consequence of an action on the part of the provider.

The participants in this study had been, or were current learners in the ABE service in County Louth when I interviewed them and had a history of poor or intermittent attendance, six women and four men the youngest of whom was twenty five at the time of my research, the oldest about sixty. Those with whom I had direct dealings before this research, I knew to be both articulate and intelligent, and so, as I discovered, were all the interviewees I met during the research process. However, during the talking and listening process, I discovered that there had been serious difficulties in communication between themselves and the provider. For example, people with whom I had regular conversations professionally, dropped out of the system, and I was surprised that this happened. I did not see any notice of it coming and I genuinely believed that they would have discussed the situation with me before taking such a decision. I have come to understand that this situation arose from lack of clarity in the relationship between me and the learner.

I discovered that they had histories which included marginalisation, through poverty and illness, but that this marginalisation affected each of them individually more than other people in their families and communities. I discovered that this group shared elements in their history, and had particular needs, both personal and educational. I sought to discover if, had these needs been satisfied, would they have been more likely to persist in ABE.

I am confident that, as we worked our way through the research process, the interviewees and I together constructed knowledge and understanding about factors affecting retention in ABE and I am confident that this knowledge was firmly grounded in the learners' lived experience, shared with me.

My background

For the past twenty years, I have been involved as a tutor in Adult Learning and during that time have been an adult learner myself, completing a degree in Psychology and a Masters Degree in Education, with a focus on Basic Education and Specific Learning Difficulties.

As ALO for County Louth VEC for seven years, I was involved in all aspects of Basic Education provision, assessing learners, creating learning plans and supporting students in their learning experience. I have also been responsible for tutor training and ensuring quality provision for the Adult Basic Education Service. Working as a facilitator for Community Development in FÁS[2], I was part of the team which developed and delivered the Core Skills Training Programme, seeking to improve trainees' employability through improving literacy. This team also delivered the training programme which enabled Supervisors in Community Employment to achieve third level qualification, so that they in their turn could facilitate the learning of the participants in Community Employment. I thus have a very broad knowledge of the theory and practice of adult education.

I developed relationships with learners and supported them, as far as possible, through their learning experiences and have come to understand the enjoyment and personal growth that they experienced, but also the difficulties they had to work

[2] Training Authority, now SOLAS

through, from both personal and academic perspectives. I have a distinct memory of a grown man with poor literacy who said to me one day, struggling with a piece of script and almost crying 'but it is just so *hard*, Mary'. On the other hand, I recollect tutors who absolutely could not understand how simple literacy acquisition is so difficult for an adult. I therefore have good personal knowledge of the effect that 'dropping out' has on both the learners and the tutors.

I have a particular interest in these 'disappearing students' since during my work life it was a continuing factor and as a tutor and an administrator I was very conscious that some of the most disadvantaged of our learners did not get the benefit from the service that we had to offer. Students leaving the system also had a negative impact on those who remained, and on the tutors. Quigley (1984), who by turns was himself a tutor, manager and now an academic, talks about the effect that dropout had on his self-esteem and that of his tutors – the temptation is to blame oneself. He says that even after years of research, he still doesn't have any definite answer.

I know some of the reasons attributed by tutors, guidance counsellors, administrators and managers for the dropout phenomenon and, indeed, some of the reasons given by learners, but this study presents the opportunity to explore the life and education experience of a number of marginalised learners who did not complete their programmes, to discover their individual reasons, to look for recurring themes in their stories and site them in a theoretical framework.

Constructing knowledge through the research process

Working my way through the research process, I came to understand my place as researcher, not as objective observer, but integral to the information gathering and explication process. As Charmaz (2006:9) says 'how researchers use guidelines is not neutral, nor are the assumptions they bring to their research'. Having decided to use long interviews to gain information and working from transcribed scripts and stored tapes, gave me quantities of rich data which I could then interpret. Moving from one interview to the next meant that I could take information from the first to the second, and so on, constructing layers of similarities and differences in experience, 'An interviewer's questions and interviewing style shape the context, frame and content of the study' (Charmaz, 2006:32) .

Throughout the research process, I was constructing reality from the information gained from the interviewees, and mediated through my understanding of them and the social context within which we found ourselves. Again, through the grounded theory process, and described in detail in Chapter 4, I was labelling data as I was constructing categories and writing up memos which reflected my immediate reaction to the information I had been given. As Etherington (2004:71) says 'reality is socially constructed and subjectively determined'.

The education context

Education throughout western history was the remit of the two great hierarchies, the Church and the State, with the majority of the population having no access to literacy, maintaining their local history through folk tales, and national histories through the interpretation of those who could write.

Schooling, which had been solely for the upper classes and their servants, became accessible to the middle classes from about the 17th Century and by the 18th Century education was becoming secular, more generally accessible and to some extent the responsibility of the state. By the 18th and 19th Century, some at least of the greater population had learned to write, frequently just their name, but elementary education for all was not available in Britain until after the 1870 Education Act. We can see, therefore how easily education, its contents, political perspective and purpose can become a hotly contested 'site for struggle for knowledge and power' (Cervero, 2001, p.xvi), with competing interests providing education for their own specific purposes. There are many examples of this, such as military schools or seminaries where young people are prepared for specific careers or on the other hand exclusions, for example excluding women from education under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, segregated education in South Africa. 'Adult learning rests in individual interest and initiative. It also emerges from a particular kind of society at a particular moment in its history' (Courtney, 1992, p. xv)

In the colonised world, education was used to promote the colonisers' ethos and inhibit independent thought. The policy of the colonisers appeared to be to ignore the history and culture of the colonised nation and to educate the Civil Service through the colonial mother tongue thereby encouraging students away from their own society and culture (Kelly, 1984). The emergence from colonisation after the Second

World War brought with it a generalised movement towards equalisation in society and access to learning for all with the stated benefits both to the individual and to society as a whole (Freire, 1998).

The gestation of Adult Education and its other incarnations, life-long learning and second chance education was the search for equal access to learning and thereby to power, by groups who had been deprived of education by virtue of their gender or social position. Thus, the trades unions provided classes for their members, local groups sought capacity building in order to make their voices heard and women grouped together to support one another towards equality. Tuition was largely voluntary and amateur and certification pretty ad hoc – for attendance rather than objective achievements. This type of delivery was reported throughout Europe, as well as in Ireland (see Keane 1988, Deem 1999, Lovett 1999). Literacy tuition, my particular area of interest was conducted in much the same way, with volunteer, amateur tutors working with little supervision on an on-going basis with a single learner. The advent of centralised funding for literacy education with its demand for accountability has changed the model to one which has a focus on measurable, probably economic outcomes.

Adult education

Sargant (1996:197) says that adult learning is far broader than 'education, training or community development', and that much learning takes place on an informal basis, within the workplace or in ethnic communities, for example. For the purposes of this investigation, however, I studied education provided within a formal structure for adults who have poor literacy skills.

Predominantly, adults who participate in such education do so on a voluntary basis, 'choosing to participate' (Edwards, 1993) and within a flexible system they will drop in and out of education according to their needs, using learning to improve their professional or social lives. However, adult education is biased towards the middle classes, both in accessibility and content (Woodley et al, 1987:85) and excludes to some extent the socially and educationally disadvantaged (Bamber, 1999). Belzer (1998) suggests that where a learner has the confidence not to feel 'bad' about dropping out, they will be much more likely to return when the opportunity presents itself. Unfortunately, none of the people I interviewed seemed to have this

confidence, rather they blamed themselves for not being able to cope in ABE, since they had already learned to 'blame' themselves for not coping with earlier, compulsory education.

Grummell (2007) gives a succinct description of the evolution of adult education in Ireland, similar to the development of adult education in Britain and throughout Europe. She refers to the Ó Murchú (1984) description of the emergence of adult education from voluntary cultural and agrarian movements in the 1900s. This model of adult education reflected the needs of the provider, skills to facilitate involvement in political activity, in order to perpetuate or disrupt the status quo, or to provide individuals with sufficient literacy to perform to the requirements of the administration - what Pearse (1913:2), cynically names 'education meant to repress' and Freire (1996:20) 'forms of action that negate freedom'.

Adult Education has evolved, therefore as either conservative, to maintain the status quo, or revolutionary to overcome it and what, how and why it teaches can reflect this political ethos. Grummell (2007) describes the functional view of second chance education, as does Fleming (2004) and this can be seen in the context of funding being provided for training, to make effective workers. Opportunities to improve basic education may be provided, as a means of achieving social justice or as a means of implementing change, for the benefit of the individual or, of course to facilitate growth in the economy. Edwards (1993) describes adult education in Sweden in the 1970s which made provision for education to 'widen as well as increase access', but which switched to a more technological focus when the economic situation deteriorated. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) propose that a state should encourage 'broad structural conditions' to encourage participation in the workplace, and they stress, like Tony Blair (1995) that in this regard, education is 'the best economic policy we have'.

Models of education which are not suitable for non-conforming students are described by, for example, Freire (1996) who paints a 'banking' model with the learner submissively taking information from a teacher and applying it in prescribed situations. This model is also described by Pearse (1913) where he states that the purpose of this style of education is to provide civil servants for the British and by Illich (1970) . In all these cases the *purpose* of education is the political will of the government.

Adult education as challenging effects of inequality

It would be good to view adult education as having the purpose to liberate, through education, those who have been oppressed. In Ireland we mostly don't see ourselves as being oppressed, but can observe that resources are unequally distributed and I argue that adult education, therefore should be provided to facilitate access as required to the population that requires it. However, Lynch et al (2012) suggest that as education is currently developing, the student is 'an economic maximiser governed by self interest'(p.14) and with consequent disregard for those students who are not likely to make a significant economic impact.

The White Paper (DES, 2000:28) defines adult education as 'systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning, having concluded initial education or training' and that this will include re-entry to education, continuing education, community education and 'other systematic and deliberate education'. It stresses the importance and inter-connectivity of the 'interfaces between the different levels of educational provision' and emphasises that policies must be designed to embrace the life cycle and 'reflect the multiplicity of sites, both formal and informal in which learning can take place' (p.12). Since many people who have low levels of education may well have had negative early school experience, they might be resistant to 'going back to school', therefore a range of possibilities are provided, in non-traditional sites of learning, such as the workplace, with the support of employers, or in the community, to encourage them to return.

In Ireland, the evolution of Community Education was organic, driven by the requirements of participants and delivering new models of education with the syllabus decided by the participants and delivered within the community, thus providing easy access for learners who might have difficulty in accessing more formal premises. As McGlynn (2012:5) describes it 'a vibrant field of practice operating on the fringes of mainstream education'. Geared specifically towards providing learning for the most disadvantaged , community education is 'part of a co-ordinated development response to the needs of their local area' (AONTAS, 2009:11).

Despite increased funding, a sizeable cohort of adults still does not have sufficient literacy to cope with their daily lives. This may be seen from the functional point of

view as a waste of perfectly good workers, from the liberal perspective as inhibiting the development of the person. Nevertheless, it is Government policy that basic education is provided for them and it is essential that this basic education is accessible and friendly, since my findings show that the interviewees were more likely to drop out of provision where they found it to be inflexible or irrelevant, where they did not have the opportunity for personal development. As Lynch (2010) states, affective inequality occurs directly when people are deprived of the love, care and solidarity they need to survive and develop as human beings. The solution to the problem, says Noddings (2005) is care relationship in education – what Gilligan (1993:156) elegantly calls 'a maturity of interdependence'. Since literacy is socially situated, Feeley (2010) argues that the affective dimensions of equality are 'pivotal' in establishing more just literacy outcomes, but Barton (2005) disputes that the literacy service as it is currently structured will produce these desired results.

I discovered that, when my interviewees felt they had a place where they were respected in ABE, then they became involved in education, and in their community. Len, for example had the confidence to become involved in community action and as other interviewees became confident in their skills, they also became intent on becoming involved in their children's education. Alice, as well as a number of the other mothers, was prepared to ask her child's teacher what were the best methods to help. This required, not just parental interest, not just belief in the benefit of education, but also the confidence to expose her personal literacy difficulty.

Citing Fleming (2004), Grummell (2007) observes the increased funding for and professionalisation of adult education, the national organisations for adult education, dedicated literacy staff and Community Employment Facilitators as providing the professional framework promised by the Government in the National Development Plan (2000). The vision of this plan is for a 'relatively seamless progression through an educational continuum from the cradle to the grave' (p.30). However the vision is predicated on 'acquiring a positive disposition to learning'.. and that this disposition should have its roots in positive early life education.

The greatly increased funding for the basic education service - €93m allocated in the National Development Plan 2000 – 2006, has increased provision and also increased the scrutiny of the service by the funders. Returns are made to the Department of

Education on a six monthly basis, not yet identifying all clients, but stating their employment and educational status. It is understandable that, with increased funding there is increased oversight by the funders and set measurement criteria. Tett (1996:151) observes that the powerful nature of the allocation of resources means that adult education has been 'pushed into a market oriented situation', in which choice for learners is limited by answerability for funding. Gilligan (1988: xii) says 'yet the humanities, in order to gain funding or to defend their place within the curriculum, have often had to justify their educational value in terms derived from analyzing the structure of mathematical and scientific reasoning'.

Taking a functional perspective, the Minister for State for Education, Sile deValera, speaking to a conference in 2005, called to the VECs to account for their money by 'close analysis in terms of learning, certification and progression', that 'funding for a project cannot be solely justified on the worthiness of the client group', and that when seeking further funding the providers should give 'evidence based advocacy'. I can't help believing that it would have been hard for any VEC to give 'evidence based advocacy' on behalf of the people I interviewed. Should they therefore be discounted as learners?

Fleming and Murphy (2000) make an economic case for investment in community and school retention measures, 'personal, cultural, social and economic capital to provide a stable base for children's education' (p.50) since they say that early school leavers are more likely to fall foul of the law and will be a cost to the community. Psacharopoulos (2007:15) calls this 'fiscal elements of early school failure', and remarks that front loading intervention is a much lower cost than that of maintaining someone in prison. This connection between low levels of literacy, early school leaving and imprisonment is also pointed out by Moser (1999).

The people I interviewed were not likely to fall foul of the law, nor become involved in anti-social behaviour, so it is hard to make an economic case for them. Is this not truly a 'terrible vista', in which once more the value of education is measured not by benefit to the individual, families or the community, but by keeping the learner out of jail. This should be a beneficial outcome, not the purpose of education.

If, in hard economic times, with funding being reduced, we once again ignore people who do not meet the normal criteria, or who do not want to get examinations, then

we are perpetuating the inequality that saw them unable to achieve at school and unwilling to persist in ABE. Feeley (2014:76) suggests that inequalities of power are 'interwoven with other inequalities of respect and recognition and particularly economic inequalities'

Adult Basic Education (ABE)

> The broader purpose, the goal of adult education, is to help adults realize their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible and autonomous learners'. (Mezirow, 2000:30)

The literacy service developed from the tradition of liberal adult education within which volunteer tutors, many women, predominantly middle class, worked on a mostly ad-hoc basis to support individuals to read and write. Based within small, local communities and with a sense of 'doing good' it reflects Dewey's dream of education to enable greater participation in common life. At the same time, within the workplace, the unions encouraged and provided education for their members, to enable their growth and development, and resulting participation in society.

ABE exists as provision for people who have left school with poor or insufficient skills in reading or writing, to help them to achieve basic skills so that they can continue through adult education to the level they require. The International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD, 1995) suggests that throughout the adult population and throughout the developed world, up to 25 percent of the population are unable to use reading and writing effectively in their lives.

It is easy to believe that an adult, recognising a deficit in basic education and the difficulty that it presents in life, will try to remedy the deficit and engage in remedial education. Unfortunately, this is untrue in many cases. According to NALA, at any one time only 10 per cent of adults who need basic education support are in receipt of it – in 2006 for example only 35,000 students (source DES) availed of ABE, whereas 25 per cent of the adult population (OECD) could have benefited. Limage (1993) argues that the most needy are the least likely to participate in literacy training, because of their social and personal position they remain what she calls 'invisible'.

Many theories exist as to why people leave school without sufficient literacy, they may come from families with no tradition of reading and no understanding of the

cultural capital associated with reading (Bourdieu, 1990), they may come from a position of having a negative experience at school, (Tett, 2007) but whatever the cause, poor literacy 'severely limits' an individual's participation in society (OECD, 2003). People who lack literacy skills may also lack confidence, lack perseverance, feel isolated, feel excluded from the mainstream of society or feel unable to participate in adult education (OECD, 1998, 2005, 2008, Morgan 1996). It is the purpose of ABE, therefore to support learners to adequate literacy and help them to function effectively in society.

As we have noted, basic education as it has developed in Ireland, was centred on the specific need of the individual. Within ABE traditionally, students worked one-to-one with a tutor and were able to determine for themselves, under guidance of course, what it was they wanted to learn and their progress was as fast or as slow as they wished. To a great extent, the success of this system depended on the skill of the tutor and also the ability of the tutor to encourage the learner's self-esteem and autonomy. It should be noted that, traditionally, there was absolute confidentiality in the literacy service, but to some extent this has become looser with more funding and greater oversight. I discovered that fears about this lack of confidentiality were a cause for anxiety for my interviewees, since they felt shame at their poor literacy. Of course one can argue that absolute confidentiality may have contributed to the sense of stigma which still attaches to poor literacy.

As part of the measurement of the value of education at this level, FETAC, the Education Awards Council have developed certificate programmes at Level 1 and 2, which are designed and delivered locally. These are intended to reflect the needs of this cohort of students and tutors are encouraged to work to a Curriculum for Basic Education (NALA,2009). This system may make quality provision more measurable, but may also lack the individual aspects of the more traditional literacy service provision, unless the progress is measured, as well as outcomes. Within the community sector (AONTAS, 2009:90), progress in education and personal development are measured and only when they fit with the FETAC standards are qualifications mentioned, which means that learners are not necessarily working towards a qualification, which for some might be quite inhibiting.

Why is literacy important?

While, internationally, various groups have spoken about why they observe literacy to be vital to society, their political focus may be deduced from their pronouncements. .

> literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life and represents an essential step in basic education which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century. (Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2007:5)

UNESCO, speaking from a global perspective, launched a 'literacy decade' in 2006, with the hope of reducing by 50 percent the number of people in the world who are unable to read and write. Conceived as a global strategy it targets 35 countries where 85 per cent of the world's population without literacy skills are centred. The purpose of the initiative is to 'provide a solid foundation for poverty reduction and sustainable development in pursuit of a democratic and stable society' (p.15). Unfortunately, at its half way point, the project has faltered, coming into conflict with the political ethos of many of the participating countries which administer selective education.

Looking at literacy from a European perspective, The International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD) in its final report (2000) shows statistics of poor literacy and numeracy throughout the developed world, which prevent citizens from participating in society and inhibit them from good employment and from free movement throughout the employment market. This report discussed in some depth the importance of human capital in economic growth, and, while describing the difficulty in measuring an increase in human capital, suggests that any additional year in education might equate to additional output of from four to seven percent in gross domestic product (GDP). It would appear therefore, that education can provide an answer to improving GDP. Education can also, according to the National Literacy Trust Report (Dugdale, 2008) improve chances of owning one's own house, becoming involved in democratic processes and less likely to be on State benefits.

It is important to recollect that the focus of the OECD is in providing a flexible educated workforce which will feed a growing economy and be able to change between industries as the economic circumstances change 'all adults are potential workers – if suitably qualified' (OECD, 2003:29). From this perspective, adult education is seen as important because it contributes to the development of the individual, ensuring a more efficient, productive workforce in a higher quality workplace. The OECD further suggests a general agreement on reasons for targeting low skilled adults 'to intervene for social cohesion and economic growth' (p.10). In their analysis of education provision and to make adult education more acceptable, they suggest a co-ordinated approach by all the players in education – employers, unions and the teaching service. They recommend a quality service, attractive to users and with a focus on training for employment, if necessary with a financial incentive.

Moser (1999), tasked with examining the literacy deficit in England, reported on the social and economic impact of poor literacy on society, that

> it can close many doors to a full life. Indeed there can hardly be a surer way to social exclusion. Moreover hard economic issues are involved. Improving their basic skills can enable people to earn more, to spend more, to help the economy to grow faster. (p.4)

In order to address the problem, the model he proposed was for more professional, quality provision, with a curriculum which would fit both the individual and the economic needs of the community and which would be accessible to learners and supportive of their educational needs. While suggesting that each learner should be able to make decisions about what and how they should learn, his proposals seem to assume that all people with basic skill needs, if they were able to improve, would move into the paid workforce. Unfortunately, the effect of this requirement for qualifications on at least some of the people I interviewed was to make them feel even more excluded. For someone, for instance, who has no qualifications at all, the necessity to complete a Curriculum Vitae with the boxes for 'degrees' waiting to be filled had a depressing effect, as John says 'Nowadays, you have to send in an application ... you nearly have to have a degree nowadays to sweep the streets'.

In the Irish Government White Paper (DES, 2000), a framework for Adult Education is suggested with ideal outcomes for adult learners impacting on their personal development and subsequent involvement in community and public life. It posits

> relatively seamless progression through an education continuum from the cradle to the grave, with open boundaries between the worlds of home/work education and provision for flexibility in learning sources (DES, 2000:30)

Obviously, where learners have made their way through primary and, often, secondary education and have not achieved literate status, their progression has not been 'seamless' and an intervention needs to be made in order to deliver to them equality in the education system and equal status in society.

Both NALA (McSkeane,2006) and FETAC (2006) have set quality standards to which the providers are expected to adhere, to ensure that the provision and administration of Basic Education Services meet their criteria. The NALA model looks at the process of tuition and tries to capture 'personal' achievement application of skills learned and the FETAC model looks at measured outcomes to a greater extent, though they are also expected to visit all delivering centres to examine the process. If properly implemented, these processes should support the learner during the difficult times and facilitate development towards stated goals. It will be interesting to see over time what differences these quality procedures make to the service.

Teaching and Learning

Adult education is 'systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning, having concluded initial education or training' (DES, 2000). However, the adults returning to ABE do not meet these criteria, since they left the education system with insufficient literacy for an effective life. What seems to be essential, is that what is offered to the learners is 'suitable for their purpose', which means that the learner has to be involved in deciding what and how he/she learns. Obviously a young early school leaver will have different literacy needs from those of a mature person.

Helping adults to learn is considered to be crucially different from teaching children and consequently the methodology used should be different since the life experience and motivation of adults are seen to be as important as their willingness to participate in learning. Rogers, (1967) for example, says that students will not change without

making the connection between learning and life and unless the learning improves the learner's self-esteem. Learning must therefore be based on participation, not just being 'fed' information.

Models of education can be placed on a continuum from very prescriptive to not prescriptive at all, and there has to be flexibility in order to suit the particular participants. The model can be posited at the initial interview and interpreted and re-interpreted throughout the learning process. Tough (1976) in his investigations arrived at an interesting overview of conditions which make it more likely that adults will participate effectively in education. Describing a learning project as 'an effort to change' (p.34), he says that the learner needs to know *what* he wants to learn and to be *involved* in planning the learning. He further says that for a learner to be motivated to continue, there must be an understanding of the value to the learner, the *use* that the learning will have, or the application of the skill. It is vitally important that literacy be taught to adults within a context, not simply 'literacy as decoding' (Rassool, 1999). Adults who have difficulties with reading and writing need to develop skills of literacy which have resonance with their lived experience and now the practice of adult literacy works within this context. Hasan (1996), quoted in Rassool, (1999), says:

> the goals of literacy can hardly have a value in and of themselves; they need to be seen in the context of the wider social environment which is at once the enabling condition and the enabled product of literacy pedagogy (p.15)

The model presented to them, therefore, has to reflect their adulthood in that it respects their maturity and involves them in what and how they learn. An adult is more used to making decisions for himself and expects that ability to be respected in the learning situation. A motivated learner needs a course of study which seems to be purposeful and this requires the tutor to be prepared to negotiate the syllabus and the time frame.

Knowles (2000) labels this new approach 'Andragogy' noting that when a child is in education, they come from a position of dependence, they are used to being dependent, but an adult is more used to making decisions for himself and expects this ability to be respected in the learning situation. A motivated learner will be pursuing a course of study which seems to be purposeful, and this, in turn, requires the tutor (facilitator) to be prepared to negotiate with the learner the syllabus and the time

frame for learning. The final stage in this learning process is the evaluation of what has been learned.

Tuition and planning syllabus

Deciding on the quality of tutorial provision Tough (1976) makes a number of suggestions, the three most important of which are the primacy of training tutorial staff on an on-going basis, that the learning for the students must involve 'major personal change' and that education should be 'more pluralistic, less hierarchical' – he refers to both Ivan Illich (1972) and Everett Reimer (1971) for guidance in this regard.

Mezirow (1996) describes the crucial importance of supportive relations within a learning experience so that an individual may find it safe to question long-held positions. He further proposes

> As a person grows and matures his self-concept moves from one of total dependency (as is the reality of the infant) to one of increasing self-directedness (1973:45)

In order to support a learner to make subjective sense of what is being learned, to internalise it, Mezirow describes the importance of what he calls 'contextual understanding'. He explains that most of what we understand is 'embedded' in the context within which we function, the family, the school, the political party, etc. Therefore, to 'learn' to 'change' means understanding where an original belief came from and whether or not it works in an altered context – many beliefs we held as children no longer work for us, as adults:

> Our understandings and beliefs are more dependable when they produce interpretations and opinions that are more justifiable or true than would be those predicated upon other understandings or beliefs. Formulating more dependable beliefs about our experience, assessing their contexts, seeking informed agreement on their meaning and justification and making decisions on the resulting insights are central to the adult learning process. (Mezirow 1973:4)

It can be very difficult for tutors without adult teaching experience or also without experience of teaching learners with poor literacy skills, to tailor a syllabus for an individual or a small group, to have the confidence to consult with the learners about relevance and to discover training materials which are suitable for adults who fall into this category. Recent developments in approaches to adult learning can be particularly appropriate for literacy clients, but tutors who have previously taught reading and writing to young beginner learners can easily revert to prior training methodologies.

In this context, a whole system of teaching literacy from a social perspective has developed, (Street, 1995, NALA, 2005, Papen, 2005) viewing literacy as multifaceted and having value in the context in which it is applied. This approach also validates the importance of non-traditional sites for learning, for example within the community, the workplace, or within family groups, where students with resistance to structured education may put a supported toe into the water.

For example, Papen (2005) describes literacy used within a shopping context as being different from, but equally useful to, literacy used for writing a letter, or reading a book. From this social perspective it is also noted that higher education standards increase 'social capital' – networks of friends and contacts (Bourdieu, 1992). Comings (1999) says that important outcomes of improved literacy, although difficult to measure are increased self-efficacy and critical thinking.

Reflection

The importance of critical evaluation of the learning process is recognised by Kolb (1984) and by Mezirow (1996) who describe an essential factor in adult learning as a review of what has been learned. As part of the process of critical reflection it is important that learners are encouraged to reflect on their learning and decide where they might be going, which of course requires confidence on the part of the learner to communicate directly with the provider, and openness on the part of the provider to listen to feedback.

The NALA Quality Framework takes this approach in examining the whole literacy service from provider, tutor and learner perspectives, but the system needs to be very much more involved in reflection, on an on-going basis. I found in my interviews

that the learners were disinclined to feedback to or about the tutors or syllabus – considering it to be 'criticism', whereas if properly monitored it is a valuable part of the learning process.

Engaging the Learners

The overarching belief by providers in the benefits of education and efforts to make access to education an easy and happy experience fails, in that there is a recurring problem with retention in education – here in Ireland and abroad. Many students do not proceed to secondary level from primary school, do not move from lower to upper secondary and do not persevere when they enter tertiary studies. (Baird,2002, Eivers 2002). About 20 percent of any academic cohort will disappear, sometimes forever, sometimes to reappear at a later date, but always collecting damaging concepts about the education process and reinforcing their innate poor self concept.

It appears that in our existing system we do not equip our learners to handle transitions, since this 'drop out' regularly occurs during change, for example from primary to secondary education, from lower to upper secondary and during the early part of tertiary education. Bennett, (1999) has studied in detail the impact that transitions from class to class and from school to school had on children and reports that trauma during the transition period is likely to impact on a child's retention in school. Fleming and Murphy (2000) in their study of early school leaving in Dublin suggest that where the student is located in the city may adversely impact on persistence. Bamber and Tett (1999) argue for a specialised management structure to support these vulnerable learners. What is clear is that it is necessary to have an integrated plan by all the players in education to keep the disadvantaged students within education.

Conclusion

Those of us who are comfortable with accessing education according to need, blithely assume that anyone who has a learning need, will access education or training to fill the deficit. However, experience teaches that this does not always happen These interviewees demonstrated their inclination to continue in education, but that they have found that because of conditions in their own lives or because of flaws in the system, they have not been able to. It is important that we investigate

and question our practice to improve learners' sense of 'belonging' to facilitate consistency of participation.

> If future research would study dropouts more exclusively – both in the formative stages when they begin to consider quitting and at different points after they leave – we would be much better informed (Quigley 1997:166)

As I have said, in my investigation I learned from my interviewees the causes and effect of their poor completion history in ABE. The methodology I have used is to listen carefully to their stories during and after the interviews, to discover some of their reasons and to seek to find consistencies and differences in their accounts across different life and learning experiences. In conducting this research, I have consistently used the learners' experience to examine the elements in the education provision process, to explain what works and which elements could be improved in order to encourage their success in lifelong learning. It is my belief that this information will provide insight which will inform providers in the design and implementation of teaching practice.

Adult education should encourage all of us who are involved in a position of learning to look critically at our lives and beliefs in terms of our practice, to decide if they work for us – Mezirow describes a situation within which both student and tutor can discuss together and reach a common understanding. This is far from the hierarchical approach to education which has traditionally been delivered.

So we can see that adults learn – change – when they want to, when what they want to learn is presented to them in a way which is respectful and interesting to them, when they are encouraged to reflect and rehearse what they have learned and when they are allowed to negotiate with a tutor (and indeed the system) both the pace at which they learn and the content of the syllabus.

There are, therefore, important implications for the providers of the education service the VEC[3]s, the community providers and employers, in terms of where provision is located, that it should be suitable for adult learners with as little revisiting of childhood schooling as possible, that there is good access to the service with suitable publicity and that everyone from the provider who interfaces with the client is very clear about the importance of quality provision.

[3] VECs became ETBs (Education and Training Boards) from 1st July 2013.

It is important to discover what they feel would be a welcoming education environment which would satisfy their needs. To determine a suitable system, therefore, it is important to discover through investigation what the learner is looking for, what they feel would be a welcoming education environment and suggest ways to provide a learning system suitable for her needs. During this investigation, I did exactly that, to discover through their stories about themselves, their families and their life experience, what *they* felt were the causes of their difficulty in succeeding in ABE. Thus the interviewee/learner is an active partner in the research process. Since it also seems to me that the less skilled the learner, the more sensitive the system has to be to his/her specific needs and the more important it is to encourage feedback which can lead to action on a number of different levels.

How literature is treated in this thesis

Glaser and Strauss (1967), the originators of grounded theory (GT), argue for a 'tabula rasa' approach, whereby the researcher reads no relevant literature prior to data collection. 'An effective strategy is at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study' (1967:37). They saw this as being fundamental to grounded theory, that the theory would arise directly from the data gleaned and analysed according to strict procedures. No preconditioned ideas would impinge, there would be no hypothesis to prove. Dunne (2011:114) comments that, for Glaser and Strauss, 'an early literature review in the specific area of study was seen as potentially stifling the process of developing a grounded theory'. Glaser (1998) maintains the position that the literature review should be attempted only 'when the grounded theory is nearly completed' lest the emerging theory be polluted by 'rhetorical jargon'. Classical grounded theory avoids a literature review until such time as the literature is required to be 'woven into the theory as more data for constant comparison' (Glaser, 1998:67).

However, one of the attractive aspects of GT is that it is still evolving. As Morse (2006:3) writes, once a research methodology is launched, it is then in the public domain and may be interpreted and thereby changed in its use. 'The method is consciously or unconsciously tweaked'. As with many other aspects of GT, several views and approaches to a literature review have emerged. From a practical perspective, Silverman says that it is not much use reading before one has some

sense of what one needs. 'Until you have done your data analysis, you do not know what stuff will be relevant' (Silverman, 2005:298). There are multiple views also about the proper place for literature in the finished thesis, book, or article.

Dunne (2011) believes that an early literature review can be valuable, in that it will provide good reason for the study and make clear that it is not a repetition. He cites Lempert (2010:254)

> In order to participate in the current theoretical conversation, I need to understand it. I must recognize that what may seem like a totally new idea to me – an innovative breakthrough in my research – may simply be a reflection of my ignorance of the present conversation. A literature review provides me with the current parameters of the conversation that I hope to enter.

Dunne goes on to quote Cutcliffe (2000:1480) 'no potential researcher is an empty vessel, a person with no history or background. The idea that researchers who have experience could 'jettison all their prior knowledge is unfeasible' (p.117). Citing Strübing (2007) 'the important insight lies rather in how to make proper use of previous knowledge.'

Dunne (p. 117) proposes that there now seems to be a consensus that a middle ground needs to be achieved

> a position which acknowledges the original ethos of grounded theory and the genuine concerns about the imposition of external frameworks, yet simultaneously recognises the often practical need for, and potential advantages of engaging with existing literature in the substantive area at an early stage'.

Taking all these views into account, I decided that some reading of the literature would be necessary to frame my understanding and justify my research, before the interviews and data analysis. In this regard, I reviewed major theories of adult education and empirical studies about retention in ABE, and about ABE in general.

From my contacts within ABE in Ireland, I was unaware of any research at this time which had as its focus students who had left ABE, to tell their stories in their own words. In Chapter 2, I discuss some research from Ireland which researches this cohort of learners, but from different perspectives. I also discuss some important pieces of research from the U.K. which did interview ABE learners in depth, but which are on a far larger scale than my research. The role of community education in listening and reporting the voices of literacy learners is also presented in Chapter 2.

I trusted that a grounded theory would emerge from my data when I came to analyse it using the procedures of GT. As trends and themes emerged during this process, I sought other literature, with which to compare and contrast my emerging findings. I was thus actively reviewing literature and incorporating references during the writing-up process and this weaving of my findings and literature is found in Chapters 5, where I present detailed findings about individuals, in Chapter 6, where I discuss the theoretical framework and the theoretical concept that emerged, 'the need to belong', and in Chapter 7, where I reflect on the implications of the findings and move towards a consideration of the need for care in education.

Structure of this thesis

The Thesis is structured as follows:-

Chapter 1

The purpose of this Chapter has been to state the question I want to address in this research, why learners who came back into ABE, seeking to improve their literacy, found that they did not belong. My findings are deeply rooted in the learners' lived experience, in their own words revealed to me during the interview process. I felt that I was particularly qualified to conduct this research, because of my background in Adult Education and my feelings that we sometimes failed in our duty to value our learners and to support them sufficiently.

From a global, European and national position, I examined theories about the importance of literacy and the rationale for investing in literacy support.

The Chapter has examined education as a site of power relations, the purpose of education and where and how adult education and literacy education developed. I examined how models of education have evolved which exclude marginalised learners and discussed theoretical models which have been developed as being more suitable for such learners.

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I discuss the relevant background theoretical studies which frame participation and exclusion from Adult Basic Education. I also refer to studies,

national and international which have elicited from participants information about their experience of ABE. In some detail, I consider research conducted in the UK in the early 2000s, which through qualitative analysis of the learners' own stories, elicited factors which they found supported them in ABE, and the factors which inhibited participation. I then consider some research into Community Education in Ireland which again listens to the stories of learners and how Community Education will facilitate access, persistence and retention in Adult Education. Finally I consider small scale Irish research projects which again consider participation in ABE and how to reach some of the more difficult learners. I justify my reason for not doing a wider Literature Review at this stage, but choosing to read relevant literature as I was analysing my data and weaving the extant research into my findings throughout the thesis.

Chapter 3

This Chapter explains my choice of grounded theory procedures for the study. As a practitioner researcher, I chose to use qualitative enquiry and grounded theory procedures and this Chapter sets out to report the method I used to select grounded theory as my research approach, since I believed it would in a systematic way provide a framework which would allow me to analyse qualitative data provided to me by the participants during long interviews and was the most suitable fit for the interviewees and their experience. In this Chapter, also I provide a brief biographical note about the participants in the study.

Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, I describe how I applied grounded theory methods to the data generated by my interviews, in order to mine the information provided by my interviewees and comprehend their stories. Because I believe that grounded theory is a flexible method in its application, this chapter describes in detail the approach I took in my search for an explanatory framework which would account for these students' drop out from ABE. Within it, I show how I analysed, sorted, coded and categorised the information provided, using the MAXQDA computer programme, to reach two major categories, social context and self-concept and observe how the tension

between them in the education context could result in retention or drop out from ABE.

Chapter 5

This Chapter is the first of three in which I present and discuss my findings. In this very lengthy Chapter, I connect the individual stories and weave their experiences across the shared conditions in their lives, their families, education, worklife and adult education. I made the decision to keep these conditions in the same chapter, despite its length, since my interviewees' difficulties in ABE were the result of their prior life experience culminating in drop out from education. In Chapter 5, I show how, by working with the explanatory framework generated, synthesising it with the life stories of my interviewees together with relevant information gained from the literature, I constructed a theoretical framework, which provided a satisfactory answer to the question 'Why do these people not persist in ABE?' .

Chapter 6

Chapter 6, first, shows graphically my methodology in achieving the theoretical framework and, subsequently, paints my explanation for the structure and content of the framework. I describe the elements of the two major categories, self-concept and social context. In the last part of this Chapter, I articulate the learners needs which I extracted from my data and conclude that if they had received care in education they would have had a more positive experience and greater persistence.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 is the reflection on my findings and revisiting the aims of this thesis, outlined in Chapter 1. From the interviewees' stories, I describe their understanding of the causes of their drop out from education, from their early history and social background to the way they experienced ABE. I point out the disconnect between their needs and the model of education which has developed to suit economic requirements rather than individual need and suggest how modification in provision and access would have made education much more welcoming for these learners. I examine the possible changes in provision which would facilitate a more caring environment which would be more suitable for these, fragile, learners. As with

Chapter 5 and 6, I introduce studies and literature which have relevance for the new ideas I am bringing forward.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 is about reflection on the completed thesis. Reflecting on the process of conducting the enquiry, the outcomes and how well they satisfy the objectives I set for myself when I set out on this enquiry six years ago. I reflect, also, on my personal learning on the journey through the research and the benefit of using grounded theory as a research method. Finally, I reflect on possible further research that might be conducted in this area.

Conclusion to Chapter 1

At this point in the thesis, I have set out the area of ABE and placed it in the context of Adult Education as a whole. I have given the rationale for my wish to investigate in order to discover from the learners themselves why they did not progress their learning. It is my belief that these learners, if they are given the opportunity, will indicate why it was the provision did not suit their needs and that therefore those of us working in ABE will not have to 'assume' that we know the causes of their drop out, but will have concrete evidence.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the relevant background theoretical studies which I have read in order to understand the context of Adult Education and in particular Adult Basic Education in Ireland. Since my research method is grounded theory, I did not introduce other literature until the synthesis stage of my analysis, in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2 – OTHER STUDIES

Introduction

As I stated in Chapter 1, my approach to the literature before I actually interviewed the learners, was to establish and justify the framework within which my research would be conducted.

In this Chapter, therefore, I propose to report on formative, influential studies and authors who have developed authoritative knowledge about participation and persistence in adult education, including Irish studies in the area of ABE. This review has allowed me to assess the other studies conducted relevant to my topic and also to assess what gaps remain in what is known about the topic. Engaging with the literature helped to give depth and background to the knowledge I had on the topic before I embarked on this study. As I have already noted, more theoretical literature relevant to the emerging findings is discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and &7.

Studies of participation in Adult Education

The studies informing theories of ABE are the formative research by Cross (1981) Tough (1976) Knowles (1984) and McGivney (1993,1996) into adult education. It is fascinating to read these writers and realise how much their theories still impact on research today. Looking at research into retention in Adult Basic Education reveals few theories specific to ABE, and very little about retention in ABE.

Patricia Cross (1978,1981), examined factors which she felt encouraged adults to become involved in lifelong learning and also those factors which act as discouragement. She proposed that participation depended on a number of factors, mostly personal, such as motivation, attitude towards education and other internal factors. Factors which act against participation in education – barriers - were more likely to be external – lack of information about provision, difficulties about funding, and general lack of support from society and family for adult learners. She labelled these barriers institutional: where access to and provision of specific programmes were unsuitable for adults, dispositional: where the learner did not have skills necessary to become involved in adult education, and academic: where the adult did

not feel suitably qualified to be involved in adult education. MacKeragher et al (2006) identify two further barriers; pedagogical which have to do with tutor approach and employment barriers, which reinforce the tradition where men have more access to workplace learning than women and managers more access than workers.

A pedagogical approach is taken up by Tough (1976) who says that much adult learning is informal and doesn't take place in an 'education' setting. Interviewing adults in Canada, Ghana, the USA and New Zealand, his group discovered that most adults *are* pursuing learning, but don't consider it to be learning, for example, learning to cook or to drive a car. He suggests that tutors should see themselves not as sole providers of information, but in a teaching and learning relationship with their students. He further cites the importance of learner involvement in planning learning and acknowledges the ability of a learner to learn by himself, without necessarily recourse to a group. He questions whether we, as providers of adult education should worry about 'motivation', and suggests that we try to 'motivate' people to learn what *we* want them to learn, whereas he sees that most adults naturally involve themselves in learning situations as they want or need to.

Knowles (1984) picks up on this sense of adult informal education and suggested, as do, for example Kolb (1984), and Boud (2003) that there was a more effective methodology for teaching adults than the often dysfunctional means which adult learners had frequently experienced at school. 'Skilful adult educators have known for a long time that they cannot teach adults as children have traditionally been taught' (Knowles, 1984:83) . They propose that adults learn well when their learning is predicated on prior experience.

Wryly remarking that, since adults are, mostly, 'voluntary learners' and that their response to ineffective learning experience is just to walk away, he points out the importance of a physical environment which needs to be 'adult friendly' and a psychological environment which needs to be 'accepting', to correct previous negative experience. Knowles observes that as adults discover they can take responsibility for their own learning, through planning the learning experience, they 'experience a sense of release and exhilaration' (p.85)

In 1993 McGivney produced a paper, which has very little to say specifically about ABE, but considered research around participation and retention by adults in further and higher education. 'There is no single theory that can satisfactorily explain participation or non-participation' (p. 11). It is observed that the higher the level of previous education, the more likely it is that an adult will participate in learning, the poorer socially or more alienated from society, the less likely. She examines in some depth and elaborates the barriers to participation proposed by Cross.

In fact in a later paper, which set new research supplied by institutions, alongside existing research, she is quite scathing about information on retention across the board 'what can be said sensibly on a national basis about mature student retention, is nil!' (McGivney, 1996:51) Her belief is that by 1993 neither the funders nor the educational institutions had recognised that adult learners constituted a sizeable proportion of their academic cohort and that insufficient data was maintained locally or nationally to keep up with changes in participation and drop out from adult education programmes. If this was a fact for all adult programmes, it was even more so for ABE programmes, frequently carried out by volunteer, sometimes poorly trained, tutors and with insufficient adult friendly materials. She notes an information deficit and 'Difficulty in obtaining information from part time tutors, resistance from students and their tendency not to divulge the real reasons for withdrawal' (McGivney, 1996:46). She questions if institutions suggest non-academic reasons for drop-out as a means of not having to take responsibility. Quoting Mansell and Parkin (1990), she suggests that even where dropouts cite non-academic reasons for their behaviour, they also express dissatisfaction with the institution. It might therefore be claimed that all drop outs represent a failure of the institution, in that they have not satisfied the requirement of the student.

In her 1996 study, for which McGivney questioned a sample of adult education institutions, as well as researching existing information, she suggests that taking stated reasons for leaving too easily could lead to 'complacency on the part of the institutions' (p.113) and to be aware that causes of non-completion can be personal as well as institutional and frequently are inter-related.

Two further studies are worthy of note, McGivney (1996) looks again at retention in adult education, as does Blaxter (1999), concentrating on the structural and personal reasons why adults drop out of education. In this study McGivney does treat

specifically, if briefly, with reasons for non-retention in ABE (p.89), again relating a mix of personal and institutional difficulties, citing Sanders (1977) and Clarke (1989).

These theorists stated the fundamental problems adult learners can have in their interface with education, and show how these problems differ from the experience of younger scholars. My particular interest and the research I carried out was specifically to discover how a number of individuals handled their experience with ABE, and what facilitated their leaving/persistence.

Participation in ABE

A number of investigations were subsequently conducted specifically into factors which influence participation in ABE. A broad-ranging study into retention and progression was conducted by Kambouri and Francis (1994). They collected information from over 1200 students in parts of the United Kingdom during 1992 and 1993 and questioned them about the reasons why they persisted in ABE or dropped out. Using the data returns from providers in seven Local Education Authorities, attendance patterns were noted, any stated reasons for drop out were also noted, as were reasons for non-attendance. At the same time, the qualifications of the tutors were examined, but no mention was made of poor tuition as being a reason for fall out.

It was found that poor or irregular attendance was frequently a predictor of drop out, and that drop out occurred most frequently at the start of the programme. There appeared to be a consistent pattern of attendance and drop out over the years which was evaluated. Many of the students progressed or gave their opinion that they had achieved what they wanted. The main reasons cited for non persistence were personal.

The other broad study by Comings et al (1999) interviewed 150 adults who were within ABE programmes in the United States. The students who were interviewed were suggested by their tutors, as were those who were interviewed in my research. As its focus, this study attempted to look at conditions which helped and hindered access to and persistence on courses, through interviewing students when they started in ABE and again four months later. This study concluded that it was too simple to

categorise people who left as non learners, they might easily have sufficient skills to persist with learning on their own. Thus one can help adults become persistent learners by 'using episodes of programme participation as critical parts of a comprehensive learning strategy'(p.5). This would, of course, demand resources for students who were not necessarily involved in structured learning. Another, interesting, discovery is that the ways in which providers categorise students, by age, ethnicity, etc., do not give any guide to their persistence in ABE.

In Ireland, the NALA Horizon Project (Bailey, 1998) sought to investigate why people became involved in ABE, and also to see what might be hindering others from accessing ABE. They interviewed about 160 participants who were in Literacy Schemes, to create a profile of the participants, some understanding of how their literacy difficulties affected their lives and how they felt about being recruited into literacy tuition, how they felt about being involved in literacy learning and things that affected their participation. This study triggered a number of subsequent studies, which considered particular constituencies of ABE learners – older people, men, and people interfacing with the medical profession, all of which give good guidelines on effective provision. As an example, the study of best practice in providing suitable learning for older people is examined in more detail below. However, again, there is very little reflection on retention, the focus being access and barriers to participation, with suggestions as to specific policy guidelines and suitable education provision.

Sliwka & Tett (2008) conducted in-depth case studies across three Basic Education providers in Scotland. Their paper describes examples of best practice in their facilities. Interestingly, these programmes are not labelled 'basic skills', because the perception is that this label relates to functional/technical learning, whereas the optimal approach is that of social practice, to include the feelings and values learners hold in relation to their learning, and their learning in relation to their lives. They report the importance of in-depth initial assessment, continuing performance monitoring and, perhaps in particular, that the learners are able to decide for themselves how well they are doing, to reflect on their own work and achievements. Within this framework, there are no 'tests' of formal or informal learning, rather the students are encouraged to discuss with tutors on a regular basis how they are achieving their negotiated goals.

Comings et al (1999) in the United States, state as their mandate 'to develop advice for practitioners on how to help adults persist in their studies'. They do this through a literature review and subsequent interviews with students, to ascertain how students could be supported to persist and also to discover some of the barriers. In this study, Belzer (1998) reports on his interviews with ten students across a number of learning environments 'for four months, or until they dropped out'. There is a very interesting discussion about what constitutes 'drop out' and consideration of the importance of the institution supporting learners who are not necessarily still accessing classes. By the end of the four months, Belzer found that five of the learners had left, citing very different reasons for doing so, but in general maintaining the position that they had only paused, that they might take up education again when circumstances permitted. Belzer describes this condition as 'Stopping Out, not Dropping Out'.

They conducted a 'force field' analysis through interviews where participants were asked to name all the important forces which influenced their participation, then list the most important positive and negative forces. The forces which were discovered came under the predicted headings, personal factors, life context factors, instructional factors and programme factors.

A NCSALL[4] (Beder, 1999) report looks in some detail at the impact of literacy education in the United States, using a qualitative, case study, methodology. Although 150 students were interviewed, this is of course a tiny minority in the context of literacy need in the United States. It is an absolutely fascinating look at the perceived impact of Basic Education on participants, covering all the expected outcomes, of improved skills, greater self-esteem, greater involvement in community, better employability, etc., Beder states, (p.7), that the study is singular in giving results in terms of 'outcomes and impacts', as opposed to the more usual 'inputs and outcomes'. The reporting back of the outcomes and impacts, Beder argues, provides the opportunity to actually measure the effectiveness of literacy tuition in increasing human capital – which is seen as the preferred outcome for funders.

[4] NCSALL: National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

Beder further quotes Young (1994b) as recognising a 'dropout rate of 60 percent' (p.11), which appears to be massive – a waste of resources and with a significant impact on learners who elected to become involved in ABE and were dissatisfied, but they question the methodology used to inform the findings – telephone calls and self report – 'estimates from this data ought not to be generalised'. Beder (1991) suggests that the lack of support, part time tuition and other factors may contribute to the fact that provision might not meet learner's needs, therefore they drop out.

Supporting Persistence

A number of studies in the United Kingdom considered the state of Literacy provision in the U.K. and the complex mix of factors which make up the learning experience for adults. I propose to consider each briefly and then discuss the important points raised within them.

The studies point to the various elements in the learning experience which individually and collectively affect outcomes for students. The interconnectedness between the various elements in ABE the learner past and present history, what they hope to achieve through the learning and the tutor approach and pedagogy have been analysed to understand how to best support learners in acquiring literacy. Thus, from this research comes an improved understanding of the concepts of persistence, progress and achievement and they help to identify the key organisational and pedagogical factors which contribute to non-achievement.

In Scotland, Maclachlan et al. conducted research concerning the Scottish Adult Literacies strategy – during 2007 and 2008, which examined ALN[5] provision and which sought 'further understanding of the concepts of persistence, progression and achievements in literacies learning and to identify the key organisational and pedagogical factors that influence attainment' (p.5). The focus of the research reflected the 'growing concern over the numbers of adults in ALN provision whose life and learning circumstances militate against their continued engagement with learning' (p.22). The report states the importance of the variables in provision which contribute to persistence in ABE, including the lives of the participants, the ways in

[5] Adult Literacy and Numeracy

which provision is delivered, the focus of teaching and learning and the importance of support and guidance. These are recurring themes throughout all five reports considered.

Crowther et al (2010), further examined the data gleaned by Maclachlan et al (2008) in order to better understand relationship between persistence in the programme and changes in the participants' attitudes to engaging in learning in the context of the pedagogic practice of the organisations involved. This research looked in greater depth at how the group of learners 'experienced the complex mix of factors that impact on learner engagement and persistence in ALN' (p.661) and found that they used their literacy learning to help them make the changes they desired in their lives. While not underestimating the effect of poor early life experience on the students, they found that where organisations offered sufficiently supportive environment, students were able to overcome early poor experiences and, indeed, use them as a platform for growth.

In England, Barton (2007) also set out to 'untangle the complex relationship between peoples' lives and their learning and to show what it is like to be in formal learning in a fast-changing world 'we study the relationship between lives and learning through a detailed examination of people's lives over time and in a range of settings' (p.1). In describing the experience of learning from the perspective of the learner, the study observes 'what people use literacy for in their everyday lives, how literacy is a resource for learning and how literacy is learned through participation in activities.'(p.53). He tells the stories of people who use literacy in order to learn about what they are interested in as part of their lives *outside of their classes.* He sees that learning is frequently accessed as it is required by life situations; students will often use their initiative to acquire information as they need it - not always within a structured system and that just as frequently the learning within the structured system does not incorporate learning which is valuable to the learner.

