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Title

"The experience of progressing from Community Education to Third level Education from a learner's perspective"

Alan Farrell

M.A. (Third Level Education) **June 2012**

Declaration:

I hereby certify that the material, which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of Masters (M.A.) in Third Level Learning and Teaching, is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than partfulfilment of the above named award.

Future students may use the material contained in this thesis provided that the source is acknowledged in full.

Signed…….

Date……

Abstract.

This study explored the experiences of community learners as they progressed from community education to third level education. It also examined the reflections of those who had completed their studies and the impact that education had on their lives. It focused on former students, students currently participating in certificate courses, and also students studying on college access programmes. It was hoped to give a broad view of perspectives on the contrast between community learning and third level education.The study attempts to focus on the positive aspects of the experience rather than the barriers which each student faced. Data collection was primarily by way of semi-structured interviews

The research design was interpertivism informed by a social constructionist epistemology. It involved the exploring of the real life experience of the participants and was therefore phenomenological in nature. The research method used consisted of one on one semi structured interviews and the data was analysed. The interviews were sructured so as to enable the participants to take a narrative approach and to document their experiences.

A literature review was conducted on the available writings in regards to community education, social inclusion, anti-poverty and access routes to third level education.The findings reveal many of the positive aspects that the learning experience has had on students as they acessed third level courses. It highlighted some of the reasons why many of them did not proceed directly on after second level. It also indicates some of the teaching practises which encouraged a more involved class participation and the motivation behind the student's desire for a college accreditation.

The study concludes with recommendations for policy makers with regards to improving the future learning experiences of progression students.

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List of Abbreviations

ALCES Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme

AONTAS The National Adult Learning Organisation

BERA British Educational Research Association

BTEI The Back to Education Initiative

CAO Central Applications Office

CIT Cork Institute of Technology

DES Department of Education and Science

DIT Dublin Institute of Technology

DSCFA Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

FAS Foras Aiseann Saothair

HEAR Higher Education Access Route

IT Institute of Technology

NFQ National Framework of Qualifications

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PLC Post Leaving Certificate Courses

RPL Recognition of Prior Learning

UCC University College Cork

UCD University College Dublin

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CHAPTER ONE

Context of the Research

1.1 Introduction

The idea of community education was first introduced to me in the late 1980's. A group of women which included my mother received scholarships to attend a course in the Vocational Educational College in Marino. Community education at this time was in its infancy and it had been set up as a response by women to their isolation and frustration with the economic climate of the time. All the participants in the group had left formal education early, as this was the common practice at the time. Personal development was the main theme behind the course and it became instrumental in building the confidence of all the participants. Although not apparent to me at that time, I can look back with hindsight and see the liberation and empowerment these women received from education. My mother later went onto to graduate with a Diploma in women's studies from UCD and all of her friends who had participated in the original course have themselves served on parents councils, committees and one has become involved in local politics. All of their achievements to date stemmed from their involvement in community education.

The rationale behind this thesis proposal came from a meeting with two representatives of the DIT's community service learning programme. The function of this programme is to link up with community and voluntary organisations to identify a specific need which they feel needs to be researched. In my case the organisation is AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation. They felt there was scope for an investigation into the experiences of community learners as they progress to third level education. The role of AONTAS is to promote the importance of adult and community education as a key part of lifelong learning and make it accessible and inclusive to all people. By achieving this it is their intention to improve society as a whole.

Due to the current economic climate the number of people engaged in adult education has increased dramatically over the past two years. Recent figures from the Department of Education and skills show an increase of approximately 36,000 learners participating in adult, community and further education initiatives bringing the numbers to more than 130,000 adults. Further education acts as a progression route to higher level education and one in every five applicants to the CAO in 2010 was a mature student yet participation is still low in comparison to many other OECD countries (AONTAS, 2011).

The Leaving Certificate Examination was introduced into Ireland's educational system in 1924 and it is currently the deciding factor in determining which third-level institution a student may enrol and what courses they can take. The learner population in higher education in Ireland comprises mainly young adults who have made a direct transition from school to higher education. Approximately 56% of those completing second level make this transition each year.

There is on-going debate about social inequality of this method of examination. It has been claimed that poorer students do not perform as well on the Leaving Certificate Examination as their peers from more affluent colleges. The rationale being that the students with more money can afford to attend better schools, giving them a distinct advantage over poorer students.

