

TO EARN OR TO LEARN?
WHY THE WOMEN FROM NAVAN
TRAVELLER EDUCATION CENTRE
RETURNED TO LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In July 2012 the Navan Traveller Education Centre closed its doors for the last time. The centre had been providing learning and training opportunities to members of the Traveller community in Meath for over 20 years. This thesis asks the Research Question – Why did the Women of Navan Traveller Centre returned to learning following the closure of the Traveller Training Centre in Navan, Co Meath. This thesis challenges many of our preconcieved ideals concerning the motivations of Women in the Irish Traveller Community, and particularly why they accessed learning through the centre. In conjunction with the exploration of why the Traveller Women returned to learning this thesis will also explore the creation and evolution of the Navan Traveller Womens Development Group and the role it played in helping the women shape their own future

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ACRONYMS

AONTAS	The Irish National Adult Learning Organisation
BTEI	Back To Education Initiative
CE	Community Education
DES	Department of Education and Science
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institution
ETB	Education and Training Board
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NTEC	Navan Traveller Education Centre
NTWDG	Navan Traveller Women's Development Group
STTC	Senior Traveller Training Centre
VEC	Vocational Educational Committee
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Country Person: A person who is not a member of the Traveller Community

Traveller: A member of the Traveller community.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

To Earn or to Learn? Why the women from Navan Traveller Education Centre returned to learning.

Introduction

In July 2012 the Navan Traveller Education Centre closed its doors for the last time. The centre had been providing learning and training opportunities to members of the Traveller community in Meath for over 20 years. In October 2010, I began working on this thesis as part fulfilment of the requirements for the MEd in Adult and Community Education.

At this time I had been employed as a teacher in the centre for a couple of years and had formed strong bonds with both the staff and learners. We knew the closure of the centre was imminent and that services offered by the centre would be reduced over the remaining terms. The closure became a topic for discussion in class and I'd noticed that there was an air of denial about the closure, many learners didn't believe it would happen or that some alternative course providing an allowance would be available. This attitude is what brought me to the decision to research the reasons the women attend the centre, what they plan to do when the centre is no longer available to them and how to bring them back to learning. I hoped to find the answers to these questions for the thesis but more importantly, by asking these questions the women would be faced with their own answers to the next step in their learning journey.

This thesis will also tell the story of the inception and continued evolution of the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group. This group was set up by the learners from NTEC as a reaction to the closure of the centre. Somewhere along this journey, through a process of interconnectedness, it became unclear if the development of the group lead to this thesis or did the thesis lead to the development of the group?

Outline of chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter one gives an overview of this thesis, my personal perspectives, why this research is important and an outline of each chapter.

Chapter 2: Literary Review

Chapter two is in two parts the first part details the political and social context of Traveller education policy, and especially the options available to adults in the Traveller community. The second part concentrates on the theoretical framework underpinning this research. There is much emphasis on the writings of Critical and Feminist Theorists. Praxis and what it means in the feminist paradigm and how the women involved in setting up the group have developed through the actions they have taken in the research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter details the methodology used in this research. It tells the story of how the methods and methodology evolved due to the time constraints involved in this project. It details how feminist paradigm merges with action research in order to provide the methodology used in this work. The rationale for the decisions made are also discussed.

Chapter 4: Findings and analysis

This chapter discusses the findings from the semi structured interviews and how this information was used to move forward with the setting up of the Women's Group. The timeline of the group is also detailed in this section.

Chapter 5: Implications, recommendations and conclusions

This chapter details the implications of having or not having the

group. It also lists recommendations for maintaining the links between Traveller women and lifelong learning. This section also discusses a conclusion to this thesis.

Why is it important?

The question of why the women attended the centre is important as in the answer lies the next step in their learning journey. I was struck by how passively the women accepted the closure of the centre and I wanted to explore the reasons why. Traveller women are unique in that they are already discriminated against in their own culture as well as their own country. It is somehow socially acceptable to discriminate against Travellers in a way which would be unacceptable against immigrant minorities in this country. This constant discrimination and oppression can lead to an inferiority complex.

When studying for the post-graduate diploma in Adult and Community Education I felt privileged to be working in the NTEC as I was working with learners who could really thrive from the learning methodologies used in emancipatory adult education. I could see the benefits; how the women, mainly mothers, were learning and gaining a respect for education that they didn't have before attending the centre. The positive effects of their increased literacy were evident in other areas of their lives including health, finances, personal relationships and community interaction. I could also see the benefits of the support they received from the centre, the links with other agencies such as the HSE and schools as well as the strong friendships formed with other learners.

When I began working with Travellers had my own prejudices and ignorant views of Travellers based on my upbringing and scant interaction with members of the Traveller community.

However, now I struggle with the idea that just because I value education does not mean the women I work with should. Maybe it is more important for them and their families to be earning rather than learning? But it just brings me back to the feminist mantra of 'choice', it is important that every

woman has the opportunity and choice to reach their potential, whatever that is?

The women had never been asked directly what their motivations were for attending. Assumptions were made based on society in general and not Travellers. The rationale for closing the centre was based on 'lack of progression' to work or further learning (McCarthy, Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, 2009). This was unfair as the learners did not know that the success of the centre was based on these criteria which didn't take Traveller culture into account. However, for many of the women, attending the centre was seen as their ultimate learning goal. From working with the women, I suspected their reasons for attending were more than simply 'to access education'.

I began working in NTEC in February 2007 teaching computer literacy two mornings per week. I was apprehensive when I started as I had never worked with Travellers before and didn't know what to expect. I was an inexperienced teacher and had only begun working in adult education a couple of months before in Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). I did expect the experience of working with Travellers to be distinct to working with other adult learners due to the segregated learning practices many of the women would have experienced. What I found was that the women at the NTEC were looking to improve their situation the same as any other adult learner, being a Traveller didn't come in to it.

Many Travellers view attending a Training centre as 'work' and the money earned contributes to family finances. For most, learning, personal development and socialising isn't enough of an incentive to attend courses.

Many challenges now face adult Traveller education in the current economic climate. The NTEC has closed, where will adult Travellers go to meet their educational needs? The expectation is that they will access the services of Community Education, Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes (VTOS) and Back To Education Initiatives (BTEI) which are available to all who meet the specific conditions, but there is no increase in place numbers.

While the current policy is against segregation, many Travellers are uncomfortable in groups of mixed gender and would rather attend women or men only groups, rather than a specific 'Traveller only' group. There is also the issue of 'chaperoning' of unmarried women.

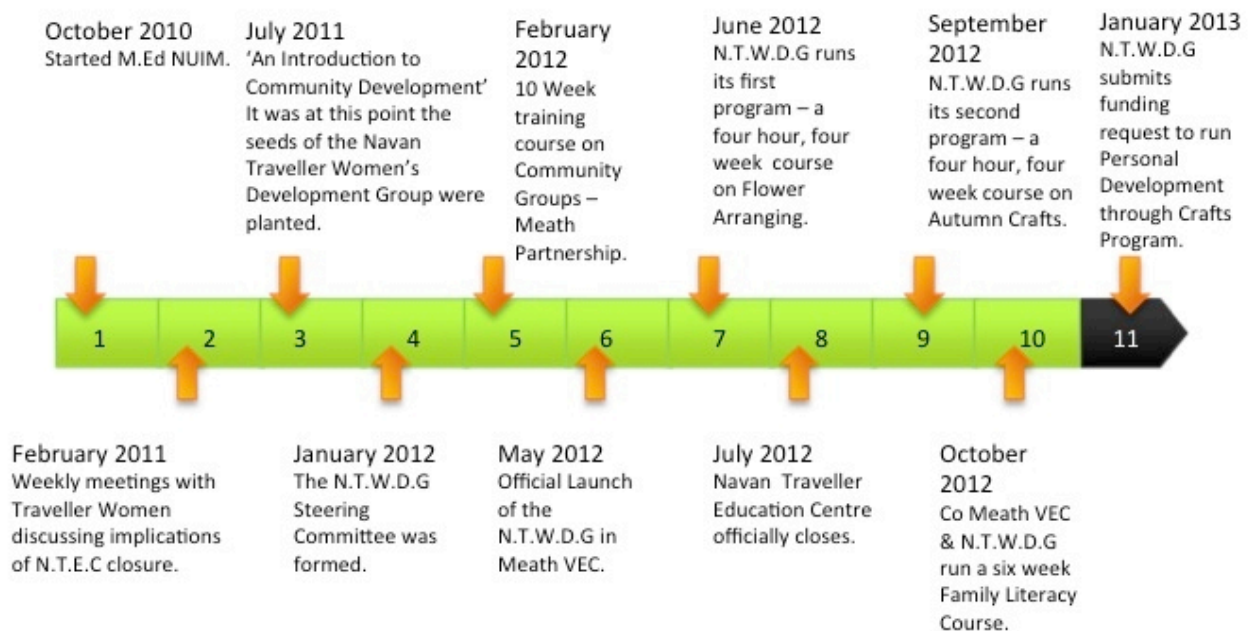
My goal in undertaking this research is to find answers to the research question through using feminist methodologies. We explore the concept of 'praxis' and how it applies in this research. The women from NTEC will engage in an exercise of action research through feminist paradigm. The findings of this process will result in a chain of events which will enable the women involved to gain a strong sense of control over their learning and the path it takes. The women will also learn valuable, practical skills in community development which will empower not only themselves, but their families and communities.