Also in England Carpentieri (2007) evaluated the Skills for Life Strategy after five years of its provision. The strategy, launched in 1997, sought to identify more people with skills needs, as well as encouraging and enabling organisations to recognise the basic needs held by many learners on vocational courses. In evaluating the situation after five years of the programme they analyse how provision has improved and where it still can be improved Working with a cohort of 282 people,

they examined the 'variety and complexity' of literacy practices in the lives of adults, both inside and outside the classroom.

Outcomes from this research, in teasing out the interconnected factors in ABE, suggests that where the provision and ethos of the provider are supportive in a holistic manner to the individual learner, then there is more likely to be persistence in education, with positive outcomes. The research emphasises the centrality of the person and their involvement in the process of education, and looks carefully at the person in interface with elements of provision and how this mix affects learning. They demonstrate the relationship between changes in people's attitudes, the pedagogic practice of the organisation and persistence in education.

In the next few sections, I propose to consider in more detail what this research has to say about the three critical elements in the learning experience, the learner identity, the value of positive provision and how they lead to persistence and achievement in ABE

Learner Identity

Barton (2007) is very clear that learning shapes and changes identity, he suggests that to learn is not necessarily about acquiring new skills, but could be about 'changes in identity and representation of self'(p.21). A distinction is made between learning as a process and learning as a product or outcome where new understandings challenge what they had formerly done or thought. He suggests a framework of four inter-related aspects of people's lives interacting together and which impact on the learning event – the timeline from past history to a wished-for future, ameliorated by circumstances and events and personal practices and identities – essentially people bring their particular life history with them into the learning context in order to achieve their vision of the future. Barton et al consider the impact of trauma and illness on the learner, their experience of early education which may affect their willingness to participate in Adult Education and also the possibility for them to benefit from it. However, he also says that once they actually start coming to class and learn to assess their achievements, broader motivations emerge and lead to other motivations.

Crowther et al (2010) review the life experience of the learners using the 'lens of learner identity' to explore the student's engagement in learning, observing that as

adults progress on their way to learning goals, their identities may 'form and re-form' as they strive towards their goals.

> the meanings and processes of engaging and persisting in programs must include first, an understanding of where learners have come from ... and second, their present experience in the program, particularly the pedagogic practices of tutors and other institutional factors within which the learning is contextualised (p.654)

Machlachlan et al (2008) state that, where learners are particularly vulnerable, then it is increasingly important to support them as they strive not only to improve their literacy, but to change their lives, and they can only do this as their self esteem improves, they say that the value of this approach is incalculable, where life and learning guidance is provided to students as a matter of course, enabling them to clear up difficulties in their lives and consequently enables concentration on the learning process.

All of the studies stress the importance of positive personal interactions to the learning experience, that there should be a welcoming environment and support and guidance as required, and I move on, therefore, to consider what they say in this regard.

Provision -Ethos/Support

Since adults, unlike children, have to fit their learning around the intrusion of their 'real lives', it becomes obvious that education providers should make every effort to help learners towards their goals. Barton et al (2007) say it is important to show that each learner is valued within a class 'will be listened to and treated with respect' (p.164) and that the impact of their lives outside the class has to impact on their performance within it. They describe the need to show that each learner is valued within a class and 'will be listened to and treated with respect'. (p.164)

In a supportive environment, which generates collaboration and allows negotiation between the concerned parties, then Barton et al (2007) say that learning opportunities are 'maximised'. They suggest that such an environment, while carefully planned, will also take advantage of any learning opportunities as they present and tutors' ingenuity in using existing or potential situations to suit 'individual and emerging needs' (p.113)

Crowther et al (2010) reinforce the importance of having a 'welcoming and accepting' environment and he notes that this is more crucial to the learner than having very good classroom conditions. This welcome will be typified by an informal atmosphere and the availability of 'drop-in tuition and guidance'. He further notes that because of the particular conditions of many of the ABE learners, it might take a very long time for new learners to acclimatise.

Maclachlan et al (2008:11) suggest that the ethos of literacies provision is fundamental to developing services which support learners in taking responsibility for their learning, persisting with study and progressing, she says that a fundamental pillar of this ethos has to be holistic, or 'wraparound' support, which will help them during personal difficulties as well as in education. They describe this more fully, as being welcoming and confidence building. Where learners are particularly vulnerable, then it is increasingly important to support them as they strive not only to improve their literacy but to change their lives and they can only do this as their self-esteem improves. They say that the value of this approach is incalculable where life and learning guidance is provided to students as a matter of course, enabling them to clear up difficulties in their lives and consequently enables concentration on the learning process. They say that in these conditions the learner will be facilitated to use the literacy service and 'slip in and out of provision' as they need to.

Carpentieri (2007:8) suggests that it is very important for the learners to receive support and encouragement within their tutorial group. In terms of the development of learners, he says that where there is effective formative assessment, this will lead to the tutor understanding and responding to the learner and he further suggests that for some learners they will *only* become involved in pedagogy which is 'innovative and understanding of their needs'.(p.8) Noting that the most hard to reach adults are the least likely to persist, he says this points to clear need for on-going support and guidance for this cohort of learners.

Overall, learning opportunities emerge from dialogue between what students bring to classes and what the tutor brings – there is a negotiation of learning opportunities. Although, obviously there needs to be serious learning intent, classes need to be pursued in a relaxed, friendly way within which positive social relationships develop in an atmosphere of trust between learner and tutor.

Provision - Social Literacies

All these pieces of research described the importance of the involvement of the learner in the education process, that difficult to reach students will not respond positively to rigid curricula, but will respond positively where they can use literacy as a tool to achieve their learning or life goals. For example Crowther et al (2010) quote Barton in emphasising that social approaches to learning, for example working in pairs and groups will 'facilitate persistence' in that they can give instant positive feedback which in turn feeds into positive feelings of self-efficacy.

Barton (2007) suggest that the skills and abilities of the ALN learners are frequently ignored – particularly where curriculum is determined by the provider. Carpentieri (2007) notes that where the learner is at the centre of the learning process, then there is effective learning, but again there may be conflict between the two perspectives- that of the provider and that of the learner. In general the provider will be looking at skills provision, and measureable outcomes, whereas the learner perspective is more likely to have a social focus. The social practice approach has a focus on what people 'do' with literacy, therefore skills tuition should have immediate reference to the learner's life. Crowther (2010) describes this as using literacy learning as a resource. Unfortunately, there can also be conflict, or a 'clash' as Barton et al (2007:146) put it, between the local, needs driven curriculum and the 'priorities and agendas of funders and institutions'.

Crowther et al (2010) stress the importance of a flexible curriculum, so that students get to learn what they choose to learn – this goes back to formative assessment 'learning what they want to learn'. He notes that where learning and interest in a topic are checked at the beginning of the class and again at the end the interest of the student is kept up as is on-going reflection which is very important in education. He also notes the importance of using a student's learning style to facilitate learning. Skills, knowledge and understanding need to immediately be applied in their lives.

Barton et al (2007) identified the contribution of teachers to the learning/teaching event – their responsiveness to learners as individuals and the view of language, literacy and numeracy underlying their practice. However, as Carpentieri et al (2007) say, it is vitally important to have effective formative assessment, taking as a starting point the strengths, experience and varied expertise of the adult learner, but

also as it facilitates the discussion between learner and tutor which forms the basis of communication in learning. He is very clear that insistence on accreditation is not welcoming to learners, however he says that it should be available where they look for it.

By valuing what teachers bring in particular in responding to learner needs and also valuing the wider range of life histories and motivations students bring, a construction of learning will emerge from a 'dynamic dialogue' between what learners want to know and teachers want to contribute. As a result of this dialogue, then broader outcomes of learning emerge for people's lives, including increased social confidence.

Crowther et al (2010) stress the importance of a flexible curriculum, so that students get to learn what they choose to learn – this refers back of course to the formative assessment and 'learning what they want to learn'. He describes the importance of utilising the student's learning style and that any learning is immediately applied in the student's life as do Maclachlan et al. Crowther (ibid) notes that where learning and interest in a topic are checked at the beginning of the class and again at the end, the interest of the student is maintained, as is student and, indeed, tutor, reflection.

Carpentieri et al (2007) in their study look at what people 'use' literacy for in their everyday lives - that literacy is a resource for learning and is also learned through participation in activities. He describes the manifold uses of literacy in the lives of adults and that literacy is learned outside the classroom and subconsciously through participation in everyday events.

Carpentieri found that where provision was delivered in partnership between Skills for Life and community staff, it was important for tutors from college settings to understand and respect the particular approaches taken on site, quite often very different from those within a college situation.

Carpentieri et al, in talking about tutors, make it very clear that it is important to have well-qualified tutors 'a highly qualified professional workforce' although current provision might suggest that there are not enough sufficiently qualified. He also found that the more qualified teachers and those involved in professional development, tended to have a better opinion of the Skills for Life programme, but were aware that the need to meet targets might affect provision for the most

vulnerable learners. He further noted the difference in approach where a 'skills' tutor was working together with an 'ALN' tutor in the same group – he said it was important from college settings to understand and respect the particular approaches taken in an ALN setting.

Persistence and Completion

Across the academic literature different words seem to be used interchangeably to describe the learners, the process and outcomes. For instance, learners might be called students or clients, tutors might be facilitators or teachers and the outcome might be 'achievement' or failure 'dropping out', 'stopping out' 'persevering' 'retention', 'completion', etc. In reading the research, it becomes clear that the language describes the position of the researcher, with some used to show the provider position, some the learner position. In particular the research mentioned above takes issue with the many words used to describe participation or not in ABE, and suggest that the term 'persistence' describes the interface between the learner and the learning provider in a much more positive manner.

My study sits at the interface between the learner and the provider and seeks to understand, from the learners' own stories, why they felt that they could not continue in ABE, There is an interesting discussion in the literature (Comings, 1999, 2007, Quigley (1995) and others as to whether non-completion is a failure by the learner, by the institution or both, or whether the learner *takes* the opportunity to desist from formal learning. As already noted, McGivney (1966) suggested that non-completion of programmes was affected by the inter-relationship of both personal and institutional factors and this point is taken and elaborated by these studies.

However, an important point is the difference in understanding of persistence as between the provider and the learner. Comings (2007) says that for the provider, the importance of persistence is the element of retention, whereas for the learner persistence is frequently whether they decide to proceed with their learning seamlessly, or to pause when they choose.

Carpentieri (2007) suggests that we look at persistence as 'retention turned inside out'

> Such a learner centred focus takes account of the complexities of adult learners' lives and recognises that individuals who appear to be dropping out may only be dipping out and may engage in self directed study before returning to formal provision when they are able. (p.8)

Conceding that persistence has a complex nature, he elaborates that retention is the 'provider centred concept' - where a provider might see a non-continuing learner as dropping out, the learners might only be 'dipping out' for a while, generally because of other responsibilities in their lives. Succinctly, he says 'inconsistent does not necessarily mean non-persistent'. He maintains that provision to encourage persistence and progression needs to be flexible enough to include an 'irregular' or 'inconsistent' journey.

Maclachlan et al (2008:13) also consider persistence, progress and achievement in ABE, and say that little research has been into literacy learners and they state a growing concern over participants in ABE whose 'life and learning circumstances militate against their continued engagement with learning'. 'Persistence is continuing to learn throughout life, often struggling against obstacles, in order to achieve life and learning goals, with or without breaks in between learning episodes'.

They highlight a range of factors that influence persistence, the ethos of the learning organisation, the social relationships and the pedagogical practices.

Examination of these pieces of research suggest that where improvements are made to provision, engagement and motivation increase. Although the Skills for Life takes place in different contexts, Carpentieri et a; (2007:29) suggests 'the evidence demonstrates ways in which we can all work together to improve outcomes for adults through effective and inclusive provision'.

In terms of learning identities, there is a relationship between persistence in a programme, changes in participants' attitudes and the pedagogic practice of the organisations.

A distinction is made between learning as a process and learning as a product or outcome where new understandings challenge what they had formerly done or thought.

Crowther (2010) reviews the life experience of the learners using the 'lens of learner identity' to explore their engagement in learning – they say that 'adult learning can

have a significant role in the formation and re-formation of the identities of learners and consequently of their ability to persist in reaching their learning goals' (p.654). There is a very strong sense that the learning is not literacy, but using literacy to learn.

He says that, while previous research provides insights into the mix of factors that impact on learner persistence, their research seeks to study the factors in some depth.

In Conclusion

From these research papers one gets a very strong sense of how life and learning are inextricably linked in delivering effective ABE tuition, where the connection is facilitated, then people are much more likely to persist. It will be interesting as I analyse the stories gained from my small cohort of learners here in Ireland to consider how the variables described impacted on their decisions to remain or leave ABE provision.

Since this thesis seeks to tell the stories of this group of learners, from their perspective, it seems logical for me to use the word 'persistence' throughout.

Studies of Community Education

Literacy tuition is provided in Ireland predominantly on three pillars, through the ETBs, through Community Education and less so, through Workplace learning, when employees need to 'upskill' including improving basic literacy and computer skills.

I wish to consider two studies from AONTAS (2003, 2008), which consider the differences between school based instruction and community education and the benefits to the individual of the community model.

Community Education – Listening to the Voices (2003)

In this paper, Connolly (2003) suggests that Community Education has provided a 'forum for listening to the voices of an otherwise silenced people', which has strong resonance for me, since my research has as its focus learners in Community settings who had stories to tell and which were not heard. 'Community Education is often proposed as a means to reach marginal groups because of its success with developing relationships with people who are often silenced'(p.14)

It is her premise that, through Community Education, women and marginalised groups of men have learned to express their views and 'address particular social issues and disadvantage'. Looking at the ways in which literacy education has developed under the aegis of NALA, she makes a strong link between suggested tuition approaches and a social justice agenda. She points out that in many ways, community education groups 'challenged existing provision', with women demanding education provision which was suitable for them within their society and accessible to them at a suitable time, and with childcare provided.

Community Education – More than Just a Course (AONTAS, 2009)

This study relates the 'outcomes and impacts of Community Education in Ireland, in relation to enhancing learning, fostering empowerment and contributing to civic society. This is of course fundamentally different from the focus of other strands of education provision which have as their focus the improved academic ability of participants, with self-esteem and community involvement as a bonus. The report states that the community education sector provides a way for some of the most disempowered sectors in Irish Society to achieve wide ranging positive academic outcomes, together with their involvement in their local community.

The focus of the learning is decided on by the learners and tutors are very carefully trained in 'empathy, respect, encouragement and equality', which must encourage persistence in education.

Although the system is funded by the Department of Education and Skills, there seems to be more flexibility in the curriculum and the tutorial approach than there is in ABE provided through the ETBs.[6] The report suggests that this might well be because of the particular knowledge of a community by the Community Education Facilitator.

The report suggests that because Community Education removes institutional barriers through a mix of flexible course provision in a local centre, together with a welcoming environment, then learners are more likely to persist. It further suggests

[6] Education and Training Boards.

that community education is ‘meeting a stated aim to bridge learners into other types of education and training’(p.12)

The practitioner perspective

From the practitioner perspective, I read a number of studies which tried to analyse the factors which affect the learner persistence in second-chance education. B. Allan Quigley, a practitioner in the United States, has written some very thoughtful and insightful work about his feelings when students fall out of ABE and the impact on himself and his staff when this happens. In ‘The First Three Weeks: a Critical Time for Motivation’ (1984) he suggests that researchers have found it difficult to understand why learners leave ABE because they look at the situation from their, academic, perspective, not that of the learner. ‘Our learners are not a different species’(p.1) This is precisely why I took the grounded theory approach, so that I could find out what the students felt, in their own words.

In 1995, Quigley, conducted an enquiry with 17 adults in Pittsburgh who had recently left ABE provision and a control group of 20 participants in ABE. All the 37 people were interviewed in depth based on a series of questions developed by tutors and counsellors in the ABE system, to compare why some remained and some left. The results of the investigation indicated that those who left provision had a worse experience of previous schooling, with this being mirrored in ABE, they felt they were not challenged by the curriculum and did not feel close to the tutors. There was also a younger age demographic in this cohort. This is a very interesting investigation and suggests that those who persist in ABE are more mature and have a better social relationship with the providers and other students.

Quigley (1997) discussed his methodology and approach to teaching and learning, paying due respect to the tutors, but more to the learners and excoriating the popular media myth of the ‘heroic illiterate’. He suggests reasons for dropout in ABE predicated on his own life experience, first as practitioner, then academic in ABE. In terms of provision and syllabus, he talks about the importance of reflecting the needs of the learner, regrets the funding focus on ‘value’ for money and observes that this aspect of social policy ‘goes to the very heart of ideological differences in democratic government (p.69). From the practitioner perspective he recognises the

damage done to tutors' self confidence when they have a large drop out from their classes.

As Quigley states:

> If future research would study dropouts more exclusively – both in the formative stages when they begin to consider quitting and at different points after they leave – we would be much better informed. If we could predict which new students were likely to drop out later, and why, we could focus our energy on them in constructive ways. (p.166)

Small-scale, Irish studies

In this section, I look at a number of studies conducted in Ireland over the last number of years and which, while not examining reasons for leaving ABE, do consider some of the barriers to participation and some of the more difficult constituents to reach.

Moving from the margins, 2002

The aim of Corridan's (2002) research was to look specifically at men who were participating in the Dublin Adult Learning Centre's (DALC) Literacy programme and to discover barriers to participation and some of the factors influencing motivation. It was hoped that, as a result, she would be able to recommend models for good practice. It was also interesting from a methodological perspective as it utilised mixed, qualitative methodologies, focus group sessions and interviews across 46 men. It also introduced me to Participatory Learning and Action which is an extremely interactive methodology, and which Corridan (2002) judged to be very suitable for working with a group with literacy difficulties.

I found this interesting as part of the focus of enquiry states that 'DALC wishes to identify effective strategies for attracting and maintaining marginalised men in literacy education', so there was a clear reference to the work which I was planning. However, although mention is made of retention, there is really very little about it in the report. Service providers were also interviewed in order to discover what they felt were the difficulties and opportunities in encouraging men to participate in Literacy programmes.

The observed outcomes covered many of the recurring 'common sense' beliefs within the ABE community – that learners grew in confidence, were better able to manage their lives and better able to access employment – but of particular interest, from my perspective, was that the information was voiced by the participants, not collated from a series of questionnaires applied by researchers.

Reading and writing difficulties: understanding the interaction of personal and environmental factors in the retrospective narratives of adult literacy learners

Quish (2006) used long interviews with a number of clients of the Adult Literacy Service, in order to 'elucidate the reasons behind their childhood literacy underachievement'. She had initial interviews with seven clients and repeat interviews with five, which she argued have sufficient information for her purpose.

I was particularly interested in this thesis, for a number of reasons; firstly the author was an Adult Literacy Organiser, so comes from a similar background to mine and also throughout the thesis we hear the stories of the participants in their own words. From this position, she comes to the investigation with a good rationale for working at the level of the individual and her personal belief that illiteracy is multi-factorial – with society, family, education, class all in the mix.

She also uses a qualitative approach and my feeling is that the methodology she uses – narrative enquiry – is very strong since it uses the actual words of the participants through an in-depth interview. In this way, as described by Hollway & Jefferson (2007), Quish constructs data between the interviewer and interviewee in order to 'show intrinsic motivations and external influences that have shaped them'(p.68) Quish's belief is that this inductive approach does not impose any pre-existing expectations on the phenomena under study, which is really important, since as a literacy organiser she would have experienced many of the conditions she discovered, across most of her learners.

As an outcome, she believes that although many reasons were involved in the fact that her interviewees left school with insufficient literacy, three conditions were paramount: there was a poor learning environment, self protective behaviours insulated them in the classroom and there was a pervasive presence of negative

affect, colouring their report of their early childhood schooling. All of this would be my professional experience, the reported experience of many of the people involved in research and the experience of the people whom I interviewed for my study and will be discussed later.

It's never too late to learn (NALA, 2008)

The purpose of this research was to look at the interface between older literacy learners and the system, what benefited them, what they found difficult. Authors Byrne and Lawless in noting the demographic changes in the population in Ireland and the importance of good literacy skills in maturity, sought to discover how the education system would better suit older learners, how they had experienced primary education, how they managed their lives with poor literacy skills, what happens when these coping strategies fail.

Sourcing their participants in four, Dublin-based ABE providers, they used case study design which suited their purposes since it 'encourages group dialogue and interaction' (p.25) and with the discussion predicated on four areas: engagement with the literacy service, their personal coping strategies, barriers to returning to education and learners' future plans.

Analysis of their findings produced suggestions across a number of areas, firstly that there should be a Government policy decision to discover exactly what learning needs existed for mature learners, secondly that providers should be aware of the importance of satisfying these needs and ensure that tutors and syllabus reflect this and, thirdly that there should be on-going research into the educational needs of older people. It is very interesting to have revealed, though hardly surprising, that older people felt doubly discriminated against, both because of their literacy difficulties, but also because of their age.

Once more, the participants disclosed that they had had very negative experience of early life education and that this had contributed to their poor literacy, with consequent low-skill employment history and unemployment. Although hesitant at first to re-engage with learning, they reported that when they did, they 'revelled in the experience'.

The twenty four interviewees had very positive experience of the ABE programme and consistent attendance. From the report, it does not appear that drop out was a problem for them, or for the provider, despite the fact that in their early life education they did not persist. It would be interesting to discover if there was any incidence of drop out on the programme as a whole.

On a broader note, Byrne and Lawless remark (P.3) that there is little 'systematic Irish based research into the multiple contexts in which learners, including adult learners, acquire knowledge and skills'.

Pathways to Competence and Participation in the Digital World (Casey, 2009)

Casey's research investigates and records the success of a digital learning initiative, *Know It,* in which he was involved in the National College of Ireland. Using interview methods within a Grounded Theory approach, he looks at 'how and why' adults approach their own learning for basic digital literacy.

The designers of the *Know It* programme made every effort to facilitate entry for participants who were unused to adult education. There was, for example, no compulsory attendance at tutorials, since learners were largely responsible for what and when they learned, through using a computer programme.

The research did not itself seek to discover what discouraged participation, but emphasised that the design of the *Know It* programme sought to mitigate what are seen as common-sense barriers, such as obligatory attendance, cost and lack of support from family and employers. Casey concluded that learners are seeking for 'specific' rather than general competencies and that gaining specific competence will increase self-esteem and encourage further participation in education.

However, the people Casey interviewed were all successful participants in the programme, once again, no mention is made of fall-out or non-participation, except where he mentions (p.128) that it would be interesting to 'talk to those who didn't take up the opportunity'.

Conclusion: Revisiting the aims of this study, in light of the studies reviewed

As I reflect on the information which is available on access to and participation in Adult Education, particularly ABE, it is apparent that nobody has suggested any fundamental change to the original framework on barriers which was produced by Cross (1981), McGivney (1996) and the adult teaching methodologies outlined by Tough (1976) and Knowles (1984). Subsequent major studies have refined their findings.

Many examples of best practice have been described and methods to encourage inclusion for particular constituents have been suggested. Specific provision for older people, for children and parents, to facilitate access to health services or help manage finances with specific support from Government, community and family is described. Tuition in small group, provision of one-to-one tuition and provision of self directed tuition through IT are all suggested, but without any overall 'winner'

Quantitative studies have enumerated very high figures for dropping out of ABE, but against that, there is the suggestion that ABE learners are more inclined to 'drop in' and 'drop out' of provision as they require, they do not necessarily feel the need to be part of an academic cohort. Figures also show that students are more likely to leave programmes during the first six weeks, that there is a correlation between poor attendance and dropping out. Students who return to education are more likely to persist than those attending for the first time.

Qualitative studies show that self-concept is extremely important in success, that family support is crucial, that the relationship between the learner and the institution and the learner and the tutor are vitally important and that students who leave will cite both personal and institutional failures as reasons.

The studies I have reviewed attend to the participation of adults in education, both formal and informal and some of the barriers to that participation, both practical and emotional, which is important to the provider. The UK Studies of the early 21st Century have noted the interaction between various factors in the learning experience which, when positive, support persistence, which when negative contribute to non-completion. We have seen a novel approach to teaching, the benefit of digital

learning and the importance of involving the learner in the teaching and learning process. However, no study in Ireland deals in the depth I was seeking with individual stories of individual learners and with a particular focus on retention.

Although a number of methods of good practice have been described, we have no template which can be used to provide the conditions within which students, specifically students of ABE, will access and remain in second chance education. However, the more I read, the more I felt that previous, particularly qualitative, investigations described only parts of the picture, and that additional, in-depth investigations would add value and give a wider perspective.

Research questions revisited

Through my reading I caught glimpses of various reasons why adult students did not feel comfortable within the education process, to the degree that in some circumstances almost 60 percent of students drop out. Since it is clear that there is no single answer as to why people drop out of ABE, more investigations are necessary in order to discover more of the picture.

This study, by interviewing learners in depth and hearing from them their stories and the precipitating factors for their discomfort in ABE, can provide real information on another part of this picture, in its ability to capture the stated reasons and feelings of a small number of learners who did not seem to fit into the ABE provision. The information gained should be of value to education providers.

In the next chapter, I report on the process I went through in reaching the decision to use grounded theory as my research method, using long interviews to gather data. I also give brief pen pictures of the ten interviewees, six women and four men, who volunteered to participate in my study.

CHAPTER 3 - PROCEDURES FOR COLLECTING DATA

In this chapter, I relate how I selected a suitable method to research the experience of students who had a history of dropping out or intermittent attendance in ABE. It was important for me to gain 'real' information from people who had been students in the ABE but who did not persist. To gain this information, I felt that I had to understand the benefits and disadvantages of various research approaches and to look at some of the theoretical pillars of investigating adult education.

In the last chapter, I described my approach to reading literature relevant to the topic, and some of the existing International and Irish work on retention in adult education, as well as ABE. As a result of this reading, I had a clearer idea of the kinds of questions I wanted to address with my interviewees to discover their subjective experience of ABE, to understand what kinds of reasons caused them to drop out. I discovered that personal and practical barriers needed to be covered, as did their experience of teaching methodologies but I was clear that there were going to be myriad reasons that they attributed to their poor literacy and poor success in remedying their situation.

My previous experience of research

While working towards my MA, I conducted a small research project which involved interviewing VTOS students to discover if they felt their self-esteem had also improved during their time in the programme. The methodology used for that investigation was based on questionnaire, and subsequent short interviews, having previously conducted a literature review and with an understanding of the theories linking persistence in education with self -esteem.

However, the interviews were conducted with students who persevered to the end of their year of study - no effort was made to speak to students who had not and it seemed to me even at the time that this was a lack in the investigation, since it begged the questions about their reasons for not persevering.

In my analysis, a positive statistical correlation was found between return to education and growth in self-esteem. While the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is not unusual in investigations (Strauss, 1964), I felt that greater

richness of data would be obtained through longer time spent, in deeper conversation, with participants. In this manner I could hear the stories of participants in the most realistic way possible and in the most natural setting. Instead of putting specific questions to participants, noting and categorising their answers, it seemed that a more interactive approach would be better. So, from this point on, I had decided what I was going to investigate and then had to decide how the investigation should best take place.

Since my purpose in this investigation was to search in depth into the life stories and feelings of the participants, to discover why they had left ABE, it was clear that I needed rich, qualitative data and had to look for a method which would capture the changing behaviours of the actors in the research. In Strauss & Corbin's (1990:11) words, qualitative research 'refers to research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions or feelings' which seems to fit the present investigative requirement and Bryman (1999) agrees that qualitative research has the capacity to 'throw up actors' meanings and interpretations'. As Charmaz says (2006:10) 'my approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it.'

Which Qualitative Research

> The process of doing qualitative research presents a challenge because procedures for organising images are ill-defined and rely on processes of inference, insight, logic and luck and eventually, with creativity and hard work, the results emerge as a coherent whole." (Morse, 1994:1)

Researching qualitative methods, (Creswell, 2007, Denscombe, 2010, Morse, 1994), it seemed that there was a choice between several methods which might be suitable:

Case study was dismissed, since its focus is a specific issue 'explored through one or more cases within a bounded system' and would not be suitable for my purpose to explore with a number of different people, the reasons why they left ABE.

Neither would Ethnography be suitable, since it requires observing the person in the society to which they belong, in this case the learning environment to which they no longer belonged.

Two approaches were considered in more detail, phenomenology and grounded theory.

Phenomenology

As a research approach, phenomenology seemed to have many of the requirements to discover the information I required from my interviewees. Since I believe that data is a construction between the researcher and the researched it requires that the research experience is described as clearly as possible through the eyes of the researcher. As Denscombe (2010:95) says 'phenomenology stresses the need to present matters as closely as possible to the way that those concerned understand them', which is what I planned to do in my investigation.

Furthermore, phenomenology lends itself to the long, relatively unstructured interview where time can be spent discussing matters that arise, in some depth. My plan was to take this investigative approach. However, Denscombe (2010) also says that phenomenology, rather than trying to discover *why* something happens, the focus instead is on describing as really as possible, *what* happened. My purpose in this investigation was to discover some at least of the *whys.*

Denscombe (2010) says that phenomenology is suited to small scale research, can tell an interesting story because of describing lived, authentic experience, and it is a humanistic approach in that it is respectful of the people involved. However, he says there are disadvantages to this approach – it can be seen to lack scientific rigour, is descriptive not analytical, may refer largely to what he calls 'mundane features of life' and it is very difficult to generalise from its findings, since it may involve relatively few participants. He further says that there is difficulty in seeing things exclusively from the interviewee's point of view and suspending your prior knowledge.

The fourth methodology, and the approach which I ultimately took, was grounded theory

Grounded theory

At the very preliminary point in my research journey when I was first in discussion with Maynooth about the possibility of pursuing a Ph.D., I had a short meeting with Leo Casey who had just completed his Ph.D., also in the area of Basic Education. As part of our discussion, he mentioned that he had used Grounded Theory as his research method and he very kindly allowed me to access his thesis. It seemed to me that it provided a good research method for a small project in the area of education and I therefore discovered more about it, in order to decide whether or not to use it myself.

Grounded theory was developed by the sociologists Barney G Glazer and Anselm L Strauss (Glazer, 1965, 1967). They were critical of what they called the 'overemphasis in current sociology on the verification of theory, and a resultant de-emphasis on the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the area that one wishes to research' (1967:1)

In order to make sense of patients' and medical professionals' understanding of dying, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that such research would be better conducted in a qualitative way, and that it would also be possible that researchers could rigorously analyse this qualitative data in order to generate theory. This work was diametrically different, of course, from the positivist approach which calls for research to be used in order to 'prove' a theoretical position. 'We suggest as the best approach an initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research. Then one can be relatively sure that the theory will fit and work' (1967:3). Gherardi & Turner (1987) describe this methodology as being about 'discovery' rather than 'verification'. (p.12)

Glazer and Strauss were approaching their studies from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1937) which considered people to be self aware, adaptable to situations as they presented (Mead, 1934) and capable of 'shaping society via shared meanings' (Heath, 2004). Developing the concept of symbolic interactionism, Blumer (1956 in Heath, 2004) stressed 'the role of concepts that are sensitising rather than definitive, that gain their unity and significance from patterned relationships rather than quantifiable correlations'(p.142). We can see, therefore, how grounded theory is reflective of this approach, since Blumer also compared cases in order to develop general features and emergent theory through these comparisons.

Selecting Grounded Theory

Because the purpose of my study was to talk to participants of Adult Basic Education and to learn from them why they had had difficulties in accessing and continuing in the programme, it seemed to be logical to use an approach to examining the data which would allow them to frame their reasons. As Creswell (2007) says, grounded theory is valuable in this case, where those participating in the study would have all been part of the question and help to provide the answer. No theory would be imposed on the data; insofar as possible the researcher would come to the data with a clear mind; the theory would therefore arise from careful study of the data given to the researcher by each

individual and that information also carefully examined against data delivered by the other individuals involved in the study. In Charmaz' (2006:5) words 'They proposed that systematic qualitative analysis had its own logic and could generate theory.' In particular, Glaser and Strauss intended to construct abstract theoretical explanations of social processes.

In researching about grounded theory, I first read Charmaz (2006), who was recommended to me as a good source of information about grounded theory and also 'how to do' grounded theory. I found that I had to read and re-read the book before I really got to grips with the theory. Looking back, I wish that I had first read a number of research papers using grounded theory, e.g. Bhandari et al (2003) , Larsson (1998), or indeed taken the advice to read theses using this methodology. These practical examples of using grounded theory would have made the subsequent reading of Charmaz more easily accessible.

There is a tension all the time in utilising grounded theory, between the prior knowledge of the investigator and the necessity of coming to the information without preconceptions, to truly reflect the place of the interviewee and allow theory to 'emerge' from the data. In the 1970s, Glaser and Strauss diverged in their approach to grounded theory, with Glaser insisting that meaning exists in the data and that the researcher's task is to extract meaning and develop it into a theory. He criticised as 'forcing' the Strauss and Corbin (1990) belief that researchers cannot be entirely neutral and that deriving meaning requires interpretation by the researcher.

Among further developments, Charmaz (2006:xii) describes grounded theory methods as a way of 'Creating an analytic edge to your work', as a 'set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions' and her book gives '*a* way of doing grounded theory that takes into account the theoretical and methodological developments of the past four decades.' And it is through this, constructed approach to grounded theory that I conducted this study.

Simply put, Charmaz (2006:6) sees the 'defining components' for grounded theory as:

- Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis
- Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses

- Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis
- Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis
- Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories and identify gaps
- Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness
- Conducting a literature review after developing an independent analysis.

At this point, having examined the various qualitative approaches to research, and taken advice from sources, (Creswell, 2007, Denscombe, 2010, Morse, 1994) I came to agree with Charmaz (2006:507), that Grounded Theory methods would be suitable for my needs, since they are:

> a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build inductive middle range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development .

Constructed Grounded Theory

Andrews (2012) describes constructionism as a means of making sense of our worlds and understanding all knowledge to be constructed between ourselves and what we understand of the world we inhabit. He refers this back to the Mead (1934) idea of 'symbolic interactionism'. Blumer (1937) sees constructionism as the way within which an individual 'learns to cope with his world', trying to solve problems through changing behaviour. Thus this approach sees both the person and knowledge as relational and changeable in changing environment.

The constructed nature of knowledge is thus described, information given to me in the interviews, re-evaluated in the light of their life experience, my applied understanding to their stories reported here 'trying to make sense of a complex world and then constructing their own knowledge and understanding of it' (Stock, 1996:21).

Charmaz (2006) applies this understanding in her approach to grounded theory. 'We interpret our participants' meanings and actions and they interpret ours' (2006:127) She maintains that grounded theory methods will create knowledge between

participants in a study and the investigator, since each is making sense of the interaction from her own perspective. The investigator is thus part of the outcome, since she is interpreting and labelling data and working towards a theory. Charmaz states that, although an investigator strives to get as 'close to the inside of the experience as we can, we cannot *replicate the experiences of our research participants'* (p.130) (my italics). To quote Etherington (2004:20) ,'I value local stories and know the world as socially constructed', and it was to the local stories of people who had unsuccessfully participated in ABE that I went to discover reasons they suggested for their drop out and that might have a wider resonance.

Reflexivity

I was very clear that what I discovered from the information given to me by my interviewees would be my interpretation. I needed, therefore, to be as sure as I could that my interpretation was as close as possible to what they wanted to say. This has to be a serious concern for the researcher, that his/her prior experience or long-held beliefs do not affect the results. Etherington (2004:19) says 'we need to be *aware* of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them'. Bryant and Charmaz (2007:609) define reflexivity as a 'stance which informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants and represents them in written reports.'

Etherington (2004, citing Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska 1966) suggests that it is important within our interpretation to discuss with others so that 'we can co-construct new meanings in response to their critical reflections and our own'. Since I came to Grounded Theory with a limited Literature Review, as outlined in Chapter 2, I used post-interview notes and the memos I was creating as I analysed the data, together with information from theorists and other researchers to validate my construction and to present opposing arguments, during the time that I was writing up my findings.

Generating data

Within grounded theory it is possible to generate data by use of a number of methods, some of which I have discussed earlier, and which I discarded. The advice from Charmaz (2006:15) to 'let your research problem shape the methods you choose', and my belief that I needed to get as close as possible to the experience of my interviewees,

led me to believe that interviewing would be the best method. The discussion below provides the rationale for my decision.

Interviews

Judith Bell (1999) says that adaptability is the major advantage of an interview, in that the interviewer is able in a relatively unstructured way to seek clarification of points that are particularly interesting to him. She further says that the interviewees are more likely in an interview situation to declare their feelings, which could be a very valuable resource.

Nunkoosing (2005) warns not to take the interview 'for granted' but when we use it as a tool, that we should carefully consider each individual interview, with each individual participant. Denscombe (2010) notes three differences between a conversation and an interview, because in the latter:

- There is consent to take part
- Interviewees' words can be taken as 'on the record'
- The agenda for the discussion is set by the researcher.

Denscombe (2010) suggests that an interview is appropriate where a researcher wants to 'gain insights into things such as people's opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences'(p.173), which makes this approach particularly suitable for the current investigation. He provides a checklist, which appears pretty obvious, but which is good for potential interviewers to be aware of: the interplay between the personal identity of the interviewer and the interviewee and the effect that this might have on the interview situation, and, second, that the interviewer is careful to present in a way not to antagonise and to remain 'neutral and non-committal' on statements made during the interview.

Using an interview in a research situation means, to quote Dunne et al (2005) recognising 'that the views and actions of certain social actors are important' – that they have specific knowledge about some data which you, as a researcher think are important. They stress the importance of understanding from the start *why* and *how* interview features in your research design. They observe that the interviewer 'mediates the link between the methodology and the substantive concerns' (2005:29) and clearly,

agree with Seale (1998) that the relationship between researcher and interviewee is not at all passive and should be part of a 'reflexive engagement' between their worlds.

In approaching this current piece of research, I wanted to take the opportunity to speak in more depth to a cross-section of learners who had histories of coming in and out of the second chance education system and to discover from them *their* understanding of why they behaved in these ways. Mezirow (1996) states the importance of striving to learn what someone means in the discourse created between interviewer and interviewee. In this way, by careful consideration of positions taken and 'informed, objective and rational critique' a 'best judgement' may be made of the constructed truth. However, Cohen (1994), cited in Bell (1999), warns that 'like fishing, interviewing is an activity requiring careful preparation, much patience and considerable practice if the eventual reward is to be a worthwhile catch'!

In fact, deciding to use interview as the data-gathering technique and considering the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee appears to be so fraught with difficulties – like power relations, influence, interpretation, that my initial, uninformed, feeling that it was the best possible method needed some detailed consideration.

Kvale (2006) does not dispute the 'value of research interviewing for producing knowledge of the human situation, but raises conceptual, methodological and ethical concerns' (p.496) in describing the power of the interviewer over the interviewee and stresses that an interview is not a dialogue but a situation in which one person gives information and the other reports it. He says that there has been a growing, but mistaken, sense in which interviews have been perceived as dialogue, but where what is actually happening is that a seeker of knowledge is tapping the source of that knowledge. He says therefore, that the term 'dialogue' is incorrect since the only benefit from the interview is to increase the knowledge of the interviewer. Kvale (2006) further warns to be aware that this power may be extended more generally in the research.

I understand Kvale's perspective, especially as he quotes the political misuse of dialogue in interviews. However, I think that as researchers we need to have belief in our intentions, confidence in our skills and to the best of our knowledge strive for genuine understanding of the subject's point of view. In a practical sense, I also utilised memos and post interview notes to very carefully consider the content and intention of the interviewees.

I was mindful that my interviewees might have seen themselves in an 'inferior' position, or felt that it would benefit them if they 'told me what they thought I would like to know'. Nunkoosing (2005) typifies the power of the interviewer as 'resting in his or her authority as a seeker of knowledge (p. 699) and the power of the interviewee is that of 'privileged knower'. Glesne and Peshkin (1992), question if a non-hierarchical position is at all possible within an interview. This is a great responsibility for the investigator and raises very serious questions about doing no harm to the interviewee and the possibility of getting 'truth' from an interview.

Borg (1981) describes how the feelings between the two protagonists could bias the data obtained from interviews. This is called '*response effect'* by survey researchers. More helpfully, Gavron (1996) notes 'it is difficult to see how this (bias) can be avoided completely, but awareness of the problem plus constant self control can help' (p. 159). To quote Denscombe (2010:178) 'Interviewees, and interviewers come to that, have their own preferences and prejudices, and these are likely to have some impact on the chances of developing rapport and trust during an interview'

Very clearly, the interviewer needs to be aware of any inequality in the situation, to strive to remain as impartial as possible and avoid leading the interviewee.

It is my belief that through my experience in working with clients within the Literacy Service and in education counselling, I have good understanding of how to manage an interview situation, good empathy and am able to monitor the process of the interview and steer the conversation in the direction I desire. Of course, I don't believe that I did not make any mistakes, in fact I noted several in my feedback after interviews, but these mistakes informed my performance in future interviews.

The long interview

As McCracken (1988:65) says 'to capture how the respondent sees and experiences the world, the long qualitative interview has many special virtues and is designed to 'capture the famous "richness" of qualitative data without setting the investigator adrift on a featureless sea'. Charmaz, (2006) suggests that 'intensive qualitative interviewing fits grounded theory methodology particularly well' (p.28), though she warns against the interviewer taking too much control over the 'construction' of data.

For me using the long interview as a method was particularly user-friendly since the interaction was conducted in one session and it was necessary to 'set the scene' and

relax the respondent on only one occasion. It is what Gubrium & Holstein (1997) call 'naturalism', whose goal is to 'understand social reality in its own terms'.

When I was working in ABE, I developed interviewing skills in order to discover from learners their level of ability and their learning needs, so the process was well within my comfort zone and I believe that I was able to get rich data in the interaction. Charmaz describes using in-depth interviews 'to explore, not to interrogate' (2006:29)

Chase (1995) describes two 'major principles' for narrative interviews. Firstly, that narration is a way in which 'people make sense of experience, construct the self, and create and communicate meaning' and secondly that narratives 'no matter how unique and individual are inevitably social in character'. This form of interview can obviously serve my purpose in trying to find out why learners fall out of the education process, but in conducting the interview, I had, all the time to be aware of my responsibility not to 'lead' the interviewee. In facilitating the interviews, I took a broadly life story approach, asking interviewees to start 'at the beginning' and trying to keep them on course where they diverged too far, without if possible, interfering with stories they wanted to tell, or they felt were important.

Aronowitz (1991), encourages researchers to be aware that stories given by students should be examined for their contradictions, as well as for their possibilities (p.131). Denscombe (2010:175) tells us that the role of the researcher is to be 'as unintrusive as possible', but to allow interviewees to 'speak their own minds'. Hollway & Jefferson (2007) in talking about this 'narrative' approach see that meaning is constructed between the interviewer and the interviewee, with the interviewee having the responsibility for truth 'making the relevance of the telling clear' (Polanyi, quoted in Chase 1995:2)

Within a long, virtually unstructured interview, it is possible to extract the interviewee's perspective of the phenomena, so long as the interviewer keeps focussed and, as McCracken (1988:40) puts it when interviewees divert, they must be 'gently' returned to the topic of interest, keeping the interviewee on course, but also giving them 'plenty of room to talk', since as he further says, often the value of an interviewee's information will only become evident when the material is analysed. This value should become apparent during the coding and comparison modes.

During the interviews for the current investigation, I was aware of the need to listen very carefully 'When we listen carefully to the stories people tell, we learn how people as individuals and as groups make sense of their experiences and construct meanings and selves' (Chase, 1995). I was careful to use open questions, in order to elicit as much information as possible and was also careful not to make my opinions known. I determined to allow the interviewee to decide what information they wanted to share, what areas were too sensitive for them. It is my belief that the attitude of the researcher is absolutely crucial to the success or otherwise of the interview in order to gain rich data – essential for the purposes of grounded theory method.

Selection of interviewees

Before I left County Louth V.E.C., I spoke with the Adult Education Officer, explained my research purpose and had her agreement to get in touch with the various co-ordinators of second-chance education programmes. I felt that, in the first instance, I would concentrate on learners in a location that I knew and, if necessary, would move outwards if I could not reach enough clients in the North East. I received a great deal of support from my colleagues who in turn introduced me to their learners with the required profile and who were prepared to talk to me. No selection procedure took place, other than the interviewees were or had been involved in ABE and had a history of intermittent attendance and/or falling out of provision.

I therefore approached learners with whom I had worked during my time as ALO and I also asked the other Adult Education providers, the ALOs in Dundalk and Drogheda, the VTOS co-ordinators and the Community Education Facilitator if they would suggest possible participants. The ten people described below agreed to participate in the research and in nine cases the interviews took place in County Louth VEC premises and in the case of Len, the meeting was in his office.

The reason that they were selected for interview for this research was because they had attended ABE programmes, some over the previous twenty years, but with very intermittent attendance and sometimes with years between study. This meant that I had the opportunity to discuss with them why they were involved with ABE and why they dropped out, equally why they felt the need to return. 'When an adult returns to a program after a lapse in attendance, the program may view that student as a drop-out who has returned. The learner may view himself as a persistent learner who couldn't attend for a while' (Comings, 1999).

Several people whom I contacted did not feel able to participate in the study, although I tried to reassure them that they would not have their identities disclosed, they felt very self conscious, or indeed refused to answer my enquiry. These feelings were a critical factor in non participation which I later discovered through my investigation. Rooney, (2010) discusses in some depth the reasons why vulnerable people resist being interviewed, which she says include 'lack of confidence and internalisation of stigma' (p.62).

Another interesting fact was that for me and for the other Literacy Organiser in Louth, we had a higher number of acceptances than the other Adult Learner practitioners, the VTOS, Community Employment, etc. This might be because, as Literacy Organisers, we were more used to dealing with this category of learner. It has been my experience that teachers, in common with many in the general population, are frequently embarrassed to address literacy difficulties with students, and indeed will cover up for them. Of course, the students themselves have very well developed coping stratagems to avoid discovery of their difficulties. These issues are discussed in some detail in Byrne & Lawless (2008), NALA (2009) and Harris & Shelswell (2005).

Participants[7] in the investigation

Alice: 49 years. I know Alice well, since she had been a learner with the ABE throughout my time working both as a tutor and administrator. She is married with two grown up sons and a daughter in secondary school. They are very supportive of her.

She had joined and left a number of programmes and many times found herself in difficulty, since she reacts angrily to situations, which meant that she left programmes on the basis that she was 'not treated fairly'. This behaviour also meant that, as I knew, she was quite difficult to manage during her time on Community Employment.

However, I always found her to be reasonable and we had a good relationship. She was very amenable to being part of the investigation and was very open in her answers in the discussion.

Angela, 56 years: I also know Angela well, since she, too, was a learner in our service. She was getting support from a social worker in changing her life, and between them they decided that it would be good for Angela to learn reading and writing skills. She is

[7] Names cited are pseudonyms

an extremely likeable woman, but with poor self-esteem, finding it hard to make decisions and difficult to manage her life and her family. She is separated from her husband and has an adult daughter with learning disability, who lives an independent life.

John, 56 years: This man, too, was a learner in ABE , but I cannot say that I knew him well, since he is a very private person. I was quite surprised that he agreed to be interviewed, and equally not surprised when he avoided answering some questions.

He is unemployed, having for the last several years been on a Community Employment Scheme, but has now come to the end of his time. He seems to be quite isolated, although he lives near his family.

Will, 59 years: This man was not a student of mine, but he was for several years in and out of ABE in Louth. Although he is unemployed, he presents extremely well, with a suit and tie and carrying a briefcase and is very involved in voluntary service with a high profile in the community. It became clear during our interview that he had a particular agenda in agreeing to be interviewed for this research, in that he had unresolved issues with the service he had received.

Len, 50 years: This man is one of the few people of his age who actually are diagnosed with Dyslexia, since there was very little diagnostic provision while he was through school.

Len is employed as a Community Worker. I first met him when he was a participant in Community Employment and continued to meet him as he was part of the Return to Education Programme and a programme devised for parents in a local National School. He was extremely intermittent in his attendance at class, apparently because his outside interests were more important, or because he was not interested enough. However, he did succeed in gaining the Junior Certificate, of which he is justly proud.

On the basis of his community profile, Len was selected for a fast-track community programme in DKIT [8] and did extremely well, until he had to submit written assignments and although we offered him every assistance, he did not complete them.

[8] Local 3rd Level College

Bernie, 64 years: This woman has just done her Junior Cert., and is planning to go forward to do her Leaving Certificate in the next year or two, as part of the VTOS programme. She is working as a Carer in the Community Service in Drogheda. A widow for a number of years, with grown up, independent children, she says that she is now able to look out for herself and 'feels strong enough' not to care if 'people know' that she is still improving her reading and writing.

She presents extremely well and looks and initially sounds very confident, but became emotional at times during our discussion when we were talking about areas she found sensitive.

Grace, 65 years: This woman has done a number of programmes in Community Employment, but has never returned to main-stream education, although she has poor basic skills, about 6th class level. She did not exactly fit the profile that I had asked for, but I felt that she would be an interesting person to talk with, and she proved to be so, with good ideas about why second-chance education was not attractive.

Eileen, 26 years: This woman was the youngest I interviewed, and had a very complicated story to tell about health problems and her interface with school and bureaucracy through primary, secondary and tertiary education and how she managed to find herself, now, back in ABE and with relatively poor skills.

Like Len and Will, it became clear in our discussion that she had a personal agenda, but that did not affect the value of her contribution.

Mary, 38years This woman left school very early, in order to join a training programme with FÁS. She left that, also, and worked at various unskilled jobs throughout the years. Some years ago, she decided to return to education, in order to be able to support her children through their education. She joined the VTOS programme, but only attended until the end of the first term. Subsequently she returned and this time has completed the programme. She is hopeful of going on to college in due course.

Nat, 35 years: This man had been a student of the VEC in Louth on a number of occasions, through Youthreach and ABE. He also had literacy support through FÁS when he presented to them looking for work. Unusually, for this group, he had good self-esteem, managed his life effectively despite poor literacy and had a good experience of primary school.

He is extremely personable and generally liked by people who have had dealings with him.

As I mentioned, Eileen, Will and Len had particular agendas that they felt they could address through the process of being involved in the investigation. Eileen had a personal complaint about a teacher in her post leaving cert, Will about not being allowed to choose one to one tuition and Len about provision for his children in school. While of course I listened to them all before steering them back to my areas of interest, Len and Eileen's individual concerns did not come through the coding and categorising process, since they were single issues. To some extent Will's did, in that one to one vs. group tuition came up as an area of concern and is discussed in the findings.

Ethics

Educational Researchers, in particular, often hope that the new knowledge they produce will contribute to the improvement of educational practices and policies as well as better treatment of students (Howe, 1999)

It was certainly my intention in conducting this piece of research, that I might contribute something to the debate on retention in Adult Basic Education, but at the same time I was very aware of the importance of the duty of care I had in relation to the participants in the study and, indeed to my colleagues in Adult Education. At all times, I was absolutely open about what I was trying to do and for what purpose.

Having previously conducted research projects, I was aware of and complied with the British Psychological Society (1996) Code of Conduct, 'to ensure that the interests of participants are safeguarded'.

The Adult Education Officer of County Louth VEC gave me her unqualified support for the project and also wrote to my colleagues in Adult Education asking for their support for and co-operation with me. I then approached my colleagues directly. They were informed about the purpose of my investigation and what would be involved for the interviewees, it was stressed that participation should be entirely voluntary and entirely anonymous. Since the possible interviewees were within the usual social welfare system while participating in education, I had no reason to believe that they were not able to make informed decisions for themselves. Arising from this work by my colleagues, I telephoned each of the potential interviewees and introduced myself, again

explaining the purpose of the investigation and, where they were interested, appointments were set up, within the Adult Education Facilities in Drogheda and Dundalk.

At our meeting, I explained to each of the interviewees that I was engaged in a piece of research and that I was interested in their experience of being in ABE. I explained also that their names would not be disclosed in order to maintain their privacy and that they might, if they were interested, read the thesis in due time.

