

An Exploration of Change, Progression and Transition in, Through and Beyond Community Education.

By

Mary Smith

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**Department of Adult and Community Education
Maynooth University**

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Head of Department: Dr. Mary B. Ryan.

Supervisor: Dr. Fergal Finnegan.

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An inspirational text...

You encouraged me to go on to further study after the course, so I just wanted to tell you how delighted I am today after getting a 1:1, first class honours degree in business. Thank you for your encouragement.

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to examine the experiences of adult learners in, through and beyond community education. To interrogate this question a qualitative study was carried out using semi structured interviews with five adult learners at and two adult guidance counsellors were carried out. This research was underpinned by an interest in the impact of early education on adult education, the effect of the social distribution and use of power with regard to education and an interest in the transformative nature of transformative learning.

The results of the research showed the contrast between enforced education in childhood and its transformative nature as adult learners in community education settings. Substantial barriers to participation in community education were identified which included issues around previous experiences with education, identity, caring roles and persistence in education.

These findings demonstrate the need for changes in the structured way adult education is offered to support persistence, an increased investment in early education and provision of educational spaces conducive to transformative learning.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction

In this study I explore the experiences in community education of five adult learners who have returned to education. I also interviewed two guidance adult counsellors with a view to looking at the issue from an education provision perspective. The focus of the study was to obtain an account of the experiences in, through and beyond community education. The research led me to an investigation of how different forms of education empower or disempower and how education can transform lives in adulthood. Social and structural barriers to education for adult learner were studied and the progress of recent Irish education policy was examined with a view to facilitating transformation.

As is often the case my research did not begin at this point but evolved over time. I started interrogating the progression of adult learners to higher education from community education. It emerged that the learners in my research group didn't perceive and issue with access to progressed from community education to higher education through the national framework of qualifications. Information and support for this progression was, in general, available to these learners.

For my research cohort, their community education experience appeared to have fostered in learners a confidence in their ability to progress to higher education if that was their wish. As the research progressed I discovered a much more interesting narrative was emerging. Although barriers are still a feature of the experience, I feel I couldn't do justice to the research material if I didn't highlight the powerful process of change experienced by learners. The learners and guidance counsellors I interviewed recounted a compelling account of the personal experiences of adult learners in

community education, the influence brought to bear by aspects of their pasts, the barriers they encountered along the way and their hopes for the future.

My motivation for the research.

I have facilitated and coordinated adult education programmes for many years and I became an adult learner myself when I studied for my degree part-time in 2009. My adult learning experience in particular gave me an insight into the experiences of adult learners and inspired a personal interest in how adult learners access and progress through different areas of the education system.

I feel that becoming an adult learner was the single greatest qualification I could have as an adult educator. It was a very necessary learning curve for me as it allowed me an insight into what difficulties adult learners face. When reflecting on my own experience of this learning journey, I have rediscovered how easily an individual can internalise feelings of inadequacy and incompetence. I feel confident that the sense of bewilderment I felt when completing my work for the masters programme has added an empathic dynamic to my research and will allow me to identify how vulnerable adult learners feel when I return to professional practice. I believe that it has resulted in sacrifice of a small part of me but has brought about incredible learning. 'Learning necessarily involves not merely risk but the pain of giving up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things' (Boostrom, 1998, p. 339).

Some of the research participants were adult learners I had worked with in the past and who had also helped me out with research for my undergraduate degree. It was amazing to see the changes that had occurred since I had seen them last. They each exuded a confidence and self-assuredness that they attributed to the community education

experience they had participated in. It was humbling to have been a small part of something that had made such a profound change to people's lives. Although some had progressed to higher level courses they attributed their life changing experiences to their first community education experience. The research process allowed me to see the impact adult learning has on people's lives. It was evident that the changes experienced by participants had extended like ripples in a pond. The confidence, self-esteem and sense of ability flowed out to incorporate many other aspects of learner's lives. This appeared to have been as a result of learners 'becoming critically aware of how and why [their] assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world' (Mezirow, 1990, p. 14)

Rationale of the study

The aim of the study is to explore the experiences of adult learners as they progress in, through and beyond community education. It examines what factors influence participation, what effect the process has on learners and how they progress to the next level. Secondary research was carried out with adult guidance counsellors to get a view of how learners are supported through the process. This process is underpinned by an interest in transformative learning, the effect of cultural and social capital and social liberation through education.

Research methods

The study was carried out using qualitative research methods using a constructivist epistemological perspective. Seven semi structured interviews were performed and the data coded thematically, analysed and discussed using contemporary theory. Ethical

issues were considered and all necessary data protection and informed consent procedures were followed.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 reviews contemporary literature pertaining to adult education policy, community education, critical sociology, transformative learning and liberation through education.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used in this study. I will outline my ontological and epistemological position. Issues of sampling, ethical considerations and limitations of the study will also be explored.

Chapter 4 presents an overview of the findings from conversations with adult learners.

Chapter 5 presents the findings from interviews with adult guidance counsellors.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings and presents an analysis in the context of supporting theory.

Chapter 7 reaches conclusions and makes recommendations based on the findings and analysis of the research.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an introduction to the research study. It outlined my interest in and motivation for the study. The rationale of the research and the chosen research methods were defined.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter I will endeavour to ground my research in contemporary literature. To better understand participation in community education from a structural perspective I will outline the policy and systemic position. I also feel it is necessary to explore the topic from a critical sociological perspective which emphasises the persistence of inequality in the nature of social structures. However, there is also a body of adult education literature which I will present.

The education policy perspective.

There has been a movement in recent times to integrate educational systems so there is upward movement through levels of learning to make the system more transparent and more accountable. This system had transformed how adult education is envisioned and discussed. Consequently, adult education provision is presently unrecognisable to that of the 1990's. The expectation of accreditation of learning has increased. There is a type of movement through education levels imagined and hoped for from a systemic perspective. The result of these developments changed the relationship between adult learners and community education. The trend towards accredited training in community education settings can be seen as both a positive and a negative development.

Community education can now act as an access route to university education. this has created opportunities for adult learners that were not available previously (Fitzsimons, 2017).

Until the 1990's it was difficult to enter the higher education system if you has not first been successful in the Leaving Certificate Examination in the final year of secondary

the national policy access office established in 2003 have published three national plans for equality of access to higher education. The first of these in 2004 *Achieving equity of access to higher education in Ireland 2005-2007* recognised substantial inequality with regard to access to Irish higher education and acknowledges that ‘Students in our higher education institutions continue to be predominantly from the middle and higher income groups’ (HEA, 2004, p. 9). It considered progression to higher education from community education as one of its six goals. This was reiterated again in 2008 and 2015 (HEA., 2015; HEA, 2008). Although the National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS) welcome the debate around increased access to higher education for those in the community sector it recognised the existence of significant barriers to this participation. These barriers included access to ‘financial resources, transport, family and caring responsibilities’ (AONTAS, 2014, p. 4).

The decade 2000-2010 was the golden age for access to higher education for those in the community sector. It is likely that the reason was politically motivated by labour force and economic demand but this resulted in access to higher education for those who would not have considered it possible beforehand. The new approach to adult learning appears to have stemmed from the realisation that the restrictive system of progression to university and its dependence on successful completion of the Leaving Certificate was no longer effective. The rate of dropout from second level schools compared badly to the rest of Europe and it was suggested that the education deficit was impacting on the labour market. It was hoped that access to higher education opportunities may upskill those who had left school early (Government of Ireland, 2000).

One of the most influential policy documents on access to education for under-represented adults was the *Learning for life: white paper on adult education* (2000). Significantly, it recognised the possible emancipatory outcomes of community education and described it as ‘a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level’ (p. 110). It also acknowledged that opportunities to access education was dependant on socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability and gender (Government of Ireland, 2000). It focused on adult learning, which was for the first time recognised as a route to higher education for those who had not completed the Leaving Certificate examination. The access figures to university rose during that decade and a specific office was established to govern access to higher education which promised a more positive development for adult learners into the future (HEA, 2008).

The change in approach by the Irish government may have been influenced by European policy. The council of Europe considered the adult education sector as ‘pivotal’ to widening participation in university education. It cited the social and cultural diversity of further education learners as an advantage to broadening access to higher education across social classes (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000). While the opportunities offered in the White Paper to engage in lifelong learning can be seen as an opportunity for those who had missed out on formal second level education it can also be said that it marked the beginning of the professionalisation of community education and a change in its vocational ethos to that of meeting labour market demand through education (Fitzsimons, 2017).

The educational perspective

To link the literature with my research question I will first discuss early education and compare it to the ethos of community education. I will then explore how this ethos, informed by theories of education, can effect change to occur outside of the classroom.

Previous experiences of education

Our experiences of education in childhood follow us throughout our adult lives and can have a profound impact on how we view education in later life. If a childhood experience is a negative one it results in an adverse association with education in adulthood. I feel this negative association in childhood is a key reason why adults do not engage with learning and a substantial barrier to full participation when they do.

Experiences of education in childhood.

Formative education is commonly viewed as a ladder that individuals climb through their lifetime. We start as children at primary and secondary school and progress step-by-step through our lives. To facilitate this system core skills are identified and literacy levels are examined using competency based tests to allow movement through the system. Consequently, there is an emphasis on what a person cannot do rather than what they can. The mandatory, top down deficit model of education has little or no learner involvement and results in perceived failure being internalised which impacts on how an individual sees themselves as learners (Tett, 2010). Research has identified the impact that past experiences of education can have on the ability for adults to reach their true potential when returning to education (Belzer, 2004).

At the individual level, schooling can offer the confidence, of becoming an educated, knowledgeable person. It can also saddle one for life with the feeling that one is doomed to fail (Jonker, 2006, p. 123).