Another major disadvantage to student in regards to The Leaving Certificate Examination is that it can only be taken once a year during the month of June. Therefore, if a student does perform well for whatever reason, he or she cannot simply retake the test. As a result, students face tremendous pressure to succeed. Research has highlighted that access to further and higher education is generally restricted to those who have completed the Leaving Certificate, especially those with higher grades (Byrne *et al.*, 2009).

As alluded to previously educational disadvantage is closely linked to the issue of poverty. A substantial volume of research indicates that individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and communities are more likely to underachieve in the education system than their peers from higher income backgrounds. As a result, there is a cycle of poverty by which the children of poor parents are destined to remain poor and marginalised in the future unless specific programmes aimed at changing the situation are implemented (O'Toole, 2000). Although the participation by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in third-level education has improved in the past twenty years, their rate of participation is still very low compared to the participation of other socio-economic groups.

One of the functions of Community Education is to break this cycle and give students a second chance. Participation on community course enables people to emerge with more than new personal skills and knowledge. They can also emerge with a strong capacity for social action, a sense of collective empowerment and an ability to tackle issues of social justice (AONTAS, 2011).The purpose of this thesis is to document the experiences of graduates as they have progressed from Community Education to Third level Education.

1.2 Motivation for the Research

I attended school in inner city Dublin. The school is based in an area which was and still is designated as disadvantaged. At the time it seemed no different to any other school. Looking back now however it is evident to me that from the moment we entered second level, students were streamlined according to their academic ability. The A1's invariably did the science subjects and accountancy along with the mandatory English, Irish and Maths. The B1's did construction studies, carpentry and art. The same could be said for the equivalent girls school of the area as invariably they all did seceterial classes.

Schoolwork was never really a problem to me as the importance of education had been instilled into me by my parents. However being heavily influenced by my peers I did just enough to get by. During primrary school an enthusiastic teacher wrote on one of my reports that "*I was college material*" and this seemed to plant a seed. Up until this point college was never on my horizons but I had always had an interest in Engineering. This was in my mind when I sat down with my career guidance teacher in Leaving Certificate year, to discuss my options and expressed my ambitions. He informed me that it would be more benefical for me to set my sights lower. No mention of the CAO or point requirements for that course. No mention of alternative routes or PLC courses.

Four years later having completed an apprenticeship Iwas informed, through word of mouth, that it was possible to apply for college if you obtained certain grades in Science and Maths in the Senior Trades Certificate. While doing the entrance interview one of the panel advised me that the points I had recieved in my Leaving Certificate would have allowed me to apply for college through the CAO, whichh was frustrating. Although being slightly more mature and having the experience of an apprenticeship behind me was without doubt a major advantage during my college years. However had the relevant information been provided by my career guidance officer, the path I chose would have been completely different. Over the years I have met some of my old teachers who expressed the view that our particular class was one of the brightest in the school. Yet not student went directly on to college from second level. There has been little improvement in the numbers progressing to College since then.The figures for progression from my secondary school last year were. Total sitting Leaving Cert 2011: 41 stuudents**:** College places as follows: NUIM 1 , DIT 4 , Blanchardstown 2 , Tallaght 2 , National College of Ireland 1 , (The Sunday Times, March 2012). Ten students in total and not one TCD, DCU or UCD student among them. This is a small example of one school but there are thousands of stories like this all over the country especially in certain areas. It was my intention with this small piece of work to try and document just a few of these stories. A college education is not readily accessible to all students and the people who have participated in this study to me are an inspiration. They exemplify the power that education has to completely transform your life. Through their journey I was hoping to get just a snippet of their experience with a view to encouraging others to take the next step to third level education.

1.3 Aim of the Research

As mentioned previously I accessed third level education through a non-traditional route via the apprenticeship system. Although at times it was a struggle, the experience has had a profoundly positive effect on my life. The first year of college was by far the most difficult, despite the fact of having had a good foundation, from second level education and the apprenticeship system. So the question arose for me "what must the experience be like for a student coming from community education"? The aim of this research is to capture the experiences of a number of people who have managed to achieve this. Through this small piece of research it has been possible to obtain some insight into the reasoning behind their decision to take this step and attempt to understand their motivation. What encouragement did they receive and what essentially was the driving force which enabled them to complete their chosen course?