At this point, I made no mention of seeking to establish why they left the system, but I stressed the importance of their individual experiences and made it very clear that they were in charge of any information they chose to share. They could conclude the interview at any point and withdraw their consent. While I had no written questionnaire, I had a written ethics protocol [9]which I read at the start of each interview and checked that the interviewee understood. Because the protocol was read by me, it was captured on the tape recording of the interview. I felt strongly that this protocol should not be signed, since my experience of Literacy clients is that they are embarrassed about their writing and their signatures, and I felt that signing might spoil our interaction.

Hollway & Jefferson (2007) point out that prospective research participants have no idea of academic interviews and, as such cannot give informed consent to something that they know nothing about and further, say that they 'hope' that the interview process is beneficial to the participants, based on their 'feelings' at the end of the process. Moreover, considering the relative positions of interviewer and interviewee, Burgess (2004) and others, (Howe & Moses 1999, Banister 1994) also wonder if it is possible for any interviewee to give truly informed consent, and indeed if it is possible for an interviewee to be truly anonymous or data to be confidential. This was brought home to me when I was writing the short biographical notes for this piece of work, when I realised that some of the interviewees might be recognised in their communities, which in its turn begs the question of harm being done. To ensure that this does not happen and to make sure that no direct connection can be made, I have changed the names and been vague about the locations in which the interviewees were studying

[9]Appendix 1, p.231

Very great care has been taken with the interview tapes and transcripts, which were locked in a filing cabinet when they were not being worked on.

Interview process

In all, I conducted ten long interviews, some in Dundalk and some in Drogheda All the interviews were recorded – in fact they were recorded twice, because I had a horror that I would get home and discover that the interview didn't really exist! Afterwards, I made notes of my feelings about the interview. I decided not to make notes during the interview, since my experience as ALO taught me that learners were frequently inhibited by note-taking and became awkward. 'Interviewers who attempt to make their own record of the interview by taking notes create an unnecessary and dangerous distraction' (McCracken, 1998:41)

I then loaded the interviews up as voice files on my computer and subsequently transcribed them. This process was extremely painstaking, but I felt that I really got to know the interviewees and understand their position, during the process. I have a strongly auditory memory and it was easier to make sense of what had been said through hearing it, rather than seeing it on paper. Hearing it also reminded me of the physical interaction during the interview, the voice, tone, inflexion, etc. and where pauses occurred, all of which informed my notes. Silverman (2005) citing Atkinson & Heritage (1984) notes that the production and use of transcripts are 'research activities' where repeated, close listening will generate previously unnoticed information.

That being said, however, I printed the transcripts off and worked from the scripts. I used the normal symbols in my transcription, to indicate pause or disinclination to reply, etc. I also used the MAXQDA software programme to assist in sorting the text, and I found the transcription tool, F4, to be very useful indeed, cutting transcription time by about a third and having a common interface with MAXQDA. The memo system in MAXQDA provided me with the opportunity to make current notes about the interviews as I went through the initial coding process.

There were ten interviews in all, four with men, six with women. This is the number recommended as a minimum by Strauss and Corbin (1990). McCracken (1988) gives extremely good information about how to approach a long interview. The interviews were conducted over a six-month period and since I was anxious to get rich information from the interviewees and maintain a relaxed situation, I did not work from a

questionnaire, nor did I make concurrent notes, though I was clear that I wanted to cover certain specific topics. As I went through the interviews, I made post interview notes, and as I have said, I also wrote memos actually on the MAXQDA scripts, some of them related to the coding. These I collected during the process and they provided both information to use in future interviews and served to capture my feelings about the interviews and the topics that they raised. Some topics which were quite interesting came up in early interviews and I introduced them in the later.

Hollway and Jefferson (2007) state the importance of quality data, that without this quality, it is impossible to arrive at quality analysis. At the end of my interview process, I had a vast amount of data, which I considered to be 'rich' in that it gave good insight into the lives and feelings of the respondents, in particular about their relationship with education, but which had to be analysed. In the interest of obtaining real life data from my participants, the actual enormity of the volume of information generated I found to be quite inhibiting. It was necessary, therefore to put some sort of structure on my investigation to get myself motivated to analyse the information which had been generated.

In this chapter I have described how I decided on grounded theory as the most suitable method for my research. I have noted the support I received from County Louth VEC in this project and introduced the learners who felt they were able to participate in the research and my ethical approach to the work. I have described, also, that using long interviews generated vast amounts of information which I analysed by the use of the MAXQDA software which in its turn enabled me to keep some sort of control on the amount of data acquired from my interviewees and facilitated my reflection during the process. In the next Chapter, I show how I analysed the data and categorised it into themes and concepts gradually refining the information until I could propose an explanatory framework.

CHAPTER 4 - APPLYING GROUNDED THEORY PROCEDURES TO PRODUCE FINDINGS

'Seeking the theory – Revealing the obvious, the implicit, the unrecognised and the unknown' ***(Morse, 1994:32)***

Introduction

The proposal by Morse, above, that all I wanted to discover would be revealed by going through the *process* of grounded theory made something which I found quite complicated, to appear quite simple. As a researcher I had amassed, literally, vast quantities of information from my interviewees and my task was to sort the data into categories and thence into a theoretical framework which I believed would answer some of the questions about drop out in ABE.

As I have said, I really had no clear idea about using grounded theory method until I started to use it, but I found it a systematic process that suited me and was suitable for the purpose of my research, since my in-depth interviews yielded information which very soon indicated conditions in my interviewees' lives in which they had felt alienation.

In this Chapter, I describe and discuss my process of putting grounded theory into practice and report the various stages involved in my data analysis, at the end of which I hoped to develop a theory which explained the phenomena I was researching. The Chapter also shows how I reached towards my theory, through the analysis of the data and thus indicates my findings, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 5. As I was working my way through this process, it seemed sensible to take examples from the data given to me by the interviewees, to illustrate the steps necessary in coding and categorising in grounded theory. Thus, the reader gets a taste of the emerging findings, presented more comprehensively in the next Chapter, 5.

I first recorded the interviews and then typed them back and as I have said, this initial process ensured my immersion in the lives and especially the feelings of my interviewees, and prompted me to label the data accordingly. It was so clear that they had become involved in ABE with high hopes of a positive outcome, but that these hopes were dashed, sometimes because they had not been articulated clearly, sometimes because the structure or content of the provision was inimical.

They described disconnect between what they had hoped to achieve in ABE and what they actually achieved and that this disconnect led them to feel different from the other, apparently successful students in ABE. From their individual stories I was able to glean that on various other occasions during their lives they had also felt different, sometimes at home, sometimes at school. Listening to their individual stories, I was also able to hear the enjoyment and fulfilment as they described how they felt when they belonged, or were supported, in work or in their relationship with their families and children. I came to believe that their hopes would have been more likely to have been fulfilled if they had felt involved in the education system and that the theory I was searching for to explain their not persisting in ABE would lie in their need to belong.

Throughout the chapter I have given quite in-depth descriptions of the analytic process, because I believe that each use of grounded theory differs in some ways from others, that grounded theory is a framework, not a concrete plan, so long as it meets the criteria mentioned in the previous chapter, and I felt it necessary to show how my data collection, coding and theoretical analysis fit into the framework. I have to say, also, that I actually found using grounded theory to be extremely enlightening, and I wanted to share the enlightenment. I found grounded theory to be systematic, on a step by step basis I worked my way through the process and am pleased that as the findings emerged they were absolutely grounded in the words and described lives of the interviewees.

To briefly describe my analytic process, it started with coding the information gleaned in the interviews. As I compared the data bits across the various interviews and conditions, I was able to narrow the focus, gathering the codes into axial codes, connecting them and placing them in categories, thence into major categories and subsequently arriving at a core category. At this point I was able to deduce that

tension between the major categories, Self-Concept and Social Context was the root cause of drop out for these learners.

I had read many studies e.g. Charmaz (1990), Ryan (2010), Casey (2009),Roderick (2010), Seel (2006), Ravindran (2013), Hutchinson (1990) and others using the grounded theory approach, hoping for affirmation of my methodology, but discovered that each grounded theory seems to be unique, despite there being templates, examples and worked studies. Quoting Urquhart (2001:2) 'each researcher has to find his or her own way with regard to their particular analysis'.

Having decided to use, for what I thought were good reasons, long, relatively unstructured interviews, in the interest of obtaining real life data from my participants, the actual enormity of the volume of information gathered I found to be quite inhibiting. It was necessary, therefore to put some sort of structure on my investigation to get myself motivated to analyse the information which had been generated.

Of course, I understand that as this is a constructive process and that I have to take responsibility for interpreting the interview. Belenky (1997:137) suggests that 'all knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known'. As Bowers (2009:238) says 'I think one of the places we are all moving toward is a greater recognition of the role played by the researcher and the context'

From my perspective, 'construction' came on a number of different levels, firstly, my understanding of the interviews, then the construction of my labels for the data from my interviewees, sorting them into categories, and thereafter the construction of my theory. Although I felt that the codes with which I labelled the data were a clear understanding of what I had been told by my interviewees, the construction of the theory was far from easy and required vast amounts of time, thought, mind maps and paper.

In analysis, it is really important not to see oneself as 'an expert' who will magically attribute meaning, but to allow the interviewee to speak for herself, what Best (1995) describes as prioritising the representation over the represented. I found it important, as I have said elsewhere, to use memos to reflect on the process, after interviews, during the coding process and as I was working towards the theoretical framework. Morse (1994) notes that if one is working in an area, then it is

extremely difficult to research it dispassionately and Etherington (2004:209) suggests there is potential danger in researching a topic 'about which we are passionate' and I found that by writing up memos when my own feelings came up during analysis, that I was able to be more objective. In a very practical sense, Morse (1994) recommends the value in keeping descriptive notes separate from evaluative and I found this relatively simple to do, labelling them differently in MAXQDA.

Coding

Within grounded theory, the process of analysis begins with coding. Charmaz (2006) tells that coding 'is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations' (p.43). She says that the process of coding will include taking data apart, labelling it and getting some sense in which it might assist developing abstract ideas. I have to say that, as I approached the coding process I had absolutely no knowledge of how this might happen. This must, of course, be the experience of any neophyte in grounded theory.

> Grounded theory coding generates the bones of your analysis, Theoretical Integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton (Charmaz 2006:45)

In coding you are, essentially, looking at each individual segment of data and attaching a label – not applying a pre-existing label, because we are *actively naming* our data. Kelle (2007) describes what he sees as the most basic difficulty, the need to let categories 'emerge' while all the time having previous theoretical knowledge.

Following directions from Charmaz (2006), it is necessary to keep in mind what the data is about, what suggestions it makes and from whose point of view. Looking at data from this perspective may indicate a label (a code) for it. In actually doing this, one has to remain open and close to the data, move quickly through it, to have simple, short codes which precisely name a segment of the data and in this way to compare data with data. (p.49)

I coded the first interview which I conducted, with Alice. Following Charmaz's instructions, I sought to find and name meaning in the text while acknowledging that this meaning is a construction between the interviewee and interviewer. As Ryan (2006: 96) says 'all the data is filtered through you'.

After this, very early coding, I looked for consistency and themes, or categories, in the story that she was telling, and also for inconsistencies, and noted them in memos on MAXQDA, as I have said. Charmaz also says (p.51) that the 'logic of discovery becomes clear as you code line by line – you have to look at the data anew.' I am not so certain about this – it took several 'lookings' at the data anew for me to gain any clarity or get a handle on what I was doing.

The coding process

Charmaz (2006) describes initial coding as helping the researcher to look at categories and see processes, whereas line by line coding facilitates a sense of objectivity and frees you to question the data under consideration. She pursues the process of coding by suggesting that 'line by line' coding is important, particularly for 'early, in depth, interview data' as it enables you to get a close look at what participants say and have concerns about. I found that this process enabled me to get a little separate from the data, and assisted an objective view of the phenomena, as Ryan (2006) says, 'making the familiar strange (p.95) and enabling the researcher to 'reveal a certain essence of the data', which will enable you to answer your research questions. However, contrary to Charmaz (2006) who found the process 'quite simple', I found it to be quite difficult.

Nonetheless, through coding line by line, one does get a sense of what data to collect next, and I think that this is the crucial difference between GT and other qualitative systems, that one works from one set of data to another. Kelle (2007) describes in very simple terms how he assigns data to categories, watches sub-categories emerge, creates sub-categories of a given category and looks to see any relationship with other categories, thereby linking them together to form a theoretical framework.

My process, therefore, was to interview, to write up the texts of the interviews, to read them over for broad themes and to code them. Each successive interview brought up themes and happenings which could be teased out in subsequent interviews, and indeed looked for in the reporting of earlier interviews. It was interesting to discover, for instance, when talking about early schooling that some interviewees had extremely negative experience which they handled by being 'very quiet', some were put on the 'bad' bench and some had positive experiences and only fell out of the system at a much later date. Thus the category 'experiencing school'

had a number of dimensions. Looking at these dimensions, for instance, I found that my interviewees' own early school experience frequently impacted on how they behaved as parents of young children in school. For example, Bernie's mother, in particular was violently antipathetic to her participation in education, whereas Bernie, recognising the importance of supporting her children says 'when I see what I done for my children, the encouragement I give mine'.

Charmaz (2006) says that coding full interview transcripts gives 'ideas and understandings that you otherwise miss' (p.70), bringing a deeper level of understanding. She also says that the first coding might not necessarily be the last one, and in my case this was absolutely true. I used gerunds, trying always to name actions, not persons, as suggested by Charmaz (2006), quoting instructions from Glazer (1978). Thus, '*It was that I couldn't fit into it, Mary'* was coded as 'feeling excluded', rather than 'exclusion', since I was trying to describe precisely what Alice had said. It begs the question, of course, about whether or not it should have been 'being excluded'; since Alice did not exclude herself, but felt that school had excluded her. She describes this feeling very strongly even after a long number of years.

Following this piece of work, I approached John's text and dealt with it in a similar way, looking carefully at the text and coding it, but thereafter putting the texts side by side, looking for similarities and differences and consistency and inconsistency between them. I found it useful using MAXQDA in this process, because I was able to keep both texts on my computer screen at the same time. I would disagree with Ryan (2006) in this regard, because I found having the texts on my screen during the whole coding and analysis process to be very useful. Whenever I wanted to ask a question of the data, it was readily to hand.

As I have said, I was simultaneously coding earlier interviews and conducting newer, so this meant that I could raise topics that appeared important in the earlier interviews for discussion with the later interviewees. Charmaz (2006:51) says that close study of the data will 'spark new ideas for you to pursue'. I took very great care, however, not to drive the later interviews in a direction suggested by earlier, since I felt that this would be forcing the information. For example, if, in my post-interview review, I noted a topic that I thought to be important, then I raised it at the next interview, but during the process, not at the beginning, and with no particular

emphasis. If the second interviewee did not have anything to say about the topic, then I let it rest for that interview and raised it in the same way in subsequent interviews. In exploring the subject of 'experiencing school' raised above, for example, I gained some very good information about the development of later interviewees' beliefs and feelings about education.

Comparison

The first stage in coding was to read through the text and highlight in different colours what I labelled 'situations'. Because of the way in which I structured the interviews, covering the same life situations in approximately the same order, I quickly became aware that all of the people I interviewed had had difficulties, not just with ABE, but with their earlier education and, indeed in their interface with their families and their families' experiences.

I subsequently discovered that what *I* called 'situations', Charmaz (2006) citing Strauss & Corbin (1990) calls *conditions* – 'the circumstances or situations that form the structure of the studied phenomena'. From the first reading of the first interview (with Alice) she described being isolated within her family, within society, within school, within second chance education. I therefore considered that, for her 'isolation' was a serious consideration, within the *conditions* mentioned above. I then went to the second interview, with John, and found that he had a similar experience.

I was therefore making comparisons between codes which I had applied within and between interviews. According to Strauss and Corbin(1998) the '*art of comparison'* is about the interplay between the data and the researcher. However, Boeije (2002) states that there is more at play here than '*just comparing everything that crosses the researcher's path'(*p.394) and stresses the importance of what she calls the 'production procedure' which takes place at the data analysis stage, in judging the value of a study. Quoting Tesch (1990:90) she describes the importance of comparison, thus:

> The main intellectual tool is comparison. The method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis, forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarising the content of each category, finding negative evidence, etc., The goal is to discern conceptual

similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories and to discover patterns.

Boeije (2002) further describes what she calls 'a purposeful approach' to comparison –a sort of route map of the 'production procedure' a tool I found to be very useful in working my way through the logjam of codes in which I found myself and towards categories. However, I had to get my mind around what should not be compared, and how I could decide what was important, what less important. As Dey (1993:46) says 'classification cannot be neutral – it is always classification for a purpose'. This of course, underlines the constructed nature of grounded theory, where the researcher investigates the data and reaches conclusions, or constructions about why the actors perform in certain ways.

Boeije, (2002*)* demonstrates the process that she went through in studying couples, one of whom had multiple sclerosis, by using grounded theory. In her example, too, interviews provided the texts for analysis 'to make sense of the data and reconstruct the perspectives of the groups being studied'. This is done by 'fragmenting and connecting' both actions being necessary for the process, to keep each other in 'equilibrium'. She sees that fragmenting 'lifts the coded pieces out of the context of the interview as a whole', whereas connecting 'accentuates the context and richness of the data, as the interview parts were interpreted as a whole'. In analysing text, the codes attached to fragments can make sense of what she calls the 'core message of the interview' and to 'interpret the parts of the interview in the context of the entire story as it has been told to us by the interviewee'. (p.395)

Boeije (2002) included a Table 1 with her article[10], and I used the first two stages of her process, since I had comparisons only within and between one series of interviewees. These questions systematise the process of axial coding 'searching for indicators and characteristics of each concept, in order to define the concept' (p.398)

Looking at a single interview she asks the questions 'What is the core message?, is it consistent?, which codes should be used? What are the relationships between the fragments? Without actually using the matrix she produced, I found this process to be very useful when I was looking at text of an interview and trying to get a sense of what the interviewee was actually saying about conditions they described.

[10] Appendix2, p.248

At Stage 2, - making comparisons between interviews - she asks about similarities and differences between interviews and whether or not interviewees are actually talking about the same situations and what information they actually give about a category. She also asks what combinations of codes occur and what construction can be put on them – defining the constructed nature of her approach.

The answers to these questions, she says, will develop categories and label them with the 'most appropriate codes', but also help to note inconsistencies. 'It represents an attempt to interpret the parts of the interview in the context of the entire story'. (p.395)

In an example of my application of this process, I examined Len's interview. I found that he talked about 'needing support' in education, because of his dyslexia. This was not surprising when he described how he had needed support with his literacy at school and at work – again a fairly straightforward application of the code. However, I saw that he spoke about how his family needed support during the time of his mother's illness and I could use the code to label this. He, as an individual needed support with his learning during that time and the family received support from their extended network. He was conflicted by noting his personal needs at a time when such tragedy was unfolding in his family, but he pointed out that his particular need for extra support in his homework was neglected and he fell far behind the others in his class. Now I had a broad sweep within his experience of his declaring his need for support in a number of conditions.

I then examined Alice's interview and found that the same code applied to a similar situation in that because there was a sibling with special needs in the house, her mother was unable to cope, so Alice went to school far too early. She, again, is conflicted because she understands why this happened, but she clearly feels that had she had additional support, she might have had greater success. Thus I found the code 'needing support' was applied in a number of different contexts, at home, with their families, and at school.

A number of memos linked these various applications of the code, as Boeiji (2002: 393) says it can 'describe and conceptualise the variety that exists within the subject under study'.

Preconceptions and prior knowledge

However, at this point it seemed to me that I might be superimposing my prior knowledge on the data which I had collected. This is an on-going worry for researchers – Creswell (2007:67) talks about the 'conflict and difficulty about coming to the data with a clear mind'. While it might be glaringly obvious to one working in Adult Literacy that the family background would affect learning experience, it was important to find this information in the texts, not in my personal experience. It is extremely difficult not to look for fragments which support the themes and categories already observed. I am with Kelle (2007:191), in believing that Glazer and Strauss's initial idea ... was difficult to realise in practice

> The most basic challenge in grounded category building is to reconcile the need of letting categories emerge from the material of research (instead of forcing preconceived theoretical terms on the data) with the impossibility of abandoning previous theoretical knowledge. (2007:192)

My coding came directly from the data which I had collected and I believe that it was therefore free of preconception. I was very careful, also, in writing memos to reflect my feeling about what the interviewees had said, not what was 'common sense theorising' (Schutz, 1967, in Charmaz, 2006:67).

My intention for this research task was to discover from the learners whom I interviewed where they found their difficulties in completing ABE. I believe that grounded theory method ensures this, because the codes, categories and resulting theory are intrinsic to their stories, a clear reflection of their experience and validates my decision to have in-depth discussion with learners and discover their reasons for not persisting.

Manual or computer aided analysis

Throughout the whole transcript and coding process, I used and then discarded the MAXQDA system, a number of times, finding it hard to manage and very prescriptive, particularly when I was trying to work out what I was doing. This experience reflects that of Saldana (2009) where he describes that trying to learn the basics of coding and qualitative data analysis simultaneously can be 'overwhelming' (p.22). I suppose inevitably, as I became more aware of what I was trying to

achieve, I recognised the benefit of using the computer programme and finally came to terms with it as being a good tool, particularly as I have said, when axial coding.

Kelle and Laurie (1995) assert that using a computer to analyse your data is particularly beneficial during the process of constant comparison, by ensuring that the comparisons are 'systematic rather than impressionistic'. It will also code and maintain *in vivo* – essentially words of your interviewees which clearly describe the phenomenon you are investigating.

As I have said, I used the F4 tool and MAXQDA to facilitate the coding process, meaning that the text was split into manageable phrases which were then coded. Because the F4 tool broke the text into very small bits which could be labelled individually rather than as part of a larger context, it was possible to easily deconstruct the interview. However, coding very small items of text that I felt were significant gave me an enormous number of codes that I then had to sort into categories. Throughout this process, I continued to listen to the recordings of the interview, to ground my interpretation in data provided by the interviewee. This whole process took a very long time, but had the advantage of making the interview texts and recordings very familiar indeed.

Memo writing

During the coding process, I was creating memos, in the beginning noting my very early thoughts about what the interviewees were saying, separating my feelings from descriptive notes and enabling me to reflect on the whole process. As I continued coding, looking at the data in more depth and starting to collect codes into preliminary categories, I was able to relate memos and join up my thinking about what was happening across interviews. These memos are described by Creswell (2007:290) as analytic and self-reflective, to 'enrich the analytic process, to make implicit thoughts explicit and to expand the data corpus'. Birks et al (2008:68) describe them as 'a mechanism by which the perspective of the researcher can be recorded for later critical review or confirmation.'

Using the MAXQDA system made memoing simpler, in that it was possible to insert a memo beside the data section that had triggered it, to link memos in the various scripts and also to write general memos, connecting and collecting themes and

concepts which were stored on the computer and very easily accessible beside the scripts.

For example, as I was coding Alice's interview, I was much struck by how she felt 'apart' – she described being different from her elder sister, less able to cope with social situations in school, more likely to feel that there was discrimination going on, even though whatever discrimination was going on was being applied both to herself and her sister – and I wrote a number of memos about this. The same sense of 'apartness' applied at other times in her life and I coded and wrote memos about this, also - Saldana (2009:157) talks of the importance of memo writing 'serving as a code and category generating method' .

Looking at John's and the other interviews, I also noted this sense of being different, so I coded and wrote memos about this and thus named a category. What was interesting about this process was that each of the interviewees had different rationales for why they were excluded, some blamed society, some family, some illness, some themselves, but all had this sense of being excluded. As I have previously said, I tried to frame my code to reflect as clearly as possible what the interviewee had said.

Thus, memo writing describes and connects parts of the data and also the feeling of the investigator as she is in interface with the data, keeping a note of how she is constructing a sense of what the interviewee is actually saying 'Memos are therefore the vehicles that transport the researcher from the concrete to the conceptual' (Birks, 2008). Essentially, one must ensure that information in memos is intrinsic to information generated by the interviews, not used simply to confirm previously held ideas about the area under investigation - see Bowers (2009:126), Therefore, the approach to memo writing, as to all other elements in data analysis is that it must be open, not absolute, must be seen as one part of the jigsaw puzzle from which theories emerge. Memos need to capture fleeting ideas which in turn may trigger further ideas throughout the coding process and, collected and connected, they are a vital building block.

Further along in the analysis process, theoretical memos aid the development of categories, through collecting earlier memos and integrating them with ideas triggered through collecting ideas generated through connections among categories.

They further can be used to connect concepts and assist in the development of the theory. Examples of theoretical memos[11] are in the index, showing this process.

Focussed and axial coding

In order to get some order into the coding, the next step is what is called 'Focussed Coding', though there is some discussion about whether or not this step is necessary. However, Charmaz (2006) found that when, in the analysis, there is a strong indication of an 'analytic direction', then focussed coding can be used to sift through larger amounts of data. This step can also direct you back to a previously coded interview, to see if there is reference of this code within it. 'Through your actions, new threads for analysis become apparent' (p.59). To illustrate this step, looking back at the memo writing, the feeling of 'separateness' or 'difference' provided a focussed code under which a number of other codes found a home, becoming sub-codes.

As I proceeded with interviews and coding (intrinsic to the methodology of grounded theory) I raised the recurring experiences as well, of course, as taking careful note of any other situations described by the interviewees. Mindful of the suggestions of Strauss and Corbin (1990), I looked out for the relationship between the *micro* manifestation of disconnection which existed between my interviewees and their environments and the *macro* manifestations of disconnection existing between their communities and the power constructs of the state, which of course affected their lives.

As I have said previously, the earliest interviews that I conducted – with Alice and John, detailed experiences of their difficulties in managing within their families, their early schooling and in ABE. As I worked my way through the subsequent interviews, the same trends became clear, that the interviewees had felt disconnected in some way in the same context. I used various codes for their experience 'disconnection', 'alienation' 'poor access to parents, etc., but eventually subsumed them all into the axial code 'disconnection'.

[11] Referred to in Ch.6 and in Appendix 3, p.250, & 4, p.254

An example of arriving at 'Disconnection' across the different contexts is shown here:

Data Segment	Initial Code	Axial Code
(Family)' my mother would have been home, like, as well and she was sick, but she was always in bed, you know, she would always have been resting. I could never understand why mammy was in bed because we were always told, like your mammy needs to rest, like, and that'	Poor access to parents	Disconnection
(Work) I worked in K. In the tidy towns, and you would see them and they would be nearly looking down on you, you know what I mean	Social perception	Disconnection
(Early School) When you came to 6th class, where were you then in relation to the other students?' In 6th class, we all kinda had the round table over in the corner, and our ladybird books'	Being neglected	Disconnection
(ABE) I don't know if it was me, or whether it was the programme that was not suiting. It didn't seem to be suiting me somehow, and I kept on coming in and out of it.	Being different	Disconnection

This axial code, 'disconnection' which appeared across all the contexts, it seemed to me, was part of the category 'society norms', because it was specifically described as the experience of my interviewees. It was different from 'exclusion' for instance, which fitted into the category 'power hierarchies' because other people in their communities were also excluded by virtue, for example, of their location or their poverty. I slowly worked my way through the clusters of codes and the resulting categories described in their social worlds are also shown in the diagrams in Chapter 6.

The development of the axial codes and theoretical memos and the methodological system by which I arrived at my theoretical construct are also shown in Chapter 6.

Essentially, what is happening is that the enormous amount of data collected is gradually poured through the funnel of analysis, collecting initial codes into larger

categories which may be named as Axial codes, creating some sort of 'family' or collection of codes. Within these, you can link sub-categories to categories, compare categories with the collected data, naming the dimensions of the categories and thereby creating a web of connected codes.

In their turn, these Axial codes can be examined to discover where they are connected – as Glazer (1978) says 'how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory'. Glaser (1991) suggests that at this point in the proceedings Theoretical Codes will help to connect all the bits of analysis together in order to reach a theoretical conclusion or theoretical conclusions and to 'weave them together'.

Charmaz (2006) opines that, for constructionists, theoretical concepts 'serve as interpretive frames and offer an abstract understanding of relationships' (p.140). They are, essentially collections of codes which the researcher believes relate to each other. 'Rather than discovering order *within* the data, we create an explication, organisation and presentation *of* the data (1990:1169).

As I have said several times before, this was much easier to write than to achieve.

At this stage I put all the data codes into Wordle© and the resulting diagram is in Chapter 6, p.179. I found it personally very reinforcing that what I had felt as I was analysing the data was mirrored in the diagram, since it reflected what I had noted, that the interviewees had very strong feelings which affected their performance, that they had felt different, that family, work and school were all implicated in their stories. Charmaz writes (2006:118) that 'diagrams can enable you to see the relative power scope and direction of the categories'.

Returning to grounded theory, and looking all the time at the interview texts, using the memos and the three written sections concerning family, school, work and ABE, I constructed a 'messy diagram'[12] (Clarke,2009:212) of concepts and from that formed a more coherent diagram of concepts and sub concepts. I then collected these concepts into categories wherever I felt they would fit – which was a very long and tedious procedure since many sub categories could relate to several of the broader categories. I had to bear in mind all the time that there was no 'absolutely

[12] Diagrams form part of and are included in Chapter 6

right' placement just that I had to use my judgement and my knowledge of the data and the interviewees to place the sub categories where I felt they would best sit. All of these illustrations are shown in Chapter 6, p.179-183.

Developing the concept 'Self-concept'

My interviewees spoke about their feelings, both positive and negative, in many different contexts of their lives. These feelings encompassed feeling 'comfortable' in groups sometimes and feeling 'uncomfortable' in situations where their poor literacy might be exposed. They spoke about being supported by their family or by their tutor and about being 'put down' by other people in their lives. They spoke about being 'excluded' and spoke about inclusion. Thus I had a very large number of different codes, all of which described different feelings but which I clustered together and wrote up in a theoretical memo discussing why they had been arranged in this way.[13]

Eventually, I had three broad categories in this cluster,

Frustration, Embarrassment, Shame
Connected, Good, Belonging
Stress, Different, Isolated, Disruption
} Feelings

'Feelings', therefore was a sub-category, but it was clear that 'feelings' were modified in the light of experience, either good or bad and therefore they had to be connected within a sub category. I therefore had the sub-category 'feelings' in a dynamic interaction with the sub-category 'experience', since I felt that my interviewees' feelings changed, and affected their behaviour, depending on context and new experience.

Their feelings were mediated by and in tension with their life experience, both from a positive and a negative point of view. They learned that at school they might be treated with disrespect and they took sensitivity in that area with them into the ABE.

However, I also felt that I could not ignore the fact that intrinsic temperament was important to their self-concept, as was their gender, since both of these elements also

[13] Appendix 3, p. 250

affected how they behaved in life situations. Thomas & Chess (1986) looked at the interplay between temperament and the environment of the children they studied and proposed that temperament was the 'how' of behaviour; they say ability is the 'what' and 'how well' of behaviour.

My interviewees spoke about their behaviour being different from the other members of their families and from other people in their lives, from the very beginning. There were also many examples from the data of the ways in which their gender impacted on their behaviours, from the kinds of jobs which they were expected to take up, through the ways in which they were treated at school and by their families and the ways in which they were expected to behave. For example, they clearly understood that the man's role was to be provider, woman's the homemaker, and when they were not able to function in this way, it was a source of stress for them.

I decided, therefore that the tension between these categories 'temperament', 'gender' and the interaction between 'feelings' and 'experience' were the substance of 'self-concept', or person which was intrinsic to my theory.

Developing the concept 'Social Context'

All of the interviewees described times and places in which they did not manage effectively and attributed this failure to the context in which they were situated – family, school, etc. and to their own personal situation. Looking at this information, I felt that there were really two layers, the near context – within their local environment - and a wider environment. As Strauss says (1990:185) 'micro conditions often have their origins in macro conditions, and when appropriate, the analyst should trace the relationships between these'. It is my judgement that performance in the local environment is frequently affected by the national environment – for example the necessity for retraining during the 1980s was as a result of the economic downturn.

I therefore looked at the social context from both perspectives and developed two categories 'power hierarchies' and 'norms'. The first relates to the macro level and includes such areas as education, the church, social stratification and exclusion and the second is closer to the interviewees and includes such codes as 'poverty' 'location' 'parenting', etc.

I labelled this category Social Norms, but this relates only to the 'norms' suggested by my interviewees as how *they* felt were the ways in which they were expected to behave. I decided that the 'norms' were about the usual or predictable ways in which people in their families and local society behaved. Where they felt they belonged, my interviewees were able to achieve, but they frequently felt that they did not belong, or that they were 'different'

I felt that I could connect the two categories 'Power Hierarchies' and 'Social Norms' because I felt that my interviewees described how their environment affected their behaviour and, especially, why they fell out of ABE. This concept I named 'Social Context'.

I thus had two concepts, 'Social Context' and 'Self-Concept' and felt that the explanation of fall-out or retention would come from an examination of the tension between the two.

Searching for a Theory

> ***'theories cannot be 'true' or 'false', only more or less useful' (Silverman, 2005)***

I now felt I had good support from the data for my two concepts – Self-Concept and Social Context, recognising that the tension between them could account for success or failure in the conditions which were reported to me, and I went in search for an overall explanatory framework. Willig (2008) says that such a framework provides a space within which one can understand the phenomenon under investigation and Stern (1994:215) says that it will explain 'what the interactants see as their social reality'.

As I was working my way through the data, and particularly as I wrote up the sections which related to conditions - family, school, work and ABE, I became more and more convinced that the evolving theory concerned the tension between the personal characteristics described to me by the people that I interviewed, and the world as they experienced it. Charmaz (2006:126) says that a theory can 'emphasise *understanding* rather than explanation', where the theorist's interpretation of the studied phenomenon leads to understanding. Wolcott (2001:80) asks that we

understand the importance of the search for a theory, that it might become the opportunity of an 'informed dialogue'.

I kept on returning to the attitudes of the interviewees, who described being happy when they were part of a group 'we would have good fun, happy fun and simple things' (Alice) 'the group was important – it was great'(Mary) and associating that description with being effective. Eileen describes the situation, 'it's just a nice group, they interact well. And they have the same problems you have and they are coming from the same level, like.' While they did not overtly criticise the education system, the interviewees did say that where they had no sense of belonging, of participation, then there is no continuation in education. Mary was able to describe this exactly when she could compare her two experiences of ABE, one with a welcoming group, the other not.

Another recurring theme was the importance they attached to flexibility, that in situations where they had difficulty, they found themselves up against an inflexible system which heightened their sense of exclusion and inability to cope. John describes 'you have this in your head, going back to education would be great, but ... I don't know whether it was me or the programme that was not suiting.'

When they were talking about their prior experience of ABE, they gave no sense of being *part of* their learning. As Mary says 'I just got that kinda feeling, you didn't belong in a certain place, you shouldn't be there'. When I asked John if he was interested in what he was learning, he said it's 'not bad'. Nat was very clear indeed that the reason for his persistence was as a result of the tutor consistently checking that he was learning what *he wanted to learn* and that this had direct applicability in his life.

It seemed to me that my interviewees told their stories in terms of themselves, but within the parameters set by their situation or location at the time they spoke about, and still saw themselves as different, but where they felt 'part', not 'apart', then they were happy and able to achieve. Thus, Bernie and several of the other women had a sense of 'belonging' when they were at work and derived great satisfaction from this. Grace was happy when she was contributing to her community through her voluntary work.

I believe that when they spoke about being involved, of there being a strong connection, they were pleased with their performance in ABE, or at work, and by default when there was disconnection, then they could not succeed. Thus, it met the criteria articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and used as the basis for Charmaz (2006:4), approach, '*developing* theories from research grounded in data, rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories'.

I considered at some length the concept of 'fit' as being a suitable explanation for retention – prompted by Alice saying 'it wasn't that I didn't like it, Mary, it was that I didn't fit into it'. It seemed to me that she was describing the disconnect between the learning environment and herself at that point in her life. It was a very valuable concept because it did not criticise the learner or the provider, merely stated a matter of fact – there was a misfit. However, it was a rather impersonal concept, whereas my interviewees were describing their very personal feelings about staying or leaving in ABE. It further seemed to me that using grounded theory gave me permission to describe what I felt were their personal reasons for leaving ABE.

My interviewees were very gentle in their criticism of the ABE provision, tutors or environment, though they did not think that it was as good as it should or could have been. They were able to describe how at times they felt alienated from the others in their classes, from the tutors and from the curriculum, and that they felt their opinions were, frequently, disregarded. However, in other circumstances they felt as if they belonged, where they were part of a group, where the curriculum was accessible and suitable for their purpose.

I have to say I spent a very long time teasing out these ideas, and decided eventually that the concept of 'belonging' gave me a very good explanation. Len is successful now that he 'belongs' as a manager in his social service provision, Will 'belongs' as a volunteer provider in his local community, Bernie 'belongs' as a carer for the local Wheelchair Association and sees herself as fitting into a Leaving Cert. group. John and Nat, while not seeing themselves as academic appear to be quite happy in ABE provision, now through being supported by their tutors and tutorial group. Thus, I came to my explanation, which I felt intrinsic to my findings, that where they had a sense of 'belonging', they were able to succeed. It seemed to me that where they felt successful they had learned, through their capacity for coping, to get to a place where they belonged.

Although it might appear too simple, as though I could have reached this conclusion without having spent such a long time at my research, I believe that it has value and validity in that it rose directly from what I understood them to say in their interviews. Denscombe (2003), quoting Glaser and Strauss (1967:6) says 'Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research'. As Belenky (1997:138) says, 'theories are not fact, but educated guesswork'.

An environment of care

At this point in my work, I felt that I could not just say that these interviewees would be alright if they belonged, but that I should consider *how* their belonging could be facilitated.

Thomas (2012) in stressing the importance of 'belonging' for students' retention in education, talks about the importance of feelings of connectedness, relatedness, being accepted, included and supported. If these elements had been a consistent part of my interviewees' experience of ABE, then the chances of their drop out would have been much less. Goodenow describes the sense of belonging thus:

> Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. Goodenow (1993(b):25),

Delving into relevant literature, prompted by my analysis of the data, as we shall see in depth in the following chapters, it became clear to me that an environment of care would provide the nurturing and responsiveness which would facilitate the feelings considered by Thomas (2012) as essential for belonging. Fleming (2010:2) suggests that, because adult students frequently come from poor socio-economic conditions and will have experienced disrespect for this reason, they will not persist without effective communication, recognition and respect. He further stresses the importance of the relationship of friendship and love: 'if one experiences love, an ability to love oneself and others develops'.

Lynch (2005:2) asks for a 'holistic approach' if we are to make schools 'truly egalitarian'. From my understanding of the data, the education environment provided for my interviewees was not equal, but hierarchical. Feeley (2014) stresses the importance of group support within a marginalised education group, and I found that this marginalised group did not feel that they belonged in their tutorial group. Overarchingly, as we shall see, they reported stories of being isolated, dismissed and disrespected which affected their learning experience to a degree. Carpentieri et al (2007) noted in their evaluation of the Skills for Life Programme that what they called 'wraparound' support which respects the needs of learners for social as well as academic was strongly implemented in persistence in education. A caring approach in education, explored for example, by Nel Noddings (1986, 2005, 2012) would ensure an environment in which students and tutors would mutually respect, include and accept one another and within which, I believe, my interviewees would have been happy to belong.

Conclusion of this Chapter

In this Chapter, I have shown how, using grounded theory method, I labelled the information provided by my interviewees with suitable codes and, by sorting and categorising these codes I reached the conclusion that my interviewees would have been less likely to drop out of ABE, had they had the sense that they 'belonged' in the education system. The data provided further information about the conditions which contributed to their drop out, and in some circumstances supported their maintenance.

Grounded theory ensured that this conclusion was embedded in the words of my interviewees and built gradually, as I moved from interview to interview, analysing one interview before I attacked the next, seeking for similarities and dissimilarities between their accounts of their life experience.

Myers (2009) in el Hussein et al 2014 says that the sheer volume of codes generated through this method might hinder the ending of the task, and while it did not stop me completely, I certainly found at points in the process that I was overcome with data.

As I said, earlier in this Chapter, I believe that every practitioner develops her own method of implementing grounded theory and I certainly found that it was extremely

painstaking, but as I have also said, systematic. Through this, step by step approach I am confident that my findings reflect precisely the feelings and actions of the people whom I interviewed as they explained their difficulties in their interface with ABE.

Building on this information, I move into Chapter 5, in which I paint the stories of the interviewees from the data and in the contexts which they described to me and including literature which I sourced and introduced into my discussion as I felt I should as new concepts and ideas presented themselves to me during my analysis. As Charmaz (2006:167) says, 'engaging the literature goes beyond a short section of a paper or a chapter of a thesis. Weave your discussion of it throughout the piece.'

The Chapter has had a focus on the different conditions described to me by the interviewees, their family experience, their experience of school and work and subsequent interface with ABE. Essentially, it describes their formative life experience which resulted in their being unable to manage in ABE and sets it into a theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 5 -CONNECTING THE FINDINGS TO THE LITERATURE AND THEORY

Introduction

This Chapter, 5, is the first of three in which I present and discuss my findings. In this Chapter, I make the links between data provided by the interviewees and synthesise their stories 'merging several stories, experiences, or cases to describe a typical composite pattern of behaviour or response' (Morse, 1994:30). In Chapter 6 I discuss in detail and show diagrammatically the theorising process through which I reached the explanatory framework 'the wish to belong in ABE' and in Chapter 7, I reflect on my findings and discuss what implications they might have for provision and practice in ABE.

I found it very reinforcing to read Morse (1994:24) as she describes her struggle with validating qualitative research – that at that stage it could still be dismissed sometimes as 'but that's only a qualitative study'. To combat this, she presents a template in order to organise data so that the 'analytic scheme will appear obvious'. This template has four processes – '*comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualizing'* (p.25).

In Chapter 4, I performed the first of these processes 'comprehending', during which I learned and understood,- from their individual stories - that my interviewees had histories and incidences of being isolated. I found that these incidences were common to them all and also common across various conditions during their lifetimes. Therefore, I judged that where they belonged in a situation, they persisted, where they were isolated, they did not. This led me to propose an explanatory framework 'the wish to belong in ABE'.

Morse says that without 'a reasonable level of comprehension', it is impossible to synthesise – 'to make generalised statements about the participants' (p.26) and in this Chapter, I weave together stories from each of my interviewees to illustrate what I discovered to be typical 'patterns of behaviour or responses of the group'(p.30), which Morse describes as 'synthesising' and which in turn provides the information for theorising, which is described in Chapter 6. It was not until after these processes

that I felt that I was in a position to consider if my theory would have application across other areas, which Morse calls 'recontextualising', and which is proposed in Chapter 7.

This Chapter, 5, is the very core of the thesis, in which I connect the information provided by the interviewees to show their experience of isolation across a number of conditions suggested by them - their families, education, the workplace and ABE. Considering these experiences, I then read around the topic and linked their described experience with relevant theories and theorists, attaching my findings to existing appropriate literature and embedding my explanation into its theoretical frame.

Drafting this current section, it seemed to me that this would be very long, and I considered breaking it into sections with relation to the conditions mentioned above, but decided that I felt it important to keep the flow of my argument across the conditions and so I would keep it in one, long chapter. Since, as I have shown in Chapter 4, I made connections across the various conditions, it seemed to me sensible to keep all the information in one place. In this way, I could maintain the interviewees' voices and the voices from theorists across all the conditions to generate theoretical ideas and support my framework.

I have framed this Chapter therefore, in five parts - broadly on a timeline from family experience, called 'Family', through education, called 'School', paid work, 'Worklife', to ABE and with a concluding section. The rationale for this format is that, as explained in Chapter 4, I structured the interviews to cover their life experience broadly on a timeline, to make it easier for me to cover the ground I wanted to without too much recourse to paper or lists which might interfere with the relaxed interview situation I wanted to maintain. Each of the interviews was conducted in this manner, then analysed, then another interview conducted and analysed and so on, so each transcription and coding had a similar format. Morse (1994: 39) recommends that since the interview process seeks to 'elicit a participant's story, this story is told sequentially as the events being reported unfolded'.

As I was working my way through the scripts, it became clear to me that my interviewees had common experience of being excluded, or left out, across a number

of situations during their lives. My question was, could I link these situations and connect them with subsequent non-performance in ABE? They did not appear to be much different from the other people in their communities. In general they were quite poor, had quite disturbed childhoods and suffered to an extent from the heavy handed approach to education common in their early years: they often came from a large family and were constrained by the quite rigid social mores of their time. They recognised that their parents tried to be consistent in the way they treated their children , yet they, to a greater extent than the others in their environment, had less ability to cope with education.

As I explained in Chapter 2, I did no theoretical Literature Review *before* I started interviewing, so that the data I gained would be free of preconceptions. As I was coding and analysing my data, however, and trends and ideas emerged it became important to me to be able to place my findings in the context of other studies. In this Chapter, therefore, I have introduced these theorists and theories and relevant studies in the construction of my explanation for non persistence and woven them into the discussion of the topics raised. Charmaz (2006:163) in noting that analysis is inherently ideological puts it thus 'literature review and theoretical frameworks are ideological sites in which you claim, locate, evaluate and defend your position'.

To return to the lifeline structure, I have written about my interviewees' experiences from the cradle to their drop out of ABE, starting with their family experience. Within their families, the people I interviewed felt themselves to be different in some ways, from their siblings and from their parents. They could point to early life experience which contributed, for example, being poor, having been ill or being treated differently by a parent or siblings and they could report it over the intervening years with clarity and emotion.

In relation to their experience of second chance education, I found this exploration particularly difficult, since this was my area of expertise. I found myself arguing with the scripts, pointing out to the (obviously not present) interviewees that of course 'my door was always open' and I was 'always available at the end of a phone'. The reality being of course, that this was not *their* experience. As I explained at some length in Chapter 4, I consistently wrote memos to reflect my feelings and to keep my focus on the data, not on any preconceived ideas I had of their performance. I had to keep on reminding myself that the purpose of this exercise is not to judge the

education providers, nor the students' feelings, simply to report them and try to understand how they contributed to the outcomes. Knowing that they were dissatisfied by their participation in ABE, I sought and found some interesting common ground in their stories. Giving different labels to their experience, the effect was still that they did not persist in the education process.

Charmaz (2006:61) talks about *conditions* as being the 'circumstances or situations that form the structure of the studied phenomenon', and as I have said, I observed from their stories, that disconnection, a feeling of alienation, of being 'other' in some sense, was the experience of my interviewees within their families, when they were at school and subsequently when they returned to education. The rest of this Chapter will examine in depth and cluster together examples and causes of disconnection described to me during our conversations. I was also struck by how they had stories of how and where they felt connection, particularly when they were at work, and I think it is important to discuss this, also.

PART 1 - FAMILIES

This section considers how my interviewees described themselves as part of, and also different from, the other members of their families. It also describes how the families were part of their community and how the community itself changed and developed during the time that they were children. I examine how their development was impacted by cyclical episodes of poverty, illness and poor parenting and suggest that their experience was far from that envisaged in the Constitution of 1937.

The Constitution of Ireland (1937) places great importance on the place of the family within our society, as O'Sullivan (2012:1) reminds us, the Constitution, while remaining a 'product of its time of drafting', still 'places great importance on the family as a cornerstone of Irish Society'. The families described to me by my interviewees were typical of their time, coming from poor, working class communities either in town or in the country with the benefits and disadvantages of the different locations – in the town being very closely observed in their neighbourhoods and in the countryside being isolated.

All of the interviewees had a lot to say about their families and about how they behaved within them. Because the family section is formative, and I believe that early life experience is crucial, I have spent quite a long time teasing out the elements which would impact on their life experience. We have seen that the precipitating cause for drop out appeared to be at the interface between their personality and their experience of ABE and I propose to look at, first, the factors which affect the development of an individual personality within a family unit, and thereafter external factors, such as chaos, poverty and illness which also affect the development.

Developing personality - common traits, individual traits

Our expectation that the family is the fulcrum of development might lead us to believe that children within it would have very similar personalities. We are, of course, all products of our environment, genetics, family, community, ethnic grouping, etc., and our development and behaviour through life can be, if not determined, then certainly strongly influenced by this environment. However, how this disposition or 'personality' comes about is open to discussion.

Without getting too far in to the 'nature vs. nurture' debate in personality development, it could be expected that children within one family, growing up in the same community might behave in a consistent manner in similar situations and over time, what Thomas (1987) describes as 'disposition'. However this was patently not so, as described by my interviewees. What interests me, is that individuals from the same context sometimes behave similarly, but also sometimes behave differently and this was stated so many times by the interviewees in my research.

Angela knows that her coping skills are quite different from those of the rest of the family. I asked her to explain how she thought things were more difficult for her than for the rest of her family, and she spoke about the successful careers of her siblings to demonstrate how 'the others got on' and told me in what ways they had made their mark.

> The others got on, now, I have a brother who is a captain on a boat, F is retired now – he used to work in Harp[14], he eventually retired from up there, D was in the army, D(sister) is working up in the school in K.- she's a secretary there, N. was a nurse, she's retired, she's finished now, and me.

That, 'and me' says a great deal about how she sees herself as a failure in relation to the successes of her siblings. Hardly surprising, then, when as a young adult, she had trouble with bullying in the workplace, she relied on her family to sort it out for her.

I was talking to John about how his personality was different from the others in his family and whether he had always seen himself as different, since he is extremely quiet. Teasing this out a bit, I asked if he was quiet in school, to which he agreed, or quiet at home. He explained that he felt 'quiet natured' and 'quieter than they (other family) are, quietest of the whole lot of us.' He is able to describe that his personality is quite different from those of his siblings, and has been for as long as he can remember.

In recognising that physical and intellectual development happen within a family, it is logical to believe that interruptions in family conditions might cause interruptions in development. My objective has been to discover in what ways the interviewees see themselves to be singular and how this singularity might contribute in later life, to their non-persistence in education. However, where performance differs in different members of the family, then it is necessary to understand how they felt that their *personal* conditions differed.

Bronfenbrenner (1999) proposed a model which is a great help in teasing out why children within a family develop differently and can explain why some people from the same environment manage in school, some do not, some persist in adult education, some do not. This, 'ecological' model describes a framework within which the person develops and can account for differences and similarities in performance. Bronfenbrenner, also, sought to account for 'real life' behaviour in 'real life' settings, rather than analysing behaviour in a clinical situation.

[14] Local brewery, noted for well-paid permanent employment. Now closed.

He proposed that:

- Human development occurs through increasingly complex interactions between the person and its immediate environment. (*proximal processes)*
- This development will vary in relation to the developing person and the environment in which the development takes place

This ecological model is seen as a series of concentric structures which interact with each other: the microsystem sustains the development of the person in its immediate environment – family, school, workplace; the mesosystem then builds linkages between two or more Microsystems, e.g. links between school and home, etc.; Exosystems account for links between two or more settings, one of which does not contain the person, e.g. relationships between the home and school, or the school and its neighbourhood; macrosystems then concern the overarching belief system of the culture or sub-culture. The final parameter, the chronosystem, describes change or consistency, over time, for example within a family handling unemployment, poverty, or illness. Variations within and across these systems can account for variations in performance.

Hoffman in her paper, (1991) examines research (Loehlin, Willerman & Horn, 1985, Plomin & Daniels, 1987, Scarr Webber, Weinberg & Wittig, 1981) which concludes that environmental influences do affect personality, but that the environment does not necessarily affect each member of the family in a similar way. 'The same family event can be interpreted differently ... and can have different impact on personality development', (p.191). She comes to the conclusion that this research shows that 'family members and most notably siblings, are not very similar on personality traits' (p.187). Having examined different family effects and the dynamics and roles taken within the family that may happen over the lifetime of a child, and taking note of position within the family, individual qualities and gender, she wonders 'Why *would* siblings be alike?'(p.197) (*my emphasis*).

Nat describes being the youngest in his family and being treated as if he had all parents instead of being an equal sibling 'Yeah, everyone in the house can read, apart

from me, I was the last one, so...' 'I am the youngest in the house'[15]. Notice that he uses the present tense, he still sees himself as "youngest" although he is well into his thirties. Bernie, as eldest in her family had to take too much responsibility from a very early age 'I am the eldest, my sister is the youngest, I remember the morning she was born, but I had to leave school' (I asked 'at what age?') 'twelve, twelve'. Bernie told me that at that stage, (by my calculations in the late 1950s), she went to work for a local farmer. This 'eldest daughter' behaviour continued into her adulthood, when she took responsibility for the welfare of her mother, with whom she had a difficult relationship. Will still sees himself as 'big brother' responsible, because of his greater understanding, to parent a younger brother who has problems with schooling.