The recognition of achievements in childhood can have a profound and lasting effect through a person's lifetime. As we carry our childhood experiences through our lives 'with the child remaining in the adult' a small amount of encouragement at an early stage can have a powerful influence on our relationship with learning in later life. The extension of this practice to the learning environment espouses valuing the relationship between teacher and student as opposed to the delivery of technical subject matter. This suggests that the controlled environment of the classroom becomes a place of mutual learning resulting in the 'political becoming personal' (West, et al., 2013, p. 131).

When children experience success or failure at school it results in conditioning their perception of what this means in other aspects of their lives. As early education is enforced and cannot suit each individual it results inevitably rejecting, and so labelling, large numbers of people every year. This kind of rejection contributes to a resistance to education rather than it being an opportunity for personal growth (Tett, 2010).

The negative past experiences and a lack of educational guidance at second level coupled with non-participation in education among families and peer groups has the effect of alienation from participation in education from an early age (McCoy et al., 2010). Education creates class stratification through policies and practices. At secondary level education these included the freedom to choose the 'best' school and the grouping of students by ability and sex (Lynch & Lodge, 2002).

Identity.

Adult education plays an important part in reforming identities which are greatly influenced by previous experiences in education. It is acknowledged by those in adult education provision that previous experiences of education can have a profound effect on how learners relate to education in later life. Adult educators need to be cognisant of

what individuals bring with them when they embark on the education experience. Each individual will possess their unique combination of life experiences, identities and hopes for the future which they will use to inform their learning (Barton, 2007; Crowther, et al., 2010). The answer may lie in preparing children in primary schooling for their learning needs in adulthood by making class sizes smaller, being consistent with teaching staff and monitoring the intellectual and social demands placed on children in school (Illeris, 2014).

For those returning to education their identity as ‘student’ is harder to justify as social perception does not fit in with their reality. It is argued that all identity originates outside the person and is constructed by social language and influences. Powerful groups within society have a role to play in making some aspects of social influence more acceptable than others for personal, economic and political reasons as ‘the conceptual backcloth against which our utterances can be interpreted’ (Burr, 1995 p. 34).

The need to feel socially connected is a very basic human desire (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Adults who return to education are experiencing a major change in their identity, from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Their age as well as their social and cultural capital sets them apart from the younger population of college life. There is a natural assumption that younger students will be more familiar with the education system, will learn faster and adjust quickly to the demands of college life (Crossan, et al., 2013) These adult learners may also believe that they have a higher risk than others of academic failure based on their social or cultural circumstances. Traditionally the perception among those in lower socio-economic classes is that it’s not accepted to be ‘bright’ or studious (Furlong, 2005).

The community education model of education.

As a contrast to mainstream education discussed above, the community education model is designed to operate with the learner at the centre of the process. Its ethos is one of equality where learners are not prejudged and is designed to empower and ‘succeeds because it is *of* the community and *for* the community’ (Connolly, 2008, p. 6).

It opens the doors to learning that probably had been closed in mainstream education, and these doors lead to subjects that are awe inspiring, meaningful to people's lives and pleasurable (Connolly, 2008, p. 6).

The clearest definition of community education is that it provides adults with local structured access to education outside of the traditional education system. It answers a requirement for groups of people who identify as having a common need (Tett, 2006).

The Community Education Network defines community education succinctly as follows.

Community education is a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness. It is community-led reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals and their community. Through its ethos and holistic approach community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a teaching and learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based. Community education is grounded on principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness. It differs from general adult education provision due to its political and radical focus (Community Education Network., 2017).

An example of this type of education is the adult literacy incentive piloted by the Vocational Education Committee (VEC) in the 1980's in the form of night classes.

Community education's theoretical underpinning and its impact on persistence.

Community education has embraced Paulo Freire's philosophy of social liberation through education as its template for their delivery of education. His proposal of a democratic, problem posing atmosphere of mutual learning sits comfortably into the ethos of community education (Connolly, 2003; Fitzsimons, 2017).

The factors influencing the confidence levels of an individual as they progress through their education as adults may also be based on their pedagogical experiences in formative education. Paulo Freire's 1972 work *Pedagogy of the oppressed* described the 'banking method' of education, where the superior educator imparted knowledge and the passive student accepted it. This resulted in the reinforcement of social conditioning by the welfare state thus changing the consciousness of the oppressed, leading to internalised feelings of inadequacy and marginalisation. He advocated a process of 'critical pedagogy', involving a collaborative relationship of equality and mutual learning between teacher and student (Freire, 1972)

This ethos of education provides a place where adult learners can flourish. One of the influences on persistence by adult learners is the nature of tutoring provided by adult educators. It has been established that learner-centred methods of tutoring, such as working in groups and shared teaching, has resulted in the control over learning being passed to the learner which subsequently enriches the experience (Crowther, et al., 2010). This persistence to continue in education is often the key to success for adult learners. However, this may not always necessary mean the 'successful' completion of a

course of study. The retention of students is normally an important factor from an intuitional provider's point of view, however, it is often of more value from an adult learners perspective to attend courses on an 'ad hoc' basis until they achieve what is important to them (Tett, 2010).

Educational progression using community education.

Community education provides people with an opportunity to re-join the education system and progress as far as university level. It is required is to provide both accredited and non-accredited training which is provided locally in a non-judgmental atmosphere of collaborative learning. The ethos of this type of education is to achieve the best for learners and at its core strives to create a space where individuals are motivated to reach their highest potential (AONTAS, 2004).

One of the advantages of community education is that it is structured and delivered with its learners personal circumstances in mind. The organisers are required to be cognisant of the demands such as childcare so courses, for example, are often scheduled between school drop-off and pick-up times However, its philosophy not only considers the practical elements of adults returning to education such as finance, childcare and time management, but is committed to value the knowledge and skills that individuals bring to the learning process (Fitzsimons, 2017).

However, the provision of adult education in community settings has become increasingly streamlined and a large proportion of it is now accredited in line with the formal education system. Although this has its advantages and has benefited many adult learners, it could be seen as a shift away from the Freirean ethos of community education for social change and towards a the provision of education to meet economic

market demand (Fitzsimons & Dorman, 2012)

Women's involvement in community education- 'the personal becomes political'.

'In community education, personal change is necessary in order to overcome the constraints of socialisation, of passive, unquestioned acceptance of the status quo' (Connolly, 2001, p. 5).

Although community education became an agent of social change for many disparate groups in society which were empowered as a result of working together to fight social injustice and disadvantages, it was within the women's movement that it made the most impact initially (Connolly, 2003). Since this form of education provision was organised *by the community for the community* it created a sense of empowerment, control and ownership of the process to the women involved (Connolly, 2001).

The women's movement used the opportunity provided by community education to provide marginalised women with the means to take control of their lives (Connolly, 2001). Community education 'bridges the gap between the personal and the political' (Connolly, 2001, p.1). For example, those attending community education are often women who are caring for families which can be seen as a personal issue.

However, when it was highlighted by the women's movement who demanded that childcare facilities be provided for women attending community education courses the issue became political. This emerging theme of the personal and the political aspect of community education complements Paulo Freire's philosophy of education definitively and again reflects the ethos of community education (Tett, 2010).

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the young into the

logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it or it becomes the practice of freedom. [Education then becomes] the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world. (Freire, 1972, p. 56)

Although community education had a profound impact on the rights of women in the early years and the participation rates remained high, the sector was poorly funded and lacked prestige. Moreover, progression to higher education by women remained disproportionately lower than that of men (Lynch, 1999).

Personal change through education.

When an adult learning experiences social emancipation through education sometimes they will also experience profound change on a personal level. The concept of transformative learning is an aspirational model of adult learning that distinguishes between learners who are vessels of knowledge and those who engage with the process through critical reflection to question their expectations, beliefs and assumptions to achieve new perceptions to inform future action.

This concept offers us a uniquely adult theory of learning which is grounded in the nature of human communication. The concept was first proposed by the American sociologist and educationalist Jack Mezirow. He believed that the experiences of adult learning bring about dramatic fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live and involves experiencing a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions (Mezirow, 1997).

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an

authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understanding is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking (Mezirow, 1997, p 1).

Critical reflection

The central characteristic of this transformative experience is when individuals reflect critically on their long held assumptions and beliefs and consciously construct new ways of understanding their worlds (Mezirow, 1995). One of the pivotal elements of adult learning is the ability to reflect and is defined as ‘the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience.’ (Mezirow, 1991, p. 104) The act of reflecting on action allows us time to explore why we acted the way we did, what was happening at the time, how we felt about it and how we would do things differently in the future. *Critical reflection* moves this reflective process on a step further and results in an individual questioning the beliefs they assumed were absolute. ‘Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving. *Critical* reflection involves ‘a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built’ (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1).

The formation and questioning of meaning perspectives.

Deep seated beliefs and values are learned in childhood through our formative education and shaped by our culture, family and personal experiences. Mezirow considers that these place limitations on our future capacity for learning (Mezirow, 1991). These beliefs are developed over time and are contributed to by upbringing and by formative

education in childhood. Typically formative learning is carried out within these existing points of view or by learning a new point of view.

Transformative learning is only possible if much deeper convictions or meaning perspectives are questioned through a learning experience. We learn every day by reflecting within the safe limit of what Mezirow terms our *meaning schemes* which are our assumptions, beliefs, values, judgements, attitudes and feeling. Critical awareness of why we hold the convictions we do, and by questioning them at a very deep level with a view to change, completes the process of transformative learning. This reflection in turn creates the conditions that promote self-worth and confidence (Mezirow, 1998).