Conclusion

This chapter detailed what I originally set out to do in asking questions of the women attending the NTEC. Asking the question has a radicalising, consciousness raising effect as the women have to explore why they attend the NTEC and what they will do when it closed. This research will raise important questions about lifelong learning, progression, qualifications and whose needs are really being met.

Image 1.0: Timeline of the development of Navan Traveller Women's Development Group

'To Earn or to Learn – Why the Women from Navan Traveller Education Centre Return to Learning'



A Timeline detailing my Journey with this Project from Inception to Completion. Oct 2010 – Oct 2012

Chapter 2 Literary Review

Section One: Political and Social Context

Introduction

This literature review is part of a study on the attitudes to adult education of Traveller women who attend the Senior Traveller Training Centre (STTC) in Navan, Co. Meath also known as Navan Traveller Education Centre (NTEC). There will be particular emphasis on motivations to education when the supports of a Traveller dedicated environment (NTEC) and training allowance are removed in July 2012.

Travellers and Adult Education

A Traveller is defined as “The community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland.” (The Equality Authority, 2006, p. 35) Travellers are acknowledged in many reports as one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society. This is particularly emphasised, for example, in the *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community* (1995). Many Travellers fare poorly on every indicator used to measure disadvantage, including educational attainment, health status, unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, life expectancy, infant mortality, gender equality, political representation, accommodation, and living conditions.

Through a number of initiatives and policies since the 1960s there have been attempts to assimilate Travellers into the dominant Irish society. The justification behind this was the flawed theory that there were no Travellers before the Famine and they were a displaced people. By this reasoning the State wasn't settling Travellers but '*resettling*' them. Michael McDonagh has disproved this theory in his study of the 'History of Travellers'. (Navan Travellers Workshops Ltd)

According to the 2006 census 22,435 people were identified as Travellers which represented 0.5 per cent of the Irish population at the time (CSO, 2007). There

are approximately 724 Travellers in Meath including an estimated 250 women over 18 years of age who would have access to Navan Traveller Training Centre. When the NTEC closed there were 62 Traveller women attending the centre on a full or part-time basis.

Senior Traveller Training Centres were first set up in 1974 and there were thirty-three centres around the country. Although Traveller Training Centres were open to all communities only ten per cent of trainees were not from the Travelling community. Following the McCarty Report in 2009 (McCarthy, Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, 2009, p. 52) and subsequent budget it was decided that Senior Traveller Training Centres were to be phased out by July 2012.

McCarthy's basis for the recommendation was *The Value for Money Review* (DES, 2008). McCarthy reported that the Review concluded that "the STTCs should be phased out over the next 10-15 years 'as participation rates for Travellers increase at post-primary level in the future'. *The Value for Money Review* concluded 'in the long term (15 years) there should be no segregated provision for adults' (McCarthy, Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes Vol II, 2009, p. 63). However, what the report actually said was "For STTCs funding should continue for the next 10-15 years" (DES, 2008, p. 13), this is not the same.

The point about participation rates is not sound as although there is an increase in the number of Travellers transferring to post-primary, almost half have left by Junior Certificate and only a small number remain by Leaving Certificate (Joint Working Group, 2006). Travellers will continue to leave school early due to their obligations to marry in their community. Marriage is essential in Traveller culture to gaining social status, financial security and entering adulthood.

It is expected that Travellers seeking education will access it through Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) and Community Education (CE). Where TTC have closed, for example in Mullingar, not one of the 52 Travellers have gone on to mainstream education system. Even those who had completed one year of a two year programme didn't enrol

on another programme to complete their studies. (Hourigan & Campbell, 2010, p. 98)

The aim of the STTC is to “provide Travellers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to successfully make the transition to work and adult life, and to participate fully in their communities.” (Gerard Griffin, 2011)

Unfortunately the success of the STTC has not been measured by reaching these aims but by the number of Travellers who have progressed to further education or employment. These are measures of success in the settled community not the Traveller community and actually measures assimilation rather than successful integration. Hourigan found that many Travellers viewed ‘progression’ into mainstream educational and workplace contexts as assimilation which would require them to sacrifice the aspects of their cultural identity which bind them to their own community. (Hourigan & Campbell, 2010, p. 97)

The average Irish settled person derives both income and status from their occupations (Fields, 2003). However, within Traveller culture, there is little if no social prestige attached to participation in the workforce. Social status is derived, almost completely, from marriage and family ties. Ni Shuineir also highlights this cultural difference stating ‘Travellers...recognise no occupational pyramid. There are only more and less effective ways to earn money, and more effective earners...While Travellers take pride in their skills, they do not define themselves in terms of specialisations’ (2005(b),p.3)

The Traveller Community is not one homogenous group. The Traveller Community in Ireland is diverse and many have more in common with the ‘settled’ community than many in the Traveller community. There are diverse opinions on what it means to be a Traveller and which traditions should be maintained and which should not. Which traditions are uniquely Traveller and which are just Irish traditions which should not be maintained as part of a modern society.

We are still dealing with the legacy of how Travellers were treated in the education system. The policy of Traveller only ‘special’ classes, studying a

curtailed curriculum of English and maths and daily showers is still fresh in the minds of the parents of today's students.

The European Commission on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) second report on Ireland refers to the fact that;

Traveller children have in the past faced extreme marginalisation as regards access to education in Ireland, often being entirely excluded from the schools system, placed in segregated classes, or dropping out of the system early. (ECRI, 2001)

Traveller parents want their children to get an 'education' as they believe it is a necessity in modern society. For many Travellers the first time they become aware that they are marginalised is when they enter the school system. Up until this point many are secure in their identity and don't have to deal with exclusion, racism, discrimination, ignorance etc. A Traveller child starting in primary school is not celebrated as a child is in the 'settled' community, as the parents know they are exposing their young child to the 'system'. The hostility they face is part of what is referred to as the 'hidden curriculum'; this is 'what is learnt through the experience of education, rather than the actual stated objectives' (Haralambos, 1991).

Adult Travellers in Co Meath can access adult education by approaching Meath Adult Education Guidance Service (MAEGS) who will have the learner take a course placement assessment. The results of this assessment will determine whether the learner is referred to Adult Literacy, Community Education, Back To Education Initiative or VTOS. Co Meath VEC has recognised its responsibility to Adult Travellers by including this provision in the Co Meath VEC Education Plan 2010-2015.

Design alternative programmes that meet the education needs of Adult Travellers in response to the proposed closure of Navan Traveller Education Centre. (Co Meath VEC, 2010)

Co Meath VEC is meeting their commitments by providing support to the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group through funding and use of premises. The women from the group are also taking part in a 'Family Literacy' programme through Adult Literacy.

Education or Work

There was a common discourse among course providers that, in their experience, Travellers will only attend a course if they are being paid. Many Travellers view attending a training centre as 'work' and a source of income, not education thus, when the centres close, they will seek alternative source of income, not education, "...Travellers view participation in adult education as work, a practice which creates a false impression of workplace culture and practices in Ireland" (Hourigan & Campbell, 2010, p. 102).

This 'culture clash' is not unusual in the field of adult and community education where those who Freire classes as the 'oppressed' have to access education through the 'oppressors' (Freire P. , Pedagogy of The Oppressed, 1970). This perception was not challenged in the NTEC as the learners and teachers would commonly refer to attending as 'work'. However, the fact that it is a commonly held perception does not mean that it cannot be changed and as such it is one of the aims of the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group.

The Teach Report

The Teach Report (Hourigan & Campbell, 2010) was commissioned by the national Association of Travellers' Centres (NATC) in response to the announcement of the phasing out of the STTCs. The aim of the research was to 'map a way forward in terms of adult education for Travellers in 21st century Ireland.' The report found that to ensure the continued link between adult Travellers and lifelong learning that there should be 'designated Traveller adult education spaces within the Irish education system.' These spaces would be located in existing VECs and 'should be viewed primarily as support centres for Travellers whose primary goal is to assist the broad integration of Travellers into Irish society.' The report also recommends running a 'Preparation for Further Education and Work Programme', open to Travellers and country people and

would a training allowance. (Hourigan & Campbell, 2010) The Navan Traveller Women's Development Group came to similar conclusions through our process of feminist action research and is actively providing these services. To date, no VEC in the country has officially set up such a space.

Conclusion

Successive Adult Traveller Education policies to date have been deemed not to be successful as they have yet to lead significant numbers of Travellers progressing to further education or work. The response to close all STTC without exploring the reasons or measuring other positive outcomes would appear to be short sighted. The education as work assumption is just accepted and not challenged, however, in my experience, when learners can see a benefit to their learning they are likely to engage fully in the learning. This is not a new concept and will be explored fully in the next section which discusses the theoretical framework of this research.

Section Two: The Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This second part of the Literary Review concentrates on the theoretical framework underpinning this research. There is much emphasis on the writing of the critical theorists and the feminist theorist. Praxis and what it means in the feminist paradigm and how the women involved in setting up the group have developed through the actions they have taken in the research.

Gender Issue

One of the main aspects of Traveller culture is traditional values and this extends to gender roles. There are defined, traditional, gender roles in Traveller culture, these roles are embedded in the Traveller way of life. Many of the Traveller women I know would not identify as feminist and accept their gendered role as part of their strong sense of identity of being a Traveller. 'Identity is a stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world.' (Josselson, 1987)

When the decision was taken to close the STTCs based on the low level of progression or employment it didn't take into account this aspect of Traveller culture. The measure of success of the centres was based on how many Travellers went on to gain employment and did not take into account the fact that the learners nationwide were eighty per cent women (one hundred per cent in NTEC) and very few Traveller women work outside the home. This implies that adult Travellers should only have provisions educating if they add to the 'Social Capital' of our society, no recognition is shown to how if a mother has valued education through taking part in a program in a centre she is more likely to pass on that value to her children and support them in staying in education (Irish Independent, 2010).