Robert Plomin (1987, 2001, 2011) in examining how children develop within a family, has, over thirty years, considered and refined ideas about the causality of differences between children in a family: 'psychologically relevant environmental influences make children in a family different from, not similar to, one another.' (1987:563). Simply put, he says that because genetic research cannot account for differences in siblings, then environment has to be the reason. He extrapolates, therefore, that happenings within a family will be experienced differently – that is to say 'non-shared' and that this non-sharing can affect the development of 'personality, psychopathology and cognitive abilities' (2011:582)

I found it very interesting in reading Plomin's work, to note that my interviewees spoke about having experienced difficulties within their families in several categories he described, for example their experience of parenting, of poverty, of illness. I believe that I can argue that my interviewees developed different personalities from others in their families and therefore handled their particular life experience differently, and this may have contributed to their belief that they were isolated from early childhood.

Chaos

Insecurity and change were a recurring pattern in the life stories of my interviewees, which they recall with clarity over the years. These types of happenings can be

[15] At the time of interview, Nat was 35.

categorised as 'chaos' (Evans, 2010) [16]within the family, or what Belenky (1997) endearingly describes as 'din', causing overstimulation and interfering, for at least some of the children, with their natural development. Ackerman & Brown (2010) note the importance of regulation in the daily lives of children, and suggest that children may be able to handle some elements of chaos, just so long as other aspects of family life are stable.

The stories I heard show that many elements of their family life were chaotic, that for large parts of their childhood, my interviewees had little stability in their worlds. For example, insecurity with relation to their living conditions 'Dad worked in Mac Farm O.K.? so his job - his house went with his job and when he got sick we had to leave the house, we were turfed out of the house.' This story, from Bernie relates to a time when she was about 12, the eldest child in a family of four and trying to earn a little money 'thinning turnips and picking potatoes, and then we were picking blackberries'.

Another good example of family 'chaos' was described by Len, he felt that he was 'fortunate' that when his mother died, he was not sent to an industrial school!

> When my mother died, that's the part that I said was the most difficult, because you were chopped and changed so much and my father he was, he was classed as, you know .. there was no widow's pension for him you know, he had to go out and work, he was back to a single man and he would have had, he had just the two boys at home because me sister was away to England and the other sister was living in the aunt's and me father would have been away at maybe six o'clock in the morning' ... 'Then my aunt had to move to New St. to look after her brother who got sick and my sister went with her as well, so we had to go back to de La Salle and my father's sister came to look after us, we went over to her.

Listening to his story about how his family managed the total disruption of that time, sisters living with aunts, Len and his brother managing themselves much of the time, family support being given by aunts and uncles, but without any consistent pattern, gives a sense of how these two young boys had very little security. Nevertheless, Len was the one of the twins who was unable to cope in school, which underlines how much children within a family may differ.

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[16] Evans (2010) distinguishes between *'chaos'* in this regard and *'chaos theory'. See p. 5 ibid*

John gives another description of the chaos in his early life, having no fixed sense of place, since his father had to go to England to find work as a plasterer. However, his mother could not settle in Reading and they had to return to Ireland, first to Monaghan and subsequently Dundalk. 'when my parents were married first, they were in England for a while ...I spent the first years of my life there ..we lived in E. for a while – my father's from there, so we spent a while there and about 10,11, we came into Dundalk so we were kind of moving here, there, everywhere and so on'. In the retelling of his story, you can still feel his sense of insecurity.

Poverty as a barrier to participation

> *'I would talk to some people who would say "it wasn't hard like", but it was, it was tough – there was nine in ours, nine children' (Will)*

No one I interviewed felt that their family was affluent; in fact all could give accounts of some level of deprivation, both within their families and of where their families were physically located or situated in society. I get no sense that they were so poor that their families did not have enough to eat, 'plenty, well not plenty, like but we got by' (Will), but the level of poverty was such that there had to be a focus on managing, leaving no extra capacity to support education, nor children who needed extra support to succeed at school. Grace very succinctly put it

> it was more important to have food on the table and soap for washing the clothes - God, Mammy could create a miracle with a bar of Sunlight soap, everything from our hair right down to the windowsills, the table, everything was scrubbed with Sunlight.

At various times in their history, some of them experienced parental unemployment, with consequent insecurity, in their families. John paints a picture of his father working in England, but being unemployed when they came home to Ireland. When I asked him what was 'good' about England he said 'well he (father) was working there. He was a plasterer by trade, he always was a plasterer'. Alice attributes their financial difficulties to her father being out of work and Will and Bernie talk about their fathers' being in very low paid, unskilled work. Will talks about subsistence living 'No, dad was a labourer and mam, at the time like, I can't even remember if women used to work after marriage, we went through different times and periods, but granny was living with us, mammy looked after granny and there was a lot of us at

home, like'. 'I imagine that we didn't have any money, so I don't think that we did. I imagine that life would have been about survival when we were younger, you know' (Will)

Poverty was a problem for the individual children when they saw themselves by comparison with wealthier children. There was stratification even in the domestic tasks undertaken by the children in her school. Alice describes one type of task for the middle class child, a different one for the poor. 'It was O.K. for us to wash the floors and shine it with the skirts, you know what I mean, but then when the buffer came in, it was O.K. for the rich children to use the buffer'. She also points out a key difference between her personality and that of her sister, who had a far better ability to stand up for herself 'but my sister, she would just say that, like, she would say "how come you are not letting us use that, we used to always"'.

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997:2) defines 'relative poverty' as involving 'isolation, powerlessness and exclusion from participation in the normal activities of society as well as lack of money' and indicates that this must affect individuals and families, with an obvious effect on cognitive and social development. Alice talks about trying to save her mother from having to pay for two of them to go on a tour, and you can still feel the annoyance she had with her sister's lack of sensitivity.

> I remember that one year we were going on a school tour and I was saying "I want to go" and then my sister – I looked and she was standing up and I thought "God my mother won't have money for both of us", so I'll sit down. I can see the two of us in the class and I was thinking "*she's* not thinking about Mam", so I'll go, and I was back up again, and I was getting on the teacher's nerves and she said "lookat Alice, you'll have to make up your mind – are you going, or are you not?" and I said "No" and I sat down. But *she* went to Galway, like. (Alice)

Attree (2006, p. 59) says, 'for children living in low income households, life can be a struggle to avoid being set apart from friends and peers'. This separation is described by Alice, who talks about feeling bad because they had to accept 'charity', not only accept charity, but that the charity was obvious.

> We had free books and so we had to sit beside each other because we had free books, but that shouldn't have been an issue .... but there was just a stigma about it, and I think that that stigma stopped us from getting on.

Alice feels that poverty affected the way in which her family was able to function, and can articulate that feeling very clearly. 'I would still feel kinda that stigma about, like, when

me father didn't work and you would be called up for your books, it just wasn't right, it wasn't a good system – do you know what I mean? (Alice)

Redmond (2008) feels that what concerns children is not necessarily the lack of resources, but the exclusion caused by being unable to participate in school activities, for example, because of the lack of resources. This 'embarrassment and shame' described by Redmond affected Alice even in maturity, where she felt she needed to address one of her children's teachers who had labelled a child in the class as being unable to 'afford' to go on an outing. 'She's the teacher in K. and she says that I am making it more than there is, and I said, it's not, if it is upsetting my child, it's not making more of it'. It is easy to think that, in an ideal world, Alice as a child would have received this kind of support from her own family.

> Poverty brings uncertainty and insecurity to children's lives, sapping self-esteem and confidence and undermining children's everyday lives and their faith in future wellbeing (Ridge, 2009)

In her two reports, Ridge (2009, 2011) discusses how poverty in childhood can be a barrier to participation across many areas. This is particularly interesting for my study, where I am looking for traits in childhood which may result in adult disconnection from education. Drawing on her own work (2000, 2007) and works by Crowley & Vulliamy, (2007), and Roker (1998), Ridge says 'low-income children experience considerable anxiety, unhappiness and social insecurity in relation to ... social participation'. (2011:75). She also notes that children raised in deprivation feel isolated and barred from many pursuits and are marginalised, trying to 'fit in' with their peers, but without the physical and emotional resources to do so. It is not hard to assume that this, initial disconnection would reappear under stress throughout their lives.

Grace talks about the exclusion from education accepted by children, their parents and the schools 'a nun would have said to me "there's no point in you doing the entry exam[17]" "there's no point in you doing that, you know mammy and daddy couldn't afford the books or the uniform, or anything". There was no money for anything'.

Furthermore, Attree (2006) describes another form of exclusion which occurs within poor families - that they are less likely to participate in present activities, nor to plan

[17] Entrance for secondary school taken in last year National School

for improvement in the future. Again, this was described by my interviewees 'they (parents) just didn't mind, you know, it just seemed easy to let go'(John) ' I went to the shoe factory... that's the way it was, you know ..I wasn't in the minority' (Grace). This sense that they could not change things permeates the interview scripts, and probably accounts for the fact that when they were themselves parents, they recognised their role as parents, to influence better outcomes for their own children.

Relationship with parents

As Sroufe (2005) says, of course we believe that on the whole parents 'do the best they can', but at least some of my interviewees felt that they were not supported as they should have been during their childhood. Maccoby (2000) says that the role of parent is, essentially, to provide nurturance and protection for children.

I asked each of my interviewees were they happy at home and they all said that they were. One of the things that was particularly interesting was that they gave this answer, even when they were patently *not* happy. Bernie told me that she had an 'unhappy childhood where education was concerned' and then I asked her was it happy in other ways, to which she said 'happy in other ways, yeah, happy in other ways'. I wonder what she meant, because when I slipped in a question about being beaten by her mother she said 'oh, yeah, big time'. She elaborated saying that she was beaten and one of her brothers was beaten, 'two of us got it', but the other two children in the family escaped.

It seemed to be a reaction to the question 'were you happy?' that there was a pat answer, 'yes'. Will talks about being 'much loved'. When I asked Angela about how happy her home life was, she answered 'That was lovely'. She said 'Oh yes, any time I needed them, they were there for me, but I am the sort of person that wouldn't go and ask for help, even to this day.' One can't help but surmise that she learned when a child that if she 'asked for help' it might not be forthcoming.

There were, however, stories about being an ideal 'happy family'. 'Yeah, I have beautiful photographs of first communion and confirmation, just as if we were millionaires' (Will), which conflict with his other stories of deprivation 'we were a big family, like, a happy family like, even if we were three in a bed'. When I asked him if they celebrated birthdays, he said 'I don't think we did. In my imagination I

imagine that we didn't have money, so I don't think we did'. It seems that the family did not want to be stigmatised within their community as being unable to cope. Will talks about the St. Vincent de Paul[18] being accessed 'by people in the town', but when things were 'desperate, people in the country didn't do that'.

Some at least of my interviewees seemed to come from unusually large families. Nat, Alice and Will came from families of nine or ten children. This would obviously contribute to difficulty for a child who needed special care in education, since there would be less capacity available from the parents. The interviewees did not think that they were fairly treated by their parents, in that parents 'should' see that children did their homework, 'should' be able to support them. Several said that they did not remember parents sitting down with them to their work. As Alice says 'it is way it was, you know, that there was no family skills'.

All of the interviewees who are parents show that they have very clear ideas of the importance of the parent role, through their description of their relationship with their own children.

Since children develop in interaction with their environment and since parents are a crucially important part of the environment, difficulty with or for the parents can result in arrested development for the child. Angela's mother, against advice, 'she was told not to change us', removed Angela, with her sisters, from a school in which she was quite happy and moved her to a different, single sex school in which she was socially different from and academically behind the other pupils and where she was very unhappy. 'My mother didn't like the change of girls in a boy's school I don't know why'. Since that time, Angela says her development deteriorated 'I thought it was just me, because D (sister) was catching on quicker than me'. Listening to Angela you can still feel her hurt, not only at being moved, but also in her powerlessness to do anything about it.

Alice really minds that her parents did not support them to 'better' themselves, she describes the powerlessness of poverty 'once you were born, you were just headed – you went on to get a job, you would Or just, maybe my parents would not have had

[18] Local Charitable organisation

the sense (husband) is older than me, but he did his Junior Cert[19] and went on to serve his time, so maybe it was lack of education on my parents behalf.'

Lack of communication within the family is a recurring theme: Alice talks about there being a sibling with special needs in the house, living within the family but never spoken about 'We didn't talk about that, you know what I mean, we didn't know that she had Downs'. She explains that she wondered why L.(her sister) couldn't do things 'because there was a wee girl across the road the same age, but she was able to do things better than L., and I thought to myself was there anything wrong with her that she can't do it, but nothing was ever talked about it – things did not really happen.'

Talking to them about the approach to reading in their homes, no one said that there was much reading, except for Nat, who, since he was the youngest, was read to by his brothers. The fact that he benefited from being read to is confirmed by his wish to be able to read to support his child. I got a strong sense that the parents had relatively poor literacy, in fact Mary's mother only learned to read in her mid-life, because she was 'not allowed to go to school'. Will said that his parents had relatively poor literacy 'not great' and Len described his father's ability 'he would have been able to read, like, he learned, the letters would come in, like and he would understand them, but he wouldn't have took a book out.'

I suggested to John that he avoided doing his homework, and he agreed but said that his parents should have ensured that he did it. Instead, he felt that they were 'not too bothered'. 'Em now, they didn't seem to push school, which was probably wrong, just looking back as a parent it was probably wrong, they should have made sure, I am not blaming them, but I think that parents should make sure that their children is doing it'

Len also talks about lacking support from his parents for his learning 'Now, as I say, not great, I never remember anyone sitting down and doing homework, I never remember.. We couldn't afford, like, comics, we couldn't afford...' Nat's mother also was too occupied, or lacked the skills to give him the level of support he needed

[19] Examination at end of 3rd year secondary school

for his study ‘When I had work to do, she would say “take the work out and sit there at the table” but I would say “I’ll do it later” and very seldom I would do it with her’

In another manifestation of poor parenting, it seemed that the parents may have been just too tired, too worn down to give the kind of attention that the children would need – Bernie talks about the whole family being ‘put to bed by seven o’clock, winter or summer!’. In The Millennium Survey (Gordon, 2006) it was found that households in relative poverty were unable to provide for the learning needs of children and children were less likely to be able to play, which again inhibits their development. In Bernie’s case they were only allowed space in which to play in the pig house ‘after the pigs left’. Not only were the children denied access to play, which is necessary for development, but they also learned de facto that their needs were subsidiary to the needs of the pigs.

The tradition of families in relation to education and to work comes through. Older children were expected to start earning as soon as possible. Although Grace was a good student, she says ‘everybody around that time would have known that when you were fourteen, that was it, you were leaving school’. On the other hand, she says ‘no, naturally, the younger ones were able to stay at school, they could stay’ In Alice’s family, the best student, her elder sister, was quite successful at the Primary Certificate Examination[20] and the nuns recommended for her to go to secondary, but Alice says ‘I suppose that mother would have been glad for her to go to work’.

Where resources were limited, then obviously within a large family, there was less to go round. However, there were different protocols for children at different positions in the family, which of course also made them behave differently from one another. Older children were expected to take responsibility at an earlier age, to go out to work as soon as possible, and provide resources for the rest of the family. ‘When we got working, when the others got working, like, we tried to give the younger ones, you know ... as we got older we got jobs and we tried to support them’ (Will).

As the situation eased, with older children going out to work, then sometimes money was provided for education. Pressure within the family to perform to expected norms created difficulties where children either did not feel that they had the

[20] In final year of National School

necessary skills, or that they were not able to display their skills ‘ When I came into V’s (secondary) you know, I thought that I was going to be able to do it all, I think that’s what I thought, ... but the material was not there’ Alice. ‘But then they (siblings) were working and then we had good times, because we were the youngest and then we got all the things that they didn’t get, you know what I mean?’

This is reinforced by Gershoff (2007), who correlates improvement in parenting with higher income, because of less stress which probably leads to less harsh parenting. She proposes, therefore, that it is the impact of poverty and material hardship (food insecurity, residential instability and lack of medical insurance) on the *parent* which most affects the child. A good example of this is from Bernie who says that her mother – the managing parent in their house – treated the two younger children in the family differently. As these children were growing up, Bernie was at work and the family had access to local authority housing, so there was marginally less poverty.

Becker (1995), in a paper to the World Bank recognises that women’s education is inhibited by childbearing and that where families have fewer children, the women and children benefit by having better access to education, as well as more money to furnish the requirements for education - such as time and resources.

Illness within the family

The stories that I heard are a salutary reminder that as recently as the mid 20th Century, there was a high level of serious illness among these, poorer families. Listening to my interviewees’ stories, illness played a large part within their families. Studies (Holland, 2012; Nikiema, 2008) talk about disproportionate use of hospital resources among poorer families, particularly among children, and suggest that this has to do with insufficient preventive care.

Bernie’s father died when she was still young, having suffered from chronic illness, so did Grace’s; Angela was hospitalised shortly after she was born, as was Len. Eileen was ‘given up for dead’ in her terms, twice, during her first year. Will suffered a road traffic accident when he was about seven and was hospitalised, coincidentally during his mother’s absence from the house, and attributes his perceived memory difficulty to this occurrence.

Parental illness

All of them, as they were relating the stories, were aware of the impact that illness had on their lives and the emotion the stories generate still comes across in the retelling. Sieh (2012) points to the fact that children from a family with a parent with chronic illness are more likely to suffer from somatic and real illness and social isolation. Rolland (1999) proposes a coping methodology for families, which would be wonderful if implemented, in which he talks about the necessity to 'openly and directly discuss issues of threatened loss' (p.252). Len's statement 'I could never understand why mammy was in bed, because we were always told, like, your mammy needed to rest, like and that.' shows he felt apart from any understanding of the difficult family situation.

It is not hard to understand how isolated those small children must have felt during the family trauma. Whereas adults might wish to protect a child by withholding bad news, Lewis (1989) says that to minimise the impact of illness on the children in the family, they need to be included in conversations. It is easy to believe that this experience of insecurity must have contributed to their life-long difficulty with changing situations.

When I asked Alice about her father's illness and the effect that it had on her family, she spoke at length about the financial effects, social isolation and the impact on her schooling, but it was only during the interview that she realised the kind of strain her mother had to have been suffering, with nine children dependent upon her, one of them with special needs, and no breadwinner 'L.(child with Downs) was about two when he had that breakdown, so that is why it's only now that I am working it out that that's why the school probably took me, to help Ma out'. This might have made the situation at home a little easier, but for Alice it was the start of an horrendous relationship with education which lasts until this day

Rolland (1999), points out that, logically, the effort of caring for a sick person will diminish the attention and time available for parenting, with consequent effects. He further says that the time at which a parent is chronically sick will impact differently on the children in a family, depending on their age and stage of development. Hoffman (1991) supports this position saying that family events will be 'presented differently' to different children within a family, depending on their age and

relationship with the parent. 'Because non-twin siblings are different ages, the same event may be a different experience' (p.194)

Len's mother died from cancer, having suffered from it since before he can remember. Lewis (1989) considered the impact that serious illness had on the whole family, calling it a 'multidimensional experience', and observing that it taxes the resources of all the family, as a major stressor. While this is patently true, he also says that families often develop coping behaviours, looking for support and help from neighbours and family. Len describes this 'he (*father*) would have done all the caring, the washing the clothes and the rearing the four of us'. It is obvious that Len does not see this as being normal behaviour for a father. He and his brother were moved from one school to another, in order to facilitate the collection by members of the wider family, who also fed them. Rather pathetically, he says 'it was very difficult for homework or anything like that, because you hadn't got the mother's instinct there when you came home from school, like. .. if she had been able to be, not be sick, like'

Childhood Illness

'Parents and family members are affected inevitably by a child's admission to hospital.' (Shields, 2004)

As I reported earlier, a number of the people I interviewed had been hospitalised as young children, four altogether out of a cohort of ten. It has to be remembered that they would, with the exception of Eileen, have been infants during the fifties and sixties. The hospital rationale was that to exclude families from visiting also excluded infection, made way for professional care and minimised the possibilities for children to be emotionally upset at the end of the visits. The tradition was not to have mothers staying in hospital with their children, nor, probably, would the families have had the capacity or the support at home, to permit the mother to be permanently in hospital. Not only that, but for two of the families, they would have to travel from Dundalk to Drogheda to visit the children, with consequent expense. Grace has an interesting story about a nurse who suggested that Grace's daughter, who has hearing impairment, should have gone to a residential school, so as to improve her life. Unfortunately, Grace realised that she would not have been able to support the cost of travelling to the school, so the child did not go, so she is quite

handicapped in her life. This story illustrates, also, how little the nurse understood about the position of Grace's family.

Obviously, where children are very young, it is impossible to communicate directly with them, and the information provided to me has to have been mediated through stories told in the families, but their episodes of illness were clearly formative, in that they retain very detailed information about the content and effects of their hospitalisation.

Patrick Cockburn (2005) in his memoir 'The Broken Boy 'speaks very movingly about how he felt by being isolated from his family when he was being treated for polio in the 1950s. 'I felt that something terrible and incomprehensible had happened to me.' He also acknowledges that he 'carried a lot of emotional scar tissue from polio. But I also, probably rightly – thought there was not much I could do about it'. Though he was very young, six, when he was hospitalised he says his memory is 'episodic, but vivid' - a very clear example of how separation from home and family at a young age is remembered and affects the mature person. It is easy to believe that this sense of powerlessness will be carried throughout life, making it more difficult to assert oneself.

From 1949, however, the British Medical Journal, and other informed medical opinion leading to the Platt Commission (1959), was that, despite difficulties around cleanliness and disturbing the patients, it was important that mothers had regular access to their children in hospital in order to support them during the traumatic time. In the formative medical training film, 'A 2-Year-Old Goes to Hospital' (1952) James Robertson graphically shows the effect at that time of excluding parents from their children when they are in hospital, with the subsequent emotional and psychological effects.

It is apt, also, to mention John Bowlby's (1952) views about the effect that maternal deprivation has on the physical, social and psychological development of even very young children. Bowlby says that some children may be 'gravely damaged for life' (1952:52). He cites studies by Bakwin (1942) and Ribble (1943) and others, for example Goldfarb (1943) all of whom noted delayed development of young children who were in institutions. Robertson worked with Bowlby on a study (1952) which

first named ‘detachment’ as a symptom of children who were separated from their mothers.

Without necessarily accepting that maternal deprivation is the only cause of delayed or poor development for children who were in hospital for periods in early childhood, it is reasonable to assume that it might affect development in some way. In fact, Fleming (2008) attributes some failures in adult education to insecure attachment in childhood. I plan to discuss this in some depth, later in this Chapter.

It is also reasonable to suppose that when the children returned from hospital, they might need specific treatment and might take up more of the parent’s time, which would make them different in the family – it might be expected that other children in the family could feel neglected. Wray (2011) conducted a study which demonstrated the levels of stress experienced by parents during and after the hospitalisation of a child.

Len was separated from his twin and from the rest of the family, because of a skin problem, shortly after birth ‘I was in an incubator, and then I had to go back into hospital’ and because of this he developed more quickly, he says ‘I was more alert to things than he (his twin) would have been’ He believes he was ‘spoiled’ – probably got more attention – when he was in hospital.

On the other hand, Angela was told by her mother that her development was delayed because she was in hospital ‘I was in hospital an awful lot of the time ...when she would come in to visit me, I was down in a cot in a room on my own, you know’. This rather disturbing story brings to mind the news pictures from orphanages in Romania at the end of the 20th Century. Another perspective again, from Eileen – that of an extraordinary recovery from lung disease which caused her to be in a coma ‘I was basically later doing all the normal things’.’You could say that I was a miracle baby’.

Will was also in hospital as a result of an accident, at a slightly later age, so he can remember – his mother was in England on family business ‘burying her stepbrother’. He is quite exact ‘she came home and I came out, and everything was fine’. However, he attributes the accident which hospitalised him as the cause of his literacy difficulties, his problems with his memory.

So, four children ill very early in their lives, four different effects, but each of them feeling different from other children. As described in Giddens (2009, p. 403) , their illnesses seem to become 'incorporated into a person's biography'.

Conclusion to Part 1, Families

Overall the people that I interviewed were poor, came from small communities, had few resources and were relatively powerless in the context of the Church and the State. An interesting fact which arises from this part of my research is that, although the interviewees in the main had much the same difficult experience as other people in their families and in their communities, the experiences seemed to affect them to a greater extent. Thus, a parent's inability to help with homework seemed to affect some of the children in the family more than others, some children seemed to overcome their ill health easier than others, some were more affected by moving than others. Fleming (2008) suggests that an impaired relationship with parents is likely to impact on an adult's ability to function well in second chance education, in stressful situations, by inhibiting their ability to access support from teachers and friends.

From my investigation of how these people had common experience when they spoke about how their early life and background impacted on their development, they felt that they were isolated in their families and had different experience from their siblings, and in many ways were more sensitive to the difficulties experienced by their families during their formative years. I want now to consider how, with this experience, they handled their time in early school and to discover if they again shared feelings which were different from those of their schoolmates.

PART 2 – SCHOOL

When I was conducting my interviews, I encouraged my interviewees to talk about their earliest memories and their experience of being at school as children and found that there were common traits and stories, some good and some bad. I felt it was important to explore them, to see to what extent the interviewees felt that early education experience impacted on them in maturity. In particular, I wanted to see how their feelings about early education were replicated in their experience of ABE. 'Because I don't ever remember being good at school' (Bernie)

Going to school is often the first childhood memory, since it is often the first interruption to the rhythm of family life. I wanted to discuss my interviewees' experience of school, since schools are such circumscribed situations, and we have seen that the interviewees did not feel that they fit comfortably into a strange environment. It transpired, for various reasons that interviewees felt that the way they were treated at school reinforced their concept that they were different in their families, different in society and isolated them from their classmates.

In listening to their stories, some particular situations in school remain very strongly in their memories, frequently with negative connotations, having started off school relatively happily, there were a number of common areas which caused them to feel bad about themselves as persons and to consider themselves to be less intelligent than others in their groups.

The rest of this section, therefore, will briefly look at how education in Ireland was delivered, by whom, and how my interviewees experienced it.

National tradition

As a nation, from the birth of our state, we emphasise the importance of education as being the panacea for all of our ills, we sell ourselves as being 'well educated' and our education system as being both inclusive and effective. This means that we perceive, or say that we perceive, education as a right, as a type of social justice. The Constitution of Ireland (1937) states the entitlement of all the children of the state to access education and this was provided free and supposedly equal for all children up to the age of 14 and subsequently for children up to the age of 16. The people, whom I interviewed, however, did not feel that they derived benefit from this free education.

Significantly, in times of poor economy when we have to export our young citizens, we have seen this as being less bad because they are 'well educated'. Thus, education is seen to provide 'human capital' in order to facilitate the creation of 'personal, social and economic well-being' (Kavanagh, 2007:298) – essentially to provide workers for industry. The workforce envisaged currently, however, is believed to have very high skills and, the ability to re-skill and consequently excludes workers

with lower skill sets. We shall see that, unfortunately, the education received by my interviewees did not help them join this club.

Gerber (2002) discusses the problems presented in providing education to the children who 'by individual characteristics and circumstances, on the one hand, and constraints imposed by social structures and material scarcities, on the other' are unable to fit into the usual educational provision in schools. He maintains that special education's 'inclusion' unfortunately frequently means a place in a classroom, rather than access to learning. My interviewees describe this very experience.

How the children were formed in their families and the family ethos mentioned in the previous section, obviously affected how successful they were at school. For example the extremely quiet personality that John developed in his family affected how he performed at school. When I asked John if he was left sitting quietly in class, he replied 'They would just hand out the usual work and if you didn't do it, you didn't do it'. 'Maybe the teachers did not spend enough time, or maybe they didn't realise that I was lacking, they just left me and just carried on'.

On the other hand, Nat behaved outrageously at school, to avoid having to learn to read, which he found difficult 'I don't know if we actually paid attention, it just kind of went in one ear and out the other, we didn't actually take it in'. Mensagh & Kiernan (2010) suggest that boys may find it more difficult to adapt to school when they are not achieving and less well able to become part of the formal school ethos.

As Green and Kostogriz (2002:106) say 'any sign of incorrect or inappropriate performance may be constructed as a marker for difference'. Little wonder, then, that people with poor literacy are ashamed themselves and labelled by others in society, little wonder that they internalise stigma about poor literacy which makes it difficult for them to ask for help.

As was clear to me from my professional knowledge, and demonstrated in our discussions, the interviewees developed mature spoken language, but somehow missed developing written language to the level of their spoken vocabulary. This is quite usual in adults who present for literacy support. Literacy, as defined by reading and writing, appears to be the benchmark of successful education, since without reasonable literacy it is impossible to access additional learning. However,

the kind of literacy they were expected to develop in school had little reference to their social context.. 'effective literacy learning involves utilising the full social cultural and linguistic resources of all participants in classroom communities' (Green, 2002:112)

Literacy as social practice, where children learn and use reading and writing which is inherent in their own community, and directly applicable in their lives does not seem to have had any place in their schooling. Barton, (2000) suggests 'if we want to understand what literacy is "about" we need to look at the social activities of which literacy is a part'. My interviewees did not see that the language spoken in their schools was familiar to them, they say that they felt that it emphasised the social stratification between themselves and the teachers. It needs to be remembered, also, that when they were in National School - the most usual Irish Primary school, predominantly during the 1970s and 1980s,- then the books presented to them were, mostly, published in England. There was a particular difficulty about the language of mathematics 'I was good at maths until I got to the stage where I had to read the maths and that's when I went downhill in secondary' (Alice). Angela could not do maths in her new school, because there were 'xs and ys'. Len talks about being present in the class for woodwork 'would have been in the classes, and that, but wouldn't have understood'

Family approach to education

The families of the people I interviewed did not show any evidence of being in partnership with the schools in facilitating their children's learning, the parents did not have any particular level of schooling themselves, and manifestly were themselves uninterested or unable to support their children.

As Bernie said 'mammy would say what good is that (education) to you' and 'I can't be bothered with that'. When I asked Len if his father could read and write, he said 'not really ... he wouldn't have took a book out'., John, when I asked him about his parents' approach to school, told me that they didn't encourage him, 'which was probably wrong'.

Not surprisingly, research shows that parental expectations impact for good or ill on the educational performance of their children (Eccles, 2004) and where parents have

no strong history in education, they are unlikely to have the skills to support their children into education. Gregory (2002) suggests that children who come to school without a tradition of reading or being read to may be at a disadvantage, but further suggests that compensation within school and society may ameliorate this disadvantage. There is no evidence from my research that any of the interviewees had this support, indeed they felt that they were isolated, both from their parents and, as we shall see later, by the most likely support, their teacher.

It was most unusual for parents to intervene in any way with their children's education, the feeling seemed to be that the teachers knew all about education and were powerful, but the parents knew very little and were not at all powerful. 'My parents were just not too bothered about schooling' (John) 'My parents wouldn't have had any real education' (Will) 'My mother had basic, she just had basic' (Bernie). How difficult it would have been for one of these parents to say something to the teachers about their children.

Reay (2003:54) confirms that, historically, particularly for working class families, there was no involvement with education support at home 'there was much clearer distinction in those days. You learnt at school, not at home'. (Claire, in Reay, Class Work (2003). Alice obviously feels strongly that nobody from her family stood up for her when she was at school, she talks about the fact that her mother, at least, must have known just how poor was her literacy, but did not do anything about it 'nobody had any emphasis on education'. Maybe she feels that if they had, if the teachers were made to listen, to support, that she would not have ended up with such a problem. Consequently, she goes in to bat for her own daughter, sometimes without sufficient thought. She addressed a teacher who trivialised her daughter's feelings 'so this is trivial to you', I said, 'but it is at your door – you are the teacher in this situation' and, significantly, 'but I knew that when she (teacher) done it, that it was old school, that nothing had really changed about the big shot'. She carries bad feelings with her in terms of the hierarchical structure of society, typified in education.

Eileen had a continuing difficulty with her education, because of her physical and intellectual difficulties. This resulted in her mother becoming active in organising Eileen's education and, eventually, going back into education herself.

> 'The only reason she (mother) went back to education was because of the problems she had when I was young and she did not know the law about it or anything like that, so she went back and re-educated herself, so that she could get up to speed with the stuff that had happened with me and I think that that is what got me through all primary school and secondary school' (Eileen).

Of all the stories I heard, this was the only situation in which a member of a family consciously changed their behaviour to support a child. As Pugh (2010) tells us, there is need for a strong, supportive family for children to protect them in education against the difficulties presented by low socioeconomic status, whereas poorer parents are least likely to invest in their children's educational achievements (Crosnoe, 2002).

School as a factor

It is difficult to overestimate how formative school experience is in the lives of children and therefore all the more disturbing that, as Condron (2007) says, schools as 'institutional contexts' 'reflect inequalities associated with individuals' ascribed or background attributes'(p.138). Structurally, Grummell (2009:1) suggests schools are environments within which there is a 'profound indifference to the affective domain'.

It is important to remember that children learn so much more than subjects at school (Giddens, 2009), they learn to take their place in the class structure and learn that their self-esteem is provisional, predicated on their success or failure in the classroom. Giddens further says that schools systematically 'advantage those who are already at an advantage' because, as schools reflect the broader society, middle class children have more of the skills to enable them to be successful, poorer children having less, are more likely to be marginalised.

When they were children, my interviewees seemed to go to the nearest National School, though as we have seen, they frequently were moved, which had an adverse affect on their progress. It seems that, in the countryside, the schools had boys and girls mixed in classes, in the town they were in single sex schools. We have seen that it was for this reason that Angela's mother moved her from a local to an urban school. For the girls, several of them went to Convent schools which had very autocratic, very powerful management – more rigid even than the norm, with associated stories of powerful ladies. Alice remembers a nun from 6th class 'she was really lovely, so she was, and tried to help, but it was too late!' Grace remembers

that it was a nun who told her there was no point in thinking she could do secondary, because they were poor. These two, contradictory stories demonstrate the power of the sisters in the community, how much they knew about the background of their students, how they felt they had the right to interfere.

Schools mirror society, of course, with management and teachers as the bosses and children and parents way down the pecking order and my interviewees mostly had the experience of being marginalised and ignored. For parents it must have been particularly difficult to assert themselves, since the educational system would have changed very little since their own participation As Gatto (1990) says 'Schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders'.

Starting school

My interviewees' experience when they first started school was, in general, positive and their feelings about their teacher very warm 'Ms M., or something like that, she was lovely, so she was'(Alice). Mary really loved being at school, and was happy 'it was a nun I had for me teacher and she was lovely, now, she was nice. Mary also remembered her primary school positively. She had nothing bad to say about school, she was happy and on top of her work. 'I loved primary school'.

Even the boys seem to have had no very negative experiences at first, since nothing really stands out for them, which would be usual if they had had a bad experience, as Will says 'the bad bits stick out'. An exception to this is for Len who told me that 'from the very beginning' he recognised his difficulty, for the reason that his twin brother was performing better than he was. This raises an interesting point, of children assessing their performance *in relation to others in their group,* and Len understanding that he did not perform effectively in school, because he compared himself to his brother's performance, but also that this memory was stronger because of the emotional aspect being 'in the same class as my twin brother, who was more advanced than me'. Alice also compared her performance with that of her sister 'the two of us was in the one class, which is an awful disadvantage, I think'. The disadvantage was to Alice, since she was very young in her class, presumably with less developed social skills, which would also inhibit her learning.

Because children develop at different speeds, they will not normally be assessed for difficulties in literacy development *until they have fallen behind their peers*, by as much as 18 months, so logically this will not happen until they are in First Class (about 7 years), unless there are compelling reasons to suppose that the child has specific difficulties with reading acquisition. . As was shown by the case of Eileen, evaluation of a child's progress will not happen unless there are specific, recognised difficulties, and there is a large gap to be made up. On the other hand, children will not feel different or stigmatised until there is some sort of comparison with other children. However, supporting children who have difficulty with literacy development is a two-edged sword, unless handled very sensitively, because the children feel different, but without additional support, they will not develop literacy.

The interviewees describe that difficulty in school seems to have started when they went into first class, Nat can remember that he first received reading support in First Class 'six or so of us in the room with one teacher, and that was it'. Eileen also suggests that her difficulties in developing literacy were diagnosed somewhere around first class. Stories of falling back and not performing become more obvious as the interviewees spoke of their going through the school. 'it just probably just wasn't set up to realise that children needed that kind of support at that time'(Len), Bernie talks about her skills being 'at third class level' *(age 8 or 9)* when she left school at twelve.

Eileen started off school quite happily, although as we have seen she was an ill child and her start was delayed by at least one and possibly two academic years. 'I went to F. School first, I remember the times I had in F., because I loved it'. When it appeared that she needed special education, she was moved to a special school.'F. school knew there was something wrong with my brain development or something, that I wasn't functioning properly or something .. and I was brought out of F and put into St.I's[21]'. This must have been when she was eight or nine. 'It was the worst experience of my life, ever, because I came out more stupider than I went in'.

One gets a very strong sense that the family was not involved in the decision to move Eileen to the special school and this would account for their strong reaction to her bad experience there. She says it was a difficult time for the whole family 'even

[21] Special School

me nana and grandpa and me dad said that the worst thing they ever did was to send me to St. I's'. From her telling it is unclear whether this move was the cause or effect of her difficulties, but she only attended the school for about six months and left, to be home tutored by her mother. From what she says, it appears that she was very upset by something that happened at the school, though she doesn't say that anything actually happened to her and I did not want to threaten my open interaction with her by labouring the point. What is clear, however, is that the expectation that the family had in sending her to the special school was nothing like the actual experience, which points to very poor communication, and that the family did not understand what the decision involved, or the likely outcomes. 'No, it was not what me mam thought it was, not what I thought it was – I thought it was meant to be there to help you, but in actual fact, it didn't'. This change of school meant that her mother 'educated' her at home for another six months, 'to get me back to the level'. Then she went back to a different primary school, thus three different experiences of national school.

When she moved into secondary and throughout her career there, she seems to have needed special support. When I asked her why she went to a specific secondary school, she said: 'because it was more, better educated for me, than it would be up there. That's what, because I would get more help. Because me mam was already researched into all this, like G. School'. Thus it seems to have been her mother who decided that G. would be the most suitable secondary school for the child, without reference to the teachers.

It is surprising that these children went on through the school from class to class although it must have been very clear that they were not improving their skills. It is difficult to understand why children who did not meet learning objectives were moved upwards through the school system, since they would not be able to 'catch up' without a good foundation. Nat, however, says that he would not have liked to have been kept back, he liked to be with his friends. 'Every year I moved on so I did, with my friends'. At the time, of course, and perhaps still, students who were kept back could have been labelled as stupid.

Changing schools

Where everything else is relatively stable, then changing school was not a problem, but there is a connection between families being able to manage and difficulty with changing school, which relates back to family chaos.

The people to whom I spoke had very disturbed education, sometimes, as in Len's case going to several different schools as his family struggled to manage in the face of tragedy. Eileen, also, as we have seen, moved school a number of times, from primary to 'special' school and back to a different primary, as a result of which she never really developed literacy, nor the concept of stability or personal efficacy in her education and which recurs during the rest of her life story. For example moving from the more supported secondary school to the independence necessary for a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) college, the transition was problematic.

Angela was able to cope quite well in her local school, telling me that she was well up with the other children in her class. This altered when she changed school and found the children in her new class had learned a different syllabus. 'But funny enough, in K. school all we did was adding and take away, but when we went to the other school, there were different kinds of sums, you know' (Angela) She is blaming herself, maybe she was also blamed at school, whereas it should be logical that to move a child at a critical time would affect performance. The school should have known, her parents should have known, her performance should have been an indicator. I asked if she could spell in her previous school and she said 'yes', 'But I couldn't spell *there* '(at the new school) (Angela). 'When I was in D., it was all new and I thought they were all talking about me behind my back, I just .. went down' (Angela). This sense that she was being 'talked about' is a recurring theme in Angela's story, but this is the first instance.

John and his family moved so often that he had to change school three times, and this impacted on his performance 'I spent the first five or six years down where we were in school in E. Maybe that upset the education, the years spent there'. He describes having poor literacy leaving E., then moving to D. for another six years – he left school at 13. I asked him if he could read and write at that stage 'I could just about write my name'.

The important point that is raised, here, is around consistency of provision of the curriculum across schools and time. It seems to me that school teachers provide, or provided education, so that at milestones all the children achieved the same level. However, this was a difficulty if children had to move. Another point is about differences in schooling between urban and rural schools, It can be noted that Angela felt different and isolated when she went to the school in a larger town.

Only four of my interviewees went on to secondary education, and the experience of transition from primary to secondary clearly made life difficult for a number of them. 'It was a big change from having one teacher to having six or seven teachers for different subjects, I wasn't capable of doing any of the subjects, so they were realising that' (Len). For Nat the light touch supervision made it even easier for him not to participate in the class. Mensah (2010) talks about different behaviours between girls and boys who are failing to achieve and says that some boys develop what they call ' an anti-learning culture'. This is described clearly by Nat - 'It was all boring, like, in the secondary, when I went into secondary, because we were in the lowest class and we were all just messing.' This impression reinforces the earlier experience of being the lowest group in primary school, as well, that there are no educational expectations of the lower group.

Teacher approach

Harris and Rosenthal (1986) looked at the behaviour of teachers to discover some of the effects that their behaviours had on the students. They state that teacher 'warmth' is as crucial in generating good student performance as is 'task orientation'. Thus, where students are encouraged to feel good about themselves, and also kept on task, they are likely to have positive outcomes. However, they say that a difficulty is that since success is gauged by the level of student achievement, there might therefore be a case for teachers to concentrate on the more able students to the detriment of the poorer performers. This is also only a small part of the effect that a teacher can have on a student, for example developing attitudes and motivation. I had personal experience of this, when I made a complaint about a teacher who had a bullying approach to children in one of my daughter's classes. The school manager gave as the rationale that this particular teacher 'had very good results in getting boys into (the preferred secondary school').

For Angela, she learned that the teacher had power even over her private functions: She tells the story about a teacher who would not allow the girls to go to the toilet 'until after the Angelus was over' and at that they had to leave the toilet door open. 'but she was a villain and she wouldn't let anyone!.' The overt power that teachers exerted and the submissive attitude of the families was a recurring theme of the interviews. Auwarter (2008) suggests that the teacher perception of the students is critically important 'if teachers believe that student outcome is predetermined or determined by factors beyond their control, i.e. SES[22] or gender, they may have little motivation to investigate ways to reach these students' (p.243). There is an unfortunate connection between the ineffectual family and bad experience at school 'the inability for a child to have a stable relationship with a trusted adult in school may exacerbate family instability' (Maxwell, 2002:90)

Because the classroom is a social environment, children learn, not only to read and write, and the other academic subjects, they learn how they feel about themselves and how others feel about them. Where it is clear that the teacher feels that they are 'other' and treats them as such, it is understandable that they internalise negative feelings about themselves. Vygotsky (1978) argues that we learn about the world by internalising information gained from around us and that children as they are learning need special support until such time as they can function independently. Children therefore in an unhappy or isolated classroom situation will learn that they are 'other' or disabled and take that learning with them throughout life. When Len says 'I would have been in the classes, and that, but wouldn't have understood what the teacher would have been writing on the board', he was learning also that he had absolutely no value within the class.

Green & Kostogriz (2002), evaluating current teaching practices, report that students who have difficulty in accessing literacy believe themselves to be 'in(competent) and dis(abled)'(p.106), in a classroom which emphasises 'correctness and normativity'. They say that if teaching practice within the classroom were inclusive this would permit children to develop individual skills and they suggest that the problem is not with the handicap itself, but with its effect on the sociocultural development of the child. Alice describes it succinctly in talking about her difficulty with reading 'I

[22] Socio-economic status

wasn't getting through it (reading), and the fear of God be in your heart, because everyone knew you were stupid, then'.

Children have a very strong sense of 'fairness' and are well able to acknowledge the 'unfairness' of being singled out – Angela talks about being sent to another class to demonstrate a sum she had absolutely no chance of getting right, Eileen talks about being targeted in class - 'That's the thing that I cannot understand, she did not do it to anyone else, only me'.

Referring back to the stated importance of education in our developing Republic, the teacher had powerful status and control of the destinies of their pupils. Thus, they had the right to decide whether or not a child would go to secondary school, the right to teach them a different curriculum, the right to ignore them in class. 'Oh no, I am not slow, maybe I never got the learning – teaching' (Nat)

Size of class as a factor

My interviewees, the men particularly, described being in very large classes, which they felt impacted negatively on their ability to keep up with the other pupils 'Well, back then there were 35, maybe 40 people in a class, and if you weren't the brightest one, you were kind of shoved to the back' (Nat). John concurs, as does Will 'there were two classes together, like, and I think there could have been at least – I haven't a good memory like and I think there could have been at least twenty in each'.

It needs to be remembered that, as we have seen, these children came from homes that were, to a greater or lesser extent, disturbed and that any additional disturbance at school must have exacerbated their difficulties in coping. Common sense says that children who find study difficult will have a particular difficulty in large classes where they have less access to teachers, or where teachers have less time or inclination to interact with individual students. Blatchford in his study (2003) noted that the size of class at school entry was of critical importance for the success of the student.

Maxwell (2002) talks about the negative impact that crowding may have on children in a classroom when they are trying to pay attention to their own schoolwork – that it may create 'a situation of cognitive overload'. Whether from the behaviour of the students trying to compete with the noise levels or just not paying attention, she says

that the classroom overcrowding must 'ultimately affect academic achievement'. 'I don't know, I ask myself that question. I come up with the answer, did I not do enough at school, or I don't know, is it just that I am slow and you question yourself' (John)

This kind of poor achievement would account for my interviewees' self-perception as not being 'good' at school and 'not as good as' the other students in their classes. It seems that this crowding may affect behaviour on a continuum from behaving very noisily 'I just never seemed to pick it up, I was just messing too much didn't pay attention, maybe' in Nat's words - to John's self-exclusion 'they would be doing exams and you would be conscious that you were not able to participate in them'.

Research into the topic, however, does not entirely agree that smaller classes are worth the investment, and these results are, of course popular with politicians and other administrators who accept the findings that investment in smaller classes will not impact on student performance, unless the student/teacher ratio is extremely small. The political opinion, typified by the Minister for Education in England, in 1993 (Eric Forth), is that there is no connection between the quality of education and size of class. Obviously, politicians will support strategies which cost less to the taxpayer. However, Maxwell (2002) cites a state-wide study of elementary schools in Tennessee where class density was manipulated and which saw a positive benefit to children who were in smaller class sizes for the duration of the study.

Blatchford et al (2003) conducted a longitudinal study to examine if student numbers in a class affected academic achievement and also to examine if class size affected conduct within the classroom. They found that particularly in early (reception) classes, the size of the class had a clear effect on the progress of the students and also on the conduct of the class, with more inattention within a larger class. They stated, however, that success depended on the way in which teachers adapted their teaching methodology to the size of the class, and that this has implications for teacher training and professional development. Certainly, as reported by Shapson (1980) in Canada, although teachers *felt* that they were more skilful in small classes, this was not supported by external observation. However, Nye et al (2001) in their six-year examination of the STAR research (Finn, Tennessee's Class Size study, findings, implications and misconceptions, 1999) suggests that, particularly in early grades and particularly with minority students, small classes have a beneficial effect on the

performance of children. One can extrapolate, therefore, that if the focus is always on the bottom line, having as many students as possible in a class, then the more needy students fail.

What might be more important than class size of course, could be teacher attention and there is little evidence that the needier children received more of the teacher's time than better children. In fact, Feinstein (2007) observed that from the time they are six years old, able children from poorer homes were performing less well than less able children from richer homes, thus perpetuating inequality. As Rist (1970) tells us, teachers are more likely to give additional praise and instruction to children who are like them, thus where teachers are predominantly middle class, middle class children get more instruction.

Being taught differently, being given different teaching materials

As we have seen, many of the interviewees were part of large classes, and obviously it was difficult for one teacher to teach all the children together, thus they would have been grouped into tutorial groups. Oakes (1985) looks at the process of streaming and grouping children within the classroom according to their abilities and sees it as systematising inequality, forcing schools to play 'an active role in perpetuating social and economic inequalities'(p.2). Research has shown (NCCA 2007) that children who are taught in mixed ability groups actually perform better 'up' to the group norm rather than 'down', whereas children placed in lower streams became 'fixed' within them and quickly developed a negative attitude to school. We have already seen Nat give a prime example of this symptom.

A number of the interviewees describe having different training materials within the classroom, and that this made them feel inferior. This was particularly noticeable for Len, since his materials were different from materials given to the rest of the class, including his twin brother, who was in the same class. 'there would have been maybe six or seven people in that category' 'we always had kinda the round table over in the corner and our Ladybird books' 'we were given Ladybird books – my education was Ladybird books, that's all I can remember'.

Alice also talks about learning from the Peter and Jane books 'you kept picking the same one, because you knew it off by heart, but nobody tuned into it, nobody said

"why are they on Peter and Jane at that age?" I never remember anyone saying that'. And, significantly she adds 'but I think that they should have been aware'. Working with people who have literacy difficulties, one becomes aware that they try to memorise text, because they can regurgitate it on demand and can appear to be fluent readers. As I was listening to her story, I can only agree that the teachers, as Alice says *should* have been aware.

Alice noticed that the learning resources distributed within the classroom were different and understood that this was because they were 'socially inferior'. 'We were all at the one row ... I was aware of what was happening ... do you know what I mean, it was getting the hard marla[23], not the soft marla, there were just a few things like that' It is disturbing to hear how strongly the feeling of deprivation has lasted over 30 or more years. Len still carries the feelings about unfairness in not being taught, but being chastised for not completing homework

> now maybe sometimes we would have got involved, if the teacher felt you know, that you had to do some kind of homework, like, and so take down the thing. But you might not have been taught in the class, but you would have the same homework as my brother. But what I would do is, he would have the same homework, so he would do the homework and I would copy it, like, and that. But then you would get in trouble going into school the next day, because it would be the same.

Being treated differently was of benefit to Eileen, she appears to have had a personal learning plan, presumably developed as part of the additional support she received in the third national school she attended. Having been diagnosed with dyslexia she did not attend Irish classes and had additional English classes. Throughout her secondary schooling, relatively recently, during the 1990s, she had additional support, with a scribe for examinations and extra time allocation. She did achieve Junior Certificate and went on to do the Leaving Certificate (applied) with extra support. However, when she went on to the College of Further Education, she was unable to manage. Her story is that she was promised the same level of support at this level and believed that the curriculum would be amended to suit her personal needs, and indeed believed that this was agreed with the institution. This lack of understanding led to her falling out of PLC without any qualification. 'The reason why I left there as well was because she (tutor) was picking on me.' Looking at the

[23] Modelling clay (Irish)

situation from the outside, it is clearly unrealistic to expect students at this level to have individual support to the same extent as at primary or indeed second level, but I have no doubt that, since funding for PLCs is predicated on roll numbers, there is benefit for the colleges to enrol as many students as possible, to enhance their capitation grants.

In retrospect, Alice cannot understand why and feels angry that the teachers did not know that she had such poor literacy 'How could the teachers not know', but there seems to have been some structural difficulty in that the class just went on through the school without catering for the needs of the individual. Of course, this was the time – during the 1970s, when there was little access to support teachers and, indeed, stigma attached to children if they needed additional support. This is repeated in John's story and also in Nat's, although he is about fifteen years younger. John says 'maybe the teachers did not spend enough time, or realise that I was lacking, they just left me and carried on.'

Bernie has a story, which certainly resonates with me, - about having to repeat an exercise until it was correct 'I always remember the copy, you know, the one where you do the line to line, I always remember doing that, again and again', until it was correct. What is clear is that she learned not to trust her skills, she talks about having to 'produce a tab at the end of the night' in a workplace as an 'absolute nightmare' 'and if I was even a penny out, I would be absolutely devastated'.