The disorienting dilemma.

This process is often accelerated by a ‘disorienting dilemma’ which is an event that causes a sufficient amount of distress to result in an individual questioning their meaning perspectives which may be inadequate to explain what they have seen, heard or experienced. Through critical reflection a person then construes a new meaning as a result of examining their beliefs which hastens the transformative process (Mezirow, 1991)

I would defend the idea, based on my own experience with educational biography, that learners often enter adult education as a means to dream and to deal with changes in the stages of adulthood. Adult education is an access, an escape, a transit, and a bypass as well as a failure or a success in the lives of adults (Dominice, 2000, p. 49).

Resistance to transformative learning.

Resistance to perspective change is common, even among those who are exceptionally motivated to learn. The process of transformation requires change on a very deep level and is an emotionally charged process. Adult learners have held their beliefs for many years and have a personal loyalty to them so it represents a substantial risk to abandon views that have been successful for them in many ways (Illeris, 2003). To account for the resistance to partake fully in the transformative aspects of adult education it is vital to provide a non-judgemental environment that encourages openness (Taylor, 1998). Community education bases its ethos on this type of welcoming environment.

A critique of Mezirow's theory

Though there are many positives about Mezirow's theory I believe it is excessively individualistic and fails to account for the significance of other people in the learning process. Mezirow carried out his primary research in the 1970 on a group of women who had returned to education as adults and the research is widely considered to be redundant at this time (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

The critical sociological perspective

We have looked at the unique dimension of community education. Now if we look towards critical sociology, specifically the pervasive function of social power at a systematic level, it offers a slightly different perspective. The analysis will focus on how social power affects adult learners before, during and within their experience of education. It is thought that the opportunity to access education by adult learners, their connection with it and even the structure of the education system itself is dependent on how social power is disseminated and who controls it. There is a convincing argument,

put forward by a number of social theorists that focuses on the power of social structures to reproduce themselves according to a dominant social logic.

The theory of educational reproduction.

If education is held in high regard in the family it usually follows that an individual will continue to value it as they become adults. Pierre Bourdieu a sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher referred to this as the reproduction of education and incorporated it into his social theory (Bourdieu, 1986). He challenged the notion that social power is dominated exclusively by economic factors. He attempted to reconcile the influences of both external social structures and subjective experience on the individual. He believed that each person occupies a multi-layered social space shaped by a complex combination of cultural, social and economic influences he refers to as capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus he extends the perception of economic capital to that of our social and cultural connections and development (Bourdieu, 1998).

Capital in its various forms is a set of pre-emptive rights over the future; it guarantees some people monopoly of some possibles although they are officially guaranteed to all (such as the right to education) (Bourdieu, 2000 p. 225).

Each of these forms of capital operates within social relations and networks and can be responsible for the creation and reproduction of social inequality and benefit.

Furthermore, his theory encompasses a notion of fields which he saw as spatial, community, social and power arenas that an individual interacts within (Bourdieu, 1984). In these fields actors develop a complex array of social interactions which are dependent on their access to capital and their position in the field. The complex nature of society therefore necessitates interaction between the fields which results in an increased amount of capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cultural capital is acquired unconsciously through socialisation and upbringing and is sustained from generation to generation through investment in the cultural attributes that allows an individual to achieve economic, social and cultural status. It refers to the internalised belief in one's cultural position in society and represents the unconscious passive absorption of cultural knowledge that is passed to an individual as they are raised. The impact of this exposure is that a person becomes open to similar influences. For instance if education is valued in the home then it becomes acceptable to pursue it in later life (Bourdieu, 1986). The concept of *habitus* refers to the embodiment of cultural capital to its deepest embedded behaviours, abilities and characteristics. It determines how an individual perceives the social world and reacts to it and is shared by those with similar upbringing and backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1984).

As cultural capital can be transferred from family as a result of 'total early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life' it follows that the position of a high amount of cultural capital facilitates success in education (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 66). Those with the right amount or composition of capitals cultural, social and economic can then gain access to the 'best' schools. These offer an array of attractive environmental and academic advantages such as low teacher pupil ratio and choice of subjects. This social system facilitates putting the students at an academic advantage and making them feel more valued. This in turn allows them to feel set apart from the general population (Power, et al., 2013). It is recognised that middle class cultural capital has a significant influence on education policy. The education system is based on the assumption of the presence of cultural capital and pedagogical systems have been developed accordingly. This results in an education system that is alien to the remaining members of society (Reay, 2004; Sullivan, 2001).

Critique of Bourdieu

Although I believe that many aspects of Bourdieu's theory have merit, there are a number of areas where his assumptions are open to question. He appears to assume that all of those in the education system place significant value on the cultural capital of their students and treat them accordingly, this may or may not be true but it is at the very least open to speculation. Bourdieu's theory can also be criticised for not being cognisant of the influence of other aspects of human endeavour on the learning experience. For instance, he overlooks the possibility that an individual's natural ability and effort can succeed over the advantages of cultural capital (Kingston, 2008). He also doesn't take into account the influence exerted on the structure and content of the education system by the domination of economic forces linked to industry (Bennett, 2005).

The integration of cultural capital theory and education for liberation

As we've discussed Bourdieu places a lot of his focus on the power of social structures to reproduce whereas Paulo Freire's focus is on the power of human agency to alter social structures. Henry Giroux an American-Canadian scholar believes that the social reproduction theories of Bourdieu and others disregard the notion of human agency and downplay the possibility of change. He believes that where there is domination there is also the possibility of resistance. Paulo Freire, as discussed earlier, saw liberation through education as an individual endeavour whereas Giroux thought it was something that could be a collective endeavour using the cultural capital of learners to resist the prevailing domination.

For teachers, education points to the need to work with adults around issues directly related to their lives, their cultural capital. It means acting not simply as teachers, but as citizens or if you will as ‘radical educators’ struggling to establish a social and economic democracy’ (Giroux, 1983, p. 239).

He puts forward the notion of a ‘public sphere’ where learners and educators can effect change but embracing the critical pedagogical philosophies of Paulo Freire. Freire’s theory relied heavily on the involvement of learner’s lived experiences in the learning process (Freire, 1972). Giroux suggested that prevailing literacy uses the cultural capital of the oppressed to validate dominant ways of knowing and to teach not only essential skills but also how to ‘live passively amidst alienating structures’ (Giroux, 1983, p. 227).

‘The notion of the public sphere represents both an ideal and a referent for critique and social transformation...It signifies the need for an enlightened citizenry able to rationalize power through the medium of public discussion under conditions free from domination’ (Giroux, 1983, p. 236).

The power of social discourse and self-regulation

Michel Foucault the French philosopher and social theorist’s philosophy of self-regulation supports the fact that it may be socially important not to be ‘seen’ to fail which often results in potential learners perceiving non-participation as the safer option due to a consciousness that ‘the gaze that sees is the gaze that dominates’ (Foucault, 1963 p. 39) He considered power to be transferable, often as a strategy, in a complex process involving individual instances of interaction. These subtle strategies, invisible

to those perceiving them are considered inconsequential but their effect is no less powerful (Foucault, 1977)

Many prospective learners have concerns about their intellectual capabilities and believe that only members of specific social groups are capable of participation in education and are less capable than others based on personal, social and cultural circumstances. Foucault would argue that this is a 'truth' that social discourse has shaped to achieve a social objective. He believed that discourse is central to power as it represents the accepted opinion of how to behave, even how to think and that truth is sanctioned by discourse and accepted forms of knowledge. Consequently, the conduct of a population is then guided by subconsciously internalised beliefs which become what an accepted truth to each society (Foucault, 1972).

Foucault challenged the traditional belief that knowledge had no power dimensions. In fact he believed that there is a co-dependency between power and knowledge.

Foucauldian theory suggests that the state has a vested interest in what is considered desirable knowledge to ensure it can take advantage of a compliant educated population (Foucault, 1972).

A critique of Foucault's theory.

I believe Foucault's theories of social surveillance and discursive power are limited by his apparent conviction of their unchanging domination of society. He appears to consider individuals as passively accepting their fate, incapable of individually or collectively subverting or eliminating the power of social discourse (Woermann, 2012).

Conclusion

This chapter has set out the literary context for the research. It has examined contemporary literature from the perspective of policy, critical sociology and theories of

education. This literary context will be used to frame the discussion on the research results in the following chapters.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences of adult learner, in through and beyond community factors that influence adult learners. The aim of this chapter is to explain the epistemological stance that frames the research and overall research design used. The reasons behind the use of semi-structured interviews to carry out qualitative research to obtain data are outlined. The method of data analysis is explained and ethical issues are discussed.

Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology refers to how we make sense of the nature of the social world on a personal level, what we perceive reality to be and how it is structured (Crotty, 1998). The concept of ontology can be difficult to understand because of its simplicity. I realise that in order to carry out effective research it is necessary to recognise my personal worldview so as to appreciate that of research participants (Mason, 1996).

Epistemology is a philosophical field which focuses on how we perceive truth and knowledge. It follows that the epistemological perspective in social research refers to how knowledge and meaning is acquired in relation to social phenomenon (Mason, 1996). Different epistemological standpoints can shape the entire research project including the research question, or research participants involved in the study and the structure and content of interview questions (Creswell, 2007).

Also known as worldviews or paradigms epistemologies can be categorised into three frameworks, objectivism, constructivism and subjectivism(Mason, 1996). Objectivism

refers to the existence of reality independently of consciousness. The distinction between the theories of constructionism and subjectivism lies in the nature of their interaction with a given phenomenon. Constructivism claims that reality is created through interaction with the world and the individual whereas subjectivism relates to a reality that is imposed on the phenomenon (Crotty, 1998).