While some women told me that they were not interested in returning to learning without an allowance, when it is presented in the form of 'dress making' or 'driver theory' then they are interested. They needed a reason to learn, this is not a new idea, Brookfield wrote about it as did Knowles. Adults need a reason to learn. "Adults generally become ready to learn when their life situation creates a need to know." (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005)

It is crucial that Traveller women access education as their level of literacy is linked to their own health and that of her family. Mothers have enormous influence on the educational attainment of her children (Ou & Reynolds, 2008), so it is important she gain a positive attitude to education and learning. Traveller women, like all women, need to have the skills to adequately participate and contribute to her community and society, for her own self esteem, confidence and happiness.

Critical Theorists

This section will detail my main influences with regard to adult education and how it is accessed by the community. An obvious influence is Freire as the use of education as power and how it is to be used as a weapon against the oppressors. Freire asserted that radical education by engaging in raising consciousness leads to social justice. (Freire P. , 1970)

Freire's theories can easily be applied to Traveller education as Travellers are a marginalised group, the oppressed, dependant on the larger settled community, the oppressors, for education. There are many similarities with Freire's work with disadvantaged groups in Brazil and awakening consciousness through education. Liberation in the sense of enlightenment through learning is not a gift but well earned. Educators have a responsibility to the learners that if the learner has become 'liberated' that their needs continue to be met in a safe learning environment.

Freire would have you believe that poverty is a product of a lack of education (Freire P. , Pedagogy of The Oppressed, 1970). This is a very simplistic view but poverty does go hand in hand with a lack of education. This view is not popular as it puts responsibility onto the learner that if they had sought education they would not be poor, but for this to happen education has to be accessible. Our 'Celtic Tiger' went against this view as many manual workers with little recognised education enjoyed the boom and all it had to offer. However, these people now have no jobs, huge mortgages, bruised egos and no prospects. Their self esteem has been rocked and now they may feel are being punished for their lack of education. The solution may be to return to education but, there are also many highly qualified and educated people out of work too.

Freire encouraged educators to engage in praxis in order to change the world and free the oppressed, or for the oppressed to free themselves. 'Liberation is praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.' (Freire P. , 1970, p. 79) In adult education praxis is a radical concept as it empowers, in our case, women to act on their knowledge, their ways of knowing, to affect a positive outcome in the shape of the community group the women developed and are currently running.

While attending university has taught me the names of the theorists, working with the women in the group has show me the application of theories in practice (and praxis) and I have to admit to learning much more 'on the job'. I know exactly what Freire (Freire P. , Pedagogy of Hope, 1997) is talking about with regard to oppression of the marginalised in our society.. The women are members of the most discriminated against and misunderstood community in

this country. In my experience, education in the sense of attending a mainstream school, followed by college, is not, in general, highly valued in the Travelling community. That's not the same as not valuing education, in my experience Travellers want to be able to hold their own, and can, when interacting with the settled community and bureaucracy. There are many skills which are valued in the Travelling community, mainly practical skills and those relating to business acumen.

Current policy reinforces the difference between the Traveller and settled community. The current school system teaches all students that Travellers are outside the mainstream and are to be 'tolerated' not 'accepted' as an essential part of the wider community. The subversive force of education is seen here as Travellers don't have any input into what is taught in schools and Traveller history, skills and culture is not part of any curriculum.

My main criticism of Freire is the absence of a woman's voice, especially in his early work, this is shared by bell hooks "...he constructs a phallogentric paradigm of liberation-wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same.... And yet, I never wish to see a critique of this blind spot overshadow anyone's (and feminists' in particular) capacity to learn from the insights." (hooks, 1994)

One flaw I see in some of Freire theory is that all the uneducated and disadvantaged want to take the same path in education. For example, the disadvantaged in Brazil would be educated if they could afford it, so it is only lack of money separating the educated and uneducated. However, with Traveller culture it goes deeper as even the Travellers who can afford to access learning don't value education highly. In Traveller culture, the main motivation for training or employment is the generation of income. However, when it comes down to individual Traveller women, their need for mutual support is stronger.

In comparison, Mezirow's theory on transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) is relevant in this research as originally I wanted to explore the concept that 'transformative learning' can be achieved when a learner reaches a particular level of literacy. Is there a different attitude to learning and education at different

literacy levels? Can Transformative frames of reference become more critically reflective?

However, the learning centres offering courses are part of the system. There is control over the type of courses offered which is dictated by industry. According to Inglis (Inglis, 1997), while this is the case, learners can be empowered but cannot be emancipated. Learners may gain meaningful education and gain qualifications but will be complicit of the system. True emancipation comes from bucking the system but that takes courage, confidence and support. Many learners are not in a position to 'bite the hand that feeds them'. 'Despite Freire's hopes and expectations, most people may want to read and write as a means of getting on in the world, rather than changing it.' (Inglis, 1997)

In the current economic climate we have an opportunity for people who want it to access education. Education in Irish society is very hierarchal, not everyone needs or wants to be educated to the highest levels but there is a basic level which should be achievable to all who want it. This level is FETAC Level 3 literacy and numeracy. If a person does not have this standard of education they are excluded in many ways. This is not 'right' but it happens. For example, if a person has not achieved this level of education they will find it very difficult to pass the Driver Theory Test which means they will not be awarded a Learner Permit and will not be able to drive. This has many implications in a person's life and limits their potential employment and personal development.

Since the publication of 'Learning for Life' (Department of Education and Science, 2000) The White Paper on Adult Learning, there has been more of an emphasis on courses which can be accredited and less of an emphasis on the 'holistic' courses. A course is not deemed worthwhile if it is not accredited regardless of the learning potential. This is frustrating for all concerned and reinforces the belief that success is measured by the qualification or 'piece of paper', not by the effect the learning has had on the learner.

There have been instance where a Traveller woman attends a training centre and has a 'Transformative' (Mezirow, 2000) experience which affects other areas of her life and choices she has made or have been made for her. There may not always be positive outcome with such cases as often, due to external circumstances, they are powerless to change.

I can't take responsibility for such occurrences but when women undergo such a transformative process, I can support a learner when they go through the process. "We cannot pursue liberation without uncovering and then challenging the hegemony of capitalist values and practices", (Brookfield, 2005:39)

Feminist Thinking

I would identify as a feminist, to me being a feminist means being free to make choices in my life and not be restricted by my own or others views about what roles a women may take. However, in adult education being a feminist takes a much more radical, political role and it benefits men as well as women, but mainly oppressed women. As Ryan tell us that..

We need feminist/politicised facilitators who are able to incorporate social analysis, radical politics and feminism into course content which is also capable of meeting the felt and expressed needs of many women for a focus on their personal lives. (Ryan, 2001)

While I do agree with Ryan in this instance, it is a tall order when dealing with required course content and shorter and shorter time frames in which to carry out certain courses but social analysis can always be embedded into modules.

The feminist critical thinker bell hooks is a major influence on this research as she is speaking as a woman who is also discriminated against for being black. Similarly, Traveller women are discriminated both sexually and culturally.

Feminist education -- the feminist classroom -- is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm. (hooks, 1989)

I see hooks referring her to praxis in the relationship and acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of theory and practice. In my case, I see the process of consciences raising and problematising of the closure of the centre and working through a series of tasks to meet the needs of the women by setting up a community group, as praxis. Many women from the Traveller community would not identify as being a feminist but the women in the group, the women who are actively engaging in the group by attending, taking part, planning, and taking on committee roles are engaging in feminist, radical education. It is

empowering for the women but also for me as a feminist adult educator.

Since beginning this process of radicalisation the women realise they have a voice and they are aware of their own strengths and how they can be heard, they are 'learning to transgress' which 'is about overstepping the accepted limits, boundaries and conventions of the status quo, including those found in formalised educational settings.'" (Gilligan & Zappone, 2006)

At the closing ceremony of the NTEC, there was a presentation of a plaque to commemorate the Traveller centre to be hung in the main reception of Co Meath VEC. The words of the plaque are in Cant, the Traveller language, and the translation is as follows:

We are not searching,
We are not lost.
We belong here. (Anon)

These were the parting words from the women from NTEC stating their intention to return. At the time the NTWDG had been set up but I didn't know if any of the women would return in September but they did, and they are still attending, they belong there.

An Cosán

The story of the Community Development success story that is An Cosán (Gilligan & Zappone, 2006) is a huge influence on this researcher on how a community group can begin from, literally, the ground up. Like Gilligan and Zappone we believe that education is a living system and try to instil the following into Navan Traveller Women's Development Group.

"Education is a living system if it:

- Supports common ways of learning
- Accommodates diverse capacities, learning paths and achievement outcomes
- Enables communal solidarity or 'sticking together'
- Reduces inequalities of resources between social groups and geographical communities.

- So that every person's powers are released, directed and enlarged." (Gilligan & Zappone, 2006)

Gilligan and Zappone in creating An Cosán which is 'a progressive, dynamic and innovative centre of Learning, Leadership and Social Enterprise' (An Cosán, 2012), are providing a template for radical community development groups.