Being located separately in the class

The double effect of large classes and isolating the poorer performing children in the class must have made the chances of these children gaining sufficient literacy, even less. Blatchford (2003) in his longitudinal study reported that not only was it important to have a high teacher/student ratio for success, but also that the physical size of classes should be smaller to benefit children who had particular learning needs.

MacIntyre (2002) discusses the purpose and effect of grouping children within a classroom, she feels that within-class ability groups may 'potentially limit rather than facilitate children's learning'(p.259). It is to make teaching easier, that children are frequently placed in small groups and this was what was described by several of the

people I interviewed. Their problem with these small groups was that they felt they were stigmatised as being 'poor' or 'stupid'. It is interesting that they coupled the social with the academic; 'I would always have been at the back of the class, down at the end' (Bernie) 'If you weren't like the brightest one, you were kind of shoved to the back' (Nat). Alice describes her feeling of social stigmatisation in the class. 'We were all at the one row near the window. I don't know if in particular it was poor rows, or bad children or whatever, you know what I mean?' (Alice). MacIntyre also found that the groups tended to remain, with little permeability between ability levels, which would of course increase their sense of stigmatisation. A combination, therefore of teacher preconceptions, allied with fixed ability groups does not make for happy outcomes.

Research by Oakes (1985) also looks at the process of streaming and grouping children within the classroom according to their abilities and sees it as systematising inequality, forcing schools to play 'an active role in perpetuating social and economic inequalities'. She sees that limited resources are unequally directed towards the most able, leaving the poorer (both academically and economically) with less support.

Being beaten as a factor

In 1982, corporal punishment was outlawed in Irish Schools. Before that time, corporal punishment seemed to have been systematic for boys' and rather more arbitrary for girls. The people that I interviewed seemed to take for granted that they were beaten at school, as Will said 'I never understood all the beating, I never understood all the beating, but it just seemed to me to be the culture, like.' However it has to be that fear of being beaten must have a bad effect on children's self-concept and underlines the sense of powerlessness that children have with the consequent effect on their ability to learn. When I asked why they did not ask their parents to intervene, they seemed to think that if they reported it at home, then the punishment would be repeated. Another example of the overarching power of the education system.

Investigating the prevalence and violence of permitted punishment in Ireland was quite an eye-opener for me. A group of concerned parents – the Schoolchildren's Protection Organisation – was set up in 1955, to lobby for the suspension of corporal

punishment. According to this Organisation, reported in 'A Good Beating Never Hurt Anyone' (Maguire, 2005) and raised in the Seanad in June, 1955, punishments included 'canings on various parts of the body, beating with straps or pointers, hair pulling and beating with hands or fists'. (p. 655). Interestingly, the INTO had a history of reporting to the Department of Education about parental complaints being 'frivolous'. I wonder if they would feel that this story from Angela was? 'We used to have a teacher Mrs.D. and she used to have – do you see – do you know the wooden legs of the chair? She used to have one of them and a big cane. I used to get it on the back of the legs.'

Alice and Angela went to the same school for a short while. It became clear as I listened to their stories that they had the same religious sister as a teacher of cookery, at different times. I can report that this lady's name came up in conversations with several potential ABE students, during the course of my work; 'there was a nun there, she used to do the cookery – that's another one had it in for me' (Angela) 'Ah Sister L. Oh, the cooking!, you used to be hammered throughout, like, your legs walloped off you, like. When you think about it now, like, it's wrong, like, but you weren't learning to read in them classes, you were learning to cook'. (Alice). It does not appear that notoriety was a cause for intervention by the managers. Bernie's recollection of school was of always being 'slapped', so when I asked her if she was very bold, she said 'No, but I just couldn't learn'. 'If you didn't know, if you gave the wrong answer, if you didn't spell a word properly'... and if you went home and said you got slapped, you got ten more. Reay (2003) describes both the anger that Alice felt at her treatment and the blame that Bernie took to herself as being typical of poor children who had bad experiences at school.

The Department of Education Guidelines (1965) from that time clearly state 'that teachers should treat pupils with kindness combined with firmness ... should aim at governing them with reason, not by harshness and severity. Ridicule, sarcasm and remarks likely to undermine a student's self-confidence should be avoided. *Corporal punishment should be administered only in cases of misbehaviour and should not be administered for mere failure at lessons'*. (cited in Maguire, 2005:205) (my italics)

It is hard to believe that in the last year for which statistics are available, 2007 (Wasserman, 2011:1030), up to a quarter of a million children in the United States

were punished in schools and that the right to use corporal punishment, defined as 'the use of physical force upon a child with the intention of causing the child to experience bodily pain so as to correct or punish the child's behavior', is still used as a teaching tool!

Human Rights Watch (2008) says that the threat of corporal punishment discourages the open and trusting relationship which should exist between the student and the school and may contribute to a school atmosphere of harm and degradation. 'It humiliates and degrades students, and may leave them depressed or withdrawn' (p.30).

Social stigma in school

Without positive self-esteem, it is very difficult for learners to achieve. Rogers (1978) quoting Hyman and Singer (1967) describes the classroom as an 'edifice of social comparisons' within which self-concept will develop.' 'The process by which the individual develops and maintains self-regard is critically dependent on the social group in which the individual resides' (Rogers 1978:51). He remarks also about the importance of 'significant others' in this development. In looking at the development of the people I interviewed in school, they saw themselves as frequently to be physically isolated from the rest of the class, isolated in terms of their difficulty to develop literacy and what they saw as general poor performance in school. This must have made it extremely difficult for them to develop a positive sense of themselves.

An exception to this was Nat, who developed a strong self-esteem, despite having poor literacy. Although he has very poor skills, he has a positive self-esteem – talking about his literacy difficulty he says 'I always knew, I always knew, but I was never ashamed of it – even when I was small I was never ashamed of it'. Here is a young man who sees his literacy difficulty *from his own point of view*, not that of the classroom and sees it also as a practical difficulty which hinders him in life, but does not diminish him as a person. Rogers (1978) observed that for some children that self-concept may be based 'minimally, if at all, on school classmates'(p.55) MacIntyre (2002) concurs with this idea, that children with high self-concepts are more likely to make positive statements about their ability to perform within their groups, than those with low, despite their actual performance.

Of all the people I interviewed, the one who was most affected by, and least accepting of, perceived social stratification, was Alice 'we had the free books and so we used to sit beside each other, because we got free books, but that should not have been an issue'. It seems to have been at the time of her early childhood education that Alice developed extreme sensitivity about being labelled and discriminated against and she can give many examples of differential treatment. She says 'We had a girl in our class and her father was a guard and her mother a teacher and it didn't matter what *she* did'... 'Looking back on it, Mary, I do think that when you were poor years ago it didn't matter, you didn't have the same chances'. It is interesting that Alice, subsequently, became involved in the Trade Union Movement as a worker representative. One might have hoped that the days of social isolation within a classroom had long gone, but Reay (2006:297) interviewed students who still spoke about 'educational worthlessness' and feelings that they were not really valued and respected within education'.

Leaving school

Several of the older men in the group left school at 13 or 14. This would have been during the 1970s and before the economic catastrophe of the 1980s at a time when it was still relatively easy to get unskilled work. As John says, it was possible to leave school because there were plenty of jobs – around Dundalk there were three or four meat processing plants, for instance. Will has a wonderful description of leaving school 'Oh, about 13 when I left, about 13, you know the way you would be going in and out, in and out, until you would actually get that you were gone, like.' Len tells 'there was never any one there to force us to go out to school, so we never went to school'.

The fact that through the earlier part of their lives they were able to access unskilled work relatively easily must have made long-term unemployment very difficult for them. Moreover John, for example, says that he is unable to participate in worthwhile employment 'because the education was just not there'.

For the women, too, there seemed to be easy access to unskilled and semi-skilled work. We have seen that Bernie left school at 13, because her family needed her financial and physical support, but the other women left school rather later – Grace at 14 went into the shoe factory, Alice at 16 went to work in another shoe factory.

What was interesting in the modern context, was that they all had to leave work when they became pregnant, although they could have used the money.

Mary was doing quite well and enjoying herself at school, up to the age of 16, when she was doing a pre-employment programme, after her inter-cert[24], 'I was left babysitting and I decided to go down to FÁS[25] to find out what courses were available and I had an interview there and then and started the next day!' The Basic Skills course she started was one of a series of FÁS training programmes which made up the story of her employment life. While it could be argued that she had completed her secondary education, there is no logic for one State Agency to take a trainee from school, where she was relatively successful and since all the statistics show that longer time spent in education has a strong correlation with employability. However, it is not so surprising that her family would have supported this action, since they had no history of persistence in education, and a training allowance was applied to FÁS courses.

Conclusion to Part 2 – School

I found that my interviewees experienced isolation during their early education, both in terms of where they were located in the classroom and of their access to training materials. While they did not all suffer the blatant discrimination that Alice described, this experience must have affected their self-esteem, particularly in relation to their ability to succeed in education. It should be logical that some intervention needs to be made for a child who moves through school without gaining sufficient skills to keep up with the rest of the class. However, it appears that neither the school nor the parents made any effort towards remediation. A number of my interviewees still feel quite angry that 'I was thinking, too, about mother – she should have known I couldn't read, you know, that's what I think now...I think they would hate to say it, be afraid to say it'(Alice). Angela talks about being able to do sums 'you know I could add up in my head and get everything right, but I can't get it down on paper'

[24] Intermediate Certificate changed to Junior Certificate in 1992.
[25] National Training and Employment Agency, now Solas

As my interviewees tell their stories, I got the sense that the difference and isolation that they described within their family life was perpetuated by their experience of school - it can be seen how their personalities as they went into education made life at school difficult for them. Reay (2006:298) discovered from the young women she interviewed that they still had strong sense of being alienated within the learning group 'A potent sense of unfairness and unequal treatment infuses their attitudes to both seating and levels of teacher attention'.

Many factors contributed, from the start their family's position in society and the family approach towards education. When they were in school they were so dependent on the attitude of the individual teacher and whether or not they would be included in the class activities whether or not they could get the particular support they needed. All of this contributed to their failure to leave school with education sufficient to enable them to access the kind of employment they would like to have been involved in. This is far from the ideal of education to 'create personal social and economic well-being' (Kavanagh, 2007:298).

Part 3 – WORKLIFE

Introduction

I did not set out to report on how the people I interviewed dealt with work, since my focus was on their ability or otherwise to continue in Adult Education. However, as I was listening to the interviews, I was struck by the fact that for most of them they did not feel 'different' in relation to their work life, especially when they first started to go out to work.

All of the interviewees, when I interviewed them, either were unemployed, or had had fairly long periods of unemployment, which encouraged their participation in ABE. However, this would not have been the norm in the communities from which they came. In the section which dealt with their family history, I have found that, although they were fairly poor, unemployment was considered to be something to be ashamed of.

During their interviews they spoke about having fairly rigid ideas about 'how' life *should* be, modelled to them by their families and the society in which they lived

and I have discovered they felt different where their competencies differed from what they saw as the norm. It did not seem to me that they believed their competency in the workplace was in any way outside of the norm. There was an acceptance that unskilled jobs were available, for example Angela was 'called for a job in the Clark's factory', Len says 'my brother would have got a job in the egg place, and I would have gone out with him', and that moving from one job to another was also relatively simple, as we shall see, later.

As we have also seen, at various times within their families, they felt isolated, different from the other members, perhaps because they felt that they handled conditions differently from other family members. They described that they had less of the attention, care and support that they needed to facilitate their development. 'When I had (school) work to do, she would say "take the work out and sit there at the table, but I would say "I'll do it later, I'll do it later and very seldom I would do it with her"' (Nat). As I have noted already, I believe that the parents did not have the time or the skills to support their learning. "Did your mammy slap you? 'oh big time, yeah'"(Bernie) 'I would talk to some people who would say it's not that hard, but it was –there was nine in ours, nine children' (Will)

Similarly, in school, at times they felt different and blamed the system as well as their own ability for this difference. In the previous section, I have given examples from most of the scripts which illustrate this feeling 'It was the worst experience of my life, ever' (Eileen) 'There's the slow table and the fast table and I went over to the good girls' table, 'cos I wanted to be with them and I wanted to be like them and I wanted to be learning, but it just didn't work'(Alice) ' I think that I was left behind, that I was slow' (John).

However, they appeared to feel that their competency was similar to the rest of their families when it came to the expectation of getting and maintaining employment. As Liam said 'we were all great workers, like, physically we could shift mountains, like. Work was no problem and getting work was not a problem'. At least at the start of their work lives they seemed to fit into the family and community tradition of work and coped reasonably well.

Family background in work

When it came to describing the background of work in their families, I got the impression that work was a matter of fact, all their fathers and/or mothers had been able to work and provide for them, though they were not very well-off and sometimes had to cope with periods of unemployment. Even these periods of unemployment had to do with illness or moving family. In fact, the father was the recognised provider unless some catastrophe happened.

Their employment would be typical of the community, not very well paid and quite flexible. Reading 'That Was Then, This is Now' (Central Statistics Office, 2000) gives a picture of an Ireland very different from the picture we have today. At the time when my interviewees were growing up in Drogheda and Dundalk – mostly during the 1960s and 1970s, there was still reasonable employment in the towns. Unfortunately, the recession of the 1980s, together with the impact of 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland, meant the closure of many of the local factories with resulting very high levels of local unemployment. In some of the estates in each of the towns, from the 1980s there were generational problems with unemployment, where parents and children were both out of work, causing a heavy dependency on Social Welfare with understandable effect on the community.

Thus, Alice was able to say that her father was able to provide for the family until he had a breakdown and then her mother was able to get work 'my mother used to work, she used to be like a carer in the hospital and a cleaner and that'. Bernie's father was the provider until he became too ill to work, at which time her mother took over, raising pigs and growing vegetables to support the family, and involving all the children in the work. As we have also previously seen, as the children in the various families grew up, then older siblings went to work and gave additional support for the younger children. Alice says that *she* would get the chance since her mother 'had a few pounds with a few of them (older siblings) working'.

John's father was a plasterer and was able to get good work in England, but found gaining employment much more difficult when they returned to Ireland, so they had to move their home. Emigration was a usual way of keeping unemployment low (Honohan, 2002:28) but unfortunately, this pressure valve did not work where unemployment was also high in England. Len's father seemed to have been a semi-

skilled worker in heavy industry which existed in D. at that time, he moved between two metal fabrication companies. No specific mention of Nat's father's employment, but clearly there was suitable provision for the very large family; he gives no sense of serious financial deprivation in his childhood.

Even where the family background was that of farm labourer – for example Will and Bernie - the fathers remained in employment as long as their health would support it. There also seemed to be some ability for the parents to move between jobs in order to provide for their families.

The national focus was economic improvement and equality through education (O'Toole, 2000), but this was not necessarily the reality for families in poorer communities. Mary says that because she was earning, her family were pleased 'I didn't get too much of a hard time from my parents, then, for leaving school!'

I was quite surprised to discover that my interviewees, although they felt themselves to be unsuccessful at school and different from the other members of their families in significant ways, saw no reason why they couldn't be quite successful at work. They were pretty matter of fact about their progress from school to work, since they could relate to the work experience of other members of their families, unlike their education experience.

Ease in gaining employment

Alice talks about the facility with which she got work 'I went to work in the factory for about three years ...I went to another factory and then I got married, then another factory, and then two factories closed down and then there was nothing in the 80s, until about 84'.

Several of the men spoke about how easy it was for them to get work straight from school, in fact, as we have seen, Len, John and Will left school in their early teens, because of the availability of work. It seemed that they also expected that they would get one job after another.

Len describes this pretty well when, after working with the egg producers, he and his brother then got work with a bread roundsman 'I would have helped him, then, the bread man – we would have delivered the bread around to the houses, that was the

big thing at that time.' Egg production is now automated, of course, and bread brought from the supermarket. As he got older (and presumably stronger) he subsequently got jobs with a steel manufacturer and another manufacturing in another part of the town, which was similar to his father's work experience. When his brother got a job in a shoe factory Len followed him in - working a machine and 'earning big money'. He seemed to progress seamlessly, using the contacts he gained in one job to open the door to another. 'I enjoyed working in Gaskins, like, and I liked the people, like and I was working with another chap .. and we got on very well'.

Will has a neat description of the family expectation around work and how they saw the development of their lives, describing how they started work as soon as they could in order to contribute to the family income and support younger siblings. Len describes this system also, talking about his employment moves as he matured, from egg factory, to roundsman to metal worker. Nat, even though he left school a little later, in the 1990s, than the other men says 'I was always good with me hands – making things or doing things – I was always working on building sites'.

It is clear from our conversation that my interviewees had the personal qualities which were needed by employers, but lacked the skills to put this down on paper, thus as long as there were unskilled or other manual jobs available, then these people were not inhibited from moving around the workplace. 'I was never left sitting at home for too long, I was always out doing something' (Mary). There is a resonance here, as well, mentioned frequently by John, that as work became more difficult to source, then the application process became more formal, that CVs became important, their literacy difficulties more apparent.

Poor education did not affect their ability to have an effective work life

It didn't seem that you had to be 'good' at school to be good at work. For the women who lived in Dundalk there were relatively well-paid jobs working in factories. Until the early 1980s, there was still a tradition of shoe making in the town and Grace, Alice and Angela all worked in this area at some stage. The factory in which Grace started off - she was the eldest of these three women - she describes as 'primitive' 'we didn't have a canteen or anywhere, like, you actually sat at your machine' (throughout the day). She was very clear that conditions were bad

'Remember it's leather we have all around us'. She says that the managers were quite nice, but 'we were sort of afraid of them, but I was only 14, you know, we were in awe of them and we were afraid of them.' This is pretty much a repeat description of her school experience, with the supervisors taking the place of the teachers. However, she did feel that she related well with the other women who were working there and after seven years there, she left to get married.

Grace says that as long as you could get the aptitude test, then nothing would hold you back 'once you done the aptitude test, and passed and I know girls there who done that and they weren't very good at school or that'. Here is an interesting repetition of poor communication – this time between employer and employee making the working situation difficult. Bernie also talks about the difficulty in gaining the aptitude test for one of her jobs – that she had no idea what she was supposed to do 'couldn't make head nor tail of it'. However, when the test was demonstrated it presented no problem. She also describes moving from one job to another 'then I left there and got a job in GEC in Dunleer'. 'And I loved that, working on a line'.

Angela was also 'found' work near to her home, working in a shop, but unfortunately was physically and mentally bullied which exacerbated her sense of guilt 'I thought I was doing things wrong'. When her parents found out, they intervened without involving Angela in the resolution, just as they had excluded her from their decision to change her school 'I never found out what was said or anything like that'. They subsequently used their influence, again without reference to Angela, to get her work in a shoe factory in Dundalk, where she was very happy. 'Oh I used to love it, it was fantastic! So that's where I was until I got married and had a family'. This appeared to be a good resolution for Angela, but as she got older, she still did not develop the capacity to assert herself and this becomes clear in her story of her later life, when stress caused her to have a breakdown.

A good example of someone who did not persist in ABE and yet was effective at work is the story told by Eileen. She seems to have been doing part-time work in Dunne's Stores[26] and persevering with it, and relating well with her manager throughout the time that she was having difficulty with her tutors and her health in

[26] Multiple retail store

education. She says she was unable to finish her course 'when I was in, see when I was in Childcare, half way through my sixth year, I got sick and I was missing days here and days there'. However, when she is talking about work, she paints a story of perseverance, even though her doctor had told her to take time off 'well I refused (to go home) because it was Christmas and we were mad busy like'. Another interesting facet of Eileen is that, as she is the youngest of the group and stayed at school longer, her training made her more suitable for the changed workplace. Working in a Supermarket is typical of the type of lower paid, part time service jobs now open particularly to women.

Cleverly avoiding the need to be literate at work

Many people who have literacy difficulties develop very effective coping mechanisms, to avoid exposing themselves or their difficulty. These are well recognised among those who support literacy development in adults and have been researched inter alia by NALA (2009). 'Any job out there has that aspect to it and when you haven't that aspect, you have frustration, embarrassment and all that goes with it' (Will)

Alice talks about how she managed notices at work 'when I would see a flier coming, I would be looking at the clock, to see how long everyone kept it for, so I did, and I would keep it the same time'. She would then raise the topic during the 'toilet break' and discover exactly what the management had been sending round. 'then I would get more information than I knew and then I would know what the flier was about'.

Len says that he learned to manage, he learned the bits of writing that he had to do and practiced, so he was able to cope with whatever writing he had to do at work 'It didn't affect me, no, but I was embarrassed about it and I did avoid it, yeah I did avoid it because it was an embarrassment'. Even Angela learned to manage with her writing in work ' I could do that, I had no problem with writing down how many things I did, you know, you had to write your sheet every week – you know how it was – and I was able to do that.'

Bernie talks about doing the tab at the end of the night in the hotel where she worked 'Well, that was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare, but I got used to it, and I done

it'. Nat just completely avoided any work situation in which he would have to write 'I was always working on building sites, so I wouldn't go near shops or factories, or anything'. He even avoided doing his driving test, because he could not read signs or the instructions.

Will described being very much involved in charity work and being unable to read or write and yet coping 'I would tap into someone who would help me and between us, you know, and I would say what I was doing and they would say "what do you want to write, what do you want to do?" and between us ... I survived by tapping into someone else that could work for me'.

We can see, therefore, that their level of literacy and poor education did not militate particularly against their ability to work and they were quite successful, until the dramatic changes in employment which resulted from the economic crises of the 1980s and 2000s. Then problems arose when they had to apply for jobs and compete with other, more literate candidates.

> but then I learned my own life skills, then, I learned to hide it, I worked, got through different things with it, like, and nobody knew, unless I told them,'(Alice)

Being happy in the workplace

Bernie says she was working in a factory in Dunleer and she 'loved' that. When they opened a factory in Dundalk she was moved there, 'I was transferred and I stayed there for a few years, until I got married'. Grace was working in a factory in Dundalk and she also loved it 'it was a great place, you know there was a chance of promotion, there' 'it was great, you know, that somebody recognised you, recognised that you could do something more.' 'I had a little promotion, you know, sort of from A to B,, but you got extra money and it was great'. Angela was happy and enjoying her work 'I felt, how did I feel? I felt then that I was on top of the world'.

Len describes working without supervision, together with another man with whom he related well and being quite successful 'me and G got on very well and then we worked up in Park Street and we had a boss who came in and out and it was quite good like'. He also tells a story of being trusted enough by his boss to borrow money in order to buy a motor bicycle and repaying it over time. 'and M (boss) said "how much is the bike?" and I told him and he said "you will need a helmet and all

that", but he lent me the money and he deducted it back week by week, so I got my motor bike, like, and I was the bees knees!'.

Within the work context, they appeared to grow in confidence and to assert themselves in ways that they had not felt they could while at school, or in their families. Bernie was prepared to raise issues with her employers 'I didn't really feel that I had a voice, but I *did* voice, because I had to, I *had* to.' Alice became a representative for the non-unionised workers in a factory in Dundalk and was part of the negotiators around the closure 'I think that I was great, the way I went up to the Tribunal and I represented the non-union people and I didn't write anything down. I couldn't hardly at that stage spell "non-union"'.

Women and work

An interesting perspective is that the older women, when they were speaking to me, were quite accepting about leaving work when they were married, or when they became pregnant and also that they would give up work in order that their husbands were able to search for work. Although their ages stretched over twenty years and it was times of fundamental change in the workplace, this seemed to be a given. 'Married women were not allowed to work' (Liam). Between 1971 and 1991, the number of women in the workforce grew by 100,000 and by 1997 had reached 512,800. (Central Statistics Office, 2000:109)

Mary, who was one of the youngest of my interviewees, had the example of her mother who was 'not allowed' to go to school 'my mother, now, for years she couldn't read or write, she was the eldest of the family at that time and she had to stay at home and rear the family'. Despite her mother's encouragement for Mary to stay in education, she went with her boyfriend to live in England and easily found catering work. However, because she became homesick, she came home to Dundalk to start her family, where they remained, although they both found it difficult to get work.

Angela and Bernie had to leave their jobs when they married 'I got married in '73, so that put an end to the work' (Bernie) – Angela became pregnant as soon as she was married, and stopped work immediately. This meant that when they wanted to return to the workforce, they had no skills and to upskill they came back into

education. Angela through the good offices of her social worker, Bernie as part of her education package on Community Employment (CE).

Grace stopped work when she got married, also, because her husband could not get work in Dundalk and went to England. However Grace didn't like that 'I just didn't want to be there and that was it, you know, so when I had my first child I came home for a visit and stayed ... and stayed, yeah' She appears to have come home to Dundalk without her husband for a little while. This seems to be the start of difficult times for the family, with the husband finding it difficult to get work and Grace unable to work 'I just couldn't keep up with children and work and that and I reluctantly, I reluctantly had to give it up'.

Changing face of work

Because of the different ages of the people that I interviewed – they entered the workforce at various times during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, they were working during a time of dramatic change both in the Irish Economy and global work patterns.

There was a transition from agricultural employment during the 1960s and 1970s, (Treacy, 2000) with subsistence farming virtually disappearing and it was the experience of Bernie, and Will, from farming backgrounds, that they did not expect to work on the farm, but they were able to access manufacturing work nearby. During the 1960s and 1970s there were still unskilled and semi-skilled jobs available in towns like Dundalk and Drogheda, until the 1980s, when these jobs were exported to countries with lower production costs. The factories that replaced them frequently needed a higher skilled workforce, producing high-tech products or needed language skills for service centres. The people that I interviewed did not have these skills.

Unfortunately, for my interviewees, the available work changed, with higher skills necessary to gain and maintain employment and certainly to be able to move between jobs. Unfortunately, also, the option to emigrate to England also lessened, since the unemployment rate in the United Kingdom during the 1980s (Treacy, 2000) was similar to the rate in Ireland, and there was greater competition for unskilled jobs at home. We can see, therefore, that as they became unemployed after the downturn in

the economy, they had particular difficulty in returning to employment. ‘ Times change, as I knew they would change and they are gone, Mary, there’s no job out there that you don’t have to use a computer, or write, or stocktake, you know.’ (Will)

These changes were particularly difficult for the men, because of what Giddens (2009:902) describes as the ‘feminisation of work’. He says that, as work is automated, fewer people work in factories and most new jobs are created in ‘offices and service centres’ – not suitable for the profile of the men whom I interviewed. We also have a situation in which both partners contribute to the income in a household, or where a woman is the only worker in a household. Between 1971 and 1997 the number of women in the workforce doubled from 275,000 to 512,000 whereas in the same timeframe the number of men in the workforce only increased from 773,000 to 825,000. (Central Statistics Office, 2000)

The reality of unemployment

However, as looking for work became more formalised and available work was frequently advertised in local papers and through FÁS, their inability to manage paper became more problematic. Applications – in fact all types of forms - are a recurring nightmare for people with literacy difficulty. ‘It’s only in recent times they have started applications – what degrees have you’ ‘I was noticing over the years that it was getting harder . nowadays you have to send in an application ... you nearly have to have a degree to sweep the street’ (John) Len agrees ‘not really knowing the reading, and that, as you get older you have a lot of more forms to fill in and stuff coming in the door and that, like’.

John seems to have had a series of temporary jobs, in meat factories and as kitchen porter. ‘I was working in one thing or another, you know, but they got shut down, or it was temporary work’. I asked him at what point did he realise that his lack of education stopped him from getting work ‘I suppose when I was coming into my 30s.’ Nat had no difficulty in finding work in construction when he left school in the 1990s, but unfortunately these jobs also ran out with the death of the Celtic Tiger. He seems to have been long-term unemployed, since, and with his partner as wage earner in their home.

During the 1980s, the CE was introduced, to give unemployed people valuable work in the community and access to education, in order that they would develop skills to make them more employable. Alice, Len, John, Bernie, Grace, and Mary were all involved in this system and it was through this route that they became involved in Adult Education.

Unfortunately, the kind of work they were doing on CE, while it made an important contribution to their communities, did not necessarily fit the profile of current or potential jobs in Drogheda and Dundalk. The men were mostly working on environmental tasks, whereas the women were doing caretaking and childcare work. 'I worked in K, on the Tidy Towns (Alice), a great three years, you know what I mean'

Part of my work in the VEC was to support CE Supervisors in providing the kind of skill training for workers to assist their return to the workforce, but unfortunately at that time during the 1990s, there was little enthusiasm by participants to 'go back to school' and a general expectation by the workers that they would be able to remain on CE – essentially remaining on Social Welfare - until they reached retirement age. In more recent times, as funding became more difficult to access, participants were expected not to remain constantly in CE, but to progress to further education, or employment.

During the time that her family was growing up Mary was working in a CE scheme as a crèche worker for about 14 years, until 2006, when the crèche was privatised and the CE workers gradually let go. Although she took advantage of the educational opportunities in CE, she did not seem to increase her employability and fell out of the workforce at that stage. She subsequently joined the VTOS[27] programme.

Bernie used the route of CE to improve her literacy and also to do Caring Courses, and she feels that she will be able to maintain employment until such time as she chooses to retire. Eileen seems to have greater employability skills, since she is working in a shop part-time, as well as attending ABE. Younger than the other interviewees, and with a longer school history, her skills seem to be more in line with the available part-time work. Len, as a result of his placement in CE is currently

[27] Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme – opportunity to return to education while retaining Social Welfare payments.

working in a Community Support project and seems to be happy and competent. Will is involved also with Community provision of social services, on a voluntary basis.

Alice finds that her poor literacy makes it very difficult to get work 'Aah, why would I make a muck of myself at this stage of life, you know what I mean, the paperwork part of it, I mean .. this paper would just be wrecking my head'.

Conclusion to Part 3 –Worklife

The data has shown that my interviewees did not feel particularly out of their comfort zones within the workplace. They seemed to be able to measure their performance in relation to the people around them and see that they fitted in. Certainly, initially, they were able to move about within the workforce with relative ease. They had also learned to manage their literacy difficulty so that they did not appear different in this regard. They seemed accepting of the status quo and did not feel the need to change anything, so there was no threat or uncertainty.

We can see that these interviewees fit into the world of employment as it was traditionally among their families and communities. As the workplace was structured at the time, they were not inhibited by poor literacy skills. They were effective, recognised by their employers, participated in unions and were able to support their families. They had good personal skills which enabled them to get work and transfer from job to job. Unfortunately they were not able to fit into the radically different structure of employment in the 2000s. By various means they returned to education and in the next chapter we can see how they fitted into ABE and what they achieved.

PART 4 – ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

At different points in their lives and for different reasons my interviewees decided that they needed additional education or training. The purpose of this investigation was to discover why having returned to education, they subsequently dropped out.

In their prior education, they reported many negative experiences, which as Knowles (2000:85) says, we would be foolish to ignore. 'adults have a need to be treated with respect, to make their own decisions, to be seen as unique human beings'. One can

argue that all people have a need to be treated with respect, not just adults, but in this instance we are talking specifically about adult education.

We have seen the interviewees in charge of their work and personal lives, functioning well and with good self-esteem. However, it is reasonable to believe that this changed when they became long-term unemployed and with insufficient skills to gain new employment, or for training.

In this section, therefore, I will discuss why they returned and what difficulties they encountered, building up on their previous school and life experience. I also propose to show the factors that assisted them to succeed, insofar as they were able to achieve.

Deciding to return to education

The Department of Education and Skills' guidelines for the Literacy Service is that anyone with 'less than NFQ[28] Level 3' qualification is entitled to free education through one of a number of different programmes, to facilitate their progression to Level 3. With full time programmes they maintain their Social Welfare payment and other entitlements. It is also possible for learners to progress into the VTOS programme, or Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) which can, in turn lead into further education or training.

The people I interviewed were fortunate, in that at the time I interviewed them, they did not have all the 'situational' (Cross, 1981, Quigley, 1984) barriers to ABE, since they were enrolled in full or part-time education programmes funded through social welfare, or the Department of Education, which funds part-time Basic Education programmes, thus had no cost or travel expenses. They also had the opportunity to study during work time, though they had to have the discipline and motivation to study at home.

It needs to be said that those who were participating in full-time programmes, might have been 'encouraged' by the Department of Social Welfare to join ABE, since their poor basic skills would have inhibited their ability to gain employment.

[28] National Framework of Qualifications

Nevertheless, as we shall see their reasons for returning to education varied across a number of areas.

Considering their decision to return to improve their literacy, I found, as did Bailey (1998) that situational factors also motivated my interviewees to enter basic education. For some of them, it was about supporting their families, for others an attempt to re-skill for work and for yet others, a response to a trauma in their lives.

Alice and Bernie, acknowledging the difficulties caused by poor literacy in their lives, initially joined evening classes provided by the VEC in attempts to remedy the situation. Alice says that she 'always' wanted to come back to education. 'I came back before I got married, over on the other side (of the VEC facility) '. For Bernie 'It was something that, in the back of my head it was always there to do it'.

For John, unemployment was the precipitating factor. In his mid 30s, unemployed and only seeing the opportunity for work that he did not want 'I got, started feeling that I don't really want to be working day and night and I don't really want to be working that type of work. I began to look at, to see if I could get some sort of education'. He clearly felt that through education he could 'better' his chances of what he felt was more acceptable employment. 'What I wanted from education, I had this in me head, if I returned to education, I would learn to read and write and I would get a proper job'.

Len, also, returned to education during a time when he was unemployed, but he saw education differently. It seemed to him to be an opportunity to live a more effective life 'I would have been out of work and boredom as well, like, and not really knowing the reading and that' 'Asking people to read for you like can be embarrassing, like for people, so I decided to try and do something.' Another important factor for Len was the support of his supervisor in CE 'My Supervisor would have been Nuala and she was very supportive and that, you know, she advised me to go back and do the education, like, because she obviously realised that I was going through a tough time.'

When I asked Will why he joined ABE he told me 'I am 56 now, and I am sure I came back in my 30s and probably in my 40s' He talked about being unable to do the kind of work he wanted to do 'the same thing that always was there, wanting to do things' –' I was always involved in my parish, in my community you know'.

Implicit in this statement is that his poor literacy inhibited his performance. For example, Will wanted to be a volunteer for Samaritans, but realised that his poor literacy meant that he could not keep notes of meetings or telephone calls.

When I asked Nat why he came back specifically at this time, he didn't seem to know why it was, but that his girl friend was anxious that he 'gave it another shot to see if I could do it again'. 'I think it is three times, now that I have done it'. As we have seen, Nat has no ambition to use literacy at work, but is anxious to be able to read to his child and help with the homework. His partner seems to have this ambition for him also.

For Grace, Angela and Bernie, returning to education was part of their recovery from trauma. Grace talks about becoming involved in Adult Education to help her recover after the death of her daughter 'the house (community education facility) opened up a different world for us, for some of us.' Angela came into ABE as part of her recovery from depression and was recommended by her caseworker. Shortly after Bernie's husband died she decided that it would be good for her to take charge of her literacy difficulty 'when I decided that I would like to do, would like to go back to school', and again 'as I say a lot of things happened at home and I went into myself a little bit, but when I come back I said, right, I am coming back now and this is for good' 'and I just got to a stage where I said O.K., I don't care who sees me or who knows, where before I did.' Fortunately for Bernie, the VEC was doing information days 'E.-(tutor)- came to the workplace to give a talk about the programme, so I decided I wanted, I was going to do it, and that's how I came back in'.

Once more, Eileen is different from my other interviewees, in that she found herself in ABE seamlessly when she was unable to cope with a PLC[29] course, which she started twice and did not complete on either occasion. (It is important to understand that some students in secondary manage to achieve a Leaving Cert. (Applied), with very poor reading and writing skills – in the Literacy Service we call this a 'spiky' profile. It means that they can do exams if they have a scribe, but are virtually unable to study independently.) One of her tutors suggested that she go back to ABE in order to make further study easier. 'I wanted to get help with me English and

[29] Post Leaving Certificate

because all me whole confidence and all was gone'. 'I hope that after this course I might get me maths and my English and I want to go on and do management'.

Mary became involved in adult education as part of her work in CE, where she had to get her certification to work with children. However when she decided to go back to full time education and to get some certification, her motivation was to be an example to her children 'watching the children and not knowing any Irish, I sez "I would love to go back to study" and I applied then and started doing me Leaving Cert.'

Many of the others took the route from CE, through the Return to Education[30] programme (RTE) and into mainstream education programmes delivered through the VEC. As we have seen RTE was designed for participants on CE and provided the means first, to improve basic literacy and thereafter provide an access to education or training programmes delivered by FÁS and the VEC. At the time of our conversation, for example, Bernie had just taken her Junior Cert. and was planning to go on to do her Leaving Cert., and many of the others' stories relate this means of access to education.

There seems to be a very easy relationship between the VEC and the people that I interviewed, they were able to learn about programmes and possibilities for education, whether through their CE supervisors or, generally in the community. However, they seemed to enrol in programmes, without really understanding what the purpose was, which points to lack of clarity in the message being sent and lack of checking by the receiver.

Poor communication

I don't believe that my interviewees were casual in their decision to return to education, but had really strong reasons, mentioned above, and hopes that they would succeed. The data shows a misfit between their own expectations and ineffective communication with the provider. For instance, John felt that he would be able to improve 'like a flash of lightning', Angela that 'she would just give it another go', whereas Len, realistically says that 'the more I go back to basics, the more I get from

[30] 9hrs per week basic skills training provided for participants on CE

it' and Will suggests 'I think the tutor and the person should be brought in .. and given a one to one to find out where they is'. There needs to be an adjustment in this, initial phase of the training programme. A major fact in their failure, I suspect, was that they really did not understand what they were getting themselves into. This failure relates to their own expectations and ineffective communication with the provider. A solution to this problem could be to have access to a previous participant on the programme, who would be able to give genuine information. 'Involving students in recruitment and training them in various forms of outreach work appears to be one of the most effective methods of increasing participation' (Bailey, 1998:33). McGivney (1993) suggests that both mentor schemes and peer support groups could improve understanding by students of the implications of returning to study.

Many of the problems they encountered had to do with what McGivney (1993:18) describes as the 'unresponsive system'. Quigley (1984) says that it is absolutely vital for providers to put themselves in the world of the learner, not their own world 'Educators have a common experience that separates us from our students. The culture of school that we so enjoyed is not necessarily a culture into which our students fit' (p.1.)

Because funding depends to a large extent on the numbers of students on the roll, there is an understandable tendency for the providers to maximise the number of students. This must put pressure on scarce resources, with consequential difficulties for clear communication and, sometimes, to the detriment of finding a correct learning fit. As Will said 'The main thing is that that board on the wall is full, you know, that is the main priority – no I don't mean the main priority, but that's very important, the board has to be full'.

It needs to be understood that a fundamental difference between ABE and other adult education programmes is the support needed by the learners; they don't just slot into a class, but need the recognition of their individual educational needs. Without this recognition, they will not persist. Len says 'When people are doing it, if they go back in late life into education and they have problems with reading and writing, they kind of need that extra time'.

John came back into ABE on various occasions from the 1980s, over the years he has started 'four or five RTE programmes' but did not persist for very long. However his most recent view of second chance education was formed through watching the *Read Write Now* (NALA, 2000) programme. This television programme follows the development of a number of literacy students while they improve their skills, by working through a very good workbook and with access to a telephone support system.

John got a clear idea from the television that this progress was linear and relatively straightforward, whereas his personal experience was quite different. When he compared his learning with that demonstrated by the people on the programme, he felt that he was making very little progress. 'You listened to these people and they had no education and all of a sudden they were doing this and doing that and you think to yourself "I am going to be like that"'. Unfortunately, John never seems to have developed a realistic idea of how long it takes to learn to read and write effectively, which is of course an information deficit on the part of the provider.

In the evaluation report on *Read Write Now* (2001) which was very positive and praised the innovative approach to teaching literacy, no mention was made of this difficulty though I would not think that John was the only person who found that the proposed outcomes were unrealistic for him. However, the report does say that this, initial series of programmes was aimed at learners at an intermediate level, whereas John's literacy was very basic. Mention was made of relatively few referrals to mainstream literacy courses and it was hoped that this would change with future series. It is important that there is a clear focus for learners, so that they are not put off by too high standards, too high expectations which make them certain to fail.

Poor communication also affected Eileen and Will. As we have seen, Eileen was attending the PLC programme after her Leaving Certificate Applied programme, which would be a logical transition. Unfortunately, Eileen's literacy was insufficient – partially because of her dyslexia – and she was unable to participate without very high levels of support. Eileen describes her belief that she would get one-to-one support for her studies, 'I had to have a teacher that would be there all the time – like when you have free periods'. I cannot believe that the provider agreed to this plan, because of course they would not have the resources, but Eileen absolutely

believed it, and attributed her failure in her course to the lack of this provision, a clear failure to communicate.

Will expected that he would receive one-to-one tuition until he met his required standard and when this did not happen he left the service, 'I was shifted from a one to one into a two group, or a three group, but I didn't like it'. Later on in this section, I consider the advantages and disadvantages inherent in group versus one-to-one tuition, but what is important at this point, is that Will had the *expectation* of being in a one-to-one situation and when this expectation was not fulfilled, then he left the service.

There seems to have been a communication difficulty in relation to these students, in that they did not have a clear idea of what would be provided for them in what circumstances and what the outcomes were likely to be. Where there is a good understanding by the learner what the possible outcome might be, and how long it is likely to take, then, since expectations are more realistic, the situation is much more satisfactory. This clear understanding will only occur where the learner is actively involved in the process. Knowles (2000:87) says that fundamental to the teaching/learning experience for adults in education is the involvement in deciding what needs to be learned and how it should be learned. 'Every individual tends to feel committed to a decision (or an activity) to the extent that he has participated in making it (or planning it)'

Diagnosis of need

Fitting a learner with a tutor, or into a group is as a result of an in-depth interview between the learner and the provider. There are now clear guidelines for this interview (DES, 2012, IVEA, 2012) and each basic education service has developed its own protocol within these. Prior to these publications each literacy service or VEC would have had its own code of practice, broadly in line with the present guidelines. NALA have produced 'Guidelines for Good Literacy Work' (1985, revised in 1991 and 2005), reflecting the development of initial assessment procedures as well as changes in utor training, which we shall discuss later. The proposed outcome of the interview, as recorded in an IVEA Resource document (Clare Adult Learning Scheme, 2012) was to 'inform the learner clearly and accurately about the course and the activities involved in it.' and 'Inform the learner

also about the supports available'(p.6). Unfortunately, the people I interviewed did not appear to have such an outcome.

In an ideal situation, the initial interview and perhaps subsequent interviews, would lead to an individual learning plan agreed between learner and provider with clear expectations of outcomes within an agreed timeframe and measurable success. The importance of this clear communication cannot be overestimated, since unless the learner has the sense of what s/he wants to learn and also the sense of his/her ability to learn it, then they are programmed to fail. 'People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered, rather than as threats to be avoided', (Bandura, 1994).

Sliwka et al also report from their research in Scotland, that an ILP[31] is developed during the early part of the programme in order to formalise what is available to learn, and that there is on-going review. This process would also create a positive relationship between the provider and the learner. Ziegler (2006) stresses the importance of a learner's belief in the school, especially where they did not have a good prior experience of, or belief in school. My interview data shows that this was not the case from the participant perspective. The feedback from the interviewees on their pre-learning interviews was that quite often the programmes offered differed from their needs and did not necessarily reflect their level of skill.

Feeley (2014:169) talks about the difficulty in trying to 'unlearn' bad experiences of school, mirroring one of the stories told to me by several of my interviewees, of being isolated in class. She reports one of her interviewees saying 'sometimes as an adult you can feel that you are being left at the back of the class, too'.

Talking to Will about the initial process, it becomes clear that he felt there was a major disconnect between what he feels are his needs and the tuition supplied by ABE. He feels that his 'problem' is greater than any tutor or assessor understood and this is his major difficulty with ABE. He feels that if everyone were properly assessed, then the individual learning needs of the student could be fulfilled. He says 'I think I felt at the time, like, that because again ... feel like that there wasn't a proper assessment, I feel that if everyone was done on an individual basis and they

[31] Individual Learning Plan

said O.K., this is where this problem .. this is the problem this person has, so maybe they need to be taught this way, rather than that way, because you have a certain thing that will work for a good lot, but will not work for everybody so..' It appears that Will expected to have deeper assessment of his ability and because this did not happen, he was dissatisfied. It would be important in such instances, to have on-going communication between the individual learner and the tutor, to check progress.

John says that he came in and out of education, looking for information that would 'help me better', however once he came back he did not seem to be learning what he wanted to and this caused frustration for him.

> I think the tutor and the person should be brought in by the people who run the place to find out where they is and say, "Right, we are going to start a programme and this is the programme" instead of just coming into a tutor and the tutor assuming that this is what you want.' ' I think what a tutor needs to do is to talk to you beforehand and find out what level you are at and where you are, then organise a programme with you instead of coming in and handing you stuff that you know by heart, like 'cat' and 'dog' and stuff, like a 5-year old

Communication – during the learning

Some of the interviewees first returned to the literacy service as much as twenty years ago and describe conditions that are really old fashioned, and which, from my experience, no longer exist. The reason that I am reporting them is because they coloured the interviewees' subsequent interface with the service and that we need to recognise that other learners subjected to the same system probably did not have the strength to try again.

We need to note, also, that as we have seen, my interviewees' experience with early education was not entirely satisfactory and therefore they may well have had particular difficulty in facing up to difficulties with curriculum, with the tutor, with training methodologies and with the provider. 'One's prior education experiences, especially schooling as well as social class and gender, contribute to a more rounded understanding of the barriers to learning' (Fleming,2008:40). As educators, we have an obligation to be aware of the sensitivities of our learners and ensure that they receive due respect. Will found that he was in a classroom that was something of a thoroughfare, so the class was frequently disrupted and anyone could see who was in the literacy group. 'It's amazing the people that would see you and I felt very bad'.

He then said something which really showed his hurt 'But I say if you are doing something in a privacy situation, you need to have that as you say it is, and it wasn't like that, and it was tough'. It should not need a theorist (Knowles 2000) to make us understand that such situations make it extremely difficult for anyone to learn, let alone adults.

Tutor approach

> the main reason why adult education has not achieved the impact on our civilization of which it is capable is that most teachers of adults have only known how to teach adults as if they were children (Knowles, 2000:82)

Nat says 'they never asked if you knew your alphabet, or anything, they just gave you words to do'. 'I don't think they asked you too many questions, back there, they thought you would just come in and do your work'. Mary said that on the first occasion she was in the VTOS, she did not have the confidence to ask about things she did not understand. Small wonder, therefore that she did not persist. Angela also talks about her difficulty in asking questions in class, 'maybe they think that I am holding them back'. It seems from all of this, that the learners did not feel that there was a system whereby they could say what they wanted to learn and no system for feedback to the tutors – they experienced an old, hierarchical system within which the tutor made the lesson plans and implemented them with very little reference to the interests and skills of the learners.

Like any other learned skill, literacy needs practice in order to improve, and where there are long spaces between sessions, students seem to need to relearn previous lessons before progressing. This can easily account for the 'frustration' described by a number of my interviewees. 'You see yourself after a couple of weeks going no further and you kind of think to yourself "there's something wrong, here"'(John). Alice explains her slow start 'it was just that I was that long away from them and things like that, like'. Hamann (1994, cited in Kerka 1995) discovered that lack of communication about possible progress and expectations was one of the primary causes of early dropout from ABE programmes.

A difficult time for learners seemed to be when a tutor had to leave, or at the end of term or the end of the school year. Where the learner had an association with a particular tutor, they found it hard to remain when that association was broken. Will

talks about ‘losing’ a tutor and being ‘moved to a big group’ within which he could not cope. There are also a number of situations where the interviewees felt that changes in tutors made a bad situation worse – for instance Mary reports ‘basically, one teacher had to leave and another came in type of way, and it was kinda different’. Alice talks about her first tutor being a ‘lovely girl and I was coming on rightly’ – then the tutor got married and moved away ‘and I stopped, then’.

An improved situation

Clearly, the approach by the tutor has a huge impact on the learning experience of the student. John says he prefers a woman tutor ‘a man just throws a photograph down’ (this a reference to his prior experience in ABE). Will quite openly discloses that he and his small group made their tutor talk, because so long as he was talking ‘I hadn’t to do the hard work! It was a big group and it was just not working’. However, he agrees that he went out ‘disappointed because we learned nothing whatever’. We need to remember that, before the professionalization of the tutor cohort, the teaching experience of many of those people working as tutors was when they were at school themselves, within the established hierarchical education system. We also need to remember that, since they were volunteers, the VECs were hesitant to insist on in-service training.

The role and professionalisation of tutors has changed literacy provision dramatically over the past few years, notably during the time when these people were in ABE. This is reflected in the fact that several of my interviewees *eventually* achieved what they wanted. The volunteer tutor working with a single learner on an open-ended basis has been succeeded by professional, trained tutors for both one to one and small group tuition. This has presented difficulties for both tutors and learners, as well as great opportunities. The provision of adult education counsellors, largely since my time in ABE, has also made a positive contribution, but unfortunately, cutbacks in funding has meant that counsellors are stretched widely over the adult education service. I wish, later, to return to the crucial role of counselling which I believe could radically diminish dropout.

The regulation of tutor training has meant, also, that tutors are encouraged to consider different philosophies of Adult Learning (NALA, 2005) and bring these approaches to their tuition. When I was still working in the system, in order to

maintain consistency of provision across the country, Tutor Training Programmes developed by local VECs were validated by NALA. Quigley (1984:3) sees that the life experience of tutors and providers, so different from their learners, is a great problem in terms of successful provision 'if we can see the differences between our dispositions and theirs more clearly, we can become more effective at our tutoring, teaching, counselling, and, consequently, retention'.

For Eileen and Bernie, the fact that they already knew the tutor who was going to be working with them in ABE made the process much more comfortable. Eileen's support tutor in her PLC moved to the ABE service and encouraged Eileen to move, also, which facilitated her entry and for Bernie, she had had the same tutor through several of her interfaces with the literacy service 'I have to say, I have to say, E. was a great support to me'.

Nat is able to describe graphically the difference between the way he was taught on other courses and his present experience in ABE. 'Oh, yeah, it's good so it is, it's grand.' When I asked him what was better, he said 'I think it is probably the way I am being taught, aye, compared to years ago.' 'Cos years ago they never asked you if you knew your alphabet, or anything, they just gave you a few small words, and every week they just gave you an extra two words and an extra two words and before I knew it then I could have twenty or twenty five words that I didn't know, and I would think "jeeze what's going on here". It's nothing like the way it is done now, so it is, it's a lot better now compared to back then'. He gives a good description of the success 'Yeah, at the moment I am finding it great, the best so far of all the teachers, she is a lot more experienced, she knows what she is at – she was taught the right way to do it comparing the others who were there, they were just dumped in and hopefully could teach'.

Group tuition

There has been a move in literacy provision from one-to-one support and into groups, for very good reasons of financial necessity, group support and objective standards and certification. However, as I have said, there was resistance to this move both by tutors and by some learners which showed itself in my interviews. Clearly, in these cases, the interviewees did not feel that they were involved in the decision making. They did not seem to realise why they were moved from one-to-

one into groups ‘We seemed to jump from one person into twos and threes at that time – I put it down to O.K. maybe space and numbers’ (John).

The data show that the interviewees had difficulties with change and an implication of the findings is that since being moved is quite difficult for people, students should be involved in the decision making or at least understand the reasons, which might alleviate their anxiety. This process would, for the provider, give them clarity about why they were taking certain actions. Showing respect for learners is fundamental to a positive experience for the learner and the tutor, and, as Knowles (1984:86) further says the psychological climate should be suitable for adults ‘which causes adults to feel accepted, respected and supported’.

The Quality Framework for the Literacy Service (McSkeane, 2006:55) says ‘managers and tutors encourage students to express their own views, in their own voice’, which is a noble aspiration, but unfortunately such good communication is often difficult considering the disparity between managers, tutors and students.

At the time of our interview, Nat was still in a one-to-one tuition situation, because of his poor literacy. It was the usual practice to support learners in this way until such time as it was felt they would be able to function in a group. Nat, as we have seen, was extremely happy with his situation. Over the years, John had a varied experience of one-to-one and group tuition. ‘ I had about four (1/1 tutors) I think, I had one woman, she was alright. I think you can talk to a woman better, I think they are more understanding, they tend to talk to you more and understand more.’ It could be argued, of course, that women have a ‘naturally’ more caring approach, but I believe that caring has to be intrinsic to the tuition, no matter who is tutoring.