The ontological and epistemological assumptions that frame qualitative research are central to an effective methodology. Therefore the link between my epistemological perspective and the research has had a significant influence on the research methodology and methods used in this study. The process is as follows; the ontological perspective inform the epistemology which in turn determines the theoretical perspectives thus representing the philosophical stance that underpins the methodology and subsequently the research methods used (Gray, 2004).

My epistemology

Thinking about the research resulted in reflection on my own epistemology. My belief is that social reality is not predetermined but is constructed through the relationships individuals have with their social, cultural and physical environment (Gergen, 1999).

On this basis I felt drawn to a constructionist standpoint. I then based my methodology on an interpretivist approach in order to immerse myself in the 'lived experiences' of those who had attend community education (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). I believe that as this study is concerned with personal experiences so issues are dependent on personal, social and cultural circumstances will have different impacts.

Consequently, the study is framed using relativist ontology. As social reality is subjective, relativism considers that reality is constructed differently by each individual *relative* to their social interactions (Scotland, 2012). I will apply a social constructive

epistemology. The constructionist view is that we are born into a world shaped by a pre-existing cultural reality which we then use to *construct* meaning (Crotty, 1998). The study will be framed using an interpretivist theoretical perspective. Interpretive research seeks to *interpret* social meaning based on cultural and historical context (Crotty, 1998).

Social constructionism

The constructionist view is that meaning is constructed not created, so truth and knowledge do not exist until they are created by interaction with social realities. The theory claims that truth and knowledge do not exist externally but that there are an infinite number of truths which are created independently based on how individuals interact with the world and with each other. It follows that individuals will construct truths in different ways depending on their social and cultural influences leading to various truths in relation to a single phenomenon (Crotty, 1998).

In an attempt to understand the social, cultural and historical context that has shaped individuals social reality I felt it was important to allow research participants themselves construct their narrative through open discussion (Creswell, 2007). Though this has resulted in individuals holding very unique positions depending on their socially constructed realities it has also allowed for the identification of common factors. Research methods based on this paradigm acknowledge the importance of social, cultural and historical factors in the research process.

Interpretism

It is useful to distinguish meaning from research the overarching question is ultimately whether to use a descriptive or interpretive approach. A descriptive approach is generally used to decipher data that is acquired from a positivist perspective and considered through a quantitative lens. On the other hand, an interpretive approach is

normally used when researching social phenomenon using qualitative research methods (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991).

By using an interpretive method of data analysis I endeavoured to gain an understanding of the factors impacted on the experiences of learners in community education, by focusing on the subjective and intersubjective aspects of research participants experiences. This refers to the personal experiences of individuals and how that experience is shared unconsciously with others. The purpose of this type of approach is not to find answers or solve difficulties, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of the research subject which will then add to existing knowledge (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991).

Qualitative research sits naturally within an interpretive philosophy because it is 'concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced and produced or constituted' (Mason, 1996 p. 3). Interpretative research interrogates the 'lived experiences' of many individuals in relation to the research topic. During the research process I endeavoured to achieve this by focusing on interpreting the commonality of experience to discover the fundamental nature of the phenomenon, what individuals experienced and how it impacted on them (Creswell, 2007).

Feminism

As I have previously stated a social constructionist perspective suggests that meaning is determined by social factors, feminism focuses that influence on gender, specifically the domination of male over female in a predominately patriarchal society. I regarded the aspect of domestic domination of women, whether it is implicitly or overtly, as particularly relevant to my research. Feminist researchers believe that this domination manifests itself not only in aspects such as language and day-to-day discourse but that

gender has a fundamental influence on the development of consciousness for both sexes (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Methods

The research cohort

The research participant group worked well because it allowed me to interrogate the issues from two different perspectives. I interviewed five adult learners who have participated in community education and two adult guidance counsellors. I believe the student group, who have the first hand experienced learning, were uniquely placed to report on this experience. On the other hand guidance counsellors reported the operational, cultural and social obstacles that exist from their perspective.

As the experiences of mature learners and guidance counsellors were investigated in this study it was necessary to keep the research methods exploratory and unstructured. An effort was made to keep the voice of the participants central to the process at all times by constructing any prepared interview questions with them as the focus. From a social constructivist standpoint I felt it was important to obtain a clear picture of individual experiences in relation to the research question and in so doing gained a clearer picture of learner experiences in community education.

Research method

It was important to choose a research methodology that effectively obtained detailed descriptions from adult learners about their experiences and from guidance counsellors about their issues when offering direction to their clients. It was decided that quantitative research was not appropriate for the study as it is largely used to methodically analyse empirical data using statistical or mathematical methods in an

effort to get answers rather than opinion (Gray, 2004). Therefore, a qualitative approach was favoured, which involved structuring questions which developed as they were investigated within the research process. This method of data collection was necessary to analyse the 'complex, multi-layered social world' which is heavily influenced by the social and cultural environment (Mason, 1996 p. 4).

It was envisaged that a qualitative method would elicit detailed information from research participants and gather an in-depth understanding of their experiences. This research method generated, rather than collected, data that uncovered the motivation behind human behaviour which was of significant importance when identifying the factors that impacted on adult learners in community education. However, I realised that the results would be somewhat influenced by my worldview and was aware at all times that the process involved 'activities which are intellectual, analytical and interruptive' (Mason, 1996 p. 36).

Interviews

Face to face interviews were used as the method of data collection and generation. Though these proved time consuming they were a very effective means of getting questions answered. I believe the use of this method was uniquely appropriate in relation to the particular research cohort involved in the study allowing me to recognise the emotion and feelings behind responses and gain the personal data necessary for the research. I didn't realise how much of this data was present on taped interviews until I carried out one that wasn't taped. One of the research participants preferred not to be recorded and of course her wishes were honoured. Although I reflected on this interview immediately and wrote about all aspects of our encounter I felt her account lacked a resonance when compared to the others. There was a sense of time and place from the

recorded accounts that was missing from this one. It allowed me, in a very real way, to make comparisons between the two different types of participant involved in the process.

I considered open-ended question where participants were encouraged to expand freely on a topic were the most effective method of generating data. I believed that the questions needed to be structured in such a way as to facilitate additional information if it was forthcoming from interviewees. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were carried out with an option to change or adapt questions to meet the changing needs of the interview. Though a list of questions was prepared as a guide I was not limited to a pre-arranged format. I instead favoured listening to how each person responded to questions and used this as a guide to determine the direction of the interview and the order in which the questions were asked (Gray, 2004). The objective of the interviews was not merely a data collection exercise but rather a collaboration between me as the interviewer and the interviewee resulting in the construction of a reality (Charmaz, 2006).

Thematic Analysis

Analysis is the process of linking the theoretical framework with the research material, and subsequently with the research question, by analysing the data to establish patterns or 'codes'. It represents 'the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations' (Charmaz, 2006) using inductive, rather than deductive analytical methods. Deductive analysis reaches conclusions that are definite and not subject to change, while inductive inquiry is used not to prove or disprove a theory but to add to the body of existing knowledge (Creswell, 2003).

I transcribed the interviews immediately after they took place and added emphasis for many where necessary. As a result I learned what had been effective or unsuccessful and based on this I altered the questions, sequence or technique for subsequent interviews. I then listened carefully to the interview recordings a number of times and wrote a synopsis, noting what themes I might expand on in later interviews. I then started the coding process by read the transcriptions in a focused manner and underlined key phrases and categorised the material into themes (Gray, 2004). I next broke those themes down into defined categories and linked them with the theory ‘using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to shift through large amounts of data’(Charmaz, 2006 p. 57).

As expected this approach gave rise to many different sets of results from the same interview questions. Consequently, many different but equally valid ‘truths’ were attributed to a given phenomenon. The consequences for the research are that individuals identified different responses to the research subject matter depending on their social and personal circumstances. (Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2004)

[To be confirmed]

Ethics

During the research process I was acutely aware of an ethical duty of care towards research participants. Considering the constructivist nature of the process and the use of semi-structured interviews which could change direction at will, it was difficult to pinpoint what ethical issues may arise. Consequently, I felt it necessary to explore the potential issues, centred on the research participant, in advance.

The nature of social enquiry results in subject matter being socially and ethically charged depending on the social context. This experience is extended to the research as

the process is directed by the structure and interpretation of questions (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). The intimate nature of interviewing allowed me to explore deeply personal and emotional matters in an atmosphere of safety and trust. However, this resulted in placing the interviewee in a potentially vulnerable position.

As the researcher I accept that I cannot remain neutral or impartial and I continually reflected on the influence I inevitably had on the process (Mason, 1996). This reflective experience gave me an opportunity to better identify and examine my opinion about the research question. A heightened awareness of my personal views resulted in an ability to limit their impact on the research and more easily accept the opinion of others. This resulted in the process being influenced by my worldviews on the one hand but I also believe it added an element of empathy and mutual understanding on my part for the participant's experience.

I tried at all times to be aware of my subjectivity around the issues and be conscious that the research participants were the true owners of the research material (Creswell, 2007). To help interviewees take ownership of the research it was stressed to them in advance how important their contribution was to the process and that the research and my thesis wouldn't be possible without it. I believe this gave their involvement a sense of value and resulted in requests for copies of the completed work.

I needed to be aware that I held a substantial amount of the power in the interviewing relationship, since I had generated and was asking the questions. Naturally, aspects of my world view influenced what questions I asked and how they are asked, which in turn may have resulted in controlling the direction of the interviews (Creswell, 2007). However, as individual interviews progressed they evolved into what became more like

a comfortable chat, the impact of the recording device lessened and I could see the transfer of that power to the participant.