It would require ways of being, doing and relating that builds solidarity between all of the education partners. And finally, it lays out the view that for everyone to learn and to achieve, for everyone to meet their unique potential, changes to the wider social and economic systems must take place in order to reduce the inequalities of resources between social groups and geographical communities. (Gilligan & Zappone, 2006, p. 19)

Conclusion

The current economic climate is being used as an excuse to reduce funding and support for Traveller education. The savings from having a dedicated training centre were to be reinvested in traveller education but this is not the case. The 'issue' of Traveller Education will be phased out as complete integration is introduced throughout the education system.

There is much research supporting the retention of a dedicated Traveller space but this is not been acted on from a DES level. "...the state will have to give serious consideration to dedicated adult education service provision for Travellers for the foreseeable future." (Hourigan & Campbell, 2010, p. 99)

There is also the issue of if the DES isn't willing to meet the needs of Travellers can they not do it themselves? However, while this is meaningful and probably inevitable it is just reinforcing the feelings of exclusion and of being 'outsiders'.

CHAPTER 3: THE METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter is going to detail the methodology and methods used in this research and the rationale for doing so. The evolution of the research will be detailed and how action research was merged with feminist research in order to adapt to the path the research was taking. I will also chart the process of how the former learners from NTEC and I set up a successful women's development group and explore why we did what we did and if we were to repeat the process what we could do differently.

As the researcher is a woman researching women only, a feminist methodology will be employed. Feminist methodology gives enormous freedom to investigate the issues in a way that best suits the women involved, and as a methodological process it produces not only relevant results for a thesis but also leaves a functioning development group to support the women and meet their educational needs into the future.

Ontological and Epistemological Stances

The ontological stance of this research project is that as part of an equal society we should all be treated the same with regard to education and that the state shouldn't provide separate facilities for Traveller education. This point is backed by the main Traveller organisation (Pavee Point, 2006) and also the Traveller education strategy (Joint Working Group, 2006). It is seen that integration is the only way. Learners, regardless of cultural background have to adapt to the learning facilities available to them. Also, there is an underlying belief that in order to integrate, Travellers need to attend schools from a young age. This poses many problems to the Traveller way of life and by insisting Traveller children attend school it makes preserving Traveller culture and customs more difficult. For example, there is no element of Traveller history on the curriculum, even though Travellers are indigenous to Ireland. There is no provision for learning Traveller language or customs. Lynch refers to a 'hidden curriculum' (Lynch, 1999) which is present in the schooling system in Ireland, many Traveller mothers I spoke to referred to it also. They talked about how a

Traveller child isn't aware of the discrimination Travellers experience until they enter the school system and then they are taught that they are a 'disadvantaged' minority, that they are 'different'.

My own epistemological stance is different and is based on personal experiences working with Traveller women in the Navan Traveller Education Centre (NTEC) and while setting up the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group (NTWDG). I believe that in the short term there should be an element of segregation in learning groups for those Traveller women who have yet to develop the confidence to mix or have the family support to attend the groups.

Feminist Paradigm

The methodology for this research is in the feminist paradigm. This was the obvious choice as I am a feminist researching an issue affecting women and my interview subjects are women. Feminist research has its foundation in critical theory and the model is both critical and emancipatory.

"Feminist research is research which is carried out by women who identify as feminists, and which has a particular purpose for knowing (a 'why'), particular kinds of questions, topics and issues to be known about (a 'what'), and an identifiable method of knowing (a 'how'), which distinctly draw on women's experience of living in a world in which women are subordinate to men." (Hargreaves & Wadsworth, 1991)

In this instance the women are not only subordinate to men but also to the Department of Education and Science (DES) and its course providers whom the Traveller women rely on for their access to education.

The subjects for this research are women from the Traveller community who up until July 2012 attended the Navan Traveller Education Centre. Their participation in this research will, hopefully, result in a positive development in their lifelong learning journey. The main theoretical influences come from Oakley and Ryan. During the process I adapted the methodology to include an element of 'action research' and group work with the women. The women became radicalised and with my support launched a development group to

meet their needs when the centre was closed. The rationale for this development was at the point that it became obvious that due to time constraints the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group would have to be established before the NTEC closed or risk losing its founding members.

Traveller women live in a male dominated society and many Traveller women accept it and do not want it to change but they would like more say over their lives and what happens to them. Women and men in Traveller culture are bound by defined gender roles. A Traveller woman enters adulthood and gains status through marriage, so delaying marriage is not an option for many. Being a married woman affords much more freedom than that of a single woman. Often an unmarried woman must be chaperoned wherever she goes and would have to seek support and permission from her parents to attend learning courses.

The women had no say in the closure in the centre but in the group they have a say. They are members of a recognised group and collectively they have power. Participating in the group is empowering the women. If needs are not being met through political channels then, the women now have the skills and the tools to do it themselves. We have 'a moral right for research subjects to exercise ownership and control over the generation of knowledge produced about them, and their world.' (Lynch, 1999) Hopefully this thinking will disseminate through other aspects of their lives. Feminist research is said to be emancipatory type of enquiry as it causes the subjects to think about the topics asked and how they influence them.

Feminist research gives me the freedom to interview the women in a relaxed, non-threatening manner. One major concern I had was that I would not be detached enough from my research and I may become emotionally involved but feminist research allows for this, once I name it and refer to it in the research. I must place myself so that my frame of reference is clear and the filter through which my research is processed is explored.

What I like about feminist research is the flexibility and radicalism it allows, I don't like the gender bias it may imply, good research methods are good research methods they shouldn't be reserved for just research on women.

How did I get here?

When I began working in the Traveller centre I had my own prejudices and ignorant views of Travellers based on my middle class, suburban upbringing, my education and a scant interaction with members of the Traveller community. Obviously my views changed and working with the women has opened my eyes to the repression that is still prevalent in these so called enlightened times. However, now I struggle with the idea that just because I value education does not mean the women I work with should to the same degree, I had made assumptions based on my own personal filter. Maybe it is more important for their family to be earning than learning? These thoughts bring me back to the feminist mantra of 'choice', it is important that every woman has the opportunity and choice to reach their potential, wherever such choices may lead them.

When the decision to phase out the STTCs was made public, I was appalled, least of all due to the fact that as a contracted employee, I would lose my job. I was appalled because we were so powerless to prevent it, powerless to appeal the decision, it was a decree and wasn't up for debate. I was also struck by how passive the learners were. Why were they not emotional at the centre closing and just accept the decision, their loss of education and income? At this point I began to have group sessions where we would discuss the decisions being made and the ripple effects to the lives of the women involved. It was important that the women consider their next step in their learning journey and what options were available to them. I knew these women personally and had invested time and energy into their education and wanted to see them continue. It is also important for their children, especially their daughters that they continue their education and are seen to value education.

I knew I had to explore these issues for me too as I had to consider that the decision to close the centres was a progressive step and maintaining the status quo was limiting the potential of the women. Yet again, I had to trust the process of asking the questions. We needed to challenge the changes because if we let dominant discourses do this to the powerless in our society without question, we are giving permission to treat all like this. When we see people being treated like this we become desensitised and are more likely to accept it next time.

'The personal-self becomes the researcher-self. It...represents honesty and openness to research, acknowledging that all inquiry is laden with values.' (Creswell, 2003 :p 182)

I acknowledge that I am heavily emotionally invested in this topic and that is unavoidable as I know the subjects personally and the research will be filtered through that personal prism. It would be impossible for this researcher to be neutral, if I didn't have an emotional attachment I wouldn't be able to carry out this project as it takes a considerable investment of time and energy, however, the outcomes more than compensate.

The Research Question

At the start of my journey, I had a very definite research question in mind, however as time passed my question evolved, but not only that - the actual focus for the researcher changed over the course of the research. The ramifications of the shift of focus were multifaceted. My original question was "The Motivations of Traveller women to attend the Navan Traveller Education Centre and do their motivations change as their literacy improves?" I was asking this question in light of the impending closure of NTEC. But during group work and interviews it became apparent the women wanted to maintain their link with the VEC if there was a safe, welcoming place they could come to. With this in mind and with the support of the Director of the NTEC we began actively putting the wheels in motion to establish a 'group' for the women to return to. My role in this project became 'coordinator' and I was tasked with facilitating group discussions and arranging for experts to come in to visit the STTC. At this point, in conjunction with 'Le Cheile' (a dedicated Adult Education Training Provider) the women attended a 'Community Development' course which explored issues of personal development and community. This process culminated with the naming of our 'group' – The Navan Traveller Womens Development Group, the N.T.W.D.G. The enthusiasm of the women was contagious and knowing that there would be something to come back to in September helped many of the women through this difficult time. I knew this was an important, radical development and it was at this point my focus changed to the formation and running of the group. The change of events also resulted in a change of question; the question now reads To Earn or to Learn? Why the women from Navan traveller education centre returned to learning.

There was also a timing issue involved as the NTEC closed in July 2012 but I wouldn't know until September 2012 if the women were going to come back and if they did, why did they return? What motivated them? The contrast between the women at literacy level 2 and literacy level 4 is relevant at this point and I will discuss this finding in the next chapter.

Methodology

I will be using qualitative methods as these methods are embedded the feminist paradigm and will give the most useful return for this research. Another rationale for using qualitative method approach is that quantitative methods lead to the closure of the centre. Oakley (Oakley, 2000, p. 42) explains the distinction as 'the qualitative is the soft, the unreliable, the feminine the private – the world of "subjective" experience. The quantitative and the experimental are hard, reliable, masculine, and public: they are about objectivity'. The centres were deemed not to be successful due to a lack of progression. Had the measure of success been based on qualitative methods, the centres would still be in operation. Also, where positivist research brought about the close of the centre, it is feminist methods and methodologies which will empower the women with a lasting legacy in the group which has been set up as a result of this research. These methods give the women a voice and allows them to tell me what is important to them and not just what I feel is important.