However, at the time when I was speaking with John, he said that he very much prefers working within a small tutorial group, in particular because it provides more tuition hours than the one-to-one system. He says that he found it ‘frustrating’ to only have one hour a week. About the group, he says ‘we are all at the one level, so you feel more relaxed and we are all pulling each other up and you learn from the other people as well’. – this is of course a perfect example of group synergy. Mary also says ‘I feel safe around a group of people, I don’t like being on my own for too long’

Mary's situation was particularly interesting, because she was speaking to me at a stage when she had successfully completed some subjects at Leaving Cert. When I was discussing with her why she succeeded this time, but not on other occasions, she attributed her success to group support. Teasing this out, she said that previously 'I just kinda got that feeling that you didn't belong in a certain place, you shouldn't be there'. She describes a class where they were studying biology 'and I didn't fit there because they were going on far ahead'. Mary says about her second attempt 'I felt very comfortable now, so I did. This time I wanted to do it, because I wanted to be up there with me kids'. However, she also had greater ownership of the subjects she studied and gained benefit from the support of her tutorial group. In the present situation she had greater freedom to select some subjects. Very clearly the group support was also crucial 'they were the sort of group that wouldn't let you go'. If she was missing for a day, they would ring her up.

Eileen also talks about the importance of group support, and that she could not manage within a larger group, but as she describes it, there seems to be an optimal size for a tutorial group. For Eileen, she felt that her previous group of 25 was too large to support her and to overcome this problem, Sliwka (2008) suggests the benefit of groups being gradually formed, so that there is no immediate total immersion, but learners are able to integrate into groups as they feel they are able. Eileen, talking about her current learning group, in which she was achieving, said of the smaller group – about five people – 'it kinda makes you feel comfortable and that'.

Will left ABE because he was put into a group and felt that his needs were not recognised 'within a group there should be room for everybody, for different learnings, you know?' Not finding this space, he left. He was also not at all pleased that he was moved from one to two to three in a group. 'Well, I think that before being shifted to a group you would want to be at a certain level'. We see again, here the recurring situation of students comparing themselves to others in a group, often to their detriment. Will says that he feels very strongly that, as an older student, you should be kept in a one to one situation, which is contradictory to the experiences of the other interviewees and inimical to current best teaching practice. The DES say 'however, as a general principle, learners should be offered the option of attending a group in the first instance'. (2012:7)

Angela was in a group from her start in RTE, but she felt extremely self-conscious and this contributed to her falling out and poor attendance. 'As I said, when I am in the middle of something, I was happy, but I thought that I was keeping the others back, I really thought I was keeping the others back'

Persistence

The provider's goal is that students who join ABE will remain until such time as they reach NFQ Level 3, which is equivalent to Junior Certificate and which gives an external validation to the literacy levels acquired. However, as we have seen, the interviewees themselves did not come to ABE with academic aspirations, but with various personal reasons for improving their literacy and varying goals which they hoped to achieve, some possible, some impossible.

It becomes clear that, as these students successfully interface with adult education, they become better able to measure their achievements, and probably also better able to give themselves credit for these achievements, without having unreasonable expectations. A very good example of the value of persistence is to contrast Len saying to me, some years before the current study 'You don't understand how *hard* it (learning to read) is, Mary, to his being able to say, now 'So, and I find that my reading has come on tremendous, absolutely tremendous. I have no problem now picking up the paper and reading the paper, I have no problem going on the internet and reading things, but I do find my basic, my big problem is spelling words. Yes, my big problem is spelling words and that, even today now would be a big problem, putting a letter together.'

Bernie can both measure her success and see that it feeds into her life plan for the future. She feels connected with her tutor, the programme she is doing and the impact that her study is having on her work life. 'I have to say (tutor) was a great support to me'. She also has less pressure on her time. 'Mummy had died, so I was able to do it, then'. She says that she had learned not to be ashamed of needing to study. 'when I came back I said, right, I am coming back now, and this is for good ... and this was for me'. It was important enough for Bernie that she was prepared – though not delighted – to do work on Sundays, to keep up with the study programme ' I found I was doing work on a Sunday ... doing up our essays and a bit of research'. We can see that there are a number of different factors involved in Bernie's

persistence, just as there were a number of different factors involved in her earlier drop out. Having just completed her Junior Cert she has the confidence to say that she will continue and repeat it if she doesn't get the result she hopes for 'I will go back and resit if needs be .. and then do Leaving'. It is interesting that the interviewees relate to the education qualifications as they used to be, rather than as they are now – they would like to achieve Junior or Leaving Certificate.

Nat, who never felt ashamed having literacy difficulty is very specific about what keeps him within the system - the improvement in teaching methods and approach since the last time he attended. Alice is also able to measure her success, she can text messages to her family without her sons 'screaming with laughing at me'. She can read a book – slowly – and enjoys learning about other people's lives. 'I can see how the word is made up – but that's only now, that's only happened when I was back here with the nun. I couldn't believe it!' Mary believes that her results in the exam will allow her to go on to PLC 'I don't think I can go home now and sit in the house without studying'.

Dropping out

The interviewees give various reasons for leaving the ABE, some very vague, some quite specific. Some of the general reasons include such things as changing tutors and holidays intervening, and these don't need to be discounted. However, considering that holidays happen all the time and tutors change all the time, it should be possible for providers to guard against it. 'I went on holidays for about two weeks and then came back and had another week off and kind of lost the train of it. Kind of drifted away – it was easy' (Nat)

One of the things that I found incomprehensible is that several of the interviewees reported that they had poor attendance at ABE, because they were finding the programme difficult. Logic would say that better attendance would improve their performance, but this was not a logical way to behave. However, I recollected that they had previous experience of non attendance at school when they found times difficult, and they seemed to repeat the pattern. My conversation with Len in this regard seems to illustrate the point. 'I don't know, you come to a tutor and you have this in your head, that you are going to do reading or whatever ... and after a certain period of time you get it in your head, "I am no further than I was when I started" I

don't know you just say to yourself "I am going nowhere"'. When I questioned him about his poor attendance he said 'No, at the time you'd feel that because the other people would have been in a class and they would have been more advanced, you would be afraid of falling behind'. Therefore, he didn't attend! Mary tells a story about going up to a computer class one day – she found computers difficult because, she tells me, she finds it difficult to sit in one place for long. 'next of all I looked over and they were all gone, there was nobody there I was on my own'. She does not like being on her own, so she stopped going to that class. I think that this is a good example of a learner not yet being ready for self-directed learning.

Will doesn't believe that he was followed up when he dropped out of the classes, also that he would find it very difficult to discuss his difficulties 'because you know in your heart and soul that these are good people who are trying to help you and are doing their best and you feel then you are criticising them.' He does not describe an open communication channel between him and the providers, and this is amplified by his answer when I asked him why he did not talk about his difficulty with provision 'So you are afraid, even if you are asked, you would be afraid to say to someone "I don't think you (tutor) are doing it right" because maybe I am wrong and don't want to be saying that'.

There was very little evidence of good feedback between the providers and the learners. A good example of the improvement in service was given by Nat, when I asked him if he was able to describe to the tutor some of his problems, he said 'not back then, no', but when I asked him if he could now, he said that the tutor 'asked me a whole lot of questions to see how good I was or where I was with reading or letters'.

It is my understanding, however, that as with the professionalisation of the tutors, there are quality criteria and measurements on an on-going basis, which means that there are now structures for feedback. However, for this to be effective requires quite good self-esteem on the part of the learners, as well as openness on the part of tutors and providers. As Will said 'Feedback again seems like we are criticizing and we feel that even if we are genuine in the criticism, then it is still criticism and if we are not genuine because we are not learning, then we feel guilty because we are not up to it'.

Just as people cite personal reasons for coming back into education, they also cite personal reasons for leaving. Len says 'I fell out because my marriage broke down, so I would have had personal stuff to deal with and I had to keep in touch with my children, my children were being taken away from me so for me, my children were more important than anything to do with school.'

Nat left also, for social reasons, he says that he broke up 'with a woman after fifteen years, and I thought, right, now let's cut down everything. Then I went back again and it was a retired teacher and it went on for a couple of months and then we went on holidays and that and came back'. At this point it seems that they just could not make appointments for tutoring, which were being held in his home. After a long day it was 'just, like, too much'.

Angela is so insecure in herself that she finds attending very difficult 'I just think that when I get into something – it's very hard to explain, but when I get into something and I am enjoying it, I am just thinking, I be thinking, I be looking at the other people and thinking maybe they think I am too slow, with the class, or maybe they think I am holding them back because the teacher won't go back – on – until I am finished. This is what goes through my mind.'. Then, when I asked her why she came back, she said 'I don't know, I just said that I would give it another go, and then the same again!'. Angela is a clear example of the difficulty that people who have poor self-confidence have in pursuing second chance, or indeed, any further education. Quigley (1997) stresses the importance of self-efficacy in achievement in education, and I will give further consideration to this topic in the discussion chapters of this thesis.

Something that we, as providers, felt no longer existed became apparent through the stories told by some of the interviewees. They felt shame about being within the literacy service and were very frightened of being 'caught out'. Bernie left on one occasion, because she was really scared that anyone would realise she was taking literacy classes. She was reluctant to talk directly about it 'I broke up for some reason, I left it for some reason then, and came back'(there was quite a long pause in here) 'We were doing it here, and they moved up then to Fair Street, and it was up in Fair Street. And when I was leaving Fair Street one night, I seen an individual sitting outside, waiting for his wife. And I would have known the two of them. And he was there, and he was watching everybody who was coming out' At this point I asked if

she minded that and she said ' I did, and that's why I left. I phoned E. (tutor). You see, I wouldn't like them to think that I was coming in to school and being taught English or maths or Irish or anything – because I kind of felt that I kind of bluffed my way'.

Alice describes being in a waiting room trying to enrol for basic English classes and waiting for another person to enrol before her, while he was waiting for her to go first. It became obvious that this person, a man, was a neighbour who was also inhibited at the thought of being seen to need literacy support. Will also reports his embarrassment at being seen in a literacy class.

Conclusion to Part 4 – ABE

I have shown that the people I interviewed came back to ABE with very good aspirations, to improve their literacy and make themselves employable, but they did not achieve this goal. It seems that their sensitivity, together with their prior negative experience of education made them more likely to drop out of their second chance, in fact in some cases, their third, or fourth chance! However, as we have seen the problem does not arise as the learners are approaching ABE, but much further back in their life history. They do not feel that they can cope well with change, they lack confidence in their skills and are aware all the time of the possibility of being ostracised if they admit to literacy difficulties. It is easier just to avoid any difficulties and drop out of provision.

Fleming (2008) while he sees this behaviour as having many causes, suggests that one such cause might be insecure attachment from childhood. This insecure attachment first noted by Bowlby (1952) affects the development of intellect and personality of children, but Fleming proposes it also can affect the ability of students to persevere in adult education, leading them to be anxious, avoidant and disorganised and with a propensity to avoid stressful situations and thus drop out. The importance of recognising the possibility of this characteristic in learners must have implications for teaching and learning for adults.

However, the overarching cause of failure was poor communication, between the provider and the student, between the tutor and the student and indeed between the rationale of the funder and the hopes of the learners. From whatever cause, there

was a mismatch between the aspirations of my interviewees and what they actually experienced in ABE which led them to fall out of tuition. If we could nurture them, if we could find ways to co-operate with them when they hit difficult times, then we could possibly save them from dropping out.

Conclusion to Chapter 5

The purpose of this thesis has been to discover, from the learners themselves, why they found it difficult to be part of the learning experience in ABE. I also considered the cause/effect relationship between their life history, background and their interface with education, since this was the point they described in their stories as problematic. It was my hope that the investigation as Brookfield (2005:9), says would provide 'a lens' through which we can examine their experience.

This Chapter, therefore, has described the 'synthesis' process within my method, that of merging the individual stories of the interviewees to illustrate the conditions within which they described their experience of exclusion. Morse (1994:30) says that in constructing 'composite longitudinal stories of an experience' this process will help to move 'from the particular to the general in small steps' – taking the information away from the individual informant and to more general description. The way in which I have done this, however, is to illustrate a particular response to a situation by examples from a number of interviewees. As I have previously said, also, I introduced literature as I felt appropriate, weaving it with their stories and thus finding their theoretical context and moving me further along the road to generating a theory.

Reflecting on the findings in this Chapter, it becomes crystal clear that the accumulated experience of my interviewees' lives up to this point affected their participation in ABE. We have seen how layers of experience contribute to negative outcomes. The cause of their drop out was not one incident, but an accumulation of negative experiences in their lives to date. Where they had poor experience of initial education, they were sensitive to any reminders of that poor prior experience. They came with the sense of stigma usual in people who have literacy difficulties and this was reinforced if they did not feel that they were personally recognised. This was at its most obvious where they did not feel that their learning needs in adult education were understood, that they set off on their journey for education without

proper assessment and without understanding precisely what they were getting into, finding the curriculum irrelevant to their needs.

It is also clear that in the conditions where they were recognised and accepted, they felt that they could participate effectively. For instance when they were part of a well functioning group, then they were encouraged to persist, where tutors were prepared to deliver classes which had reference to their needs, which were directly applicable in their lives, then they became involved and in fact were prepared to strive for a personal goal or indeed, a national qualification, especially if they felt that it had objective value.

In writing the stories of the interviewees, it is interesting that they have so much common history. None of them was related to another, yet they could tell stories of happenings in their lives which had commonality, because they came from communities which had common characteristics, relative poverty, and a focus on secrecy, self reliance. Traditionally low skilled work was available within their communities, or people emigrated to England for work, until the recessions of the late 20th Century. Whether rural or urban, their communities had similar histories of their experience with education. They were all, even the youngest, heavily influenced by the norms of their families.

When they attended school, for the most part the local National School, they felt themselves to be entirely at the mercy of the teachers, that their families were powerless in the face of authority. In general they received no additional support to alleviate their literacy difficulties, either because no support existed, or because they were afraid of stigma. In general, also, their families would not have made any intervention in their children's education, in the belief that what education they received would be suitable for the life that they expected to live. Significantly, they all had very bad experience of school. While we can all relate to hard times at school, their experience was worse, much worse, and also, significantly, worse than the experience of the others in their families.

Performing within the norms of their families and their communities, they felt relatively secure. They had no idea of the concept of class, until they reported stories of what had happened to them and they could talk about being treated 'differently' from children of middle class families, until such time as they became

aware of inequality. They couldn't label it until they could talk about the 'children of the teachers' or 'the guards'. For Alice and Will this happened as a result of family catastrophe, one being afraid of being put into care, the other feeling stigmatised by receiving social welfare.

When they left school, they were able to work effectively and settled down without expecting that they would need to return to education as I have said, until the recessions hit available employment. They had good application when they were working within their comfort zone and in amenable company and a good space.

Through the interview and analysis process, I got to know and understand the people who volunteered to share their experience with me. While being disinclined to criticise the system, the teachers or the syllabus directly, they made me understand at least some of the causes for their dropout and also some of the effects. I have looked at how the various 'conditions' in my interviewees' lives demonstrated the phenomenon which I was investigating, namely why, having decided to return to education and with very specific ideas and plans for outcomes, they then did not persist.

In the context of the thesis, this Chapter has shown that drop out has multi-causality, that it is at the interface between the person and the environment, since my interviewees were able to function effectively at work where the situation was suitable for them, and that eventually several of them came to terms with the education context, when they felt that they belonged within the tutorial group.

The findings also show that it is the intractability of the institution that is a major factor in their inability to persist, that they have learned over their lives that they are powerless, and they lack the skills to prevail in the face of authority. This is very clearly demonstrated by Len who was made to feel inferior because he could not manage a legal situation during his marriage breakdown. He felt that the structures of the state and the language and approach of the legal system were such that someone from 'his background' was excluded. He said 'one of the points I would like to bring in ..solicitors don't understand that there are people out there who have a learning difficulty'. I have found that this is one of the most frequent complaints by ABE learners - that authority figures for example doctors, or lawyers, use

completely incomprehensible language and that this reinforces the power imbalance in society.

I also found that their stories pointed out their comfort when they were in equilibrium – that when their performance did not differ from their peers, then they were quite comfortable to remain in work or in education. At one extreme, Nat stayed in school when he and his 'friends' just messed around, and at the other extreme Grace persisted in education within a mutually supportive group.

By this point in the thesis, I have made my case for investigating retention in ABE and why I wanted in particular to listen to the voices of students. From my research, I produced an explanatory framework 'seeking to belong in ABE', which will be discussed in the next Chapter. I learned that when these students did not feel that they belonged, they felt excluded both from the learning experience and from the other students who had the capacity to thrive in ABE. I also learned at least some of the conditions which they felt contributed to this exclusion and I want to go on to consider if these conditions would be ameliorated in an environment of care.

In the next Chapter, 6, I describe and discuss the process by which I arrived at the construct 'seeking to belong in ABE', which I felt to be a good explanatory framework arrived at by analysis of the data retrieved from the interviews conducted with students.

The process included diagramming – as Charmaz (2006) tells us, this can provide concrete images for our ideas - which I found to be very useful and from this I felt justified in theorising that the ability to belong in ABE was a result of the personality of the person in a supporting environment. In the second part of the Chapter I look in detail at the construction and content of the two major categories – self-concept and social context – which I believe to be in tension with one another in framing success or failure in ABE.

CHAPTER 6 - SEEKING TO BELONG: AN EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK ARISING FROM THE INTERVIEW DATA

Introduction to Chapter 6

This Chapter is about the 'seeking to belong' which is the Core Category of my theoretical framework[32] arising from the analysis of and grounded in my data. It was clear to me from the stories of these interviewees that they had long histories of alienation, from other members of their families, from school and especially at the times when they dropped out from ABE. My analysis showed that their personalities and the social conditions both contributed to this alienation and to encourage them to persist would require change on the part of the provider and additional support at times when they found difficulty.

The interviewees described this 'need to belong' in relation to their experience of ABE. They wanted to feel comfortable - at home, respected and valued in the education setting and reported that when they had this experience they found it possible to persist in ABE, however when they did not, they left provision. I came to understand that this feeling of disconnection did not arrive unheralded at ABE, but that layers of their lived experience led them to this point. There was a cluster of stories with similar themes, which pointed to difficulties in their early lives and families, and in their primary education. My question was, could I connect these situations with subsequent non-performance in ABE?

Initially, in this Chapter, I wish to explain how through careful analysis of my data, I achieved a theoretical framework. Three parts follow – the first 'process', in which I show how the different elements in my research came together, the second shows how I arrived at the substantive theory 'seeking to belong in ABE', and the third part describes what the interviewees told me would have made their experience of ABE more welcoming.

[32] Diagram P. 183

From explanatory to theoretical framework

Willig (2008) says that an explanatory framework provides a space within which one can understand the phenomenon under investigation and Stern (1994:215) says that it will explain 'what the interactants see as their social reality'. Assuming that the research participants believe that what they share is reality, and because the grounded theorist does not come to the table with preconceived ideas, then the explanation has to come from the information given by interviewees, interpreted by the researcher. Denscombe (2010:118) tells that 'put rather simply, the theory is shaped by the facts and therefore there should be a good fit'.

Thus in Chapter 4, I described how I used grounded theory methods to analyse the information provided to me by my interviewees and then, in Chapter 5, I linked instances of disconnection from my interviewees' life stories across different conditions and thereby achieved an explanatory framework which would answer, to my satisfaction, why it was that the people I interviewed did not persist in ABE.

I was quite happy with this label 'explanatory framework', which I have used up to this point in the thesis. However, Charmaz (2006:168) suggests that a 'theoretical framework' which has a broader scope, will 'refine, extend, challenge or supersede extant concepts'. While I did not see my framework extending extant concepts, indeed my findings suggest that we have known how to support these learners for rather a long time, I do believe that it meets the other criteria she suggests, in that my data have been linked back into the literature, throughout Chapter 5, that I make my constructivist position clear and that I make no excuse for taking a liberal position in education. Within a theoretical framework, Charmaz says that the way you code and name concepts in constructivist grounded theory 'locate your manuscript in relevant disciplines and discourses'. Finally she says 'Theoretical frameworks are not all alike. They need to fit your intended audience and to fulfil the task at hand'. I believe that my 'explanatory framework' which arose from my interpretation of the data in the analysis, developed into a 'theoretical framework' as the data were examined in the light of existing theories and synthesised in Chapter 5 and should, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, inform providers at all levels, those who conceptualise, design and deliver literacy tuition for adult learners.

I propose, first, to show how this *process* of theorising worked, from data to codes, codes to axial codes, to categories, to the core category, by showing how I labelled and sorted data into an explanatory framework which would answer the question 'Why do students not persevere in ABE?'. Emerging themes and conditions were linked back into the data, enabling me to 'theorize how meanings, actions and social structures are constructed'. (Charmaz 2006:151). I have used diagrams to illustrate my process. Charmaz says, (p.118) that using diagrams at all points in the analysis help visualise connections within a category, to make connections between categories.

By the end, I decided that the two categories, Self-Concept and Social Context in tension with one another can, within a positive environment lead to belonging, but in a negative environment, lead to exclusion. In analysing the data I found that my interviewees described times in their lives when they felt 'part of' rather than 'apart' and in this condition they were in charge of situations, coping well. I also felt very strongly that this positive or negative experience had to do with the tension between the personality of the individual and the support, or otherwise, within the specific environment. Thus, it is my theory that my interviewees strove to succeed, but could not because they did not fit – their search was not just for education, but also they were searching to belong.

In the second section of this Chapter 'Explanatory Framework'(p.183) I describe and analyse the component parts of my theoretical framework and discuss the two major categories which arose from my analysis of the data – Self Concept and Social Construct. I look at the components of each of the categories and consider where they interface and why it is that a positive experience at that point supports persistence and a negative experience may precipitate drop out. I examine the importance of self-esteem in the learning experience and, finally set the elements of my explanatory framework into their theoretical context and thus achieve a theoretical framework.

In the third part of this Chapter, 'Articulating Learner Need', on page 195, I consider that, since the explanatory framework which I developed suggests that persistence is inhibited at the interface between the provider and the learner, I need to explore how my interviewees described elements in the provision of ABE which, if altered, would make a substantial improvement in their experience of adult

education. I consider their needs and consider how they might be satisfied in an environment of care in education.

Part 1: The process of theorising - from data to explanation

I have described how, at a number of times during the analytic process, I almost became overcome by the enormity of the task at hand, combined with my on the job learning of grounded theory. It seemed to me at this time that I needed to stand back in some way from all the data, to gain an overview. In similar situations, I have used a Wordle© wordcloud which I find focuses one's attention on key words. I understand that the wordcloud is not a perfect solution since its focus is on frequency of use of words, rather than emphasis, but I find it to be a useful tool. White (2014:1) suggests that a word cloud is 'a useful adjunct' in data analysis, but should be used as part of, not instead of, careful analysis. This point is also made by Ramsden et al (2008) . At this point in the process, I entered all the codes I had attached to the interview texts as an rtf file, and produced a Wordle© wordcloud. This is shown on p.179 and illustrates the interviewees' focus on belonging, their description of their feelings, the importance of family and school – very much what I had understood them to say, when I was working through the data.

I then progressed into using diagrams to link the various concepts which I had named during the data analysis, into concepts and sub-concepts. Looking all the time at the interview texts, using my memos and the four written sections concerning family, school, work and ABE, I constructed a 'messy diagram' Clarke, (2009:212) of concepts - shown on P180 . Clarke says that such maps lay out the elements in the research situation and 'provoke analysis of relations among them', She further suggests that working through the map and making linkages may also suggest where there are gaps in the data. Clarke suggests that the researcher makes many copies of messy diagrams, because several will be discarded, and this was certainly so, in my case, but eventually I was satisfied that I had grouped codes in reasonable order to move on to the next stage.

From this diagram, I then sorted the concepts into groups which refined the number of categories I had - to move the work forward towards constructing fewer, more inclusive, more manageable categories. As I explained in Chapter 4, this was a very long and tedious procedure, since many sub categories could relate to several of the

broader categories. During this process I again made use of the memos which I had written up as I was coding the data and connected them together to rationalise the axial codes which I selected. Lempert (2010:253) says that memos will record one's 'idiosyncratic' approach to theory development, but they also spark ideas for researching literature which can be used as part of the theory development process. This diagram is shown on P.181 and the example of a theoretical memo 'feelings' is shown in Appendix p.250.

From this information, I gathered the codes under axial codes, axial codes into categories which formed my explanatory framework and led to the core category 'seeking to belong', which was my substantive theory. Lempert (2010:246) says that a substantive theory covers 'an empirical area of sociological enquiry specific to group and place', and I believe that since my objective in this research was to discover why these learners did not persist in ABE, then mine was a substantive theory.

The diagrams on the next pages describe this process, visually.

- Diagram 1, is a Wordle© wordcloud, which is a diagrammatic representation of all the data codes I collected on MAXQDA (p.179)
- Diagram 2 is the original 'messy diagram' which shows the codes (180)
- Diagram 3 is a more collected diagram which shows how I grouped the codes under what I decided were axial codes.(181)
- Diagram 4 shows relationship between belonging and the two categories, Self Concept and Social Context. (182)
- Diagram 5 shows how I organised the Explanatory Framework (183)

family
feeling
school
education
work
support
describing
feelings
good
able
mother
different
wanting
relationship
change
self
ability
society
esteem
time
blaming
place
felt
skills
experience
poor
reason
seeing
social
perceptions
illness
taking
leaving
teacher
life
ABE
special
system
basic
changing
involvement
now
children
Family
sister
responsibility
strategies
access
cope
back
daddy
stratification
literacy
help
husband
treatment
getting
important
failure
feels
enough
reasons
supported
passive
things
without
sees
strong
improvement
behind
Work
mention
decision
sense
contradiction
perceptions
attention
primary
mother's
problem
reading
avoiding
illiteracy
difficulties
difficult
disempowered
power
remember
class
much
father's
child
teachers
methodologies
stating
learning
working
School
home
else
job
behaving
succeeding
low
young
charge
contradicting
new
putting
Category
treated
better
needing
adult
Education
value
history
story
outside
conditions
importance
coping
situation
means
lack
looking
secondary
Liam's
Liam
bad
Early
skill
personal
happy
expectations
really
need
managing
making
differently
difficulty
within
involved
others
remembering
tutor
needs
early
liking
saying

Diagram 1

MESSY DIAGRAM

Diagram 2

SEEKING TO BELONG

SELF CONCEPT				SOCIAL CONTEXT	
TEMPERAMENT	GENDER	FEELINGS	EXPERIENCE	POWER HIERARCHY	SOCIAL NORMS
PERSONALITY	JOBS	CHAOS	DISRESPECT	EDUCATION	EXPECTATIONS
POWERLESS	ROLE	BLAME	CURRICULUM	SOCIETY	EMIGRATION
QUIET	PARENTING	NEED SUPPORT	RELATIONSHIP	TRADITION	RURAL/URBAN
ESTEEM	PROVIDING	STRESS	DISEMPOWERED	TEACHING CURRICULUM	PREDICTED EMPLOY.
UNCERTAINTY	HOME	DISRUPTION	DECISION MAKING	ISOLATION	SECRECY
ILLNESS	FAMILY	RELATIONSHIPS	WORK	PUNISHMENT	LOCATION
DEVELOPMENT		DIFFERENCE	ACCESS	POWERLESSNESS	INSECURITY
MOTIVATION		SHAME	COMPARISON	MARGINALISATION	PARENTING
STRESS		FRUSTRATION	SUPPORT	STRATIFICATION	POVERTY
HEALTH		EMBARASSMENT	SKILLS	CHURCH	HOME
		C0NNECTED	FAMILY SIZE	DISADVANTAGE	DISCONNECTION
		HAPPY	DISCRIMINATION	PUNISHMENT	NEGLECT
		BELONGING	DISRUPTION	DISEMPOWERED	DIFFERENT
		DIFFERENT	ISOLATION	SCHOOL	PERCEPTION
		ISOLATED	POSITION IN FAMILY	SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS	PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY
		EXCLUDED	OPTIONS	DECISION MAKING	PROVIDING
		SEPARATENESS	CHILDREN		
		ALIENATION	CORPORAL PUNISHMENT		
		CONNECTION	UNCERTAINTY		
		PERSONALISING	DISRESPECT		

CONDITIONS; CARE; BELONGING; COMMUNICATION; CHANGE; EXCLUSION; DISCONNECTION; BARRIERS

Diagram 3

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL CONTEXT AND SELF ESTEEM

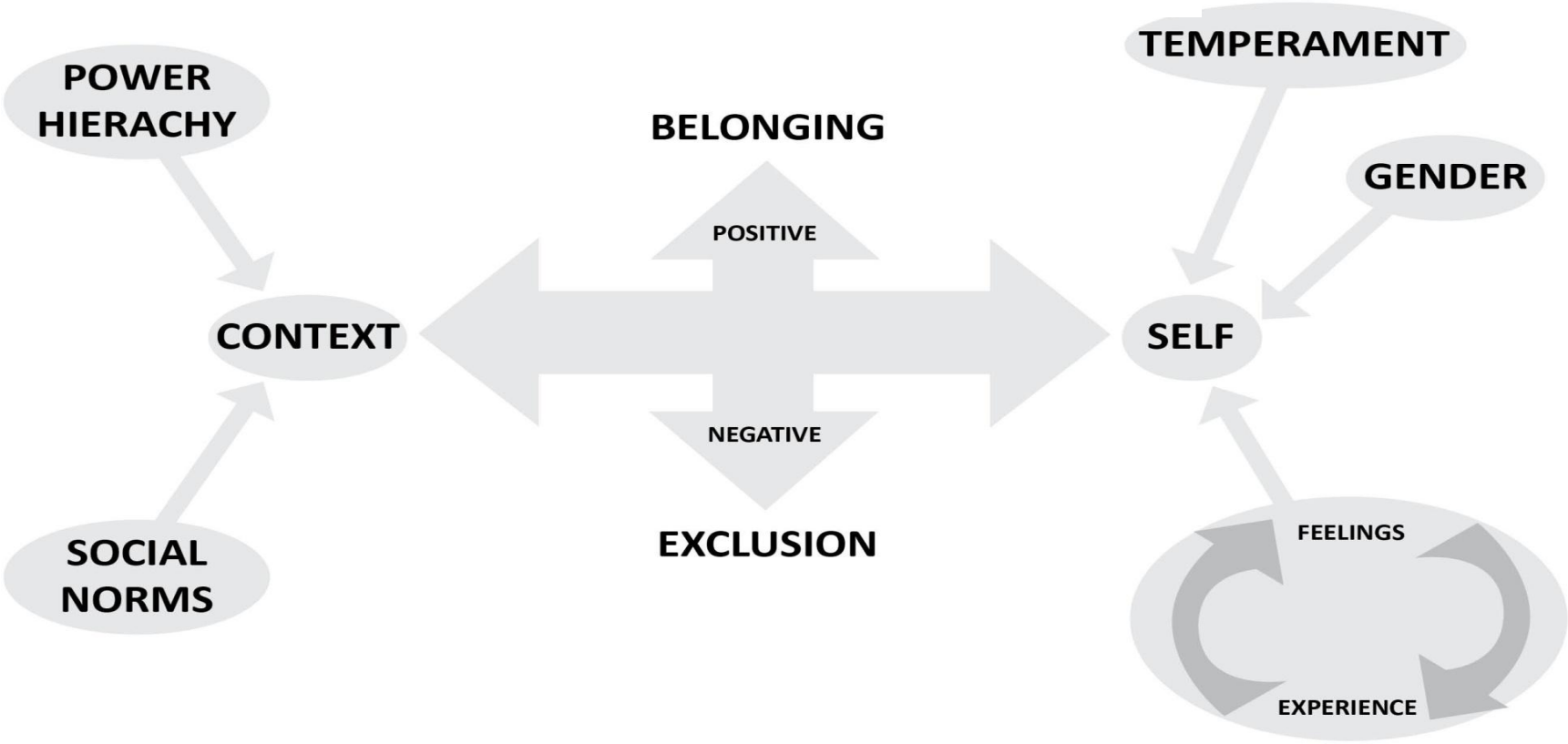

Diagram 4

Theoretical Framework

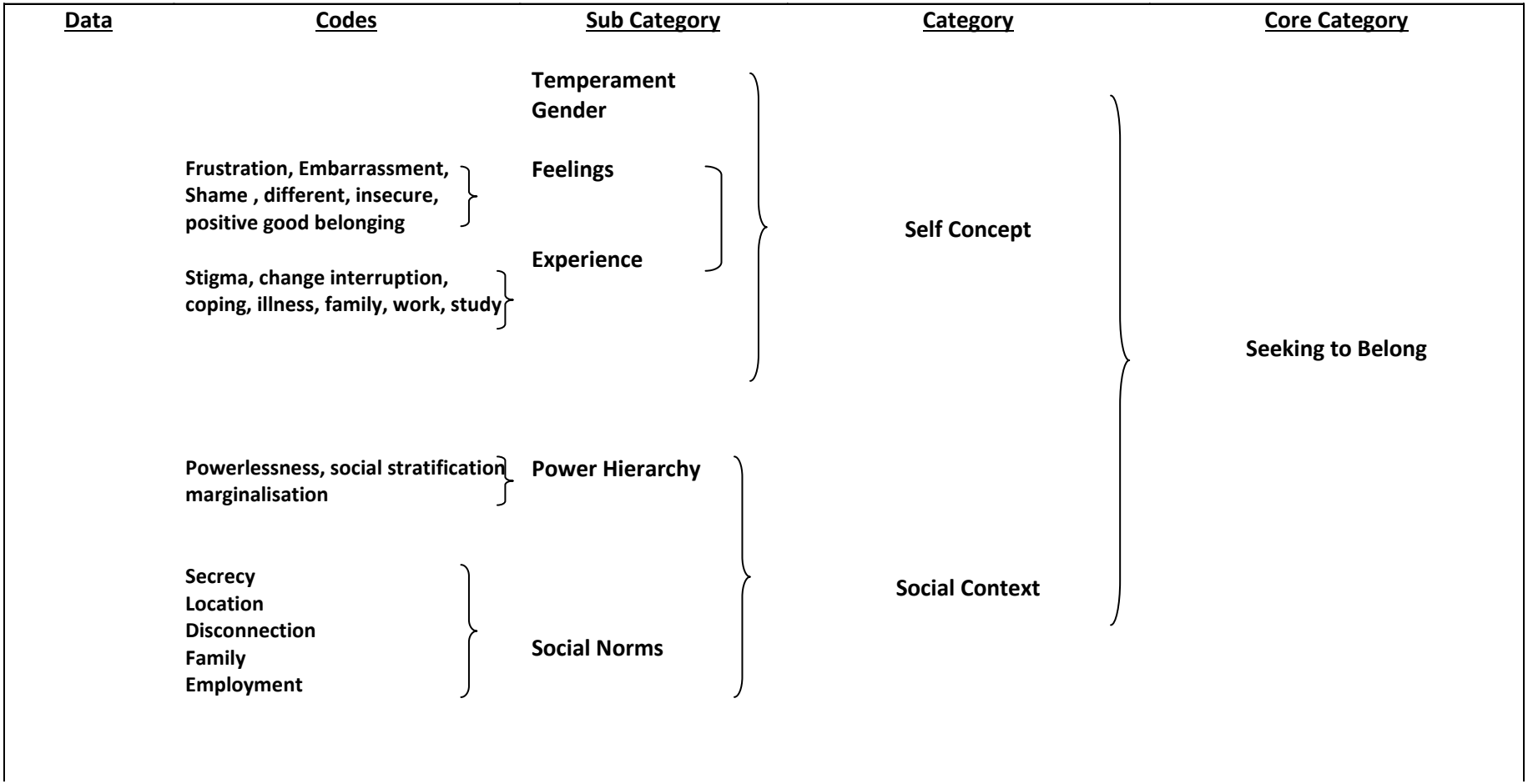

Diagram 5

Part 2: The Explanatory Framework, the theoretical context – and the substantive theory 'seeking to belong in ABE'

In Part 1, of this Chapter, I described how I achieved a framework that answered, to my satisfaction, why these students did not persist in ABE - they left when or if they felt excluded and that this exclusion was as a result of negative experience in the interface between the person and the context. In this section I want to discuss how the elements of this framework are corroborated by existing theoretical studies.

It is important to reiterate that this research, because it was approached from a constructivist grounded theory methodology, sought to develop a framework that would describe what Stern (1994:215) says 'interactants see as social reality'. The framework which I developed, shown diagrammatically on p.183 answers my research question 'Why do learners not persist in ABE?' and outlines the elements of my Core Category – seeking to belong in ABE.

The two major categories of the framework are Self-concept, built on learners' descriptions of the way they see themselves, as individuals, and Social Context, built on their experience of society in particular environments. However, these two categories do not exist in isolation, but in interaction with one another, for example a child's trouble with early education arises not only with the child, but with the child in *interaction* with the education system. What we are seeing is the relationship between their behaviour and their context. This interaction is well described by Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Systems Theory which gives reasons for developing different patterns during the lifespan and in various environments. Using his framework, I could see that my interviewees' difficulties became clear in terms of their interaction with the Microsystem – home, family, peers and school - and, later, the Exosystem where they had to handle changing patterns of work and the economy.

Before I consider in detail the major categories and describe the interaction between them shown in my explanatory framework, I wish first to consider the importance of self-esteem and self-confidence in the equation. In diagram, P. 182 I show that for these interviewees, a negative experience in education might lead to their isolation and drop out. Part of this negative effect, also, must be a negative impact on the

person's self-esteem, which as we shall see inhibits the person's ability to achieve, which further impacts on self-esteem. A classic vicious circle. I therefore believe that confidence is a very important element in the learning experience and will be enhanced within an environment of care, illustrated later in this Chapter.

It is very difficult to differentiate between self-confidence and self-esteem and the terms are often used interchangeably. Certainly, the people I interviewed did not differentiate between them. What is clear, though, is that they are inextricably linked with better performance overall and, as we are discussing here, in particular with education. Niks (2003) suggests that agency 'the ability to act in the world' seems to be a key factor in the learning of learners with little formal education. It's about being able 'to do' and having the confidence 'to do'.

It is generally held that self-esteem is an overall feeling about oneself, whereas self-confidence is about ones sense of capacity in a given situation. There was a very good example of that difference in Angela's story about being able to do a maths problem herself, but unable to do it in front of the group. In a much more general way, students frequently tell that they can read, but they can't read out loud. From a tutor perspective, it seemed that self-confidence and self-esteem are part of the same thing, and that 'confidence contributes to self-esteem, suggesting that confidence builds self-esteem' (NIACE, 2004:29).

NIACE (2004) asked a number of learners what they considered 'self-confidence' to be: they were told it had to do with feelings; it had to do with the ability to 'do' things – sometimes in front of others; had to do with talking; had to do with specific places and occasions. They were very clear that low confidence was implicated in isolation and poor relationships. I was told by interviewees that they wanted to belong, but did not seem to be able to, which seems to point to a circular relationship between 'belonging' and 'self-esteem', just as there is a circular relationship between 'success' and 'self-esteem'.

There is a generally felt idea that self-esteem grows with successful experience of education and Payne (1996) and Carpentieri et al (2007) among others describe the growing confidence of workers within a training programme. There seems again, to be a circular relationship between learning, growing self-esteem, more learning,

more self-esteem. The INTO[33] (1995), Mead (1934),Goffman (1959), Erikson (1968) all believe that a person's self-concept is dependent on environment, and we have seen that my interviewees' environment had been unsupportive in their early lives, therefore we cannot be surprised that they lack self-esteem. Honneth (1995(a) quoted in West 2013) tells us that self-confidence is 'facilitated in the attentiveness and legitimacy – in short the recognition – provided by the other.' AONTAS (2009) see that supporting improvement in self-esteem is the priority in community education, through the tutor recognising and affirming the skills of the learner.

I have learned from my interviewees that they had negative images of themselves and it is my feeling that this seriously inhibits their chances of succeeding in second chance education. According to Bandura (1994), it is necessary for learners to have what he calls *Self-Efficacy* in order to succeed in education, it is this sense of being able to achieve which encourages someone to approach a difficult task, without it, they are not likely to make the approach. Knowles (2000) argues that without positive self-esteem, learners will be unable to function in adult education, incapable of self-direction or capable of deciding what they would like to learn.

The importance of belief in generating successful interactions is stressed by Bandura (1977), Rotter (1972) and others. Rotter in particular believes that a person will act in a way that she believes will serve her well. We see, therefore, that assisting learners to positive belief in themselves will help them succeed in education. Unfortunately, as Maclachlan & Tett say 'For many the unsettled, often chaotic nature of their lives will militate against them attaining their dreams' (2008:40)

Beder (1991) and Quigley (1997) observe that society labels literacy learners and I certainly found that the people I interviewed felt themselves stigmatised in terms of their poor literacy and went to great lengths to hide it. No surprise, therefore, that they do not feel good about themselves. Baker & Lynch (2012) observe how people with low literacy levels are disregarded by society, and this would have been the experience of my interviewees. A good example of this is also presented by Maggie Feeley (in Baker et al *ibid*) who describes people who had been in institutional care, needing literacy support and feeling this neglect having a 'huge impact'(p.7).

[33] Irish National Teachers' Organisation

However, how we deal with learners who come to our programmes with poor self-esteem and their consequent sense of impending failure is important in helping them to succeed. An answer can be found, I believe, in the concept of care in education, discussed later.

Two major categories

I wish now to consider the two major categories, Self-concept and Social Context, since I believe that I have shown that the tension between them in a positive direction will facilitate persistence, but in a negative direction will reduce self-esteem and lead eventually to isolation and drop out. See diagram, p. 182.

Self- Concept

The category 'self-concept', encapsulates how the interviewees saw themselves and this view of themselves was central to how they interacted with their worlds. A self-concept is made up of the image – physical and mental – we have about ourselves and which we have collected and developed in our lifetime. This view may be right or wrong and it certainly is not absolutely fixed, since we can and do change our beliefs and behaviour in the light of life experience. We also have different self concepts and behave differently in different contexts – Len says that it is extremely difficult to behave assertively in relation to the law, and I suspect that we all share this belief. From the data, I determined that the core category 'self-concept' was made up of four categories 'temperament', 'gender', 'feelings and experience', which together with their sub-categories are illustrated on page 181. My purpose in the rest of this section is to consider my interviewees' descriptions of their development and environment, resulting in their need for additional support in education and greater likelihood of drop out.

Temperament

As I have said, earlier, I do not think that I should get into the debate around 'nature' vs. 'nurture', but I think it can be safely argued (Buss and Plomin, 1975, Rowe, Almeida and Jacobson, 1999, Rothbart, 2000) that children have temperamental traits in infancy which can be observed throughout childhood and into adulthood. Rothbart et al (2000) discuss how 'basic temperamental processes' can be observed in childhood and remain throughout the life span. They look at how temperament,

which they acknowledge is a 'genetic endowment', will affect the interaction between the person and the environment. 'Individual differences in temperament have implications for development in infancy and childhood and they form the core of personality as it develops' (p.122).

The personalities developed by my interviewees in their families further evolved during their lives, so that through school, into work and thereafter in ABE, they reacted to situations, rather than managing them. For example, John left when he was frustrated, because he did not have the skills to communicate with his manager; Eileen did not manage when she had her difficulties with her tutor.

Cattell (1957) and Allport (1961) both suggest that inherent traits in the personality are relatively stable over time, whereas Mischel (1968), Pervin (1993) and Epstein & O'Brien (1985) see human behaviour as internal. Pervin says (p.81) a result of 'processes inside the individual – how the person perceives and even overcomes the situation, as well as how he is coerced by it'. Thus behaviour is constructed through the interaction of the innate temperament of an individual in interaction with outside experience in a specific situation. It is difficult to discern whether the temperament is paramount to the environment, or *vice versa* (Diamond, 1957, Kagan, 1991, Zentner, 2008;). It is possible, for example that within an unsuitable home or school environment a tendency not to persist might continue, but could be ameliorated in a more supportive home environment (Thomas, 1986), or exacerbated by inappropriate caretaker response.

If we look at how the personalities of several of the women developed – as an example, Eileen and Angela were unwell and needed a lot of support when they were small and this need for support still remained when they were adults – they still rely on their family support and they have not learned to stand up for themselves. Angela will leave tuition when she feels that she is not up with the group, rather than discuss with her tutor the fact that she cannot cope. Eileen still uses her mother as being the buffer between the provider and any difficulty that she has in school. Bernie still hears her mother's voice criticising her efforts. Angela learned from her family that she could not expect consistency, her needs were ignored 'for her own good', her father took over her problem when she was at work and did not involve her in the solution, so she still does not trust people around her. She left ABE because she felt she held other students back.

Al Hendawi (2013) in her review of the literature surrounding temperament in educational settings (mostly early education), states how important it is that the learner's temperament is compatible with the school environment for positive outcomes, and that the learning environment should work *with* and not against the child's temperament. As Mullola (2014:148) opines, 'it is difficult to determine where innate tendencies end and learned behaviours begin'. We can see, therefore, that experience will play a role in adult intellectual development – see Tennant (1995:67) who says 'cognitive dimension of adulthood emerges as a complex and multifaceted combination of experience, wisdom, practical intelligence, tacit knowledge and common sense'.

When considering the question whether childhood temperament might cause or affect problems with adult education, then the answer probably is that the inherent characteristics of the person and the situation in which they find themselves both have effect. Fleming (2008) suggests that a child's experience of attachment will influence an adult reaction to stress, such as their ability to handle change or stress. As Pervin says 'our behaviour certainly is different in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and yet generally there is at least some sense of continuity and stability in a person' (1993:170)). I think that I can observe that because of the chaos in my interviewees' early lives, then in maturity they found it difficult to have strong self-esteem, and consequently difficult to manage well in second chance education. Unfortunately, it appears from my interviewees' interface, particularly with education, both primary and adult, that they were unable to develop a sense of their own wisdom and therefore unable to trust their own knowledge.

Gender

Jobs for the boys, jobs for the girls! Part of the socialisation that went on in the interviewees' lives was the expectation of different roles for girls and for boys. This of course was represented to them in their families and particularly when they went to school, where single gender education was the norm, work was also categorised as gender specific and they expected to conform as they reached adulthood. It was significant that in several families, for instance in Will's, Len's and Nat's, the girls were expected to continue at school, whereas the boys were not. The rationale seemed to be that the girls might need to have literacy, but boys could make their way without.

I have gone into detail in Chapter 5, about how girls expected to go into factories and to leave work when they got married or had children. This model was consistent with a society within which there were enough unskilled jobs for men to earn enough to support their families and within which there was little overt marriage breakdown. The people I interviewed, however, were on a cusp of society development where things changed – jobs became redundant, women expected to have some independence of their own and to have work, if they chose, after marriage. As West (1995) says 'male, linear, biographical certainties disintegrate'. In fact, in the way that society developed, it became easier for some women to get work, rather than the men to get unskilled labouring jobs. This posed a fundamental alteration in lifestyle and must have been threatening.

Feelings and experience

So far, I have examined how the interviewees described coming to adult education with personalities which did not fit easily into an education environment. Hereafter, I wish to examine how they handled their life experience, culminating in their dropout from adult education. In this section I address feelings and experience, because as I have already explained in the Methodology section, experience had a very strong effect on their feelings.

I have labelled 'Embarrassment, Blame and Shame' together, because the interviewees seemed to use the terms interchangeably to indicate their bad feelings in being unable to cope with literacy. The feelings seem to have developed very early in the interviewees' lives and been reinforced by happenings during school and in their personal lives.

For example, Alice received free books because her father was unemployed, she felt stigmatised because of that, but additional stigma because she could not read. 'It wasn't right, it wasn't a good system'. What made her feel 'dreadful' also was that 'everybody' would know that they were poor – because she and her sister had to share the free books. Interestingly, she does not report if anyone else in the class had free books – just herself and her sister – and she notes that her sister did not feel as badly about them. Len talks about how embarrassed he feels at having to ask people to read for him particularly in a legal situation and the embarrassment is exacerbated by the people whom he has to ask for help, perceived to be from a different, superior,

social class. Len talks about keeping secret the need to go to a special school 'Years back if people had to go to St. B's you were labelled 'stupid''.

Social stigma from poverty resulted in a defensive position and was exacerbated by the tendency to hide illiteracy and blame themselves. Furthermore, not having the money to be part of what was going on caused them to take an isolated position, to stay apart from the group and, not being part of the group, unable to benefit from it. Len still seems to feel that poor literacy and lower social status are worse than 'just' low social status. It also appears that stigma attaches to poor literacy and this stigma attaches to the person, rather than to the society which allows illiteracy to develop. This has reference to his life in his family and early schooling, in that he was 'afraid of falling behind'. Fortunately, he is able to say, now that since he met (teacher),' it doesn't embarrass me any more to talk about it'. Both Angela and Will talk about the stigma of a member of the family 'having' to go to special education and the family resistance, even though it was probably the best solution for them.

We have seen that many of them felt shame at their literacy difficulty, and that this shame made them less likely to persist in ABE. Bernie and Alice were both so determined that no-one would find out their 'dreadful' secret, that rather than let it happen, they dropped out of classes. All of the interviewees learned from early on that *they* were to 'blame' for their literacy difficulty. Teachers in their schools directly or indirectly labelled them as 'stupid' and they took this feeling with them into their lives. Inevitably, in second chance education, they blamed themselves for any failure and could not negotiate any effective change.

Conclusion of the section about Self-concept

In this section, I have shown that these interviewees described becoming a person who felt different and alienated from other people in their environment. They describe themselves as sensitive, vulnerable, unassertive – particularly so in education. We see that they are affected by prescribed gender roles in that certain expectations in behaviour and employment were heavily socialised. We have seen that the community and family expectations about secrecy made it difficult for them to admit to difficulty with literacy and we have seen that they bought into the stigma attached to illiteracy and blamed themselves for their failure to succeed in the education system.

The interactive nature of their experience is clearly shown, in that where their experience was positive they were able to feel that they belonged, where the experience was negative, they did not. We have seen that this lack of persistence impacted negatively on their self-esteem. It can be deduced that without intervention, and additional support, their personality would not be comfortable in the adult education provided for them.

In the next section, I examine their Social Context – using the labels I attached to the data gleaned from our interviews, to discover their world as they experienced it and discuss some of the reasons why they had more difficulty than others in their families and community in keeping up their place in ABE.

Social Context

Disconnection/Isolation

Perhaps because their society was so circumscribed, there was clear tradition of secrecy within the community and within the family, 'but nothing was ever talked about it, things did not really happen'. Thus, there seemed to be a logic to hiding literacy difficulties, because of the implication of stupidity, and consequent less likelihood of corrective action – even when to share would probably have made their lives more easy.

The stories they told me about when they had bad feelings about themselves frequently described isolation. Bernie, Alice and Len all had the experience of being placed apart from other children within the classroom, even to the extent of having different training materials. John separated himself through being so quiet. Angela felt disconnected when she went to her new school because she had different experience from the other children in her class.

Even within the family, as I described in Chapter 5, they had stories of being disconnected, for example Len didn't understand that his mother was ill, and he was quite resentful of not having her support. Alice did not understand that her sister had special needs and therefore required more help. Bernie talks about her success in overcoming the barrier she had, that anyone would know about her literacy difficulty 'I don't care (now) who sees me, or who knows' thus describing her enjoyment of and her freedom to continue in education.

Respect/disrespect

The learners to whom I was speaking were very sensitive around being treated with respect, as one might expect. They had many examples throughout their lives of being disregarded and isolated and therefore if they suspected that this happened within the ABE environment, they were extremely upset. For example where the curriculum was not respectful or relevant to adult learners, where the physical environment was unsuitable and where the teacher approach was inappropriate.

It is disrespectful to teach adults as if they were children, in fact it is probably disrespectful to teach children as if they were children, in the way that we were taught at school.

Powerlessness/stratification/marginalisation

This cluster of codes described how their world as they experienced it took power away from the 'little people' and maintained a strict social structure and authoritative approach. Thus, these codes form a cluster which encompasses for example, the treatment of sick children, the treatment of parents by the school, authority in the shape of politicians.