It is a significant ethical responsibility to undertake the analysis of data. There are ethical issues around how my interruption of what was said attempted to decipher the thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of research participants (Creswell, 2003). I needed to be aware that when analysing findings I was not making interviewee's contributions 'fit' with the theory being used to frame the thesis. If there was any ambiguity around what was said I understood that I have an ethical responsibility to check with the interviewee for clarity.

To avoid potential ethical issues the following procedures were put in place before, during and following the interview process. Prior to their interview each research participant was contacted by email, informed about the nature of the research and assured that they had the option to refuse to take part if they wished. Before each interview began I again gave interviewees an overview of the research, the reason I felt it was important and why I had selected this particular study. I explained how I intended to use the data collected from their interview and guaranteed it would be treated with respect. I again reiterating their right to withdraw from the process at any time before the work was submitted.

Interview participants were also made aware that the process would be recorded and given assurances around the secure treatment and storage of data. I reassured them that they had the option to refuse to answer specific questions if they wished. I undertook to protect their anonymity by the use of pseudonyms and guaranteed that identifying markers, such as use of slang, would be removed from the recorded material when it was transcribed. These details were provided to participants on an information sheet

(appendix 1) which also contained a commitment of support should negative issues arise during the interview process. They then signed a consent form (appendix 2) before the interview commenced. Each participant was provided with a copy of the transcript of their interview by email or post.

The research process.

It was obvious early on in the research process that it was not possible to have an objective view of the research. This resulted in the process being influenced by my worldviews on the one hand but I also believe it also added an element of empathy to the interview experience. The research group identified that I was also an adult learner and often turned the tables on me to ask about my learning journey. As previously mentioned one of the research participants requested not to be recorded and her interview was transcribed by hand.

Limitations of the study

A limitation of this study is the composition of the research group. Because I personally selected the seven people to interview I have to accept I have had an effect on the research process and consequently the research results. The fact that I knew some of them in the past and that they knew each other is another consideration. The adult learner group were all women which limits the results from the perspective of gender balance. Though the adult learner group had accessed community education at different times from each some of them had attended the same institution which makes it impossible to generalise about *all* community training. A further limitation of the study is the fact that I interviewed a very specific group of people

Reflexivity

It has been a feature of *my* journey as an adult learner that I have found it difficult to put my voice into the material. At time I felt like it came across that I wasn't invested in the research but I know that isn't true as I have been very committed to the process and have been fascinated by what I have discovered. While doing this course I have moved out of my 'comfort zone' for the first time in a number of years. I'd be lying if I said the process has been painless, but I realise I'm at a juncture of great learning. I now remember this feeling from my undergraduate work, imagining I can't write another word when suddenly the fog lifted and it made sense. I feel that this resulted in a strong connection with the experiences of the research participants and this helped me to connect with them on a fundamental level and also to interpret their data from a palace of greater understanding.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the methodology undertaken for the research project. It includes my ontological and epistemological perspective and outlines the research design and process. Ethical considerations were examined and the processes thematic analysis was explained. I have also reflected on how I felt my personal feelings on the research subject may have influenced the data.

Chapter 4

Adult Learner Findings

Introduction

The research cohort

For the study five adult learners and two guidance counsellors were interviewed. All of the adult learners had started their adult learning experience in a community education setting. Three had progressed to higher education, one of whom was attending university at the time of interview. I feel it's necessary to provide a short outline of their personal circumstances including a brief account of their learning story, the barriers they experienced and where this experience has led them. I believe this will provide a deeper understanding of the impact community education had on them personally and illustrate the changes they experienced as a result of it.

Tanya

As the eldest of a large family Tanya's decision to go to university was complicated by the amount of responsibility she felt to help out at home with her siblings. She attended community education as a 'gap year' while repeating a subject in her leaving certificate exam. Having completed her community course she attended university, graduated and is now working full time. Her job is directly related to her qualification and she loves it.

Kate

Kate is a single mother of adult children who has lived in a rural provincial town for many years but was born and raised in a large city. She feels that the social expectations associated with her gender and her responsibilities to her children had a profound effect on her choices regarding participate in education. She has taken part in many

community education courses over the years. She attended university many years ago for one year but gave it up to care for a sick relative. Kate would like to go back and finish her university education but is reluctant to give the commitment she feels is required.

Lisa

Lisa is a single mother who lives in a provincial town in rural Ireland. Lisa's mother was frequently absent from the home and tragically died when Lisa was a teenager so as a middle child of a very large family she was expected to assume a lot of domestic responsibility. At this time, her schooling was not considered a priority and she finished her secondary schooling early in her second year. Her first experience of adult education was when she attended a community course provided by a local community group which recommended by a friend. Lisa has gone on to do two level 5 courses and is very confident she will progress to university.

Sharon

Sharon is a divorced mother of adult children who lives in rural Ireland. She left school at fourteen in her first year of secondary school and had received very little encouragement from family to proceed further with her education. She started her journey through adult education with a course in her local community. When this course finished her motivation to go further centred on the need for a qualification to earn money. Nevertheless there was always a niggling regret at the back of her mind that she hadn't continued her education. She has since successfully graduated from university and is now happily working in her chosen field.

Fidelma

Fidelma is a single mother of an adult child living in rural Ireland and was studying in university at the time of interview. She has completed secondary and the leaving certificate examination many years ago but had chosen not to progress to university at that time. Instead she was employed in a number of industries and eventually settled in a quite prestigious administration role for many years as a result of qualifications she received on a FAS community course. Following the death of a parent she took stock of her life, gave up her job and went back to education.

Introduction

A clear pattern emerged from my conversations with the research participants, which I believe can be clearly shown if I present their collective stories in chronological order. I will start with their experiences in their formative education, which appears to have had a profound effect on their attitude to learning in later life. Next I will explore some of the barriers they felt prevented them from progressing to education. The role of community education in the adult learning process for participants will be discussed. Finally I will outline an account of the effect that the learning experience has had on the personal and professional lives of adults, their motivation to return to education and how it has impacted on them.

Barriers

Early education

The impact of the family's regard for education, witnessed in early childhood and adolescence, in the home cannot be underestimated. Research participants were asked to reflect on their experience of education as children in the home to provide an educational background to their narratives

It was but everybody spoke of education and yes they wanted me to go to secondary school but that would have been the limit, maybe junior cert, intercert as it was called, would have been your finish line. (Kate)

...I remember in third class [in primary school] I had to stay back because I had missed 110 days of school...No, no not homework education it wasn't on the highest of the list. Definitely I would have heard 'get your homework done' but nobody would have followed up to see if did you do your homework or whatever. (Lisa)

The culture among my family and friends was 'well you get a job'. And then my family had businesses and you just worked for family business or you just got another job, so it just wasn't within my circle...and then there wasn't really anyone in my family who went to college, in fact most of them didn't make it through secondary school. (Sharon)

No! Education wasn't important in the family. Days off school were OK. There was no encouragement to go to college, getting a job and making money was more important. That was the feeling generally then and that's what my parents had done so that's what they expected of me and what I expected of myself. (Tanya)

The notion of progressing to university from secondary school wasn't considered in many cases. For example, Tanya was the eldest of a large family and so the first to experience the transition from school to university. It was not something valued by her parents and as the oldest she had no role model.

It would have been easier if there was support from home. There had been no suggestion from the guidance counsellors in school to go to college. They suggested I get a job full time or take a year out in a further education course but there was no help with picking a course or career. University was not mentioned as an option for me (Tanya)

Family responsibilities.

As the research cohort was exclusively female domestic and caring responsibilities were the most common reasons for not attending education earlier in their lives.

Tanya is the eldest of a large family and felt a responsibility to help out at home with her sibling.

I also had a lot of responsibility at home, as the eldest a lot was expected of me or maybe I expected it of myself. I didn't think they could cope without me. (Tanya)

Kate dropped out of university to care for a sick parent and didn't return. However, she freely admits that she may have used that as an excuse to allow fear of change to stop her continuing with the course.

I did my first year in [course and university name] in [course title] in [year]...I just loved it - it ate it. And I was going to progress that was my foot in the door and my [parent] got [illness] and I decided no...I wonder to this day did I use it as another excuse not to do it to allow the fear barrier to stop me. (Kate)

To better demonstrate the unconscious nature of caregiving, I feel I need to include (with Kate's permission) the details of a telephone call that she received from her adult child during her interview.

It'll be the usual harass dot com...Yes [name] yes I put chicken breasts inside the microwave because I can't leave them around with the cat. (pause) well I must have just thought I was going to do it. (pause) well eat the stir-fry you'll have enough (pause) alright (pause)not much longer (pause) in a little while (pause) no about a half an hour maximum. (Kate)

In Sharon's case the responsibility of childcare appears to have been used as an instrument of control.

When I was married my husband would say 'of course, I'd love you to go and do a course, no problem, once you make sure you're available to drop the kids to school and pick them up.' That gave me around three hours per day. (Sharon)

In Lisa's case her mother died when she was a child and she was expected to take on a lot of responsibility at home.

this mammy died and I come from a family of [number] and we were all very young, the eldest was 20 and the youngest was one and a half so yeah I was the middle child come fifth in the family so I had to help rear the rest of the young ones in the house because I was one of the older ones. (Lisa)

The majority of times when I got home from school I would have had to help peel the spuds, clean the house or do something with the younger ones or basically just run the house then you got home. (Lisa)

Outstanding obstacles

In the case of Sharon the adjustment to college was made more difficult simply because she had spent so much time in the quietness of her home and had to adjust to the physical level of noise in a larger building with more people.