Semi structured Interviews

I decided originally that semi structured interviews would be the most appropriate way to gather research data from the subjects. At the time I wasn't working as a teacher with the NTEC but the Director allowed me access, with the women's permission, to do group work around the topic of the centre closing and the options available to the women. The women in this group were the women I interviewed for my research and I was well known to them as I had taught each of the women at some stage.

When it came to the time to do the interviews, they were done in private and I recorded them digitally in order to prevent any future issues regarding data collection methods. The subjects were aware of the topics we were going to discuss and I explained that it was purely for my college work and that I would respect any issues they had regarding confidentiality.

Here is a selection of the primary questions I asked:

1. How do you feel about the centre closing?
2. Is there anything you will miss?
3. Is there anything you won't miss?
4. Have you any plans for what you will do when the centre closes?
5. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about?

Other supplementary questions I asked:

1. How have you been supported in attending the centre?
2. How will you be supported in accessing education or employment when the centre is gone?
3. If not, why?
4. If you are intending to attend BTEI, do you think you will still attend when the Training Allowance is cut? Why?

Feminist Action Research

Brookfield (Brookfield, 1995) talks about being reflexivity and being reflexive in research and throughout this process I have attempted to be reflexive with regard to the progress the research had taken. On reflection I realise that my methodology can be defined as 'Feminist Action Research' as we as a group

defined a problem and together found a solution to this problem. This action not only resolved the problem, but it also emancipated and empowered the subjects taking part along the way.

As I mentioned previously using feminist methods was a given, I had already been using these methods before I knew what they were - as I wanted the research to ask the question so the women would have to face the reality that the centre was closing and they would have to explore how they could access learning in the future.

Feminist action research came into the equation when it became apparent that there wasn't a programme in the VEC that would meet the needs of the learners who wanted to return to learning so we decided we would have to develop one. It wasn't obvious at the beginning of the research that this was what would happen or that it would even be successful but that is the nature of a constantly evolving process such as this. In my role as a researcher and as a 'coordinator' of the group I was relying on the women, especially the committee members to take on particular tasks as they would need the skills to run and develop the group in the future as I wouldn't be available in the long term. Lynch refers to such a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and her subject in her writing.

'Emancipatory research also involves a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the research subject. This requires a democratisation of the research relationship so that the research process enables participants to understand and change their situation.' (Lynch, 1999)

When it became apparent that the group was going to take off I felt a huge sense of responsibility for the success of the group and I reflected on this. I realised that I had to take a step back and let the committee members take more responsibility which they happily did.

Course Feedback

Navan Traveller Women's Development Group ran an 'Autumn Crafts' course twice per week for September 2012. When the course was complete we had a group session where participants had to fill in course feedback forms to return to the funding partner. I was there on the day as I had taken on the responsibility of returning the forms and I also wanted to generate a discussion about why they had returned to the group. I recorded this session with the groups permission while also using the data from the feedback forms.

Ethical Considerations

Of all the women I asked to interview, not one of them refused, they were all open and I believe, honest with their testimony. I do need to be aware that as a researcher I was in a position of power but I did stress at the time of interview that they didn't have to speak to me but if they did it was important for me that they be honest and not just to answer in a way that they believed I wanted to hear. Also, even though I was asking questions relating to the centre closing and their training allowance I had no influence in regard to either issue and the research was for my college work and would not influence the VEC in any way.

In hindsight while I was worried about not being neutral in exploring the research issues it was also important that I accepted such a position was ok, I had to accept that I was not neutral and that I needed to have a passion for the subject that made me want to spend my time and money researching it. I should not fight against it but acknowledge it, name it and make reference to it in the research. I found with this type of enquiry it was difficult to detach emotionally as I knew the women's stories and how much they relied on attending the centre for the emotional wellbeing. 'The personal-self becomes the researcher-self. It...represents honesty and openness to research, acknowledging that all inquiry is laden with values.' (Creswell, 2003 :p 182)

With regard to the participant selection, the subjects were selected based on who was available that day, and equally importantly who was willing to engage

with me. The women were very cooperative and were appeared to be happy to speak with me. The personal interviews were done in private and they were recorded and transcribed by me. The women were then shown the transcripts and if they were happy with the content (and any clarifications which were made) signed a consent form. In the transcripts, the subjects name was removed for confidentiality.

In considering the questions I wanted to ask I also needed to be mindful at the beginning that bringing up these questions may be difficult for some of the women concerned. The training centre closing was going to be an uncomfortable experience for the women but I knew it was important that the subject was raised so they had to face the fact that the centre was closing, the issue of the associated crèche closing was also a significant issue for many.

When each of the subjects had signed a consent form and I explained verbally what was going to happen and that they did not have to take part if they were uncomfortable with any part of the process. I also made them aware that if they wished to speak to a third party about any of the issues raised during the interview they were free to do so. Each of the subjects were happy to take part in the research.

Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of this research was that the subjects involved were all Traveller women who attended Navan Traveller Education Centre. There were also time constraints due to the impending closure of NTEC and how it was imperative that the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group was launched before the closure of the NTEC.

Conclusion

In this chapter I established my epistemological stance with regard to how I view feminist research and discussed the role it has to play in this thesis. I also detailed the qualitative methods used for this research and examined how participation in feminist action research positively enhanced the educational options open to the women who set up NTWDG. In the next chapter I will document the findings resulting from this research. The findings, I believe will

address how as Traveller women progress through their education journey it becomes less about being a source of income and more about learning for education sake.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In considering the evolution of the Research Question this section is in two parts due to the two methods of data collection employed. The first part will present the data collected for the semi structured interviews and will include analysis. The second part tells the story of the evolution of Navan Traveller Women's Development Group from inception to its current form.

Findings and analysis

The method of analysis of the transcripts was through colour coding the typed transcripts and identifying common or diverse themes. I then interpreted these themes through my frames of reference and the feminist methodology detailed in the previous chapter. The findings, I believe will address how as Traveller women progress through their education journey it becomes less about being a source of income and more about learning for education sake. The analysis will be extrapolated and explained then findings will be grouped by theme will follow. I began by asking the women how the loss of the centre would affect them and if they had any plans to attend another service for adult education or training. If not, why not and what changes could be made to help them attend? Was there an issue with mixed classes/gender or country people, confidence, subject choice, training allowance, support?

Discourse 1: Social Aspect

When the question was phrased as what the women would miss most when the NTEC was closed, most respondents said they would miss the other women and the company most. When asked why they attended the centre most initially stated that it was for the payments (financial incentive) but on further investigation they admitted that they also stayed for the socialisation and the learning.

Traditionally Travellers live a very social lifestyle where they are very much involved in their family's lives, however, since most Travellers are now settled they are missing that connection with their families as they are not living in such close proximity as they once were. The connection with the other women in the Traveller centre replaces this connection and it provides an essential support

network. Interestingly some also responded that they didn't come to learn but as a support or break from their lives at home.

Discourse 2: Education or Work

While the women were attending the Traveller centre for education and training, many of the women referred to attending the centre as 'work' so they will be replacing attending with other work - not learning. So attending the centre was somewhat unique in that they did not equate attending the centre with being ready to attend a fully integrated learning environment. When we look at theories such as Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* (Maslow, 1954), the women attending are meeting their need to earn money, not their need to learn. This is another example of the 'culture clash' found in adult and community education. Unfortunately there was little awareness of future options amongst the women while the centre was closing. Many of the women concerned will aim to replace the money not the education. The following illustrates the education/work confusion.

Q: Have you any plans for what you'll do when the centre is not here anymore?

C52: No, I'll probably look for a different place, for a different job like, part-time, that's if I get it like.

Q: OK, so a job? Where will you look for a job?

C52: Probably around here somewhere like, you know, if there are a few of the girls going, say, that's where I'd probably go; I wouldn't go all on my own.

Q: OK, like a different course?

C52: Yeah.

The subject here is talking about getting on to another course not actually gaining employment. As we have stated previously it is common in the

Traveller community to refer to paid training and employment as 'work' and it is even recognised in the Traveller centres.

Should we have conceded to call it work or would it have made more sense, in retrospect, to insist on calling it training to distinguish attending the centre to being employed? For many, attending the centre would be their ultimate learning goal and not a bridge to further learning and development. However, this wasn't explicit on entry.

Discourse 3: Skills not Qualifications

Only one of the women mentioned attaining qualifications as a reason for attending the centre. For most of the women, while they were interested in gaining particular skills, they weren't motivated by a qualification. While some told me that they were not interested in education, when it is presented in the form of 'dress making' or 'driver theory' then they are interested. Travellers want to learn a usable skill not gain a qualification. They need a reason to learn, this is not a new idea, Brookfield (Brookfield, 1995) wrote about it as did Knowles (Knowles M. , 1980).

Discourse 4: Generational

Many of the women are not attending for their own personal benefit but for their children – they realise that by their attending education it will encourage their children. Many spoke about their mothers, often completely illiterate, who encouraged and supported them back to learning.

I had found research (Ou & Reynolds, 2008) suggesting that the level of education of the mother had a direct influence on the level attained by the child but this disproves that – these women would not consider themselves educated but want their children to be educated and many of the children had already surpassed the level of education of their mothers, a fact the mothers proudly delivered. The women with level two literacy recognise the need for education, especially for their children and many are attending in order that they can assist their children with their homework and also that their children will see them learning and the mothers will then support their children in their education. There was a common held belief in Traveller culture that to be seen as valuing education is somehow a rejection of Traveller culture and something to be

ashamed about – the concept that the ‘school will educate the Traveller out of the child’, however fortunately this view is changing rapidly.