Because of relative poverty and the chaos that existed in their early family lives, the environment within which these people developed did not lead them to believe that they had autonomy, they felt that they and their families were powerless in relation to such things as health decisions or decisions about schools.

In particular, what had reference for my investigation, and which became very clear from my interviews was the fact that the interviewees did not feel that they had any power over the academic situation. Alice, for instance, believed that people were denied access to good education because of their poverty. Bad enough to have a difficulty in reading, how much worse that this difficulty would not be as great if you were middle class, since she observed that middle class children received more attention in the classroom.

This started from their families, of course, where there was no real tradition of being involved in children's education, was increased in most cases by their physical and mental exclusion during school and resulted in their not feeling that they could contribute to their own learning. For Will, for example, he is looking for a physical reason for his illiteracy, that there might be 'something wrong with my brain',

whereas he clearly did not have the level of support that he specifically needed. Len felt liberated from the stigma of stupidity when he had a diagnosis of dyslexia.

How they managed the school experience

The reason for this research is because these interviewees were unable to persist in education. This was, essentially, because they did not know what to expect and did not have the skills to find out. Education is about so much more than turning up at school, having a satchel, or indeed a uniform. There needs to be the expectation of achieving, there needs to be the support from the family and the society, there needs to be a purpose to education, not simply fulfilling the norm of going to school until you are fourteen, or sixteen, or eighteen, but a basic understanding of what education *is* and what education *is for*. Maybe we need, now, to have this conversation which should have been held a long time ago.

As McGivney says (1993:21) 'There is little doubt that the inaccurate view of education held by many members of the public' – she talks about 'inappropriateness and lack of relevance' – 'and the inaccurate view of adult learners held by many teaching staff' – here she cites stereotypical views of adult learners 'have contributed to keeping education and the majority of adults rigorously apart'. She also believes that, in attending adult education, working class people create a difference between themselves and their neighbours, because of their belief that education belongs to the 'culture pattern of higher socio-economic groups.'

We need to have a look at the model of education, and confess that in large measure what we still have, despite hopes and moves to the contrary is the unfriendly 'banking model', and which can account for the fact that the interviewees who were in and out of education during large parts of their lives, learned that they did not meet other people's criteria, and that they would fail.

Conclusion to the section about Social Context

In this section I have shown how these individuals came from a community that was marginalised to an extent because of poverty, and which had traditional attitudes to education, employment and the status of women. From this position they observed social stratification with, for instance teachers and the Gardai as being elite and their families having less value, being powerless and being treated with disrespect.

In particular, I learned that they had flawed interface with the education system, because of this powerlessness and the inability of their families to insist on suitable provision when they were children, their own inability to describe their needs when they were in ABE.

I move on, now, to describe their need to belong and the approaches which would have facilitated this belonging.

Part 3: Articulating learner need and discussing lack of care in provision

In this final part of this Chapter, I want to consider, first the elements in the ABE experience which with some attention would make a substantial difference to the education experience of these learners – improving communication, setting realistic expectations, attention to the tutor approach and providing additional support. In conclusion, I will describe how these elements are intrinsic to Care in Education and would provide a more welcoming environment for this cohort.

Communication

As I have already said, I believe my interviewees had very specific reasons for their decision to return to education and had hope for success. However, I believe that because of their unrealistic expectations and ineffective communication from the provider, that they were much less likely to succeed.

There are many examples of poor communication throughout their stories, in their earlier lives which result in their not really understanding what they were getting into in ABE, through unrealistic expectations of the programmes and nobody listening to their spoken and unspoken difficulties. One has to establish, however, a system through which learner needs are articulated, not rely on half-spoken, misunderstood messages.

For good communication, it is necessary for the sender to have a clear idea to send, that it should be transmitted clearly, using a suitable methodology, that the receiver be open to it and in a fit state to understand. We can see what a minefield this presents where learners have poor self-esteem and unrealistic expectations in

interface with an hierarchical organisation. Knowles (1984) stresses the importance of the learner being involved in the educational decision making.

Expectations

Murphy and Fleming (2000) look at the difficulties experienced by adult students going back into third level education and note a conflict between the language and approach of academics and the lived experience of the students which made their persistence in college very difficult. They describe a 'disjuncture' between student expectations of what was required of them and what the institution demands.

I saw that several of the people I interviewed really did not know what they had agreed to participate in when they joined ABE. This probably resulted from the fact that they were not used to being part of decisions within their families and certainly did not have any say in their initial schooling. On the contrary, there was no tradition of information sharing within their families, probably resulting from the culture of secrecy that I found, and the supremacy of parents and older family members. This tradition was continued in school, with the providers and the teachers in absolute authority over the pupils and consequent learning by the less able pupils of their place in the pecking order. 'Learning opportunities may be formally acknowledged as just that, as opportunities, but, inwardly, may be felt as threats.' (Barnett, 2002:15)

John really thought that he would acquire literacy easily. If he had been encouraged to look realistically, to set real goals, then he might not have been so frustrated that he fell out on a regular basis. As I was talking to the interviewees, it was quite apparent that they had not gone through a process of setting learning goals *for themselves,* nor had they gone through a sufficient process of appraisal. Personal learning goals would comprise an important element of an individual learning plan.

The tutor approach

Since my interviewees had had prior bad experience in the education system and of teachers, the impact of the tutor approach in ABE could not be underestimated. If the personality of the tutor is inimical, they will leave, because they make connections with their prior experience and are reluctant to persist. It is vital for

tutors to be able to look at their classes from the perspective of the learner, both from deciding what is going to be taught, but also the manner in which the material is given.

As Murphy and Fleming (2000) say, it is hard to think that an adult student will feel part of the organisation, if the attitude of a tutor disregards the value of their prior life experience, which in turn impacts on their self-esteem and chances of success in adult education.

Of course, this has implications for tutor training and the necessity of confidence in the tutor, but the payoff is terrific. I have an erstwhile colleague who tells me that her 'best' tutors are allocated to learners with the poorest skills and lowest self-esteem, on the basis that these tutors are best placed to fulfil the learner need, whereas newer, less confident tutors would find this more difficult. Bronfenbrenner (2006:1), talking about his position in Cornell, speaks about the importance of teaching as 'enabling students to experience the adventure'.

The need for support

John, Len and Bernie all described that they were unable to do their homework when they were small and would have needed support from home, which was unavailable to them. There seems to have been a general agreement that this was an important part of the mother role and where the mother was unable to help, then the children were unable to perform. 'you hadn't got the mother's instinct there when you got home from school, like'.

Alice acknowledges from this distance that nobody stood up for her with the teachers, when she was at school. She describes that her illiteracy is a result of not having the support she needed when she needed it. Moving on to ABE, John, Will, in fact most of the people I interviewed could point to situations in which they felt unsupported. It is hardly surprising that they therefore did not persist.

I have examined the data generated by the interviewees and have discovered reasons why they were unhappy in education and did not persist in ABE. As providers, we cannot intervene in such a way as to completely change the personality of our learners, however we might be able to propose a model of adult education which will give them the support they need.

Lack of care

In so many ways, the people I interviewed described lack of care on the part of the providers of education, from not following up when children decided to leave school early, to not paying attention to the fact that children were not learning, to punishing children for being unable to cope. They also described how particular acts of care, of respect, by individuals, within a group or through a supportive system, encouraged them to achieve their literacy goals.

Where the student's self-efficacy is insufficient to enable them to be self-supporting, then there is responsibility for the provider to ensure support and care. Bandura (1994) tells that we can encourage learning by encouraging 'mastery experience' – showing people that they can actually succeed and by modelling success.

Discovering what I believe to be a major contributor to non- persistence in ABE, has to do with what was 'not' there rather than what 'was'. It is my belief that there would have been much better persistence if there had been more care of the learners at critical times in their learning journey.

From disrespect to respect

I genuinely believe that the providers are very careful to deal respectfully with learners. Consequently I think that the only remaining possibility of disrespect in the interaction between them could come from misunderstanding of the position. I think that there is an example of this in Mary's story where she was very sensitive about being spoken to like a child and the tutor, presumably, did not pay sufficient care to the tone and content of her speech.

The learning is, always, the importance of being able to put oneself in the shoes of the listener. When this occurs, there can be no place for disrespect, or inequality.

From misunderstanding to communication

From the very start of the relationship between the potential learner and the provider, there need to be very clear lines of communication, beginning with a more in-depth diagnosis of the needs of the learner.

The IVEA (Clare Adult Learning Scheme, 2012) also stress the importance of this activity. However, it was very clear to me that in many instances and at the time the

interviewees were talking about, there were some serious deficits in the system that existed to include learners in decision making as Mezirow (2000:10) says 'searching for a common understanding and assessment'. At the present time the ALOA are involved on a national level in the production of an initial assessment framework which, if implemented will give literacy providers a tool to use at the beginning of a learner's interaction with the VEC, to frame the discussion and to collect in a meaningful way information required by the provider and needed by the learner.

John provides a classic example of a learner who joined a class, expecting that his learning experience would be easy and linear. When he found it was not, he left, and left feeling worse about himself than when he joined for the first time. We need to be very clear to learners exactly what will be involved and what sort of time scale.

There need to be frequent follow up sessions with real information exchange, not merely a tick-box arrangement and that the new information would inform an updated teaching programme. Students, tutors and the providers together need to be able to have conversations before, during and after the learning, to ensure that progress is achieved.

We have seen that, for various reasons, the interviewees were disinclined to feedback information to the provider, allowing situations to come to the point where they stopped attending. Because of their respect for the tutors, because they felt they were in receipt of a voluntary service, because worst of all, they felt that the providers would not understand, they left tuition.

From irrelevance to relevance

To encourage participation it is vital that the curriculum delivered to these learners should be part of and immediately applicable in their lives. This means that the curriculum should be flexible, should be founded in their lived experience and that the language should also be familiar, academic terms should be avoided.

Because the tutors very often have a completely different life experience from those they teach, it is important that they learn to make a 'safe space' (Fleming, 2008) within which they can share their learning experience. This compensates in some way for the social divide manifested in the stories of 'them' and 'us' (Quigley 84).

Green and Kostogriz (2002) would like us to look at sociocultural differences as a 'resource' rather than a liability. Using this method would certainly allow adult learners with difficulties to feel more at home where literacy learning would focus on making meaning within the social context.

Setting realistic goals

One of the most successful learners I ever encountered was a man who learned to write, so that he could keep in touch with his grandchildren in Australia. When he reached this level of competence, he decided to leave. When I remonstrated with him pointing out to him the benefit of literacy, he was quite clear that his reason for returning to ABE was to achieve this level of skill. *He did not need any more.* Here was someone who had a clear goal and a clear sense of personal achievement.

We need to ask people *why* they want to join ABE and to listen to *what* they want to achieve. In order to do this, maybe there needs to be more counselling during the recruitment process, to look at specific skills that they want to acquire, instead of a one-size-fits-all, examination based curriculum.

There needs to be an environment of mutual care and understanding. Will describes this environment, a relationship with a particular tutor who clearly had great respect for his abilities and aspirations, but had to leave – he says he 'lost' her. Unfortunately, this relationship was not replicated and was a major cause of his dropping out. What is so very sad is that this story only becomes apparent so long after he left the service.

Isolation to socialisation

It was clear that the interviewees responded well to being in a supportive group. A number of people said that they did not persist until they were in a group that was working well. John, Grace and Mary and Eileen were able to describe the benefit of being supported by their peers.

However, in some cases they were even more isolated in the group than working on an individual basis, particularly when they felt that they were being judged by their peers, it is clear that group formation and supervision need to be carefully monitored.

Since all the people I interviewed were unemployed and had histories of being unemployed, it is reasonable to expect that their levels of confidence were quite low, notwithstanding the fact that they also had poor literacy, which is strongly implicated in low self-esteem. Nat was the only interviewee whose strong self-esteem was not affected by his low levels of literacy.

Belonging to a supportive group will end isolation and insecurity and engender an improvement in self confidence to improve their learning.

From carelessness to care

The interviewees described many examples of carelessness in the provision they received from the VEC. In fact, each of the previous sections describes carelessness – allowing isolation, having irrelevant curriculum and incomplete communication. It is through addressing these problems that we can achieve an environment of care, which of course will enable the learners to truly feel as if they belong.

Within an environment of care, the tutors and providers generally would be prepared to work to put themselves in the place of the learner and ensure effective communication. It would be important that the curriculum would reflect the needs of the learner, and have well described, realistic goals and they would ensure that the learning environment was comfortable for the learners.

Unfortunately, with the present education model seeking for economic outputs rather than supporting the individual, funding will not be available to support the most marginalised learners in our education system. Where learning is predicated on care, then provision will be suitable and we will 'educate the whole person'

Conclusion to Part 3

At the end of Part 3 of this Chapter, I have articulated the learners' experience of disaffection within the existing model of ABE, which I believe arises from systemic misunderstanding of the needs of individual learners in the hope of providing a curriculum to satisfy the majority of learners, which as we have seen, will not satisfy this small cohort of more needy learners. The decision

which needs to be taken is whether or not these learners' needs are to be ignored or whether provision will be such as to satisfy all learners.

Conclusion - the need to belong

In this chapter, I illustrate my progress through the 'theorizing' (Morse 1994) stage in grounded theory, arriving at what I believe to be the 'best fit that explains the data most simply' (ibid, p.33). I have shown graphically how I used grounded theory method to sort the data I gained from the interviews conducted with these learners in order to arrive at a theoretical framework and the answer to my research question 'why did these students drop out of literacy provision?' which was 'they were unable to belong'.

While it might appear to be quite a simple answer, I have seen many causes of isolation and exclusion, told to me by my interviewees. Some are structural, because of the format of adult education provision which is predicated on functional provision; some are indirect, as a result of misunderstanding between the provision, the tutor and the learner.

I then discussed the origins of the two major concepts, Self-concept and Social Context and showed how the interaction between them is crucial to effective provision for all learners, and that every effort should be made to ensure that the experience is positive if we want to maintain the attendance of these learners in particular. As the situation described by them exists, they are not able to improve their self-esteem and it is my belief that without this improvement they will not be able to persist in ABE.

Finally, through describing what they considered to be the shortfalls in provision, I have a picture of what could be there to encourage their participation and am able to suggest that care in education would provide for them the support they need in order to succeed.

Reviewing my route to this point in the thesis, I have shown what I have discovered from the interviewees about their experience in ABE and how they could achieve where they felt they belonged. I have discovered that they have very strong views - which were previously unheard – about their disconnection from education and how provision could be improved to better suit their needs. With this understanding, in

Chapter 7, I move to the 'recontextualising' (Morse 1994:32) stage in grounded theory, where it is shown how acquired information could be applied in a different context. In this instance I reflect on how existing provision as it developed, was inimical to these learners resulting in their drop out and how, from the learner perspective, provision could be improved.

CHAPTER 7 – REFLECTING ON MY FINDINGS AND CONSIDERING THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PROVISION

Introduction to this Chapter

The importance of this research has been the focus on the voice of the participants, who are otherwise voiceless, in that they drop out of education, sometimes to return, sometimes not, but without being recognised or heard. Students who leave without completing courses are making a statement. I set out to discover with relation to these interviewees what the statement was, and some of the ways in which it could be answered.

In this Chapter, which I have structured in four parts, I reflect on the findings of my investigation and suggest how these findings might impact on current and future provision in ABE.

In part 1, 'Causes of drop out from ABE', I reflect on my findings in relation to the original aims of the study which was to discover, from the learners themselves why and where they found difficulty in persevering in adult education. As I have shown, there was no single cause, but there was a confluence of personal and educational conditions within the learning context which resulted in their inability to cope. In this section, also I will consider how my findings build on gaps I perceived in the existing Irish studies and I believe will contribute to provision going forward.

In part 2, 'The Learner's experience in interaction with the dominant model of education', I show how the findings emerged from a consideration of the learners' experience within the existing model of ABE. These stories provide the substance for part 3 'Implications of the findings for practitioners and the provider', in which I tell how learners believe changes in provision would have made it easier to persist, which of course provide important information for providers and practitioners. The final part of the Chapter, Part 4, 'Bringing Care into Education', concludes that my overarching concept - that a caring approach in education would have made these learners feel at home - has even more serious implications for the providers.

As I dealt with the literature during Chapter 5, so I do now, in that I introduced new literature as I felt I needed to, particularly sources about the importance and relevance of care to education, as I discuss the topics.

Another piece of the jigsaw

My research question sought to discover from the learners themselves why they found it difficult to persist in ABE. This arose from previous research (2005) which I conducted to consider the beneficial non-academic outcomes of adult education and at the end of which I felt that I had neglected students who did not complete their courses.

Before I set out on the research journey, in order to set my understanding of the retention problem within the frame of existing studies, I revisited the formative work by Cross (1981), who discussed barriers to Adult Education; by Tough (1976) and Knowles (1984) who suggested suitable teaching methods for adults; and by Mezirow (1996), who speaks about the importance of self-concept in adult learning.

In terms of more recent studies carried out in Ireland into ABE, I noted that their focus was on barriers to attendance, whereas this, present study has a focus on retention. Corridan (2002), Quish (2006), Byrne and Lawless (2008) captured elements of the life stories of their interviewees, but again, their focus was not on retention, unlike mine.

Important research in England and Scotland (Barton et al, 2007), Carpentieri et al (2007), Maclachlan et al (2008), Crowther et al (2010), in the mid 2000s considered the situation in ABE, in the light of investment by the government to alleviate the illiteracy problem and illustrated the complex mix of factors involved in delivering a satisfactory service within which learners will persist. They found that learners who are well motivated, who are learning subjects in the way that they find accessible and who are properly supported in their academic and personal lives are most likely to achieve their planned-for learning.

I therefore hoped that my study would build to some extent on these prior studies and provide another piece of information to add to the jigsaw of knowledge to help providers and tutors in arranging programmes that would inform and sustain their learners.

At the end of my study, I believe that I have identified some of the myriad personal and structural reasons why students drop out of ABE, arising from their personalities in interaction with the current provision. I believe that a consideration of these reasons will help providers understand this drop out and provide valuable information for those who seek for better persistence in ABE.

Part 1 - Causes of Drop-out from ABE

Coming from my work background in Adult Literacy, I had thought it might be relatively simple to discover from the students themselves why they did not persist. However, as McGivney (1993, 1998) tells us the temptation is for providers to take excuses at face value and may lead to complacency. During my research process, I found that it was in no way a simple question with a simple answer, but that non-persistence came from layers of their life experience, at home, in early education and in ABE, in which they had felt isolated or excluded. I felt that I had to use the opportunity of in depth interviews to overcome their tendency to tell the interviewer what she wanted to hear. Their described life experience resulted in personalities that had difficulties with change, were sensitive to poor communication and dealt with the difficulties by dropping out. On the other hand, their described experience when they had a sense of 'belonging' they characterised as successful and happy.

The decision I made to take a qualitative approach to my research allowed me to listen to and report the genuine voice of the learners and by allowing them to reflect themselves on situations in which they found it difficult to participate, it was possible to discover that the vulnerability and unpreparedness of the learner was frequently met by rigidity in provision rather than the flexibility which would encourage them to remain. My purpose has been to present the authentic voice of these learners who are frequently unheard and a major finding of my research was that they were very well able to articulate why they did not feel as if they belonged, when they were presented with an opportunity to reflect in depth on their experience and I have to ask the question why we have not listened to them before.

I invited them to start their interviews with some discussion about their families and background and it was clear that in general they had received little support from their families for education, either primary or adult, in fact for various reasons they had felt isolated within their families and they took this sense of isolation with them into

school. If we consider Bernie's example, her mother could not see that there was any value in education and kept her away from school to 'help' at home. Her mother's negative attitude continued into old age and continued to affect Bernie, pulling her down and belittling her efforts. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, Eccles (2004) and Gregory (2002) both see the importance of family support in motivating children to education. An interesting fact I discovered is that the people I interviewed, contrary to their parental example, bought into this idea of supporting their children, recognising the value of education, even though they had not had the support they needed.

Using grounded theory method, I developed an explanatory framework which showed that the feeling of alienation arose as a result of the tension between the personalities of the interviewees and the particular social environment at a given time. I found that they had a history of 'not belonging' and it was because of this history that they were more likely to drop out of ABE than other learners. This points to a training need for assessors and for tutors in order to discover, where possible, the most vulnerable applicants for courses and give them the attention and support they need, until such time as they are able to cope by themselves – this of course is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning. According to Maclachlan et al (2008), this level of support is required by students who have more than just literacy learning going on in their lives.

Belzer (1998) describes students as frequently dropping out from study, but suggests that we, as providers, should recognise this as not being a formal exit, and make it easy for them to drop back in when the time is right for them. The task of making it easy for learners to 'drop back in' or persist has been researched (Carpentieri,2007, Maclachlan,2008, Barton,2007, Crowther,2010 AONTAS, 2009) and it was found that the decision to persist has to do with where the learner is in her life, what plans she has for the future and that the curriculum provided is accessible and practical for them – all within a supportive environment. This explanation for persistence chimes very much with what I discovered and which is discussed below.

My explanatory framework, the elements of which are discussed in depth in Chapter 6, proposes that their individual personalities, adversely affected by early family and education experience, were particularly sensitive to poor communication and that they therefore were unable to come to terms with poor communication in the ABE

environment and apparent disinterest on the part of the provider. It seemed that their coping mechanism was to drop out of provision. However, since several of them had subsequently returned to ABE and successfully completed their programmes it was also clear that they were able, in a suitable environment, to overcome their difficulties.

Virtually all the theorists and researchers I considered for my literature review cited prior poor educational experience as a reason for poor performance in Adult Education and in my conversations with my interviewees this also arose as a major factor. A relatively early study - McGivney (1993) points to a correlation between low prior education and reluctance to return to education. My interviewees, sadly learned that they had no value at school, they were isolated from other pupils, ignored by teachers, even given poorer learning materials. It would be easy to believe that children now have a very positive experience of school, leading to openness to adult learning, but to read Fleming (2000) is to understand that there is still antipathy to education in poorer communities, which must be addressed if we are not going to have persistent problems with low educational achievement.

This part of the Chapter has been about considering some of the layers in my interviewees' lives which made them less likely to persist in ABE. We have seen that in their early lives, because of social conditions they developed fragile personalities which were further damaged by poor educational experience and isolation. With these traits they approached ABE and sometimes found that they were incorrectly assessed, that the curriculum was not suitable for them and that they found it hard to communicate. When I write the reasons in a single paragraph like that, it is hardly surprising that they found it difficult to persist.

The outcome of my research, therefore, is that these specific learners had fragile personalities as a result of their early family and life experience, allied to their relative poverty and social exclusion. Because they had some specific learning disability in literacy and lacked self-confidence, they were unable to deal with the rigid model of adult education presented to them and did not persist in ABE.

In the next section, I go on to consider how suitable they found the existing model of ABE, which is funded primarily to encourage people to develop skills suitable for work or further education.

Part 2 – The Learner's experience in interaction with the dominant model of education

In order to understand why the learners dropped out, it is necessary to understand how they experienced second-chance education, so this section will outline the background to adult education in Ireland and consider the implications of the dominant model.

Background

As described by my interviewees, and as things stand in adult education in Ireland at the moment, the model of education through which we expect adult learners to achieve is functional, that is to say that it is provided to meet the specific outcomes required by the funder. Any benefit to the person of the individual learner is a bonus, not the intention. Unfortunately, my interviewees did not feel comfortable in this milieu, they needed far more personal support in order to function effectively and this higher level of personal support needs more resources. In Chapter 5 I discussed their experience of feeling isolated, their sense that their views were not being counted and that gradually they just stopped attending and eventually dropped out.

These members of our society have not been given equal treatment, or equal access to educational opportunity which perpetuates discrimination.

It is ironic that higher levels of support are provided, privately paid for, to those in our community who have the most resources, and those who stand in danger of lawbreaking. Families who can pay for private education with small classes – according to the DES (2013), fee paying schools in the Republic of Ireland have up to €3000 discretionary spend per pupil more than state schools, which they can use to 'employ additional teachers' 'employ additional ancillary staff'(p.11). At completely the other end of the spectrum, the National Behaviour Support Service (2009) call for individual support for children exhibiting serious anti-social behaviour 'to maximise a student's chance of success' (p.16). Murphy and Fleming (2004) note that a DES intervention, Youth Encounter Projects, again with low student/teacher ratios are provided to assist students in danger of becoming involved in crime. It is the marginalised who do not know how to speak out for themselves who are neglected.

We have, as a society to decide whether this is a situation we believe should continue.

We differentiate between liberal education and vocational training, with a formal structure for each, the curriculum geared to support students to 3rd Level whether for practical or theoretical subjects. There is now, also, a Leaving Cert. Applied course which does not enable students into 3rd Level immediately, but encourages them to PLC as the next step on their learning journey. Smith & McCoy (2009) state that 90 percent of children from professional backgrounds complete the Leaving Certificate, but only 65 percent of children from manual background do so. This discrepancy is also apparent in the level of results received, with 50 percent of students from professional backgrounds achieving 4 or more 'honours' versus 16 percent from manual backgrounds.. The obvious reason for this is that either a professional's children are more intelligent or the way in which they are educated facilitates their achievements. Reay (2006) says that even now the middle classes in England reproduce themselves through education. 'Not only do they run the system the system itself is one which valorises middle rather than working class cultural capital' (Ball, 2003 in Reay (2006)

Lynch (1988, 1996, 2002,2005,2006) has been keeping a critical eye on how we in Ireland maintain inequality in educational achievement, to keep the 'best' schools for the children of those in our society who have most. In Reproduction in Education (1988:152) she maintains that 'schools are partisan. They reproduce inequalities through the unequal treatment of pupils'. This, of course, was the experience of the people that I interviewed, so not a lot has changed since they were in education from the 1970s.

If the person is the focus of the programme, and with good communication, then their needs are far more likely to be satisfied. This, centrality of the learner needs to be real, not just lip service, and this will need fundamental change in the nature and teaching of literacy - for example. It was very clear from my interviews that it is essential that we tailor learning plans to the individual learning need.

Tough (1976) talks about people being able to learn by themselves and Casey's (2009) training programme for literacy learners was also largely self administered, with all the benefits that accrue, for example, freedom from commitment to attend at

classes. However, I found that my interviewees felt that they were more successful in interaction with other learners when they felt that they were equally skilled, and the group support was absolutely crucial. I argue, therefore, that a certain level of literacy is necessary before learners are able or willing to work autonomously.

Murtagh (2004:48) describes Adult Education as being 'at the margin of the education service' in many VECs and I think that we can safely argue that in many instances the Literacy Service is at the margin of the margin. Murtagh further sees the importance of integrating adult education services 'to make a seamless education service for the public and to move adult education from the margins to the mainstream at the institutional level'. The DES (2000) also talk about seamless movement through education, but unfortunately the provision is fractured.

What is necessary is to provide support at the point of interface between the learner and the provider which will deliver specific support where learners find difficulty.

Disconnect between the dominant model and fragile learners in ABE

In this section, I want to consider in more depth, from a historic and current perspective how it was that the model of adult education provided was not suited to the interviewees.

In ABE, we were wont to say that the most difficult step in returning to education was the steps up to the administration, or applying to do a course. What became apparent, however, was that my interviewees completed this step and started off their courses with high hopes, only to discover that they could not complete them for various reasons. I have described, elsewhere in this thesis that the interviewees seemed to have a very relaxed approach to and relationship with their local VEC, and that their difficulties emerged when they found their requirements inimical to the provision, for varied reasons. These are resilient people, as I discovered, who have come through some very difficult times in their personal lives, and yet they were not resilient enough for second chance education – a good and sufficient reason for this investigation, I think.

The VECs were established by the state to provide education 'continuation and technical' (Department of Education,Vocational Education Act, 1930) – work related skills at post-primary level for students. It needs to be remembered that the academic

system reinforced the social stereotypes of the community and the projected career path of students, some headed for unskilled work, some for trades, some for academic outcomes. Bourdieu (1990) sees this as the system replicating existing power relations. It is my belief that the structure of education provision delivered to the interviewees in primary education and subsequently in adult education encouraged them to be quite narrow in their expectations of themselves and to judge themselves harshly.

This means that *ab initio* there was a fixed and rather rigid bureaucracy with rules and regulations that do not necessarily make space for the individual needs of an individual student, particularly students who lack self-efficacy. While acknowledging this individual need - 'the needs, concerns and experience of the learners are the focus of learning' (NALA, 2005:11), the 'learner rather than the provider is at the centre of the process' (DES, 2000:32), and many other nods to the idea of learner as central, the fact that the funder's desired outcomes are measured in terms of an external qualifications framework, having as its focus a flexible, trained workforce, tends to lead towards an economic outcome, which seems to contradict the learner centrality. As Grummell (2007) calls it 'The Second Chance Myth'.

AONTAS was established in 1969, to formalise the nature of adult education in Ireland, providing 'a clearing house for ideas, a creative and innovative centre and a think tank for adult education' (AONTAS, 2014) leading in turn to the Murphy Report (1973) and subsequently to the establishment of NALA in 1977. During the 1980s, AONTAS supported the formation of community based education groups, through European and national funding. In the evaluation of Community Education (2010) AONTAS saw its achievements as: enhancing learning, fostering empowerment and contributing to civil society. Thus Community Education does not appear to have the same rigid constraints on measurement in outcomes as other programmes funded through ALCES[34]. However, the administrative structure and funding for these organisations came from the government through the established (and establishment!) VECs. In Illeris' (2003,:404) words 'political and economic measures are necessarily of superior importance, as they lay down the framework

[34] Adult Literacy Community Education Scheme

and thereby the fundamental learning conditions'. He who pays the piper calls the tune.

No mention was made of the necessity to provide essential skills to those students who had left primary education with little or no literacy. Until the shocked reaction to the IALS[35] (OECD, International Adult Literacy Survey, 1995) results, which showed the very serious problem of adult illiteracy in Ireland, at which time the assumption that Ireland was a literate, educated society was exploded.

This far, in this section we have had a look at the functional nature of education in Ireland and the reasons why it has developed thus, in a way that was not welcoming to these particular students. In the next section I will look at what might be involved for practitioners and providers if they wish to alter provision to make it easier for students to belong.

Part 3 – Implications of the findings for practitioners and the provider

The explanatory framework which I outlined in Chapter 6 paints the picture of my interviewees' search to belong in ABE and the factors in their personality and life experience which helped and hindered that search. It is at the connection or disconnection between their personalities and the social situation that they either felt that they belonged, or they did not, but the framework also shows the constituents – for example their feelings and experience - which led to their developed personalities and the circumstances in their previous life and experience which influenced their interpretation of the social situation.

While, all the time, I am aware that this is a very small sample, I am also aware that their experience is not unique, as I have repeatedly said, my findings confirm my long-held belief that we as providers do not take sufficient care with those learners who are most vulnerable. I therefore believe that paying attention to this framework can inform provision and sustain learners in ABE, through consideration of learners' self-concept and individual knowledge - which could be established at the initial interview stage - and an understanding of their social environment and

[35] International Adult Literacy Survey

experience. All of this would be part of the communication in a caring tutorial situation.

I want in particular to address how my framework can inform providers in areas which arose as problematic in my discussions with the interviewees – the current structure of provision, the importance of initial assessment, the role of the tutor and the importance of a flexible curriculum.

Teaching and learning

An important element of my explanatory framework for difficulty of retention in ABE, reflected the effect of what I named 'power hierarchies' on the lives and expectations of my interviewees. They gave many examples of feeling powerless in the face of authority, the law, the church, and, most importantly in the face of education. They did not feel that they had a right to decide what and how they should learn and they clearly felt that their literacy difficulties, together with the structure of society which was essentially exclusive rather than inclusive, prevented their progress.

Tett et al (2012) ask us to examine this present, dominant model of literacy provision and note that it is still closely aligned with the 'deficit' model in which, essentially, learners are asked to consider what they can't do, rather than what they can. Anyone who has done a literacy assessment with a potential learner will understand how well literacy students have bought into this concept and I will be discussing this in some depth later in this section. Tett et al (*ibid)* observe that the curriculum is restrictive and reproduces what is supposed to be 'real literacy' (p.3), in order to provide the learner with the skills for vocational or academic purposes. Further, they see this as being disempowering because it is not 'learner centred, not locally responsive, not negotiable' and they feel it is much better to consider what is going on in learners' lives, to see how they can be supported by literacy, socially constructed, essentially to examine what they need literacy *for.* As Papen (2005, p. 25) says 'we have to look at literacy not merely as a skill, as something people have learned and therefore know, but as something that people *do'* (my italics). Barton et al (2007) concur that the 'significance' of literacy has three aspects ' what people use literacy for in their everyday lives, how literacy is a resource for learning and how literacy is learned through participation in activities'.

Tett et al (2012) consider that since literacy is constructed, it should also be 'contested', without one literacy having supremacy. What needs to happen is, rather than acceptance, literacies need to be able to stand up for their worth, to state their own value. 'Researchers and practitioners have to construct alliances in order to develop their own agency to act back on the forces that seek to shackle them to a narrow and impoverished vision of literacy (p.5)'. While I might aspire to this ideal, I can foresee some difficulties arising with the providers seeking to achieve external validation, and learners seeking certification. As Tett et al (ibid, p.52) say, it will depend 'on the larger social policy context in each country, and the possibilities for democratic control of the policy process'.

Accessible curriculum

There is logic in hoping that through learning literacy by involving a familiar terrain, then there is less resistance to change, more participation. Furthermore the fact that the learning can be applied immediately in their lives will assist the learning process. As literacy needs change and develop with the changing person, then the ability of the learner to perform in new environments also develops, but with the individual deciding the specific literacy need. Thus the academic language required for State examinations or interface with a Government Department will be accessed at need. If we can change the teaching and learning process (Tett et al describe it as 'learning and teaching!') then we should be able to assist learners to be more involved in their communities, more able to take a critical stance, which is of course the ethos of Community Education.

Some of us at the coal face might believe that literacy differs within different contexts, but this view is not necessarily taken by all providers, nor by all students. We can see that there may be conflict between this approach and the purists – both teachers and learners – who believe that language must be properly structured and properly spelled and that grammar rules need to be properly applied. This of course is the way that we – the teachers - learned at school and for some of us it feels more correct to instruct in the same way. I mention both teachers and learners, because it was my experience that every potential learner who came to ABE, when they were asked about their skill level would say 'my spelling is dreadful'. In fact one of the best lessons that can be learned is to not worry just so much about spelling and get on

with getting the message down on paper. Unfortunately, the lesson they learned at school was that they were 'very bad' at spelling and this remains. Until we can persuade learners not to be so self-critical, then it is going to be very difficult to help them to succeed, which of course relates back to the improvement in self-esteem.

It is very difficult to get a balance between the need to get a written message across and perfection, particularly when the learner is seeking for perfection. In teaching tutors, we stress that spelling should be 'suitable for the purpose', thus a shopping list does not necessarily need to be spelled correctly, but an official letter should. For a literacy learner, it takes confidence to be able to make this judgement; therefore they will not expose their poor spelling in public. It is at this interface, again, where life meets officialdom, that there is difficulty and the responsibility is with officialdom to ensure access for all citizens. There should be clear communication and literacy awareness throughout the public sector.

Implications for the training and practice of a tutor

Anyone involved in adult education is supporting development, in that we support 'facilitate', the changes that learners are seeking. However, it was an unfortunate finding of my research that the interviewees believed some tutors did not understand the needs of the individual learner and thus reflected and reinforced their experience of teachers from their ineffective, early education experience. This misunderstanding arose for instance where tutors were teaching in a way that was not felt to be useful by the learner and it is obvious that a learner will not participate if they have negative feelings about their tutor.

It appeared from my data that individual tutors had their own methods and curricula and that there was very little communication between the tutors when one took over from another, exacerbating the difficulties learners had with change. Where a group is working towards an examination, then obviously there are clear required outcomes, but for example, when I asked Alice what work she had done for FETAC Level 3 (which she passed), she said the portfolio 'was somewhere at home', clearly pointing out that what she had learned had no application in her life. It was also clear from my interviews, that where there was a 'tutorial hiatus', for example if a tutor was unable to attend, or there was a long summer break, then the learners

forgot. This would not happen if they were applying their learning directly in their lives.

Quigley (1997) and Noddings (1986) stress the importance of a tutor's ability to put herself in the place of a learner, in order to communicate effectively. However, with the frequently very different life experience of the tutor and the learner, it must be very difficult for good connections to be made. Both of these issues need to be addressed during tutor selection and tutor training by innovative and interactive approaches.

Illeris (2003) talks about the differences between what is taught and what is learned, and this is a very difficult concept for tutors to understand. He suggests that it is important to 'penetrate semi-automatic defence mechanisms' (p.404) and mental resistance to an acceptance that adults are willing and able to take responsibility for their own learning and selecting what they should learn.

> Many people who are not in conventional terms academically successful or "intelligent" do manage to negotiate their own paths through the world and to master any topic that interests them. (Tennant, 1995:35)

It is not unusual to discover that a learner who firmly believes that they have no understanding at all of maths is perfectly well able to keep count of the scores in darts!

I believe that in recognising this ability in our adult learners we are, in a respectful way, providing the opportunity that they are seeking to access literacy. If, as Hayes (2007:12), suggests, children should be involved in what and how they learn 'Learning is a social process: knowledge and meanings are constructed through active, shared, interactions' , then how much more should adults be involved. Fundamentally, people will not learn if they don't *want* to, so we have a responsibility to make learning as attractive as possible.

Perhaps the most important non-academic outcome of ABE is improvement in self-confidence, leading to improved self-concept which I found to be essential for a learner to belong in education. Battell (2001), in her report on the non-academic outcomes of ABE, talks about the experienced tutor using many different methodologies, but she does not say that the different methodologies impact differently on the learners, so one can deduce that the important factor is the

'experience'. This 'experience' probably arises from the continuing 'reflection' by an experienced tutor on inputs and outputs. (Kolb, 1984, Schon, 1993). It is essential that tutors keep up with changes in delivery and avoid becoming stale. However, talking about tutor training, she remarks on the length of time it takes to make non-experienced tutors understand ideas which are familiar to the experienced. (Battell, 2001)

An obvious, but scarce and sometimes underused resource is the Adult Education Guidance Service, more scarce than ever with the current government cutbacks. As a relatively objective participant in the teaching and learning situation, they should be able to bring a voice to the process from the initial assessment stage, through the development of an individual learning plan and to be available during any time that the learner is in difficulty. Unfortunately, as I have said guidance hours have been cut and this support is consequently difficult to access. It seems to me that for each learner there should be some sort of team support, composed of ALO, tutors and the guidance person, in communication with the learner. This team would provide a supporting framework for a learner, particularly when they are in difficulty. There should be an experience of consistent communication from the beginning, and without any sense of obligation or gratitude, rather that this is the way that the service should be provided. Quigley (1997:179) sees the guidance service as crucial 'I believe they (possible dropouts) can be identified in most programs during intake by an astute counsellor.'

In the course of our discussions, many life changes were described by the interviewees, with a consequential training need. Alice, for example, needed to learn how to use her mobile phone, but there was no room for this learning. When someone is inhibited from accessing different knowledge, through poor literacy or lack of confidence, they can easily find themselves more and more isolated. As information becomes more focussed on IT, smart phones and the internet, where education may be accessed through distance learning and low tutor input, then at least some learners are excluded, frequently those with greatest need.

Casey (2009) described the value of an IT training programme, *Know It* held on-site in The National College of Ireland - a self-directed course, specifically targeted at low-skilled workers, with the aim of encouraging greater facility in using IT. NALA also offer an on-line and paper based learning programme, with telephone support,

and offering certification at FETAC Level 2 and 3 but it also requires *some* level of literacy and IT skills, together with the confidence to use them. Mary told me a graphic story of an IT group of which she was part, working by themselves but instead of having the confidence to take their problems to the tutor, they all dropped the subject.

My anxiety is that learners, typified by at least some of the people I interviewed might fall further and further apart from the usual learning cohort. Kirkup et al (2000) identify what they see as the strengths and weaknesses of open learning; it is good that it is flexible in terms of place and times of study, no prior qualification may be required and study may be modular, meaning that study may be taken up and dropped as required. On the other hand there may be no direct communication between the tutor and learner, the study content might be rather inflexible, the student might be rather isolated. All these disadvantages have been described by my interviewees. Although independent learning can obviate some of the problems about access and reduce the barriers to learning, where a learner has poor literacy there can be a misunderstanding between the provider and the recipient, therefore it would be hard to suggest that they should take up distance learning, until they have sufficient confidence to achieve.

On the other hand, my research proved that this group of learners, although they were quite sensitive and inhibited, were able to find mutual support within a tutorial group, where it was the correct size, where the learners were at about the same level, where it was managed properly. In fact, as we have seen, Grace described that someone from her group used to telephone her if she missed a day from VTOS, and they used to do assignments cooperatively. This is a good example of what Vygotsky describes as a 'more knowledgeable other' and has reference for provision and tutorial approach, in that the learning group, properly formed, can provide support and mentoring, where this is facilitated by the provider.

Implications for the better assessment of learners

As we have seen, the reasons given by my interviewees for their return to education were manifold, but they involved change. They wanted, for example, to support their children or to gain experience that would support their employment. However, they told me that they clearly did not know, or understand, as they set out on the

education journey what was the rate at which they might learn, or the time the learning might take.

One area of particular difficulty for the people I interviewed was around how they perceived what was going to 'happen' to them during the process of ABE. In reporting my findings, it was clear that the initial assessment if not handled correctly was a source of great difficulty for the learner. This of course refers back to flaws in communication, but at a particularly sensitive time in the learning cycle.

Quigley (1997:176) says 'I believe that the ability to identify those who may exit in the first weeks because of the influences of dispositional barriers is part of the key to turning our high attrition rates around'. My belief is that the very best way to do this is to have a really effective on-going assessment with a team from the VEC, including tutor, guidance counsellor and ALO, *and the learner.* Having this as routine, then the learner will have a clear idea of whether or not they are making their marks and will also have made a good relationship with the team, so that genuine communication can take place.

I believe that the professional skills of the ALO need to be utilised as they have a particular understanding of the needs of the learners, within team provision. The individual learning plan is crucial, as it is crucial to change/develop initial assessment as required . The ILP will provide a route map for learning; the focus on really useful literacy will have application in their lives and together will show how the provider will respond to the needs of an individual learner. The ALOA have recently published a document (2014) to which I made a contribution and within which they clearly state their view of the purpose and requirements of an initial assessment. Their belief is that an effective initial assessment which would be interactive between the ALO and the learner will clarify for the learner their skill level across a number of basic skills, and assess their learning need to allow the provider to place them in suitable provision. This, negotiated position will allow for reflection by both parties on an on-going basis. Dogan (2013) says that in the initial and subsequent assessment stages, the various learning styles and motivations of individual students need to be taken into account. He opines that 'instruction and assessment processes should be thought of as a whole, not separate'. This would also argue for ongoing consultation between the learner, tutor and the ALO or dedicated resource worker and the education guidance service.

Len, Will and John all felt that their particular needs had not been satisfied, in that they approached the ABE service and went into tuition, without any sense of how it might fit with what they particularly needed. Perhaps Nat gives the best example, since he had several disappointing interfaces with the ABE service, but agreed that his latest was much more satisfactory. In his on-going relationship with his one-to-one tutor, he was regularly asked if he was learning what he wanted to learn and if he was able for the standard. This reflects the finding of Sliwka & Tett (2008:21) who observe the effective use of taking a history before any learner joins a programme, to ensure its relevance.

The DES Adult Literacy Review (2013:51) examines existing assessment practice throughout Ireland and makes recommendations. It mirrors in many ways my findings, which were collected over three years earlier.

- There is still no nationally consistent formal procedure for initial assessment in use in Adult Literacy programmes and practice varies considerably.
- Research indicates that the development of standardised tools that yield useful information is complex; however research also shows that inconsistent results may result from the use of inadequate tools.
- Less than half of VECs undertake formative assessment every term.

To achieve a common understanding of what the learner wants and what the provider can offer, named 'formative assessment' by the Literacy Review *(ibid*) then there needs to be clear communication between the two protagonists and, as we have seen, this did not happen. There are time and resource constraints for the literacy service, there are confidence and secrecy difficulties on the part of the learner. In an ideal world this difficult, first assessment would be followed up, preferably by a support team and particularly during the early tuition sessions, as the ground rules, expectations and performance all alter at this time. If each learner had an individual learning plan, which could be regularly updated, then this would exist independently of the tutor and could be passed with the learner as they move from tutor to tutor, or class to class. This would also give the learner the sense that they were individually recognised, which is vital for their self-esteem. I have observed that for the most part, the people I interviewed did not seem to sense this individual recognition. All of

these suggestions, which arise from my data, are also recommendations of the Literacy Review (2013), and are recommendations of the ALOA report (2014) mentioned earlier.

At this point in the Chapter, I have noted the importance of not making assumptions about learners, but to value their intelligence and life experience and to listen carefully as they describe the good and the bad in their education experience. With this information, I looked at the personal difficulties described by the interviewees in the education environment and then considered how these personal difficulties made it extremely difficult for them to belong in ABE as it has developed within the framework of functional provision. In the next section, I propose that a change of focus from function to care would make the learning experience of not just these learners, but all learners, a more supportive and effective environment.

Part 4 – Bringing care into the equation

'Belonging' was the declared need of the people that I interviewed – they described how they felt bad when they were excluded from the group, by virtue of their poor literacy or social status. From my personal perspective of social justice, I suggest that an atmosphere of caring within the educational system would facilitate their belonging.

In this section, I consider how inclusion is intrinsic to caring in education, how models of education based on care are also based on mutual respect and understanding and I also propose that while the functional model of education may be inimical to care, there is practical value in a caring education system, in that there is less student drop-out. Finally, I discuss what implications there might be for provision within an environment of care.

Throughout the section, I have introduced and discussed the work by various theorists in the area of care and education.

Moving from 'belonging' to 'Care'

Obviously, the people I interviewed did not 'fit' into the mould required for them in adult education – and this begs the important question if they did not 'fit', or 'belong' then was that *their* problem, or a problem with the adult education system they were involved in, or deficiencies in both. Once again, we can observe the differences in approach as between the perspective of the provider, which may well be geared towards positive economic outcomes and the perspective of the learner which might not.

McGivney (1998) sees the importance of creating group cohesion among learners 'especially part time students who tend to form weaker ties with an institution than those learning full time'. She quotes research by Metcalf (1993) and Kember (1995) describing the importance of attachment to the institution. For vulnerable students who might not feel that they had the correct academic profile, with education being delivered by experts and with the emphasis on technical expertise, then unless they can achieve some sense of belonging, it is not surprising that they should not persist. Within a supporting group they might manage to be 'like' rather than 'unlike'.

Bourdieu (1997) from a cultural capital perspective, might explain their not belonging by their lack of academic expectations, language and behaviour, and this could be exacerbated by the kind of behaviour and language of the tutor. I had some very good examples of this in stories about early education, where for instance the middle class children in a group were preferred. Once again, this is antipathetic to the caring approach in education. Feeley (2010:86), describing the learning outcomes for a specific student who had been in an industrial school in Ireland says 'the consideration and care of her fellow adult learners was instrumental in maintaining her drive to progress'.

The Report 'Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of Change' (Thomas, 2012) defines 'success' as 'helping all students to become more engaged and more effective learners ... thus improving their academic outcomes' (p.10). I see no reason to believe that an effective approach for higher education should not be equally effective for ABE students. She further states 'belonging is critical to student retention and success' *(ibid),* and states that although staff in general buy into this idea, the institutions do not, necessarily. We have here a

difference, maybe structural, but at least in emphasis. Thomas says that 'belonging' is a key to student retention and is 'closely aligned' with the concepts of academic and social engagements. She cites Vallerand (1997) as describing 'belonging' as 'feeling connected'. It was the lack of feeling connected that resulted in several of my interviewees leaving the system and, equally, a sense of connection that helped them to persist, even when things were difficult.

Overall, Thomas says that belonging can be achieved through 'supportive peer relations and meaningful interactions between staff and students'(p.14), both of which can be achieved through Care, as we shall see. Similar conclusions were drawn from research by Velasquez (1999) and Tinto (2006). I do not believe that, because this research was conducted in a college environment that it does not also have relevance for the students I interviewed. As Barton et al (2007:165) say 'making sure that the social aspect of learning is non-judgemental and includes all learners is important to establish and maintain in a learning environment', and in fact Tinto (1998) goes to some length to describe means of encouraging remedial students in higher education to belong and to persist. The act of participation, according to Courtney (1992:101) is 'both an individual and a group phenomenon'. He further says (p.98) 'it may be assumed that the willingness, determination or motivation to engage in learning activity has something to do with one's integration within or membership of a larger social unit'.

We therefore have the responsibility as providers to support the individual and the group to mutually support themselves. It became clear from the feedback from my interviewees that they frequently did not feel that they were supported in ABE, they did not learn what they had said they wanted to learn and found there was insufficient support within the group. On the other hand, as we have seen, where there was good support, then they found it possible to achieve.

Within a caring model

The results of my research, outlined in Chapter 5and 6, led me to discover how belonging could be facilitated in education. I found that for example, Gilligan (1993), Noddings (2005) Baker and Lynch (2012) and Feeley (2014) all described the benefit of delivering education within a caring environment. I believe that their thesis, that a caring environment will deliver genuine equality, with real dialogue,

has validity. As Noddings (1986) tells us 'if we want to produce people who will care for one another, then it makes sense to give students practice in caring and reflecting on that practice.

Much discussion about 'caring' comes from a feminist, equality tradition (Gilligan 1993, Slote, 2007, Lynch, 2009, Baker 2012 and others). While I wish to report and understand this, I am also anxious to relate it to teachers and students, that in a sense the 'caring' needs apply in a gender free way, to the deliverer of education and the students. As stated by Feeley (2014:157), we should have learning relationships 'situated in a multi-dimensional definition of equality'.

To paraphrase Baker and Lynch (2012:15), the issue is how to develop ...institutions in ways that are actually capable of satisfying the needs for love and care that have been demonstrated. This may well be a female voice, since as Gilligan (1993:7) says, female 'comes to define itself in relation and connection'. However, I do not believe that this should be gendered in its application.

Lynch & Baker (2005) talk about the importance of having an integrated approach to equality in education – equality of respect and recognition, equality of power and equality of love, care and solidarity, and suggest some of the ways in which this can be implemented. Challenging the existing status quo, in order to have better equality in resources, challenging curricula to make them less inhibiting for a learner, would de facto make schools more respectful and inclusive.

Within a caring situation, you are really communicating – as Belenky (1997:144) says '"really talking" requires careful listening, it implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half baked or emergent ideas can grow'. I believe that I worked to create a caring environment between my interviewees and myself and that this contributed to the really good information that they were prepared to share with me. Noddings (2012) agrees that clear communication is not only essential within a caring situation, but also in identifying its effectiveness. Within a caring situation, more of the people I interviewed would have stayed in ABE. 'Caring is both an activity and an attitude' Tronto, !993, Bubeck, 1995, Kittay (1999) in Lynch, (2009:1),

Maclachlan et al (2008), also emphasise the importance of relationships within the education model, citing them as a 'prime motivational force' (p.10). They describe

'wrap around' or holistic support as assisting adults who were at danger of non-completion of programmes to persist and to achieve.

A caring model of provision will listen to the voices of the participants, remembering that the more marginalised they are, the more quiet; will listen respectfully and will have a useable, flexible syllabus. As I was working my way through the research process, I read a great deal about 'listening carefully', and it is ironic to think that if this careful listening had been the consistent pattern in the learning situation, then the difficulties experienced by my interviewees would have been fewer. Within the community model of education, the importance of clear communication is emphasised – they 'dedicate significant resources to ensuring that their interactions with learners are; positive, frequent and helpful; their spaces are welcoming and inviting and they ensure an experience of dignity and respect for the learner.'(AONTAS, 2009:105)

Mezirow (2000, p. 12) talks of the necessity of feelings of 'trust, solidarity, security and empathy' for participation – all of these are necessary components of a caring relationship. He further talks about the importance of dialogue with others to 'better understand the meaning of an experience'.