...I had spent all maybe fifteen/sixteen years at home so I was used to an awful lot of quietness...when it came to break time, this was only morning break, I went straight out to my car...it was the noise and being with people all of the time, there was no escape...I'd sit for my morning break in my car just for the peace. (Sharon)

The adults who contributed to the research represented a wide range of age groups so many had adult children of the same age as their fellow students which resulted in a measure of alienation.

And I remember walking over this certain corridor, you know, I came to know it really well but it was one of my first times in it and thinking, the words just popped into my head, "I don't belong here. Why am I here?" I just felt really out of place...Because probably the age thing. There were mature students but it just seemed like there were so many young people and I had a daughter who was she was probably heading for twenty and there were loads of people her age group there, and I felt I didn't belong. (Sharon)

In contrast Tanya's experience was markedly different, she had taken a gap year between leaving school and college and was younger.

Socially it worked straight away, the very first day I walked in knowing nobody I was a bit nervous but sat down beside someone who knew no one either. (Tanya)

Sharon and Lisa agreed that maturity was an advantage rather than a shortcoming of getting involved in education at an older age.

So yeah if I did it at twenty like I should have done I would have probably gone through the motions, I wouldn't have developed so much as a person or wouldn't have gotten involved in stuff or wouldn't have done my best at everything so it was an age thing as well. So I suppose even though you should do it as a young person it's different doing it as an older person...I got so much out of it. (Sharon)

I got there, it might have took me longer but it was the right time for me. (Lisa)

Motivation

Financial and employment incentive.

The initial motivation to get involved in education as adults was generally to gain employment and achieve financial success. Some research participants linked their present employment success to their success in education. Actually on the day Sharon met me for interview she had attended a job interview, I later found out she got the job

The need to get a qualification, and earn money independently, that would have been the primary thing... has got me a job so far and hopefully will get me a better one do that's the financial side of thing and the kind of purpose. (Sharon)

I was working part-time and I had no money and no car, I was just miserable...My family were happy to support me when I went to university. I struggled to get the grant and they gave me money for ages otherwise I wouldn't

have been able to stay. Now I have my degree I got a job and I'm happy now I'm working I can pay them back. (Tanya)

I was very much under the impression that I needed to earn. (Kate)

Personal motivation

Individual personal circumstances had a significant influence on whether participants engaged with education. In the case of all of the research participants, to a greater or lesser degree, their motivation to take part in adult education was directly linked to a time of trauma and personal change.

I was in a bad place, in a bad relationship at the time. (Lisa)

*I know I had a lot more inside me than what I was using and I knew I was frustrated and surprised and I didn't know how or why but I just knew I just wasn't out of it...you're not even stimulated...the conversation is gossip so you're feeling what have I done? Is this what work life is about? Is this life?
(Kate)*

Divorce [laughs] going it alone...that was a short one for you!(Sharon)

I don't know maybe it was with [parent] dying and that I just thought I wanted to really assess what I wanted to do and life's short and I was always away. (Fidelma)

My younger sister made the move to go to college and that made me start to think about my future. If she could do it then why couldn't I? I realised that if I didn't get out I'd be stuck here. (Tanya)

That was really just to keep my head right, I wasn't really thinking about education it was just something to do. (Sharon)

The changes experienced by learners.

Learners believed that they now think differently, are more open to the opinions of others and can more easily see both sides of an argument. The experience also resulted in an increase in personal growth, control over other aspects of their lives, self-esteem and confidence.

Personal growth.

... if you only went to college and never actually did that brilliantly in your results or you know in your grades or if you never actually used your qualification to get the job you studied for everyone should go to college, it changes you totally as a person. (Sharon)

I know people talk about degrees and masters but the diploma is like a masters to me when I look back to what I've come from. (Lisa)

Control.

...it's a freedom a freedom of passage into I suppose every sort of communication because otherwise you're sort of out there you're not communicating fully - you can't...it gives you that road and development to move you into the tribe that you need to be in, instead of sitting down in the basement. (Kate)

Self-esteem.

Definitely it was definitely the turning point for me in my life definitely it just it led me to a place... it's what [number] years ago now and it just for what's happened to me within them years it seems like it was ten years ago because so many positive things have happened in my life since then. It gave me the foundation to believe in myself and know that you know I am a good person I can do things if I want something I can get it and I believe that now. Yeah after doing that course, that one course it was a life turning experience you know changing experience for me. (Lisa)

It shows you that there's more to life than the little community you lived in. it shows you the differences in people, different people's good points, their bad points, the way different people deal with stuff. It just makes you an all-round better person...it develops you so much as a person. (Sharon)

Confidence.

Definitely it increases your confidence, your point of view your vocabulary. .. Different point of view - I suppose it broadens your perspective. You have a narrow world and you're introduced to a wider world and there's a lot of information - and a wider world that you never even knew existed and you know all of this makes you address things like prejudice and how you were looking at things before. (Kate)

I'm much more confident than I was. It has opened my eyes and I'm more in charge of myself. It has also allowed me to move out of this town, I can't imagine what I would be doing now if it wasn't for going to college. I would probably be on the dole and still helping out at home. (Tanya)

Support

Family support

The importance of support was evident from the conversations with adult learners. It sometimes made the difference between them being able to participate or not.

'I swore that I would never go back because while doing college and rearing my two boys it was hard, it was tough struggling and you know trying to juggle everything but I'm in a good place in my life at the moment I have great support I have a great partner and I could do it'. (Lisa)

Sometimes the lack of support was more than surprising.

My mother didn't even know what I was studying [at university] until I can't remember if it was my last year or towards the end of my second last year. She never quite knew what I was studying. Never asked ever. (Sharon)

Community education as place to nurture change.

The ethos of community education is that it is learner centred and community led reflecting the lived experiences of participants. The personal approach lends itself to motivation, respect, participation and inclusion. The voluntary nature and protected environment seems to bring out the best in learners and motivates them into achieving their potential. As Sharon put it...*we were a wee bit minded. (good)*

I was very well aware that anything you're doing part time was considered Mickey Mouse in the real world but it meant the world to me, it got me started in a protected environment and I haven't stopped since. (Kate)

That was really just to keep my head right, I wasn't really thinking about education it was just something to do and it was just what I needed at the time. I felt really comfortable there. (Sharon)

During the course I got more comfortable with my ability because of the encouragement I got. (Tanya)

I just fitted so well in there, I felt really at home it was like I was part of their jigsaw that was missing. (Lisa)

It would not have suited these women to attend full time courses in a post leaving certificate (PLC) college. Through their community education course they were able to access adult education at a time and location that suited their lives and availability. Even if the experience started as a handy course used as a means of putting in time as was Tanya's experience, it resulted in profound change.

I then decided to take a year out, my friend was doing a [course] and I decided to join her. The [course] helped me to see I had potential and could succeed in different areas... During the course I decided to repeat my leaving cert [subject] and when I passed it applied to university to do [subject] and moved away from home. (Tanya)

Chapter 5

Guidance Counsellor Findings

Introduction

Two adult guidance counsellors were interviewed as part of the research. I believe their perspective is crucial to connect the learner's perspective to that of education policy. I also felt that they had the ability to take a step back from an adult learner's situation and see issues from a more practical perspective. The barriers that they identified were more structural for example issues with travel, grants, finding the right course. It struck me how much of their role was to put adult learners mind at rest about worries they have unrelated to learning.

Conor

Conor is an adult guidance counsellor in a provincial town in Ireland working for the Education and Training Board (ETB). His remit involves meeting with adult members of the community and those sent from social welfare to offer guidance on all aspects of community education and on to higher education.

When I meet with clients it's usually around trying to engage with some kind of training and education its more 'well how do I start?'...There's always a need to talk thing out – they may already have the answers it's more just to chat things through. (Conor)

Isabelle

Isabelle is also an information officer in a provincial town also employed by the ETB and her client base was similar to Conor's. She describes what she does as

We are a guidance and information service running nationally now for around 15 years. Set up originally to support adults in learning, that could be any adult, an adult starting education for the first time as an adult or an adult possibly due to family reasons and to life in general had to put everything on hold and then pick it up 20 or 30 years later. And we get referrals in from other agencies and we deal with drop ins we have various ways of accessing potential students and basically that's what we do we're a support service to adult learners.

Reasons for choosing to participating in education

Adult learners are generally part of an adult family and family commitments came out as something they worried about. Guidance counsellors felt it was part of their role to help clients work through the necessary practical planning to allow them to attend education.

Well the nature of adult learning means that everyone is an individual and their circumstances are different and particular to them and indeed their families, because they're part of an adult family. They may be responsible for they're not just making decisions based on their own needs. (Isabelle)

Employment

Isabelle outlined a project that her organisation was involved in which resulted in employment for many.

Well [profession] was what we featured because that was a very sought after link. We has a lot of adults who wanted to do [profession] as a career so you know it was just a huge piece of work for us at the time so we did the research and we built up the links in all the universities we assisted the students with the practical elements of relocating and

funding everything else and tried to keep in regular contact and we've had many of them come back to Ireland looking for jobs. (Isabelle)

Sometimes rather than where the person's aptitude or interest is there may be more concentration on where the jobs are. But when you have the conversation you can tease out how they are going to work in this field without the motivation and if employment will be possible without it. Sometimes people push themselves for other factors such as family but that doesn't work long term. (Conor)

Qualifications

Jason commented that perspective adult learners still wanted to know what they would qualify as when they finished college. This was often more important than the learning experience.

They would also be looking at are they going to be a 'something' after it. I want to know when I qualify what do I qualify as?-that's a big thing for some. This is an interest in qualification for job not for the experience of education. (Conor)

Little or no choice

It was part of both guidance counsellors remit to work with clients sent from social welfare. The compulsion to attending education can result in alienation from the entire learning process.