Image 1.1 – Participant Open Discussion Forum

Semi structured interviews

J.C. - ‘How do you feel about the traveller centre closing?’

Participants - ‘Not happy’.

‘I feel bad’.

‘I don’t like the idea of it closing’.

‘It would be a shame; I wouldn’t like to see it close’.

J.C. - ‘What will you miss?’

- Participants - 'The education'.
- 'My friends I only see when I am here'.
 - 'The education – my writing has improved'.
 - 'The socialisation'.
 - 'I think my confidence will drop'.
 - 'The challenge – lets me know how far I can go'.
 - 'Socialising, the learning and the money also. I'll miss the socialising most, then the learning'.
 - 'The extra wage, the education, getting a chance to do a level 5'.
 - 'It gets you out of the house, meeting other people'.
 - 'I'll miss mixing with the women'.
 - 'It's a nice place, everyone gets on'.
 - 'It will be sad to see it go'.
 - 'I will miss the **work** and that and mixing with the girls and chatting with the girls and stuff. And getting out of the house for a few hours'.
 - 'And the teachers, I'll miss the teacher'.

J.C. - 'Anything you won't miss'?

- Participants - 'No enjoyed it all'.
- 'No'.
 - 'No, I'll miss everything, I'll miss them all'.

J.C. - 'What will you do when the centre is gone'?

- Participants - 'Another course, maybe'?
- 'I want to finish my courses and get a job'.

- 'I'd like to do another course but coming in here is easier, if I had to look for something, I wouldn't know where to start'.
- 'I'd go around in circles and then I'd give up. Cos I'd feel like I was getting nowhere'.
- 'I'd like to get work somewhere, but seriously, with the recession'?
- 'I won't look for more education, I've enough done. I'll look for another job'.
- 'I'll look for a different **JOB** like, part-time'. – *This subject was saying **JOB** but as she went on it was clear she was talking about another course.*
- 'Probably around here somewhere like, you know, if there are a few of the girls going, say, that's where I'd probably go. I wouldn't go all on my own'.

J.C. - 'What about the Training Allowance'?

Participants - 'It's a great help. It pays for my travel to come in'.

- 'Basically, for another course, not getting paid for it and coming from Johnstown, I don't think I'd bother'.

- 'Handy few pounds but I want to improve my education, get a job'.

J.C. - 'Will you try to get a job'?

Participants - 'That's the thing, there are so many, more qualified people, who can't find work.'

- J.C. - 'What about the next generation'?
- Participants - 'I'm going to concentrate on my boys. Get them through school and hopefully college. I can help them more now since starting here'.
- 'I Want the children to do well and stay in school and even progress to college'.
 - 'I need an income, I have four kids, and they need school and education'.
 - 'I'm not going to let my children do what I done' (left school early).
 - 'She (my mother) had very strong views about me staying in school and getting an education because she can't read or write herself so she wanted different for us'.
 - 'My boy is doing a degree in electrical engineering'.

- J.C. - 'What are the benefits of improved literacy?'
- Participants - 'I feel great. I can pick up your paper there and do a bit of reading'.
- 'Times have changed'.
 - 'You need to have literacy now to do any job, not like before when there was plenty of factory work and there wasn't much writing needed'.
 - 'All these qualifications and certificates are a barrier to work for me'.

- J.C. - 'What type of course would you do'?
- Participants - 'I would do a course without an allowance if I know I would get something out of it, like a skill, like a dressmaking course'.
- 'Catering, cooking, driver theory, computers'.
- 'I Prefer women only courses'.

During my research a difference in attitude between women at literacy level two and literacy level four began to emerge so I decided to analyse the two groups separately, therefore I added extra questions to the level four women to see if there had been a transformative experience during their time at the centre to account for the different attitude. I didn't persevere with this research as there were other factors at play, namely the level of education they had received prior to attending the centre and also whether the school they attended segregated Travellers. However, I may research this topic fully in the future.

Evolution of the Research

I could have submitted my thesis at this point; I had posed a question, completed the research and extrapolated the findings. However, the findings were being acted on from early on in this process. As such I decided to include the story of the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group in this thesis. The rationale was beneficial to the group members and to me as a teacher. The group members got to be involved in setting up their own Community Development Group and to learn the skills involved and I got to coordinate each aspect of this radical, emancipatory project. We knew at the time that we were making a political statement as we were going against the status quo but "...feminist education is avowedly political" (Connolly & Ryan, Women and Education in Ireland, 1999), and we felt we were just in taking this action. We also had the support and backing of the then Director of the NTEC, Caroline Lambden as well and the support of the wider VEC.

Education ... becomes 'the practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaul, 2000)

The setting up of the group was a 'practice of freedom', and a radical one at that. It demonstrated to the women what can be achieved when a group of like minded individuals take on a challenge.

I also knew from the group work that if the women severed their link with Co Meath VEC they would be unlikely to return. For these reasons I wanted the women to leave in July but know that there would be a course planned in September so they could return.

Many of the women didn't want a job but wanted to continue attending courses for the social aspect and to learn new skills, not necessarily qualifications. As a sociological group Travellers tend to be self-employed anyway and it is very unusual for a Traveller woman to work or to be supported in working but she would be supported in attending a course.

The Next Steps – The Chronological Development of the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group

February 2011: Following the Government decision regarding the future of the STTC's I began meeting with a group of women from NTEC in a group setting to discuss the impending closure of the NTEC and the options available to them. Throughout our discussions it quickly became apparent that the women wanted to return to a Traveller space, at least initially so we then began to explore the possibility of setting up a women's development group.

June/July 2011: In my role as a co-ordinator with the Pobal funded community programme 'Crossroads' I was aware of the need for raising community awareness amongst the women attending the Centre. Consequently in July of this year, Le Cheile Adult Education Consultancy Group delivered a programme entitled 'An Introduction to Community Development' As a result of attending the six week course it soon became evident that amongst those who attended the programme there was a serious identification with many of the themes and

topics that were raised. It was at this point of 'consciousness raising within the community' that the seeds of the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group were planted.

January 2012: I continued to work with the women weekly and a committee for the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group was formed.

February 2012: In preparation for the official launch of the NTWDG, the Chairperson and the Treasurer of the Steering Committee and myself (acting as a support person) attended a ten-week Community Group Training Course run under the auspices of Meath Partnership. The aim of the course was to provide participants with the necessary skills base that would be required to help set up and run community groups such as the NTWDG.

March 2012: In preparation for the scheduled closure of the centre, we applied for funding to Co Meath VEC, Community Education for the cost of two teachers to run a Sewing course and a Crafts course for the month of June and September. A grant of €1440 was awarded to cover the cost of teachers. The cost of materials was met by the learners as well as from donated materials from businesses NTEC has supported over the years. Co Meath VEC provided the premises.

May 2012: - Official launch of Navan Traveller Women's Development Group. Over one hundred people attended the launch which was hosted by the NTEC. The Treasurer and PRO from the group cut the ribbon and the cheque from Community Education was presented to the group. The event was well publicised in the local media and the on-line social media campaign (Facebook) was also launched at the same time.

From that day the group would meet twice per week, on Tuesday and Thursday morning, ten until twelve, during term time. The initial goal of the group was to provide peer support and access to education. The group would also act as a point of contact between other agencies and Traveller women.

June 2012: Navan Traveller Women's Development Group runs its first course. A twice weekly, course on flower arranging. The programme was a success and there was another course planned for September. The teachers delivering

the courses would consider themselves feminist educators and embed critical thinking and personal development in their practical lessons.

July 2012: Navan Traveller Education Centre officially closes. A sad day but for many, knowing the NTWDG was established they knew they were welcome to return in September.

September 2012: NTWDG run its second program, twice per week session on personal development through 'Autumn Crafts'. Twelve women return and attend regularly.

October 2012: Adult Literacy and NTWDG run a six-week 'Family Literacy' course. NTWDG also submit and funding application to The Women's Fund to run a program of craft and sewing courses from January 2013.



Image 1.2 Launch of the NTWDG – Courtesy of Meath Chronicle May 2012.

Mission Statement of the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group.

The Navan Traveller Womens Development Groups origins will always be from the closure of the NTEC but our goal is to be open to all women and we want to create an environment where we can learn to transgress by glimpsing life through others eyes and supporting and being supported through it. We want to create and support leaders and mentors for every and all communities.

To date our programs have concentrated on crafts and skills as that is what our members want. Through this application in the setting of crafts the women are engaging in a process of conscious raising and action that will affect change in their lives in a positive and worthwhile way. We will develop our range of courses but the focus will be on learning skills rather than qualifications as that is the demand at the moment. We maintain the link with Co Meath VEC and will be liaising with other centres and community groups in order to share skills and resources.

Part of Co Meath VEC Strategy for 2010-15 (Co Meath VEC, 2010) is to 'provide courses to meet the needs of Travellers'. But who decides what the needs are? I agree with Brookfield's questioning of the rational of 'meeting needs' (Brookfield, 1995, p. 21), but have found that many learners would underestimate their potential thus limiting their expectations and needs. However, based on this commitment we approached the Adult Literacy Officer, about tailoring a course to meet the needs of the women. The course would be task based with embedded literacy but also include numeracy and ICT; the course began in early October 2012 and is proving very successful.