The barriers for potential students have been well documented. So for this study, the focus was on the positive aspects of the personal experiences of the learners as opposed to the obstacles which they faced. It will involve an examination of the links and the supports that are currently in place for students, the "enablers" that made it possible, and to ascertain which of these was the most beneficial?

The study was designed to take account of the perspectives of community learners and record their experiences of college. One of the fundamental aims of this project is to provide these students, with an opportunity to tell their story. To date, I have not encountered any literature which has documented these types of experiences. One of the main purposes of this thesis therefore, is to investigate the reflections and opinions of people in relation to their experiences, prior to the decision to progress. Did they experience feelings of trepidation, and was college life intimidating initially?

The role education plays in mediating between origins and destinations, in providing employment opportunities, in alleviating and overcoming social disadvantage and in providing a general sense of wellbeing in individuals, communities and societies cannot be overestimated (Halsey, Lauder, Brown, & Wells, 1997). To place this statement in the context of this thesis, it was my intention to obtain some evidence from the interviewees to verify this.

Motivation would be a key factor behind each student's desire to obtain a third level qualification. Friere, (1973) contends that the desire for learning cannot be taught from the top down, but only from the inside out with the collaboration of the educator. So it is reasonable to question what where the factors which contributed to the decision for a college education. It may prove important to document the role and level of involvement that participation in community education in the decision to enter third level. It could be beneficial both to teachers and students to ascertain what methods are working and how can be improvements be made? One of the recommendations arising from "community education more than just a course" a research

project recently published by AONTAS is to track the types of progression that community education learners are interested in and highlight the progression options available (AONTAS, 2011). Hopefully this thesis will add to this by not only highlighting the progression routes which have been followed but it will detail each individual's experience.

Personal development outcomes, such as positive change in confidence, ability to do things by themselves, communication with others and problem solving are features which are exhibited by community learners and it would be beneficial for potential students of the future to note these benefits.

1.4 Ethical Considerations:

As this project was completed in conjunction with the community-partners all research that took place adhered to their guidelines and also the guidelines as laid out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2010). The necessary steps were taken to ensure that all participants in this research understood the process in which they were engaged, including why their participation was necessary, how the data will be used and to whom it will be divulged. The areas of anonymity and confidentiality were addressed accordingly. Ethical practice and ethical codes rest on the principles of assuring the free consent of participants to participate, guarding the confidentiality of the material they provide, and protecting participants from any harm that may ensue from their participation Smythe & Murray, (2000). Throughout I have administered the procedures of data collection with sensitivity to the challenges and ethical issues of gathering information face to face in people's college or workplaces. The research has at all times adhere to the community partnership ethos of respect for the principle of "doing no harm" to the communities involved. Holloway & Jefferson (2000) contend that for most narrative studies, the ethical requirement is to set out the general nature and purpose of the study and must be balanced against the need not to unduly direct the participant's attention to a particular phenomenon. The voluntary consent of the human participant is a principle that should apply to all research. Indeed, Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2007: 51) define informed consent as 'the bedrock of ethical procedure.' Some of the participants of the study like me have a particular reason in accessing college through a non-traditional route. Therefore although socio-economic background may have had an influence on this the focus of the study is on the positive aspects of progression and this has been emphasised to all participants.

Participants have been informed that they have the right to withdraw at any time for whatever reason they see fit and it has been my responsibility as the researcher to advise the interviewee of this right (BERA, 2010). The strict confidentiality was communicated clearly to each participant. This is an essential condition for maintaining an appropriate relationship of trust between the researcher and participant (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). Anonymity will be maintained throughout the research as there has and will be no need to disclose any person's identity. The participants will be debriefed on completion of the research and provided with a copy of the publication (BERA, 2010).

Organisation of Chapters

This thesis is organised into chapters, the contents of which are as follows:

Chapter One

This chapter has set this research in context and explained the background and the reasons for carrying out this research. The research question and its alignment with the research aims and objectives are detailed. The ethical considerations of the research are also presented.

Chapter Two

This Chapter reviews some of the literature relevant to Community Education, Educational disadvantage and access to third level.