Through the process of analysis, I came to understand how invested my interviewees were in succeeding, and how disappointed they were with themselves and the providers when they did not succeed. I felt it clearly that they wanted to 'belong' within the educational environment, that they understood the benefits that would accrue, but that they could not feel comfortable in the situation in which they found themselves. It needs to be said that I, also, felt that I had some responsibility for this state of affairs, though obviously not from any ill-will.

As I have previously stated, I believe there would have been better persistence had there been more care of the learners at critical times in their learning journey. Therefore, I have examined the concept of 'caring' to discover how in an atmosphere of care, their difficulties might have been alleviated. Because I observed the people I interviewed to have difficulties which precipitated their dropout at the interface between themselves and the educational environment, I propose that additional support at that point would have made their situation rather easier. It is my belief that a more caring environment could have provided this support.

What is care in education

I believe that it makes good sense to care, because it saves the waste of resources through people dropping out of education, and disaffecting families. Moreover, I believe that a caring approach would facilitate *all* learners, not just those who have special learning requirements. Such a model would have the learner as central who, in being 'cared for' would be involved in the learning process, exert some control over the curriculum and be in caring relationship with the tutor. It seems to me that this model should be intrinsic to the learning process, not an add-on. 'No wonder they drop out, because the market signal says to them "we don't care about you"'(Brock, 1990:12)

Where education is primarily about the development of reason, then Lynch says (2009:15) it is difficult to find a place for care within it, emotion not necessarily being important in the kind of education which has been traditional. Taking a caring perspective, however, then all is different, so we need to put the caring in juxtaposition with the rational. Illeris (2003) says that all learning must include three dimensions 'cognitive – knowledge and skills, emotional - dimension of feelings and motivation, and the social dimension of communication and co-operation. A caring provision of education will satisfy all three. Feeley (2010:87) in her report says that 'data suggest that caring relationships have a pivotal role in successful literacy learning'.

Where a model of education is predicated on outcomes, rather than process, then it might be even less suitable for learners with particular learning difficulties. As we have discussed previously, funding frequently depends on results, as does the perception of the value of educational approach, and I have discovered that this has resulted in learners deciding that *they* were at fault, rather than the system having flaws. Lynch et al (2009:17) point out 'the close and growing link between formal education and employment'.

We need to be aware, however, that the interviewees in my research are not the norm, they are those people who did not fit into ABE, and whom ABE did not fit and we therefore have to decide at some point whether we ignore their needs or provide a model which is suitable for them. Baker and Lynch (2012:3) suggest that while 'mainstream political theory' *talks* about equality in working and learning 'concerns

with love, care and solidarity .. have at best been treated as peripheral'. Without a more concerted effort to include learners with profiles such as my interviewees, there will always be a significant number of people who fall out of ABE and indeed other adult education programmes.

My interviewees were also less successful where the purpose of their learning was to fit them for work, in areas for which they did not have either the skills or willingness. There is a whole argument to be made about whether we are doing these people any good where we are encouraging them to unfulfillable and unrealistic expectations.

Relationship in caring

Hedoux, (1981) quoted in McGivney (1993:21) names 'perceptions of powerlessness' over the future as a strong barrier to participation in education and there are good reasons why in an atmosphere of care, where participants feel that they have some measure of control – power - in their participation in education they are more likely to become and remain involved. This has to be a natural result of the involvement of the learner in a caring education environment.

Noddings has written widely about the 'what' and 'how' of caring in education. In particular 'Caring in Education' (2005) seeks to explore the nature of caring relations and encounters in education and provides a framework within which to describe caring as an integral part of education. Her thesis is that the 'Main aim of education is to produce competent, capable, loving and lovable people' (2005) . In this section, therefore, I wish to use her philosophy of education as a template to look at suitable improvements in ABE.

She asks us to examine how we talk about teachers we had at school, that we were taught to describe teachers as, for example, 'tough but fair', whereas in fact their approach was dictatorial and narrow. She suggests that we come to equate caring with coercion and good teaching with hard work and control – they call the teacher "caring", but do not feel cared for. Illich (1970:94) describes the teacher as being 'painted ... into the role of a destructive authoritarian'. Although no individual can escape responsibility for his own actions, neither can the community that produced him escape its part in making him what he has become.*(ibid).*

Noddings (2005) says that the central focus of caring is its 'relational' nature, that is to say that there is a 'carer' and a 'cared for'. Within the relationship, the carer has the responsibility to understand and feel what the cared for is feeling and trying to express – no room in this relationship for the 'banking' model of education. This relationship is also promoted by Weil (1951:115 in Noddings, 2005) and by Vygotsky (1978).

In a nutshell, the caring relationship proposed by Noddings places the responsibility on the giver of care in the relationship, not only to pay lip service to care, but to demonstrate it through attention to what the 'cared for' is feeling and 'trying to express'. She says that this 'engrossment' will lead the carer to understand the wants of the cared for, never to lead them into some predetermined role. Within this relationship of care, the cared for will recognise the care, either by responding verbally, and/or by working more confidently towards their desired goal. Feeley (2014) does not see this as nebulous, but practical in that it has to 'move beyond sentiment' and focus on actions that will benefit the cared for and Hoveid (2014) talks about the role of the carer, not only to transmit knowledge, but also the sense of *being* a carer.

Noddings does not say that this relationship is easy, particularly for the tutor who may feel that teacher knows best, but 'without imposing my values on another, I must realize that my treatment of him may deeply affect the way he behaves in the world'(2005:3). In this relationship, the tutor will learn much about the learner, and his needs and be motivated to improve her own teaching competence. A virtuous circle, indeed.

Responsiveness and caring – how provision might change

My research has shown that provision as it currently structured does not encourage belonging for students with a profile such as those I interviewed, who told me that at times they found it inflexible, that the tutors did not understand and that the curriculum was unsuitable. All the students in education deserve respect and recognition and my belief is that an environment of care would provide it, and thereby encourage belonging. Obviously there would be implications for the provider as also for the tutors and syllabus. I wish now to consider some of these implications.

To support all learners in equality, Lynch et al (2009:2) say that it may be necessary to 'change structures and institutions that systematically impede people's opportunity'. The unfortunate fact is that, the people who would most benefit from these changes in institutions are those with the quietest voice. Slote (2007:107) makes the point that a failure to care – as in a parent failing to care for a child or, more specifically a teacher failing to care – in a caring relationship, is a dereliction of duty.

As Lynch (2002) remarks, in a society which has created and sustained learning institutions which see knowledge as discrete, rational and unemotional, then the introduction of caring can be threatening. She says that in the existing system, students are encouraged towards individualism, educated for economic life, in the public sphere – precisely the model despised by Freire (1996), Illich (1970) and Pearse (1913), whereas within a caring system, the education would be 'other centered', and thus inclusive.

The overarching characteristic of 'care' in the education environment is the ability to respond to the expressed needs of students. Noddings (2005) tells us that the skill is to listen and to try to address the needs of learners. However, she also says that learning to care takes a great deal of knowledge, and it seems to me as I read her book, a great deal of confidence. The responsiveness characteristic of caring would mean that we would listen to others and try to address their legitimate needs. So many of the problems described by my interviewees could have been alleviated if this had been the procedure – they would have felt safe in asking to learn what they needed to know, they would have been closely involved in deciding the curriculum.

Within a 'caring' education system, Noddings says, we would have less of a fixation on achievement scores and concentrate more on personal direction and gaining knowledge and skills. This is so exactly what Papen (2005), Street (1995), Tett et al (2012) and others are saying, that students should find what they care about and seek practical knowledge related to their own decisions. Within this single paragraph, we see the student as an autonomous learner, building on experience, and applying it directly in their lives, all encapsulated in the concept 'caring'.

Dewey (1916) as well as so many others, sees the learner as central, as is emphasised by Walter (2009:11), the intent is to 'free the talents (of the learner) in service of the

larger social good'. Bamber & Tett (1999) while talking about the contribution of the learners, stress the importance of institutions changing structures 'to challenge the negative effects of inequality' (p.465). This would mean, of course, that tutor training would be adapted to make the tutors aware of the importance of caring for learners, being prepared to genuinely communicate, to have a strong sense of equality with the learners. Since all these elements, are very important characteristics of an effective tutor, this is a strong reason to include ethics of care within the tutor training syllabus.

For Noddings, the intrinsic element of education is caring, in that the road of education is through learning to care in relation to the learner's environment; this again resonates with Bronfenbrenner's learning model and the relational elements of education described by Feeley (2014). Thus, care is the learning, even when predicated on maths, science or economics during which they would learn to examine for example, the economic world around them. Noddings believes less in achievement scores and more in gaining personal direction and skills, therefore the curriculum would be adapted to the individual need of the learner, making core subjects applicable to life. Fundamentally, this is about genuine respect. 'What is learned from caring teachers willing to share their knowledge and their pleasure in learning is often incidental and very powerful, precisely because it is given freely' (Noddings , 2005:5) .

It is really important that tutors recognise and buy in to the importance of caring in education. As Gannerud (2001) says it must be difficult to 'teach' tutors to care, but by teasing out the elements of caring and ensuring that tutors incorporate them into their teaching plans, it will change the tutor approach to all their learners. To paraphrase Baker and Lynch (2012:15), the issue is how to develop .. ' institutions in ways that are actually capable of satisfying the needs for love and care that have been demonstrated.' Noddings does not say that this relationship is easy, particularly for the tutor who may feel that 'teacher knows best' but she says 'without imposing my values on another, I must realize that my treatment of him may deeply affect the way he behaves in the world'. The essence of care is respect and communication, less a sense of being 'all knowing' but realising that education is constructed between tutor, learner and information – as Tett (2012) says 'learning and teaching'.

Conclusion to this section

This section of Chapter 7 has examined how the delivery of care in education could have ameliorated the learners' sense of being excluded from education and the education process, and has asked that we consider the contribution that truly caring education professionals would make not only to the more underprivileged learners, but to all learners. I have also considered some of the changes that would be involved for the provider in caring provision.

Conclusion of Chapter 7

It became clear to me during the process of analysis that there were quite different understandings and expectations as between the learner and the provider in ABE and it was at this interface that difficulties occurred, sometimes leading to drop out. The voice of the provider and the voice of the learner are different, because they come from such different perspectives and experience and this became very clear as I analysed my data, reaching the conclusion that the person in interface with inflexible provision at a particular time and in a particular context, would have difficulty in belonging.

Because the voice of the provider is a loud, authoritative voice, vested in Government dictat, to provide education which will fit students for work to fuel the economy, I believe my interviewees did not have any sense of agency or understanding of what the road to success for them would look like and felt themselves to be excluded from ABE. We need to look therefore at how modifying the learning experience would make understanding better, on both sides.

My belief is that the power relations between the parties is such as to make communication extremely difficult and that we need to decide, first, if we *want* the situation to improve, if there is *value* in improving the situation, and then to listen carefully to the voice of the excluded learners, since theirs is a very quiet voice. I could have suggested that these constituents would *never* have fitted into the VEC, but this is patently not true, since when conditions were suitable, they did succeed.

A decision needs to be made either to support these learners on an on-going basis, or ignore them as non-productive members of society. In a society which has something like 300,000 unemployed people, they are not going to be a serious

additional burden to the economy. We need to be aware, however, that every year some other ABE learners present with a similar profile, so that although they are a small minority, we need to decide if they are worth the support, or not.

I want to make a case for ABE, or indeed any second-chance education as a 'social good'. There is no obvious economic value in improving the situation, certainly not in relation to this minority of learners, nor the constituency they represent. In their worklife they were in the sorts of employment described by the DES (2000:122) as becoming increasingly less important in the labour market. They are as I have said a minority within a minority, in the adult education sector that we have described as 'on the margin'. Despite their best efforts, they have not managed to acquire sufficient literacy to give them the confidence to deal effectively with daily reading and writing tasks and the consequent interface with bureaucracy. That being said, they are mostly well into middle age, or older, and therefore not necessarily going to be in search of employment, or economically productive.

So the question is, what value do we put on helping them to literacy? Carl Rogers (1967) sees that people have a natural inclination to learn, that poor literacy inhibits this natural inclination, stifling their growth to full potential. On the other hand, a different objective of literacy learning comes from the Frierian tradition, that without literacy people are silenced, that they cannot contribute to society, to the detriment of democracy. Mezirow believes that with education people can grow away from the beliefs they held as children, to contribute to the sort of society that they believe is good.

I discovered that when situations changed, then my interviewees felt stress, particularly when, for example a tutor left or there was some other change. It is really important that there is a sort of constant in the life of the learner and that change is managed if we want to retain these, fragile students. As we have seen, the most difficult times in the school year for drop out is at the very start, after holidays, if a tutor is changed. As I have said previously, in understanding that, it should not be too difficult to manage the change. The only way in which this problem will be addressed is if all the players in education are consistently reflecting on provision and listening to each other, communicating clearly and subsequently modifying behaviour.

This Chapter has been a reflection on the study's finding, noting that how adult education provision has developed in this country has not been an inclusive environment for these, vulnerable, learners. I have reflected, also, on the implications for practitioners and providers in changing the perspective of provision to an environment of care, which as I have said, I believe would be beneficial to all concerned.

I now turn in the final Chapter to a personal assessment of the study as a whole, considering how well it has fulfilled its stated aims, what contribution it has made to knowledge in the area, the benefit of using grounded theory in achieving this contribution and further questions raised and remaining at the end of the study. I wish also to reflect on my personal journey and learning during the research and writing process.

CHAPTER 8 - LESSONS FROM THE LEARNERS

In this, final Chapter of the thesis, I reflect on the learning of the past six years – what I have learned about the students, what I have learned about the system within which we all work, what I have learned about myself and what I hope providers and tutors will learn from it.

I first consider the contribution of the work in terms of how well it fulfils the aims I stated at the start of the process – to listen carefully to learners and discover why they felt they could not persist in their studies. I found that, by nature of their poor literacy and lack of self-confidence they found themselves isolated from education, because of a certain level of complacency and maybe even disinterest on the part of the provider. They had very little resilience to support them through difficult personal times and problems in learning and would quickly say that they felt they did not belong in and could not continue participation. There was no single precipitating factor, but usually a combination. As Len says 'when you are dealing with human beings, it's totally different from a product, or anything'.

I believe it is important, also to discuss the benefit of using Grounded Theory method as the research tool, in particular because of its focus on discovering and reporting the real life experience of the interviewees. I believe that between us, in discussion, we constructed good information and knowledge worthy of recognition in explaining why people drop out. At this point, also, it is important to realise that this research does not answer all the questions and in fact raises new questions which should be considered in other work.

Finally, in this Chapter, I want to reflect on my personal journey during the research process and to conclude with a quotation from an interviewee whose previously unheard voice can certainly inform us.

The lost students

The aim of this study was to conduct in-depth interviews with students who had found it difficult to persist in ABE, in order to discover at least some of the reasons

why they dropped out – as McGivney (1993) tells us, there is 'no single theory', but it is important that we investigate. In satisfying my aim, I discovered a small, but I believe significant part of what I have called the jigsaw of reasons for not achieving in adult education.

What became very clear to me is that those people to whom I spoke saw themselves through a negative prism, formed in their early life, educational experience and through ABE. They did not appear to believe that their opinions and feelings were of value to the providers and this increased their propensity to see themselves as failures, particularly in education. However, in listening to their stories, it was clear to me that they were not failures, but were failed by the educational system. This failure exacerbates their sense of isolation, and their feeling of being marginalised and subject to stigma. The actual numbers who fall out might be small, but as Quigley (1995) says, they impact in quite a big way on other learners, the tutors and on the providers.

These were students who came from families who had to some extent suffered social deprivation. In particular, they felt that they were socially and politically marginalised, considered insignificant and were consequently voiceless and disregarded. Lynch & Baker (2005), Reay (2006) and many others describe how access to education and progress through primary education is much poorer for all children from these communities and inevitably for these particular students with high support needs they would fall even further behind. This accounted for my finding in my explanatory framework that they described themselves as 'excluded'. However, what I also found was that, when they were given the opportunity to consider and express their feelings, then they were extremely well able to speak up for themselves and support one another within groups. I discovered the importance of not assuming that we, as providers, know what they want, but enabling their voices to be heard.

Listening to that voice, I heard a wish to belong in ABE, to be on the inside whereas in fact they felt they had been on the outside, different from other learners and with little rapport with the syllabus. Typically, Will had a need to improve his literacy, so that he could involve himself in community work, but did not have the confidence to be part of a group, nor did he find the syllabus was suitable for him - therefore he dropped out. He did not appear to be able to make his position known, and the

provider in this instance made the assumption that they were providing suitable classes for his needs, thus making the assumption that they 'knew what was best' for the student and creating the exclusion.

There were many examples of poor communication within which the learners' expectations were quite different from their experience when they returned to education and this caused them to feel that they 'were not up to' what was being taught. These particular learners need a very high level of individual support, which they found lacking.

During the research process, the interplay and connectedness of the various elements in education became very clear and the problems with provision presented at the point where the vision of the provider was superimposed on the requirements of the learner. Of course, this situation is not what was intended by the provider, indeed all the literature I read spoke about the centrality of the learner, and the necessity to reflect their educational need. However, there is great difficulty in implementing this intention where programme provision is predicated on outcomes which are measured in economic terms.

In particular, because these learners had poor literacy and came from poor backgrounds it seemed to me that in many ways the provider was empowered to decide on the focus of learning. Where this focus was on employment, especially on the types of employment which they were clearly not fitted, then these learners felt even more excluded and just couldn't cope. If the purpose of ABE is to include these particular learners, then the education environment and the syllabus must have meaning and relevance for them.

In acknowledging that this cohort are a small minority who require additional resources to succeed in education, we have, as a nation to decide whether they should have access to those resources which would make education comfortable and welcoming for them, or they should be ignored and excluded once again. In Chapter 7, I described the caring framework which I believe would benefit them and the change in approach from tutors and other providers which are also essential.

In my general introduction to this thesis, I quoted the OECD (2000) statistic which proposes that improved literacy within a community will lead to improved GDP. What I now believe is that blindly following the functional literacy path might result

in greater exclusion for some of the already marginalised and fragile in our education community. Improvement in GDP, while a beneficial outcome, should not be the only required outcome. Unfortunately, it frequently is the required measure of success by the DES.

Hearing their stories, as I did many times, I still feel how much enjoyment and fulfilment they could express in describing situations in which they belonged – as union representatives, as retail workers, working in community. In terms of literacy, Len, Grace and Bernie all described the magic for them when they received the results of their DES Examinations. As I report on P.80 'it seemed to me that where they felt successful they had learned, through their capacity for coping, to get to a place where they belonged.'.

Gaps in the existing knowledge

In my review of the literature in Chapter 2, I observed that while several studies had considered barriers to adult education, no Irish study that I found had dealt in depth with retention in ABE, so I was pleased that I was able to make this a focus of my research. The studies I read mostly related to difficulties around access and barriers to participation and there seemed to be an assumption that once learners accessed ABE, then they remained to its conclusion, although the studies by Quigley (1995) makes it clear that this is not the case.

However, studies from the United Kingdom (Barton et al, 2007, Carpentieri et al, 2007, Maclachlan et al, 2008 and Crowther et al, 2010) did deal with the experience of adults in Literacy education, by listening to and analysing their stories. In particular, they refined what had been, for me, a difficult idea to express, the fact that adults, going through the process of education may choose to drop in and drop out in accordance with their needs. This choice may appear to the provider as being a failure (either on their part or on the part of the student) but might not be seen in this light by the student herself. In teasing out the inter-connected elements in ABE, they suggest that the term 'persistence' more precisely describes from the learner perspective their decision to use provision according to their needs.

I discovered that the learners I interviewed dropped out at times in their learning experience when they were under stress and I was able to demonstrate specific

occasions in my discussion in Chapter 5. It was clear from their stories that stress increased their sense of alienation and made them even less likely to communicate effectively, so without trying to work a situation out, they just dropped out. Len says 'I fell out because my marriage broke down and I would have had personal stuff to deal with'. If at that time in his life he had good communication with the provider, then some sort of strategy could have been arranged, so that he could pick up his education seamlessly – a stated aim of the DES. These findings accord very much with the findings of the UK studies mentioned above, in which they find that when students at a particularly difficult time in their lives and education provision, are well supported, then they are more likely to achieve their looked-for outcomes. Interestingly, they call this support 'wraparound' and it has very much the same context and content as what I have called 'care'.

The AONTAS (2009) study of Community Education also points out the importance of 'positive interactions' in a welcoming environment as essential in supporting persistence, and they further say that the fact that since their learning is decided upon by the participants, this is also intrinsic to their success.

As I have shown in the analysis of the data and arising from my explanatory framework, the sense of alienation or difference from others was a crucial factor in their failure to persist in ABE. I have demonstrated that success or failure in ABE was as a result of the tension between their personalities and the education environment, and listening to the stories told to me by the interviewees, I learned that where they felt that they were comfortable, where they belonged, then they were able to achieve. This was not just in education, but was life wide learning. In particular, because I was able to conduct long interviews with these people, and because I completed one interview and typed it out and initially coded it before proceeding to another, I could trace similar stories from one account to another, building a dense tapestry of codes to support concepts.

A number of studies, significantly Quish (2006) noted the importance of prior history in poor adult literacy, but from my research I was able to point out the layers of disaffection built by these learners through their family, early education and ABE history, making their non-persistence more likely. As they told their stories, the effect that chaos, poverty and illness within their families had on their education became very clear.

As I reflect, now, on my literature review, it is sobering to remember that much of the information I gained from my interviewees was already in the public domain. As long ago as 1978 Cross addressed the particular needs for adult learners to undertake education *including specifically the special needs of 'underserved groups'.* As I describe in Chapter 2, there has been an amount of research building on this foundation and seeking a separate approach towards the needs of adults learning. However, from my data it appears that the provider approach still had a focus on functionalism, that is to say that funding is predicated on measurable outcomes, such as employment or continuing education, rather than helping the learners to learn what *they* feel will be useful.

The contribution of this thesis

The major achievement of this research has been to capture the stories and feelings of this small number of students who did not seem to fit into ABE and to gather real information, mined from their individual experience through grounded theory method, in order to understand their reasons for not persisting.

The information generated should be useful to providers in the design and delivery of ABE programmes, specifically to diagnose and support students through times of difficulty, until such time as they can be self-supporting. If we want a caring, safe environment in education for these vulnerable, voiceless people we don't need to 'add in' care, but to make care central to the learning experience, which as Lynch (2009) says could require structural changes in education provision. This of course, is a political decision and might not easily find traction among the powerful voices in the State, whose actions tend to be to legislate for the majority. Feeley (2014:76 citing Lynch & O'Neill 1994,) reiterates that 'learning care inequalities have their roots in political structures that legitimate some voices and silence others', but it is my belief that changes in approach which help this minority would also help the majority.

Lynch & Baker (2005) suggest that creating true equality in education will require an integrated approach which will provide access, respect and recognition, power and love, care and solidarity, which would be quite different from the existing top-down model. Noddings (2012 location 222) also sees care as an inclusive framework, within which the learner needs, syllabus and the provider and tutor approach will all

work together – she looks forward to the day when 'sharp divisions will be broken down'. However, as Barton et al (2007:166) say, the 'real strength of a social practices pedagogy which includes learner and practitioner enquiry is what it contributes to sustained positive change.'

I understood from the beginning of my research that with such a small number of interviewees it would be difficult to suggest a universal result, but rather as Creswell (2007:126) says 'to elucidate the particular, the specific'. I feel, however, that the common experience of these learners across many areas of their lives gives a good idea of the causes and effects of the difficulties that assail marginalised learners. I believe that my description of their need to belong in education is respectful of their needs and gives a perspective from which providers could measure their service against conditions which the interviewees have described as helping or hindering persistence.

Finally, I believe that an important contribution of this thesis is that it will inform practice for tutors and providers to enable persistence and encourage ideas for further research.

Further questions to be answered

I would like to suggest two possible projects to build on my work:

First, it would be interesting to discover the perspective of the various players in Adult Education on the importance, or otherwise, that they attach to the concept of care in education and to the true value they place on these, unheard learners. While, as we have seen, the Government aspires to the learner as central, the actual value they place on education is economic. In the basic education service, in particular the tutor education ethos seeks to satisfy the individual need of the specific learner, and yet I have found that in practice the syllabus applied did not necessarily have relevance for the learners. Once this piece of work was completed, it should be possible to decide how ABE would better reflect their needs.

It seems to me that teaching methodologies, directly predicated on the needs of the learner, would have provided a much more valuable learning approach for the interviewees in this research. They would have had useful knowledge that they

could apply in their lives, would build new literacy skills on their existing ability, rather than failing to access the syllabus based information they were fed.

Second, because these learners described dropping-in and dropping-out of provision in their adult learning, then obviously the VEC made it easy to come back when the learners felt it imperative for social or family reasons, and yet they still found difficulty in persisting, because of their prior life history they did not feel they had value within the education system. It would be interesting to investigate this more closely, since this could give information for providers in encouraging other vulnerable adult learners to join adult education provision.

Obviously, we cannot change their prior life experience, but its effects could be ameliorated with good communication between the individual and a thoughtful provider, in genuine equality from the first point of contact throughout the learning.

Curriculum needs to be examined carefully, to ensure relevance for these particular students in terms of their life experience and required outcomes. Lynch (2005:14) states 'to confront organised upper and middle class interests'. It needs to be recognised that since these learners are not traditional there has to be flexibility in teaching methodologies and assessments, to reflect their multiple intelligences. As long as assessment has any element of examination, then it is going to be extremely threatening for these learners.

Overarchingly, and perhaps most threateningly, the importance of emotions within the learning/teaching relationship needs to be recognised, to allow students and tutors to express their feelings. Feeley (2014:178) paints a very attractive picture 'insightful, creating learning relationships, grounded and skill and expertise adapted to meet diverse needs.'

About the research methodology

I have explained in Chapter 3 my rationale for choosing long, unstructured interviews and grounded theory methods for this investigation. I was fortunate to be able to access ten learners who had poor attendance histories in ABE and I felt that the data I could elicit would illuminate my research questions and my personal skills in interviewing would be valuable.

The thought of 'discovering', which is the strongest element of grounded theory was very attractive, in that I would come to the research process without any preconceived ideas and would rely on concepts arising from the data I analysed in order to gain a framework which would explain lack of retention in ABE. I felt that since I believe knowledge is constructed, that the constructive grounded theory described by Charmaz (2006:507) would provide a route map, but not a straight-jacket by which I could work, 'a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection'.

As I have said in Chapter 4, I actually found the *process* of using grounded theory to be quite enlightening, since it is both systematic and rigorous and I am very clear that, when I reached my explanatory framework, it absolutely reflected the feelings and histories of the interviewees, grounded in the data collected by me.

Applying grounded theory was, for me, a very lengthy and iterative process, described in Chapters 4 and 6, but pleasing when I became satisfied with the collection of codes into categories and thence into the major categories - social construct and personal construct and could argue that it was the tension between these two categories in unfavourable circumstances which led to feelings of alienation and in favourable circumstances would lead to belonging. It was even more pleasing when I could argue that favourable circumstances as described above would be innate within an environment of care in education.

I feel that GT worked well for me and that the method was extremely suitable for a small research project of this nature. As I categorised the data, I read around the topics which were brought up, but as I approached the end of my work, I wondered if I had accessed all the literature relevant to my research. I need to examine the blind spots as a result of which I missed some important relevant literature and which might have given a broader perspective. For example, although this was not a sociology thesis, society and social stratification are key to discussing equality in education and this is not my area of expertise. By taking greater advantage of a multi-disciplinary peer discussion group, I could have linked into their expertise and received wider feedback, in order to broaden my understanding of this area.

There was an element of disappointment that I did not achieve a 'grand theory' which would have broad applicability, but at the end of the process I am satisfied

with my achievement, that drop out from ABE can arise where students do not have the sense of belonging within a learning environment. I believe that what I discovered was true, that these interviewees had, to a greater or lesser extent, a flawed relationship with ABE, a disconnect between themselves and the provision, which had a number of causes. However, I have also learned, that since reality and truth are constructed, this is only true in the context of what we – the interviewees and I – have created together. The reason I think that it is important, is that similar stories came from many of the interviewees, so they have validity. I think, also that it is possible to learn from their stories and to amend provision so that it is more inclusive, not just for these marginalised learners, but for any participant in ABE.

My Journey

Within this section, I reflect on my personal and practical learning at the outcome of my thesis.

Etherington (2004), says that the prerequisite for the work involved in producing a thesis is that a 'topic of inquiry needs to be something that can sustain interest and energy over a prolonged period'. Choosing the topic of basic education was, for me, a logical extension to the work in which I had been involved for the last twenty years and I have found that as a topic it certainly sustained my interest during the research process. As I have said, I came to this thesis from a background as tutor and administrator in adult education, particularly the literacy service and in community through the Community Employment Programme. I therefore believe that I had good knowledge and understanding of the learners and experience and practice of communication with them and supporting them through their learning. However, the last five years have been very much a learning curve for me. Ryan (2006) citing Agar (1988:12), says that a qualitative researcher takes a 'learning rather than a testing role' which was undoubtedly my experience of this research.

At the end of the thesis, it is time to reflect and one of the significant learnings for me has been the importance of reflection throughout the whole research process – one's reflection on a suitable methodology, reflecting on the information gleaned from the interviewees, reflection on the misfit between the learner need and the provision which led to drop out. Discovering, also the crucial importance of

reflection for both learners and providers during the learning process, to maintain the very high level of interaction which is necessary in providing care in education.

I was delighted, by the end of my research, to discover how much educational and sociological research agreed with my findings, that success in education, particularly for marginalised and under-achieving students, depends on really good support. However, it is equally depressing that this information has been extant for so long and students are still presenting and leaving provision, because they do not get the service that they deserve.

On this journey, I have had to consider my own position. I came to the research with a clear idea that I wanted to discover from learners why they were not satisfied with ABE. Although, particularly in choosing the research methodology, I was conscious of differing power relations, I still had to consider my own 'tacit biases and assumptions' (Creswell, 2007). Throughout the process I have learned to look at my personal position and views, as Etherington (2004) suggests to discover 'tensions, contradictions and complicities'. I had to develop the confidence that readers would understand that my experience was a 'legitimate source of knowledge'. (Etherington, 2004:19), and to be aware of the impact of personal, social and cultural contexts on the ways in which we interpret our world.

The purpose of this thesis has been to investigate educational provision, and I have been quite surprised to discover how inter-connected are education, sociology and indeed politics. The disaffection of these, marginalised, students in education is a specific manifestation of broader marginalisation of poor people in our society. Apple (1990:10, cited in Cervero et al,2001) points out that adult education is 'tied to the larger arrangements of institutions which apportion resources so that particular groups and classes have historically been helped, while others have been less adequately treated'.

I have had to examine how the education system as we have developed it in Ireland continues to perpetuate social stratification ensuring that even as more resources are targeted at the most needy, those in society who have most receive even more. 'It is only a matter of who will be at the bottom as the pyramid of power, wealth and privilege, as the hierarchy is not disrupted.' (Lynch,2010:1)

Of course, I don't believe that care in education will solve all our social ills, that will take much stronger political will than any government seems likely to exercise, but I do believe, in agreement with the theorists Gilligan, Noddings, Feeley and Baker and Lynch that affective support in education would have made my interviewees' experience in ABE much more accessible.

Ryan (2006) asks that, by the end of the thesis, the author has a 'clearly outlined philosophical stance', and as with so many other factors in this thesis, I had never thought of a philosophical stance, until I had to own up to one – I was relieved to learn that Kitchenham (2008:104) can say he was 'interested in transformative learning before I ever knew what it was'. This whole process of researching through grounded theory has been sort of back to front – having considered various options, I decided on the method, then discovered its philosophical roots in Symbolic Interactionism; I considered my overarching view of entitlement to education and realised that my world view is that of Social Justice; I have, during my work life had so many experiences of differing interpretations of the same situation, that I recognise this categorises me as constructionist; I understood that the ways in which adults learn has to be more relevant and respectful before I ever read Mezirow and learned to label it 'transformative'.

Thus, I would aspire to an education system, not just for adults but for all, within which there is true equality and mutual respect. I believe that the 'banking system' of education is harmful for both the teachers and the learners, since it presupposes the first is always right and the second is always wrong, which is damaging, and untrue.

Very last word

At the very end, I believe that models of learning should not only have the learner as central, but should respect and value them and utilise their background experience and knowledge to construct new, useful learning. Bruner (1973), points out that this is in an active process and must have implications for provider, syllabus and tutor as well as for the learner.

The very, very last word should go to Alice whose voice, intelligence and imagination have been hidden by her inability to put ideas on paper and by society's

disdain for people who have literacy difficulties, and from whom, if we had listened, we could have learned so much about her frustration in not being able to reach her potential.

> *I know there was just a chance for me – Rob[husband] would say 'you could run this country' and he says 'you are nearly wasted with us - you are really wasted' and he says 'there should have been something' you know. He did do all he could to help me and even the children - my child learned me to text, and he was screaming with laughing at me,. I have only half the things down – I have it in my head, but then I wanted to go back again..I thought about doing something here, like, I was thinking about all the options of going back.*

APPENDIX 1 –

ETHICS PROTOCOL

This protocol was discussed with each interviewee at the start of the interview.

The reason that this ground was covered through discussion is that my interviewees were literacy learners and my experience was that they were inhibited by reading and completing forms and I wished to make the start of the interview as relaxed as possible.

- This research aims to understand why some learners do not stay in ABE
- We invited you to take part, because you have previously dropped out of our provision
- Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can stop the interview at any point
- The interview will last about an hour.
- To make it easier for me to remember, I will be recording the interview, I hope that this meets with your approval
- Afterwards, I will be typing up a script of the recording and will carefully keep the script and the recordings under lock and key.
- I will not discuss any specific matter raised by you during the interview with anyone else. When I write up the report they will form part of the general discussion.
- Our conversation will be entirely confidential as between us, and when I write up my findings I will ensure that your name will be changed, that there will be no possibility of anyone discovering who you were.

APPENDIX 2

Boeije's Constant Comparative analysis procedure in key words

Table 1. Different steps of the constant comparative analysis procedure in keywords

Type of comparison and	Analysis activities	Aim	Question	Results
1. Comparison within a single interview	Open coding; summarizing core of the interview; finding consensus on interpretation of fragments.	Develop category system understanding	What is the core message of the interview? How are different fragments related? Is the interview consistent? Are there contradictions? What do fragments with the same code have in common?	Summary of the interview; Provisional codes (code list); Conceptual profile; Extended memos.
2. Comparison between interviews within the same group that is persons who share the same experience	Axial coding; formulating criteria for comparing interviews; hypothesizing about patterns and type.	Conceptualization of the subject produce a typology	Is A talking about the same as B? What do both interviewees reveal about the category? What combinations of concepts occur? What interpretations exist for this? What are the similarities and differences between interviews A, B, C…? What criteria underlie this comparison?	Expansion of code work until all relevant themes are covered; Description of concepts; Criteria for comparing interviews; Clusters of interviews (typology).
3. Comparison of interviews from groups with different perspectives but involved with the subject under study	Triangulating data sources.	Completes the picture enrich the information	What does group 1 say about certain themes and what does group 2 have to say about the same themes? What themes appear in group 1 but not in group 2 and vice versa? Why do they see things similarly or differently? What sources, details or new information does group 2 supply about group 1?	Verification of provisional knowledge of interviewees from group 1; Additional information; Memos.
4. Comparison in pairs of interviewed between partners belonging to a couple	Selecting themes from open coding that concern the relationship; summarizing the relationship; finding consensus on the interpretations.	Conceptualization of relationship issues understanding of the interaction between partners	What is the relationship like from both perspectives? Are there contradictions/agreements between them? What are the central issues and how are they resolved?	(Conceptual) profile of relationship; Extended memos; Inventory of central issues.
5. Comparing interviews with several couples	Finding criteria to compare couples; hypothesizing about patterns and type.	Find criteria for mutual comparison produce a typology	What are the typical differences between couples A and B? What is the possible reason for this? Can which criteria can couples be compared? What patterns exist in the relationships of couples that experience this phenomenon?	Criteria for comparing couples; Clusters of relationships (typology).

APPENDIX 3 - SAMPLE THEORETICAL MEMO - FEELINGS

While clearly gender and temperament had a large impact, the role of feelings was extremely important, this was shown in the wordle, where it has the largest word hit. There seems to be a tension between the various elements of the diagram: feelings are strongly affected by current events and previous experience, thus good practice would include some sense of dumping previous experience and/or for the tutor to use it as a building block.

However, feeling/feelings were always in relation, good when the context was supportive, negative when the context was not, therefore they have to be connected in the text.

Barriers haven't changed since Cross's day, so we haven't done a lot about making things better, we need to recognise the vulnerability of the learners. Need to be incorporated into an ILP, as well as in tutor training.

They have an enormous on-going problem about change which accounts for initial difficulties, drop out between tutors and/or classes and is a very touchy subject. We should perhaps make suggestions as to how it could be handled.

Tett, 1996 – dispositional factors;

<u>BLAME, SHAME, EMBARASSMENT AND FRUSTRATION, ALIENATION</u> – *they* are doing this - seem to be feelings that are associated with the public domain – that is that they feel that they were blamed by teachers, for example, for their illiteracy, even though they do not blame themselves they attribute the blame to other people or to the structure of society. Shame at being 'found out' contributes to their not being part of the learning community, they hide their difficulty, and it is this also that makes them pretend to have the skills that they don't and this in a circular way makes them less like to gain the skills they need. They are very scared of feeling different, even though they are aware that they <u>are</u> different. They become frustrated when they take longer to achieve than they think they should and are impatient with themselves, first, and then with the provider and, again the system. They give up

easily- don't want to stand out in a crowd, a classroom, etc. – Angela gives very good examples of this when she talks about 'everyone talking about her'.

Alice's stories about going in bald headed at teachers she feels were 'against' her child, and at the admin person in the hospital who she felt was unhelpful are typical behaviours of unmanaged anger, and this would have been symptomatic of Alice's behaviour in my knowledge of her. It is the polar opposite of Angela's but comes from similar feelings.

John remarks a number of times about the frustration he feels in not being able to cope in ABE, frustration in not being able to get the sort of work he feels he is capable of doing, because he has no qualifications. He locates the source of frustration as being not kept informed of what should or could be happening, not being able to understand how he could be improving. Bernie talks about being frustrated at poor demonstrations at work.

Ned is not ashamed of his illiteracy, maybe because he does and did not feel different in his family – this another good example of how families form people.

This is where we are 'stuck' - Will

Kerka, 95 – expectations;

<u>ISOLATED, DIFFERENT, DISRUPTED, STRESS, EXCLUSION: -</u> this is being done *to* them - seem to be feelings that are associated, again in relation, but this time in relation to themselves by comparison with others, in school, in the community and that they don't have the skills to handle change or disruption in their lives, they are more sensitive. This accounts for initial difficulties, for dropout between tutors and classes and is a very touchy subject – we could tease out how it might be handled. I have long thought that these feelings come from the fact that they are so busy covering their backs against being caught out, that they are aware all the time of the differences rather than the similarities, as I have said somewhere, they measure themselves in relation to others, but in a negative sense.

All the stuff about being sited in different places in the classroom, being given different learning materials, etc. will apply in here. Also where these feelings manifest themselves when the child is young, they can easily be exacerbated if

repeated, even slightly, in adulthood. Len's story about his (ex) wife calling him 'stupid' resonates of early school experience, and this can be compared with Alice, for e.g., being supported by her husband and family who give unconditional love, Bernie's children who recognise her ability to support them as a parent, even though she has a lot less education than they have.

Chaos in their early life will make them more likely to feel isolated, less likely to belong – Bronfenbrenner. In their early family and things that happened to them outside of the education ambit caused them to (a) poorly attend and (b) not succeed at early school or ABE, the memory of this happening seemed to have affected their later performance.

Bandura; Quigley, 1997 + Beder 1991 – labelling; Gerber 2002 – misfit; Murphy & Fleming, 2000 – disjuncture;

GOOD FEELINGS, CONNECTED, HAPPY, BELONGING - when they don't have to compare or be compared, then they belong then they function effectively, then they feel good about themselves and the world around them. Bernie is able to talk about taking a stand for the people she works with and she has the confidence to do this, because literacy is not implicated in the transaction. Len talks about helping his clients deal with marital troubles, again because literacy is not implicated and any notes he makes are saved audio files – Will tells that he has a network of people who are prepared to support him in the work he does in the community, and he can reel off the amounts of money he has raised for good causes, again without literacy being implicated. All of them have been good at work, because their natural ability was to the fore and they did not have to compare themselves. In particular for this research, they described situations in which they were learning in a group which was supporting and equal – this is a very important and can relate to Vygotski, where a learner comes from needing support and grows to the extent that they are able to support themselves, or indeed Heaney's 'scaffold'.

They could belong at work, or belong in ABE, belong within their family framework – it seems to generate self-esteem and motivation to act in concert with the rest of the group. It is rather endearing that Len sees his sister as being 'superior' – having higher social status than he has, but still uses her as an example to aspire to. Len describes his very positive self-image as a good worker.

Alice is very positive about her ability to parent and about her ability to clearly communicate with her partner and their children and is able to see how this positively affects her self-esteem. On the other hand, she carries a big bag about being socially inferior, that she feels the women in her village treat her like dirt.

Mary is well able to articulate the positive effect of recognition – because this is going on within an effective group, this might explain the underlying benefit of belonging.

Rotter, 72; Lesgold 12;, NIACE, 2004, Jack Mezirow;

Belonging: Thomas, 2012; Goodenow, 1993; Feeley 2014; Vallerand, 1997; Noddings; Lynch.

Strong people manage – how do we make them strong? Becoming autonomous – Vygotski;

It is probably too simplistic to argue that the answer is in effective communication, across student, tutor provider, but this would solve a lot of the problem. There is clearly a role for the Guidance Service in this regard. We are too inclined to patronise, however, we need Communication in equality, communication in care.

It is essential that we all emphathise. Quigley, 84; Fleming 2008;, Mezirow, 2000

There is a sense in which they have immature personalities and take a defensive position, they need to be nurtured – especially at predictable critical times; THIS IS A FINDING OF THIS THESIS AND SHOULD BE EMPHASISED.

Self Confidence: NIACE, 2004; Payne, 1996; Bandura – motivation;

There seems to be a tension between the various elements of the diagram; feelings are strongly affected by current events and previous experience, thus good practice would include some sense of dumping previous experience, and/or for the tutor to use it as a building block. THIS IS A RECOMMENDATION OF THIS THESIS AND NEEDS MENTION.

APPENDIX 4 – Theoretical Memos. – Developing Categories

Developing connections and relationships between the data bits.

Considering Social context, self-concept and belonging

(a) SOCIAL CONTEXT

Sub Category: Power Hierarchies:

Very strong sense of powerlessness – that no matter what they think nothing happens, Len had this sense that when he came up against the law, the law always won. – Eileen that her mother had to go back to education in order to cope with the 'high ups' in the educational establishment.

Has to do with being marginalised, their community being poor, their experience of being ignored, the religious and social elite keeping the good for themselves and isolating the lesser. Experience of social stratification. The sense that 'it has always been so'. No sense at all that their voice would be heard.

Has to do with feeling that they had no power over their situation: someone else decided where and when they should go to school, hospital, work, education and what would happen when they were there.

Has to do with the kind of language used by educationalists, medical establishment in books, in information from the government, even when you could visit your child in hospital, etc.

Has to do with being pushed around in the literal and figurative sense, in the classroom, from home to home, abroad and back again. Has to do with being beaten – sometimes with a big stick

<u>Positive dimensions</u> cover the ability they have developed to stick up for themselves – Alice perhaps too much so, but she was involved in the trades union movement. Will is involved in community development in his location. Bernie is able to keep a good job in caring and has learned to stick up for her clients. Len as part of his work liaises between clients and FLAC.

Axial Codes:

Society, Tradition, Education, Curriculum, Isolation, punishment, Powerlessness, Marginalisation, Stratification, Church, Disadvantage, Punishment

Sub Category: Social Norms

Has to do with 'how it has always been' within the family and the community. 'Things were different in the country', said Will, we had less access to StVdeP. There was a distinct difference in the poverty experienced in the countryside and in the town, they described the dependency on the farmer/owner and his ability to 'turf them out'. Has to do with accepting social stratification.

People emigrated in search of work unskilled and temporary and were quite likely to come back, the only difference being that there was no longer the work available for them, in either country, pushing them into Social Welfare for which they had no respect, they felt it to be another stigma.

Has to do with secrecy, which meant that 'we didn't talk about that' and were deprived of access to support. Has to do with accepting poverty.

Has to do with social insecurity since they did not train for jobs which would make them stand out from the rest in their community – the old policy of asking a local politician for something to which they were entitled. – and crediting him with 'getting it'.

Positive dimensions: knowing what was expected of one – 'we went into the factory'. Strong sense of family and family support especially from older to younger siblings, from aunts and uncles to support a family at need.

Axial Codes: Emigration, expectation, rural/urban, secrecy, location, disconnection parenting, home, poverty, social perceptions, family structure, responsibility.

(b) SELF- CONCEPT

Sub Category: Temperament

To some extent is inherent – 'I was always quiet' Has to do with poor self-esteem and inability to cope in circumstances, some at home some at work and certainly

some at school and in second chance education. Has to do with uncertainty – about how to act and how to react to situations.

Has been affected by illness, by chaos and other happenings in the family, becomes angry under stress

Positive Dimensions: is happy when in a belonging place, being recognised, liking stability, positive reinforcement.

Axial Codes: Personality, power-less, quiet, self-esteem, uncertainty, illness, development, motivation, stress, health.

Sub Category: Gender

Relates to the kinds of jobs/unemployment available. Role modelling – doing the job your father did. The way you relate to your own family/parenting

Positive dimensions: has learned to change through life experience – Len parents his second family in quite a different way – Alice makes a point of communicating with her children, so that they always understand what is going on at home.

Axial Codes: Jobs, role, parenting, providing, home, family

Sub Category: Feelings

Has to do with feeling blame – blaming oneself for not being able to do work when one has not received any instruction - needing support, being stressed, disrupted.

Feeling isolated, embarrassment, different – being given different training materials, being seated apart from the other children in a class.

Feeling different from others in their tutorial group, in their family, sensing that they do not 'fit in'.

Positive Dimensions: Learning to give oneself credit for good work, acknowledging ones skills. No longer being ashamed to talk about the need for literacy support.

Axial Codes: chaos, quiet, blame, need support, stress, good, disruption, relationships, difference, shame, frustration, embarrassment, connected, belonging, self-esteem.

Sub Category: Experience

Has to do with being disrespected, being disempowered, not being allowed to make decisions, treated as if they are stupid, irrelevant curriculum. Poor access to a programme, unsuitable for an adult. Being negatively compared. Hierarchical approach by church/state/education.

Has to do with not being helped over barriers, not getting enough support.

Positive Dimensions:

Being promoted at work, getting an examination, facing up to bullying in the workplace, being supported by tutors, good experience of teaching.

Axial Codes: Disrespect, skill, relationship, disempowered, disruption, isolation, decision making, curriculum, work, access, barriers, comparison, support, few options.

(c) Theoretical memo about society norms

This is really about putting a structure in 'belonging'

What I have tried to describe in this category is the kind of pattern that they see as the 'right' way in terms of how they live and what they do.

They feel bad about themselves when they are disconnected from it – they feel less 'themselves', for instance Grace when she had the fight with the other women in the women's' group.

So, the 'norm' has a location in their family, in their community, in their town or can be a mix of all these, Len was located in his family, but felt disconnected because he could not perform at school, which was the expectation of all the people in his family. However he felt connected when he was at work, because he was the 'same', he met the unspoken criteria. Alice was connected to the road in which she lived, but did not feel that she could 'share' family secrets. An interesting aspect of this is, despite their poverty, they would host other children from the road on picnics 'simple times'.

There is also the 'we was poor, but we was happy' stuff.

It was also noticeable that the family stood up for one another – Len's cousins took care of them during the mother's illness, Eileen's mother went into bat for her with the education authorities, 'but mum knew how to get around the board of education' Angela's family fought for her when she was bullied at work. They kept all this stuff local, did not go the social welfare way – they were actually scared that if the social welfare people got involved, then they would be taken away from their families.

Alice talks about her mother not minding that they were not 'scholars'. That kind of acceptance is important. There would be little tradition of education within their communities. Mostly, the girls would go to the convent and have a better level of literacy than the boys, in Len's family, his sister went for 'religion' which was seen as a serious social step up, though she had to go to England to be accepted – which again speaks about Dundalk in the 1960s.

I suppose my life was really 'all set out'.

Interestingly, when I look at it, the access to ABE came through their community, also, through ce.

It is quite a narrow location, separate from the wider political reality which of course has an impact, but not as directly or immediately as the feelings generated by the locality. Thus, you would have to hide your 'shame' at being illiterate from your community – you would have to hide the illness of your mother from the community – you would have to hide the special needs of a child from your community and perhaps most of all you would feel shame at having a child who needs to go to special education and if you felt that this was a good way forward for someone in your family, then you would understand their feeling of shame. Nobody understood dyslexia.

The local school is in there, too, and they could cope with that, despite being beaten and marginalised, because essentially that was what happened in their community. Thus the huge trauma for Angela when she was moved from her local school into the school in Dundalk, and the extra difficulty for Alice when she was moved into the fee paying school, with all its attendant difficulties, both educational and social.

Their age leaving school was the same as everyone else

The tradition of this 'norm' would be that men worked and women looked after their, quite large, families. Men worked in factories or on farms and would have jobs for life, or as long as their health lasted. I was very struck by the fact that Alice would talk about her father's nervous breakdown as if it were a cause for shame, but no shame attached to physical illness.

Within this norm there are specific sorts of jobs, of employment and this tradition of employment would be trans-generational, Luke for instance working in an iron foundry, just like his dad, people within the families sharing and looking for jobs for one another. Looking up to the 'boss', who was really like you, but just a bit more successful. Great description of this with Grace talking about the 'real' bosses in the shoe factory, who were all English. No mention of any kind of 'white collar' work, which made life so much more difficult for them when they got into education and found themselves in an environment which was shepherding them towards paper and pencil. The sense of 'career' doesn't exist, just the having of a job and caring for a family throughout your life. No sense of unemployment, either, until the 1980s and the change in employment.

Significant, that this change affected Dundalk and Drogheda in particular ways, because the employment had been predicated on fabric, shoes and other production which was transferred to third countries.

Marginalisation would occur when you lost your job and were, unlike the others in your group, unable to re-skill or get work.

CONDITIONS: CHAOS: BARRIERS:

DISCONNECTION: EXCLUSION: BELONGING: COMMUNICATION: CHANGE; CARE.

There seems to be a tension between the various elements of the diagram: feelings are strongly affected by current events and previous experience, thus good practice would include some sense of 'dumping' previous experience, and/or for the tutor to use it as a building block.

Belonging: Data shows very clearly that they felt that they were in a good place when they 'belonged' – Bernie, Alice, Eileen – in fact all of them. They could belong at work, or belong in ABE, belong within their family framework – it seems to generate self-esteem and motivation to act in concert with the rest of the group. The exception is the bold Will, who determinedly sets his face against group tuition. In many ways he sees himself as 'too good' for the kind of employment for which he is qualified. I wonder how this could have been changed – maybe if he had been more included in the decision making – has implication for provision.

Chaos: In their early family and things that happened to them outside of the education ambit caused them to (a) poorly attend, (b) not succeed at early school or ABE. The memory of this happening seemed to have affected their later performance.

Barriers: haven't changed since Cross's day, so we haven't done a lot about making things better, we need to recognise the vulnerability of the learners. Need to be incorporated into an ILP as well as in tutor training.

The other thing that really needs to be incorporated is their difficulties about change, this accounts for their initial difficulties, for the drop out between tutors and classes and is a very touchy subject. We could tease out how it might be handled.

It is probably too simplistic to argue that the answer is in effective communication, across student, tutor, provider but this would solve a lot of the problem. There is clearly a role for the AE Guidance service where communication breaks down, or even during difficult times – initially and also to intervene where there is a drop off in attendance. Communication in equality, though, we are too inclined to patronise our learners from our superior intellectual position.

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