Image 1.3 – Slide from NTWDG Launch – May 2012

Praxis

While forming the group was action, the action of then reflecting on why we set up the group and why the women came when all indicators where that they would not, then it became praxis in the true sense of the word. By its definition praxis cannot be conjured and the group wasn't set up with the theory of praxis in mind, it was only on reflection, that praxis was identified.

Paulo Freire defines praxis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." Through praxis, oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition, and, with their allies, struggle for liberation.

The theory of praxis explains why many of the women attended the group. They weren't sure why they were attending, they weren't sure what courses would be run, if any. They didn't know who they would know on the course and they didn't know anything about the group - just that attending was a good idea.

They were on a voyage of discovery and they didn't want to get off as they hadn't yet reached their destination.



Image 1.4 N.T.W.D.G. Receiving a Cheque from Community Education

The Returned

Of the twelve women who returned in September to participate in the NTWDG, four had been interviewed for this research. One woman in particular had told me that she wouldn't be back as there was no way she would attend a course without payment. When I asked what had brought her back, she said she missed 'the girls'. She said she surprised herself, she thought she was attending solely for the money but she needed the support of her peers more.

This woman had told me that no one would attend without a training allowance. However, some women said they would attend certain courses without payment. Courses such as Driver Theory Test Training, Dress making and cookery are mentioned time and again.

In essence I have been surprised as It is not the women who I expected to return who are returning. I knew from speaking to the women that some were unlikely to attend the other adult learning services available to them for a number of reasons.

- Not having the confidence to go into a mixed group.
- Not being supported to attend a course without an allowance.
- Barriers such as no transport or childcare as on campus crèche was also closed in July 2012 as it was run by the NTEC.

But in July, the women with a high regard for education told me they would be back but it is the women who told me they wouldn't be back, the ones with the weaker literacy skills, the ones who need education most, who have returned. I have found that many of the Traveller women I meet are very aware of their role, their place and don't question it. But, for many, they are finally being heard, they are masters of their own destiny and they are not doing it for money but for the good of the group. The 'understand the way things are' but that is not the same as accepting the way things are.

Feedback from the September Craft course

- 'I have learned more in this course that I have learned before about myself and what I can do'.
- 'I enjoyed being part of a group and getting back into a social setting'.
- 'My confidence was a challenge but when I got used to the group I really enjoyed it'.
- 'It was a challenge to explain to other people what I'm coming for and not being paid'.
- 'To get the confidence that I can learn things that I never did in my life'.
- 'The challenge was the negative attitude at home to wasting my time attending a course with no future or payment. Pulling back and allowing space of two hours for myself, alone'.

Role of Co Meath VEC in the Process

Co Meath VEC and especially Margaret Deegan, currently Coordinator of VTOS but former Director of NTEC, have been supportive to the NTWDG by providing premises to meet and run their courses. By extension this has other outcomes as it means the members of the group are maintaining their links with Co Meath VEC and will be more likely to access courses in the future. Co Meath VEC has also provided funding for our programs through Community Education Scheme. Currently the group is involved in a six week Family Literacy programme with Adult Literacy. In addition the NTWDG have also taken on responsibilities outside the group, in this case the former gardens of the NTEC which they intend to maintain in as part of their skills programs. The Navan Traveller Women's Development Group is optimistic that it can maintain its partnership with Co Meath VEC for as long as possible.

Conclusions

There are women who did not attend NTEC for education or training, primarily, their motivation was for money. No other service will offer such a generous training allowance so such women will look for alternative income source, not alternative education. I cannot change this, and many of the women will not return as they cannot afford to or will not be supported in returning without any additional payment. However, there are a number of women who are interested in returning to take part in courses for no payment they see how they can benefit from socialisation and craft courses, having a purpose, they have somewhere to go. Being part of something and having a productive outlet outside of their immediate family and home obligations, something that is just for them and their own personal development is their own reward.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

In this final chapter I will identify the significance of what has been revealed through the research for this thesis. The implications of these findings for Adult Education will also be discussed and reviewed. A number of recommendations will also be presented based on the findings and experiences of carrying out this research. Areas of further study will be highlighted and I also take this opportunity to reflect on my experiences of being a feminist educator engaging in this process of producing a piece of research. Finally, I will end this chapter and this thesis with a conclusion to address whether we have reached a better understanding of why Traveller women access particular centres of learning

Implications

There have been huge implications as a result of this study and the hope is that these implications will be far reaching and long lasting. The original research identified four reasons why Traveller women attend the Navan Traveller Education Centre. These were:

- The Social Aspect.
- The Financial Allowance.
- To Gain Practical Skills.
- To pass on a Respect of Learning to Children and Grandchildren.

Of course not all of these reasons are unique to Traveller women. Women from outside the Traveller community would access education for the reasons of the social, to gain skills and to pass on a respect of learning. However, the discourse of accessing education for payment is unique to Travellers and could be interpreted as being socially constructed in order that Travellers only access adult learning through dedicated learning centres.

Existing knowledge was that Traveller women who access the NTEC would not access learning options which don't provide an allowance. We now know that Traveller women do want to learn for learning sake. They want to put the time,

work and money into running their own courses. Traveller women will engage in a process of exploration of a problem, identifying the problem and construct a plan of action to help overcome the problem. The women will then identify where their skills are lacking to implement the plan and if necessary they will seek to acquire the necessary skills. All the while they are engaging in this emancipatory process. The women experience many positive outcomes in all areas of their lives by taking part in this process. The women involved in the NTWDG have gained skills in personal and community development, and empowerment, as a result of their exposure to the group. They have become increasingly aware that are able to rely on each other on a personal level, because they have a shared interest not only because they have a shared heritage.

Participation in the group means they will learn about leadership, enterprise, fund raising. Find rooms, find support. Deal with the banks and be accountable. The women are learning skills which will benefit their community and society as a whole. The women by participating in the group are 'learning to transgress' in the sense that if they are the group then the group ceases to exist if they don't attend which in turn benefits the wider community.

In my experience of working with Traveller women and what drives them to complete a course I have found that for many, completion of a course is not that important to them but learning a skill is. I have been at graduation ceremonies where after the presentation of the certificates, they are folded up and shoved into pockets. Where reaching a goal such as this is celebrated in some communities, it is not so in the Traveller community but it is changing. But it is changing because more skills are required to be economically viable. So education is a means to an end and not necessarily a means of personal development.

In the current economic climate where educational funding is being reduced nationwide across all services, it is fair to say that other community education providers will have to reduce the learning options available. If a current DES funded educational program is under threat it would be useful to know that their group has the skills and resources to run their program independently, based on securing funding.

The function of the Navan Traveller Women's will constantly evolve based on the requirements of its members. Currently its members are going through a period of transition between being past trainees of the NTEC and accessing Adult Literacy services through Co Meath VEC. This is challenging as the women are used to doing things based on how it was in the NTEC - but there in a different place now, even though the location is the same.

The group will meet on the Meath VEC campus every week, I will be there to act as support and, if required, liaise between the group and other bodies. Information can be distributed through the group and if the group decides, they can arrange to run courses through Community Education or if funding is secured, facilitate our own courses. The benefit of facilitating our own course is that we as a group decide the measure of success. The group's primary goal is to provide peer support and when we facilitate our own course they are usually craft based so at the end of a session our members bring home a piece they have made, that is their reward, their sense of accomplishment. Not just a 'stitch and bitch' but becoming much more socially aware.

I know that in doing this thesis I went beyond the normal conclusion by acting on the finding and following through with the group. I feel that in this instance it was the correct action to take as time was a premium and if certain actions were not taken at the time they were taken it would have meant that the centre would have closed down and the Trainees would have dispersed into the community. Many of the women, while they may be friends in the NTEC wouldn't mix socially outside of the centre. For this reason it was imperative that any group should be set up and active before the closure of the centre. So it happened, the group was set up, funding was sought and received.

Throughout this journey I was getting caught in the thinking that the Level Four group were a success story and that the Level Two group somehow hadn't reached their 'transformation' yet - I was wrong, it is not the Level Four women who have returned to continue their learning, it is the women at Level Two who are running the group – result!

Once we keep up the momentum perhaps the closure of the centre can be seen as a positive development as while it was there it offered a false sense of security as many women felt attending the centre was all they needed to do and

didn't consider other courses or progression. While the centre was there any Traveller presenting for a course at the VEC was referred to the Centre when their needs may have been met on another course. They were also bound by the generous training allowance they received along with other benefits they may have had access to.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this project will be based on what we have already done in identifying a problem and finding a solution based on our needs. I would recommend that other groups do what we did. Become independent with support. Have more autonomy over the selection of courses and measures of success. Furthermore I would recommend that providers of community and adult education take a step back and look at learning life skills such as horticulture alongside technical qualifications.

Unfortunately there is a cohort of young Traveller mothers who have a barrier to education due to childcare issues. However, many of these young women have good IT skills and have access to a computer. We plan to get these women in to the group, even for an hour per month, to access a program of learning through computers.

I would suggest that all adult educators do a course on Traveller history and culture as there will be more Travellers accessing adult learning centres. Such a course of instruction could be provided online.

Further Study

This body of research has thrown up a number of areas which would benefit from further exploration.