Well for some it may be that they feel compelled into training by social welfare...I was talking to a fella this morning who told me he was on a course and there was eight modules on it, he liked two of them and endured six of them.

He hoped I could find him a course that could reverse that... He hadn't picked the course for himself it was picked for him. (Conor)

Adult learner fears.

Academic ability

Adult learners expressed fears to guidance counsellors of the lack of priority of education in the family, financial issues and the absence of encouragement from family members. They also had fears around their academic ability and the move from community education where they were supported, to a more independent type of learning.

Well I suppose just habit, in the environment where they're living, maybe those from poorer area not getting the example in their own home...So and then financially as well where you may have some financial support but you don't have that family support which can make the difference by making it all verbal so it takes a certain strength of character to survive sometimes in that situation and it happens... sometimes it's all about getting a job and education doesn't have that priority. (Isabelle)

Family support.

I remember a guy I met his children weren't giving him the encouragement to do what he wanted to do. It was like they were getting their own fears and putting them on him, that they were afraid that he would spend time doing study and what would be at the end of it, would he get the job he wanted to get. (Conor)

Those who left school early soon realise that it's no indication of their ability now.

(Conor)

There are lots of reasons for not finishing school maybe a lack of family tradition in the home, lack of encouragement maybe in the home to branch out and detach and just location different combination of reasons. (Isabelle)

Alienation

Another concern centred on age, they felt that they would stand out because they were older than everyone there.

They have academic fears simply because they're getting in especially learner they're mixing with leaving cert students and the immediate fear is that, you'll hear things like 'what am I doing here' 'I'm old enough to be a parent here' (Isabelle)

The supportive nature of community education.

The counsellors appreciated the benefits of a community education setting for adult learners who are apprehensive about returning to education following an absence.

Probably the biggest one is the smaller classes the very supported environment be it in our own community groups which are very interactive, students help each other, students support each other, adult tutors are extremely helpful and very much appreciated by adult learners they're qualified to the highest levels and are all very positive experiences for learners. (Isabelle)

It's good for clients to know about the available supports such as literacy support and access programmes-it makes them realise that the reason they thought they couldn't do it don't exist. (Conor)

Yeah community education is a good jumping off point, it allows someone such as this to dip the toe in the water. Getting used to the language used that can be different, putting an assignment together...Learners find an awareness of their own ability and even meeting other people who are of like mind, that phrase comes to mind 'a rising tide lifts all boats'. (Conor)

Chapter 6

Discussion

Introduction

The original focus of my research was to establish the experiences of adult how adult learners progressed from further education to higher education. However, when I started research it was obvious that a much bigger story was emerging from the narratives. When they were given their voice the interviewees told a fascinating story of their experiences of community education. The research then became more about how different forms of education empower or disempower individuals, how learners negotiate the various barriers along the way and what changes occur as a result of their interaction with community education. The influence of how this experience impacted on the future trajectory of adult learners was also a focus of the study.

The adult learner's perspective

The adult learners I interviewed were an inspiration. They exuded a self-assuredness and sense of contentment. This was not only in relation to their academic progression but there was a general feeling that they knew where they were going and how they were going to get there. The effect of 'success', however it was perceived by them, was self-perpetuating, resulting in the confidence to meet the next challenge. There was a very strong sense from the entire group that they had experienced something very special.

The adult guidance counsellor's perspective.

It was possible for the guidance counsellors to give me an overview of how the Irish system of adult education is accessed by adult learners. They also acted as a link between the learners viewpoint and that of the policy of adult education.

Different forms of education

Early education

Family attitudes to education in childhood had a profound effect on how research participants viewed education through their lifetime. One of the things adult learners must sometimes overcome is the often negative experience of their biographical educational. Our childhood is a time when our most basic beliefs are assimilated and we carry these into adulthood (Mezirow, 1991). From early childhood the family's regard for education has an unconscious impact on how it is valued in later life (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). *Education just wasn't in my family. (Sharon)*

Most education begins with a reflection on previous education because you re-experience what it means to become a learner. Therefore negative experiences of formative education can have a significant impact on adult learners. The societally accepted 'one size fits all' education system marginalises large numbers of the population and can very effectively reinforce a feeling of failure that endures into adulthood (Tett, 2010).

It was evident that past 'failure' in education had a profound effect on the participants as they embarked on their adult learning experience. *I realised that by doing that course I had brain cells in my head and that I was fit for college and could do this. (Lisa)*

I feel that the true power of early life encouragement can be starkly illustrated by the following comments by Lisa and Sharon. Although these two women left school very early they had few doubts in their academic ability when considering adult education. I think it's significant that they both recalled small events in their early life that I felt may have been responsible for this confidence.

...there was potential, there is potential there, there was according to the teachers then, they came down to the house to say the potential was there. (Lisa)

I do remember my parents would say different comments I would be involved a lot in their businesses and they'd make comments (which is not very nice to say) but they'd make comments that I was brighter than the rest of them or that 'Sharon was clever' or stuff like that...I always knew I could do it myself, and I don't know why. (Sharon)

It is evident that the small positive experiences of Sharon and Lisa in childhood had a lasting effect on their confidence levels as they proceeded to adult education (West et al., 2013).

In the case of Sharon there was a stark difference between her experience in formative education and community and higher education. She barely attended secondary school and left when she was fourteen describing herself as '*rebellious teenager*' and also stated that '*if they sat at the school until they were blue in the face I wouldn't have gone in, it just didn't suit me*'. However, she excelled in the environment of adult education, achieving success academically and embracing the experience passionately. '*I got so much out of it*'. I believe that this is evidence that the collaborative, problem posing system favoured in adult education suited Sharon better than the rote learning, or what

Freire describes as the 'banking' method of education favoured by Irish secondary schools (Freire, 1972).

The sense of personal empowerment and freedom experienced by participants as a result of their community education experience stands in stark contrast to their experiences in formative education. However, as I asked about their educational experiences in childhood it struck me how they had reached a point where they had shed the shackles of their educational history like a skin that was too small and has emerged renewed by their present experience.

Where is the experience of education nurtured?

The ethos of community education is that it is learner centred and community led reflecting the lived experiences of participants. The personal approach lends itself to motivation, respect, participation and inclusion. The voluntary nature and protected environment seems to bring out the best in learners and motivates them into achieving their potential. As Sharon put it...*we were a wee bit minded.*

I was struck by the level of enthusiasm and positivity participants conveyed about their community education experiences. They attributed major changes in their lives as well as, in some cases, their successful progression to further education to their initiation community education experience. The sense of empowerment that participants realised from their community education experience was marked. This contrasted starkly with the disempowerment evident from their some of their accounts of formative education(Connolly, 2008).

It was evident that the impetus to progress further through the education system and the confidence necessary to do so was strongly influenced by the experience in community

education and control over the nature and timing of their progression contributed to their ability to persist with further learning. The presence of the required learner-centred environment to encourage persistence was obvious and was reflected in Kates comments '*it got me started in a protected environment and I haven't stopped since.*' (Tett, 2010)

The democratic nature of community education lends itself to positive change. The ethos of this type of education is to provide an environment to promote inclusion and mutual participation. Both the adult learners and the guidance counsellors considered community education a good '*jumping off point*' (Conor) for adult learners to begin their adult learning experience in a protected environment (Community Education Network., 2017).

Barriers

Family responsibilities

As all of the adult learners I interviewed were women, so some of the reasons discussed for not attending education through traditional routes stemmed from domestic responsibilities traditionally attributed to women such as child rearing and other caring roles. There was no suggestion that they considered these roles as barriers and it was clear that those they cared for had the highest priority in their lives. However, it was evident that their roles as caregivers had an impact on their participation in education. In Tanya's case as the eldest of a large family she felt responsible helping out '*I didn't think they could cope without me.*'

Lisa's mother died when she was a child and as one of the older sibling she needed to assume a measure of the responsibility for running the home...*'so I had to help rear the rest of the young ones in the house because I was one of the older ones.'* (Lisa)

Sharon's account of how her childcare responsibilities were used to prevent her from returning to education sooner illustrates the importance of education provision centred around the lived experiences of learners (Connolly, 2001)

When I was married my husband would say 'of course, I'd love you to go and do a course, no problem, once you make sure you're available to drop the kids to school and pick them up.' That gave me around three hours per day. (Sharon)

I think Kates *harasses dot com* story illustrate how subconscious the role of caregiver can be. I think this illustrates Foucault's theory of social discourse and how it informs us on a subconscious level of what our roles are in society (Foucault, 1977).

Outstanding obstacles

It emerged from interviews with adult learners and guidance counsellor that there is a profound feeling of alienation when learners progress from the protected environment of community education to more structured education such as university. Many adult learners had children of college going age and were conscious of the age gap between them and their fellow students (Crossan et al., 2013).

...you'll hear things like 'what am I doing here' 'I'm old enough to be a parent here' (Isabelle)

In addition to being self-conscious about the age gap, there were genuine concerns that those younger would be more capable academically. An experience of failure in

formative education even from childhood can remain into adulthood and can be responsible for this feeling of inadequacy (Tett, 2010).

The challenges to an individual's identity when they get involved in adult education can be profound. They are catapulted out of their comfort zone into a world that is alien to them. The experience of not belonging was a common theme among interview participants. There was a sense of not fitting in, of being seen as too old or that others would be smarter. This equates to a form of identity crisis as adult learners adjust to a different environment and struggle to connect with their surroundings and fellow students (Crossan et al., 2013; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). It wasn't necessary for this alienation to take a dramatic form, it could be something as simple as adjusting to the noise levels in the college environment as in Sharon's case... *'it was the noise and being with people all of the time, there was no escape... I'd sit for my morning break in my car just for the peace'*

However, initial concerns about academic ability and anxiety about joining classes filled with young adults who may have been the same age as their children often disappeared as learners took control of their learning.

Motivation

Employment.

The need to increase employability was a large motivating factor for adults returning to education. Guidance counsellor Conor reported clients who wanted to know what they would *be* after the course of study he was recommending.

They would also be looking at are they going to be a 'something' after it.(Conor)

Isabelle recounted a project she had been involved in that encouraged an organisation from overseas to work with adult learners with a view to training for employment.

We has a lot of adults who wanted to do [profession] as a career... we built up the links in all the universities...we've had many of them come back to Ireland looking for jobs. (Isabelle).

The original motivating factor for many on the student group was to return to education and gain financial stability. The participants wanted to provide for their family and access education to progress to a successful career.

The need to get a qualification, and earn money independently. (Sharon)

A personal trauma as a motivating factor.

Some interviewees described a personal event which hastened the decision to reengage with education, typically a personal trauma or a transitional phase of life. This corresponds with Mezirow's concept of 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991). This was shown by Fidelma who went back to education following the death of a parent and Sharon who do following her divorce.

Divorce [laughs] going it alone!(Sharon)

I don't know maybe it was with [parent] dying and that I just thought I wanted to really assess what I wanted to do and life's short. (Fidelma)

I had previously underestimated the impact of a pivotal moment of personal, social or domestic chaos which is sometimes necessary to create the 'perfect storm' to generate the necessary conditions for participation in education to flourish (Dominice, 2000).

Often personal traumas are fraught with issues of power, it would appear that the

voluntary nature of community education acted as an appropriate means to take back control and offered an opportunity for empowerment (Connolly, 2001). It can best be compared to a light had been switched on in a very dark place.

The experience of transformative change through education.

A strong theme that emerged from my research was individual accounts of the profound change that participation in community education had had on their lives. Success in the community education setting seemed to ‘kick off’ a conviction in personal achievement and challenged the belief that failure at school was a personal failure (Dominice, 2000).

There was a sense that learners had been previously unfulfilled and education gave them an opportunity to fill a void. Rather than mentioning the obstacles they faced there was an overwhelming sense of positivity about the accounts the participants gave of their experience of education in general and community education in particular. Indeed every interviewee attributed their sometimes dramatic experience of education to the community education course they started with rather than levels of academic achievement as shown by Lisa’s comment.

I know people talk about degrees and masters but the diploma is like a masters to me when I look back to what I’ve come from. (Lisa)

A realisation of personal growth

The experience of education allowed research participants the independence and liberation to lift themselves out of the perceived banality of their lives to a place filled with possibilities. Some described as a turning point in life and one which was necessary to allow them to find the part of themselves that was missing. This experience of emancipation through education and the resulting profound effect on the lived

experience of the learner is a perfect illustration of Freire's theory of social liberation through education. This is illustrated by Sharon's remark.

'It shows you that there's more to life than the little community you lived in.' (Sharon)

This compares starkly to the opposite experience of Conor's client who was forced onto a course he didn't choose or enjoy in the name of labour activation and described enduring most of the course content. Freire would consider this as an attempt by the welfare state to use education as an instrument of oppression (Freire, 1972).

Well for some it may be that they feel compelled into training by social welfare...I was talking to a fella this morning who told me he was on a course and there was eight modules on it, he liked two of them and endured six of them...he hadn't picked the course for himself it was picked for him. (Conor)

This transformation was not unique to those who had progressed to university and though the change varied in degree and intensity it was present from all the adult learners who were interviewed. Learners found they had a new ability to take on board the opinions of others and question their own assumptions. This capacity to question meaning perspectives is associated with a phase of Mezirow's concept of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). This was particularly evident from Fidelma's account of her willingness to take the opinions of others on board like never before.

It's made me more willing to not focus on my opinion. Before that I would have picked a subject I liked and researched everything I could about it whereas now... I think you can't just have your opinion and just get stuck in you have to be open minded and I think it's made me more broader, it's made me more

willing to look at more views and take in more and not be just set and that's the way I feel and that's the way it is. (Fidelma)

Support

Family support

The importance of family support was stressed by both research groups both from a practical and an emotional point of view. Lack of support can sometimes be as a result of a fear of failure and disappointment and embarrassment on the part of the learner. These fears may have stemmed from a lack of regard for education because of a lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

...they were afraid that he would spend time doing study and what would be at the end of it, would he get the job he wanted to get? (Conor)

The disinterest shown by Sharon's mother could also be more to do with a disregard for the importance of education again due to a lack of cultural capital than indifference to her learning (Bourdieu, 1984).

This support is often the key to a learner's ability to make the decision to return to education.

... at the moment I have great support I have a great partner and I could do it'. (Lisa)

Conclusion

This chapter explored the various themes discovered in the findings of the research study and discussed them using some of the literature from the literature review in chapter 2. It explored the experiences of adult learners in community education settings from the perspective of both the learners and guidance counsellors.

Chapter 7

Conclusion and Recommendations.

Conclusion

The study examined the experiences of adult learners in through and beyond community education. The effect of participation in different forms of education provision and how they empower or disempower was examined. To this end I examined participants previous experiences of schooling and discovered that the often negative influence of formative education has a profound impact on identity and attitude to education in adulthood. In contrast, community education came across as a place of safety and control and individuals learned in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and empowerment.

Personal change through the experience of education was evident from the research group. This took the form of increased confidence and self-esteem and resulted in adults revising long held beliefs. There was evidence that individuals had experienced personal growth and had a desire to become part of the wider community. Though they met personal and structural obstacles on the way this transformation represented a triumph of human agency.

Some learners have moved beyond community education to university and to employment. They would credit their experience in community education as the start of this journey.

Reccommendations

The adult education community needs to be acutely aware of community education settings as a unique setting to foster transformative learning. This provides for the space and support to think critically in an atmosphere of support and mutual understanding.

This study was, of course, limited to a small number of learners but I think their experiences illustrate how important the correct setting is to foster this type of growth.

Adult learners need to be supported to access education on an 'ad hoc' basis so they can take ownership of their own learning. The emphasis on retention in adult education settings may be a priority on an institutional level but does not take account of the 'lived experiences' of adult learners.

The importance of formative education as a lifelong preparation for learning should feature more in our early education. The evidence of the lasting impact of these early experiences right through to adulthood, and its influence on identity, should result in an effort being made to make early education a place of preparation for a lifetime of learning.

Reflection

As a former community adult educator it was heartening to hear participants reflect on the transformative effect that their educational experience had had on them. Though I had seen people change through education during my tutoring career I had not realised how the experience affected every aspect of individual's lives and the lives of those close to them. I was struck, however, by the somewhat random nature of the process. It would seem that the conditions to create 'the perfect storm' to allow transformative learning to occur, the catalytic presence of a life event, the availability of a relevant course and an appropriate experience of education, are in the hands of fate. (have a look at comment p.34)

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Appendix 1

Information sheet for interview participants.

Please accept my sincere gratitude for considering being part of my research study. I have asked you to participate in this study because I believe that you have a valuable insight into the experience of adult learners as they transition from further education to higher education.

The purpose of the study

As part of the requirements for the Masters in Adult and Community Education, I will carry out a research study. I am investigating the reasons adults choose to move on to university education from further education and also what factors may prevent this choice. I hope my work recognising barriers to this transition will give rise to changes that may result in an increased number of adult learners moving from further to higher education.

What happens if you choose to participate?

To explore the subject I will ask you to talk about your personal experiences as an adult learner.

- I will record the interview and later transcribe it. A copy of the transcript, and the recording if you wish, will be sent to you before it is used in the thesis.
- Participation is voluntary, you have the option of withdrawing from the study at any time and you may withdraw your consent up until the work is submitted.
- If you decide to proceed, I will ask you to sign the attached consent form.

Data protection and confidentiality

- Your identity will not appear in the thesis; quoted extracts from what you say will be entirely anonymous.
- Your data will be available only to my research supervisor and me for the duration of the study. It will be securely stored, in the case of digital data using password-protected software. Printed material, such as transcripts, will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.
- My research supervisor and an external examiner will see the results of the research presented in the thesis for supervision and grading. It is possible future students will read the thesis and it may be published in a research journal

- It should be noted that in some exceptional circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

Support

There is always a possibility that talking about your personal experiences may be distressing. If this is the case I can put you in contact with support agencies should you need them.

If you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Mary Smith 087 737 3798 or caroline.smith.2009@mumail.ie

Appendix 2
Consent from

<p>Researcher's Name and contact details: Mary Smith caroline.smith.2009@mumail.ie (087) 737 3798</p>		
<p>University supervisor contact details: Dr. Fergal Finnegan Adult and Community Education Department Maynooth University Maynooth Co Kildare (01) 7086059</p>		
<p>The title of the study: What factors influence the choice for adult learners who wish to progress from further education to higher education</p>		
<p>To be completed by the interviewee</p>		
<p><i>Please read the following list carefully and tick yes or no as appropriate</i></p>	YES	NO
I have been fully informed and have read the information sheet about this research		
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.		
I voluntarily agree to participate in this research.		
I agree to take part in this study the results of which are likely to be published.		
I understand that I can access a copy of the recording or transcript of my interview at any time.		
I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information from this interview.		
I realise that the interview is confidential and though it will be		

recorded this will be destroyed immediately after transcription		
I understand that I have the option of withdrawing from the study at any time and that I may withdraw my data up until the work is published.		
<p>Signed _____ Date _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Name in Block Letters _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____</p> <p>_____</p>		
<p><i>If during your participation in the study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.</i></p>		