- *Skills vs. Qualifications:* I have noticed over the years working with adult learners from within the Traveller community and from outside of the Traveller community there are certain specific distinctions. The one which has struck me most often is the motivation behind learning. In my experience, many of the Travellers women weren't concerned about having a qualification or certificate. Completion wasn't a goal, they were

more concerned about being able to attend, there was no value or kudos placed on completing a course or achieving a qualification. Conversely, VTOS learners were very concerned with attaining qualifications and completing courses. Progression was the focus and the goal.

- Usually when a person from a marginalised, disadvantaged society gets educated they leave but not in Traveller society. Even when a Traveller goes on to third level, they tend to stay working within the Traveller community.
- *Is there a difference between the motivations to learning of Traveller women depending on their literacy?* This area of research was included in my original question but I have set it aside for now due to additional factors affecting their literacy levels. Is there an additional element of transformation?
- *Learning through Gardening:* The Navan Traveller Women's Development Group have been given part of the garden on the Meath VEC campus to maintain and make their own. Not only are the women learning new skills but the garden will remain as a meeting place for the women and a welcoming space for Travellers on the Meath VEC campus. There are a number of older Traveller women who used to attend NTEC. These women's literacy would be very basic but they had very good gardening skills. I would like to investigate the benefits to the women of embarking on a program of literacy and numeracy through the theme of gardening.
- *Where are they now?* On the anniversary of the closure of Navan Traveller Education Centre I would catch up with each of the former trainees to see what they are up to. Are they well? Are they accessing learning? Are they accessing work? Are they attending NTWDG? What is their perception of learning or work since the closure of NTEC?

Conclusion

The original question of this thesis was very specific in that it asked why the Traveller women from Navan Traveller Education Centre accessed learning. Was the main motivation 'to earn or to learn?' From this I was hoping that Co Meath VEC would use this information to design courses to meet the needs of

the women in an integrated setting. However, this didn't happen. The women took matters into their own hands and established a Women's Development Group in order to provide support and learning opportunities to their members. This was the best path to take in order to meet their needs as current education policy is driven by the demands of industry. Teachers in Meath VEC have been told to expect changes with the abolition of the VECs and creation of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). What's coming down the line is that funding will be based on the 'number' of learners who successfully progress from a course, not the number who begin. This will have massive implications to learners resulting in higher class sizes and pressure to get results.

This process has radicalised me as I didn't realise the level of educational disadvantage in this country until I saw it firsthand. Being employed by an educational organisation which while supporting adult education, lifelong learning and Traveller education also has a policy of integration rather than celebration of difference.

It can be argued that the women didn't return to learning, they returned to socialisation and the familiar, therefore, setting up the group gave the power to the women, empowered them. Their transformation comes in ways of how their children and grandchildren with benefit from their experience.

The group/thesis is ongoing, organic and constantly evolving. Where the group will lead, I don't know, the women of NTWDG haven't decided yet.

Ideally the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group will be there as a support network and point of contact for women who will access the main services of Co Meath VEC Lifelong learning programme. We won't be running courses which are currently run by the VEC but we will provide peer support and run hobby courses which will integrate literacy and personal development.

On reflection, the closure of the centre can be seen as a positive catalyst to change. The model employed at the time wasn't ideal to instil a love of learning but was muddied with the issue of the training allowance.

The group is at the moment successful but fledgling and I need to take a step back to really let it take off. The group is not for me, if I stay involved too long I will become more of a hindrance although I will provide support and work with

the group for as long as I can. We are inspired by the likes of An Cosán to provide a centre of learning, leadership and enterprise and we hope we can inspire others to do likewise.

A Reflective Practitioner

Introduction

I have included this section on reflection as I believe being able to reflect is an important skill for an adult education practitioner. Throughout the writing of this thesis I have engaged in a process of reflection and I wish to include some elements in the thesis. It is especially relevant when applying critical theory as theory “locates our practice in a social context”. (Brookfield, 1995)

On being a Feminist Educator

I identify as being a Feminist Educator as I take the opportunity to empower and emancipate women through learning.

As all advocates of feminist politics know most people do not understand sexism or if they do they think it is not a problem. Masses of people think that feminism is always and only about women seeking to be equal to men. And a huge majority of these folks think feminism is anti-male. Their misunderstanding of feminist politics reflects the reality that most folks learn about feminism from patriarchal mass media. (hooks, 2000)

I am reassured when my own beliefs are grounded in theory; it gives me confidence that my methods are proven and not just hunches or personal opinion. Brookfield believes also that it is impossible to separate practice and theory, I agree, they are embedded in each other. Often, I read theory and my practice changes in light of it. Carrying out this research has forced me to be reflective and examine my own motivations for working. If some of the Traveller women believe that attending a centre of learning is ‘work’ and they should be paid, then by expecting them to attend without payment is similar to me being

asked to work for no pay. While I wouldn't say no outright, I would have to consider it and I think the same is true of some of the Traveller women.

It was interesting how the first time my teaching style was challenged, I felt empowered being able to defend it and know that it was the right thing to do and be confident and justified in doing so. Brookfield (Brookfield, 1995) mentions how we cannot change who we are as teachers based on learner feedback but I think if a teachers style is problematic for a learner, the teacher should be mindful of the fact. Adult educators can feel an inferiority complex as proper recognition of their profession by the Teaching Council is only coming into effect next year, 2013.

On working with NTWDG

Brookfield encourages us to 'clarify and question our assumptions'. I am ashamed to admit now but I had to question my assumptions as I had many assumptions about Travellers and I know now I was being discriminatory but I would never have considered myself such. When I began working at NTEC, I didn't know any Travellers personally. It was hegemonic discourse; the status quo was that Travellers were to be avoided and they were avoiding me too.

When I began working with the women to challenge their perceptions about what they would do when the centre closed. Setting up women's groups was one of the paths we could take but the suggestion had to come from the women. 'I must always start where people are, with their own needs and concerns – I must never start from where I am. Otherwise, the connection just won't be made. (Brookfield, 1995)

I really got to see 'embedded counselling' (McLeod, 2009) at work at the NTEC and will continue when I'm working with the women in the group. We also see many instances of the 'Border Country' (Hunt & West, 2006) between education and therapy. I have the utmost respect to the learners but I am conscious not to patronise or underestimate their abilities, I believe this is one of Ecclestone's (Ecclestone, 2004) arguments. I believe she has an interesting take on this issue and we can learn much in this country so we don't follow the same path of too much of a rise of 'therapeutic ethos' in curriculum content in teaching and assessment across the education and welfare system.

I agree with Freire that denying education is a form of oppression but what about only accessing a certain type of training? Isn't that also oppressive, shouldn't education be about changing a person's world view and not just their skills. Can't the literacy and consciousness rising be embedded in the skill training? However, facilitating their own courses is an empowering, emancipating act. Why do we want these women to continue accessing education? I applied a feminist research approach with an action research theory and methodology. Feminist poststructuralist can be both empowering and at times disempowering.

Some of the older Traveller women are well able to critically reflect on their situation, they have a certain wisdom and weren't afraid to criticise Travellers or their situations. They also spoke about how their confidence has increased and they've become more sociable since attending the group.

On doing the thesis

This study was carried out over the last two years of the NTEC and was completed just after its closure. It was originally to be a one year project but I felt it would have been unfinished as I linked the completion of the thesis with the closure of the centre but I also wanted to end on a positive note. This positive note is the success of the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group. Selfishly, I also needed the link to provide me with the motivations to work on the setting up of the group and to drive it on while working in a voluntary capacity since the closure of NTEC. I draw similarities between the women attending 'for free' and me working 'for free' as we both get other benefits from attending the group, the women get to learn a skill and I get to coordinate the running of a community education group.

I was influenced by my own experiences as I understand the personal challenges to studying as an adult but I was, maybe, too lax with regard to attendance, timekeeping and deadlines. I struggled to meet deadlines while I was in college but I know I need to provide more structure and it may not be helpful to learners to know they are not compelled to attend/meet deadlines.

I went through a period when I had done the research and extrapolated findings and had been given the go ahead to start the Development Group. I found that the impetus and energy to complete the thesis was diverted to setting up the group. I need to trust the process and remember that this is a learning journey. I need to make mistakes to learn from them and do better next time. I knew this thesis was going to take a considerable amount of time and effort and knowing that there would be an actual, working, successful group at the end of it may be much easier to persevere where maybe I could have been persuaded to give up.

Conclusion

Even though this thesis took a year longer than originally planned, I can identify with life getting in the way of 'education' and things being put on the long finger and putting others before myself. Most Travellers I spoke to have experienced the same issues.

Radical change is the seedbed for systems to evolve so that fairness, dignity, respect and opportunity become integral to the normal practical things like raising families, making money, implementing laws and policies and teaching children (Gilligan & Zappone, 2006)

'While I would love to have a good grade for this thesis my biggest test will be in September when we will see how many women return to participate in a course. If there are more than four, I will be absolutely delighted and it will make the past two years worth it' - I wrote the previous sentence in July, twelve women participated. I have put many, many hours into getting the group up and running while being mindful that it is not MY group, it is not for me, although I would absolutely love to participate in the group, I may be a honorary member, and I would be truly honoured if I could remain part of the group.

As I sit here putting the finishing touches to this thesis, my youngest child sits next to me, playing. It's her birthday today, she is two. This is relevant as I remember passing her labour reading a chapter of Oakley on feminist research and being inspired by the research she did with mothers and how she listened

to their stories, acknowledged them, made them feel important. I know I took the long way round in writing up this research but, the group became my focus and not the thesis this will make for a better group.

Our long-term goal is that the group will welcome members from all communities it is an empowering that other women will wish to join us, the Navan Traveller Women's Development Group, all welcome.

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