Chapter Three

This Chapter provides a detailed description of the research design. The reasons for the selection of a narrative study are discussed. The rationale for the selection of the phenomenological research methodology is highlighted.

Chapter Four

This Chapter presents the findings which emerged from the interviews conducted with students. The examination of the analysis of the findings and their relationship to the aims and objectives of research are discussed in detail.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction:

To complete this research I felt it was necessary to develop an understanding of the ethos and aims of community education. Historically the community education sector grew out of the established Vocational Education Committee night classes and adult literacy movement of the 1980s. Initially women were the main driving force behind community education which provided a forum for listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people, it developed a process which valued the stories and enabled the participants to interrogate their own words. In addition, community education has supplied the wherewithal for disparate groups to engage with empowering processes and become active agents in their communities and address particular social issues and disadvantage (Connolly 2003).

The goals ascribed of this sector of education include not just individual development but also community advancement. It is adult education and learning, generally outside the formal education sector (AONTAS 2011). These aims are to enhance learning, empower people and contribute to society. It is a distinctive element of the adult education sector in Ireland and has the capacity to reach marginalised people in disadvantaged communities in a way in which no other branch of education can.

Community education is not simply a series of teaching techniques, nor is it dependant on location; and it is not just about subject matter. It endeavours to enable participants to emerge with more than new personal skills and knowledge. They should also emerge with a strong capacity for social action, a sense of collective empowerment and an ability to tackle issues of social justice (AONTAS 2004). One branch of this study will endeavour to investigate how successfully these goals have been achieved with the participants who have engaged in community education.

The Green Paper (1998) and The White Paper (2000) on adult education considered community education in ideological terms: as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level (DES, 2000). This description best adheres to the principles of Community Education because of the social inclusion agenda of community groups and their anti-poverty or community development focus. This literature review will seek to outline some of the main theories behind Community education and the role it plays in society under the following headings.

1. **Community Education.**
2. **Educational Disadvantage.**
3. **Access to Third level.**

Community education:

The VEC sector led the development of Adult Education provision in Ireland at its outset. During the 1970s the night classes in vocational schools formed the backbone of the service, and adults had few other educational options available to them funding was scarce, but in 1984 a boost came with the introduction of the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) budget. The growth of the literacy movement in the 1980s gave a new impetus to Adult Education and drew attention to the existence of real educational disadvantage among adults.

In 1990 the Community Development Programme was launched by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs with the purpose of 'promoting positive change in society in favour of those who usually benefit least' (DSCFA, 1990). Groups tackling exclusion were funded, which led to a range of Community Development Projects emerging nationwide.

Community Education in the White Paper, was described as amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of Adult Education in Ireland (2000). Its particular significance was highlighted in three key areas:

• In reaching large numbers of participants in disadvantaged settings

• In pioneering new approaches to teaching and learning in community-based settings

• In taking the lived experiences of the participants as a starting point.

Community education is heavily influenced by a Freirean model of education. The philosophy and values presented by Freire offer a truly transformative approach based on an understanding of education that places value in learning through enriching people's lives better, more elevated, and informed perspectives from which to view their social world. . Freire's work focused around four main aspects; Firstly dialogue and the importance of conversation that involves people working with each other in learning. Second is praxis-action that is informed and linked to certain values. He stressed the importance of dialogue as a co-operative activity leading to action for social justice and change. Third is-conscientisation or developing consciousness that understands how to transform what is into what could be and finally the idea of situating education in the lived experience of the learners and this has influenced how practice is approached in community education (Freire, 1970).. Following Freire, adult educators take an explicitly political position on education for citizenship; it is 'education for liberation' rather than 'education for domestication' (Freire, 1973).

Another influential figure in the realm of adult learning is Jack Mezirow. He is renowned for the study of transformative learning theory. He describes transformative learning as the process by which we transform our present mind-sets and ways of thinking to make them more inclusive, reflective and open to change. This he contends leads to learner empowerment and change in the learner and in the group (Mezirow, 2000). It will be of interest to see if the participants with whom I will have discussions can exhibit or allude to these principles.

The key impact on learning from community education and incorporated into the literature on adult education is group-based learning. Connolly emphasises the fact that a person-centred approach is vital especially when it enables participants to create their own knowledge and value systems (Connolly, 2003). Self-actualization, which is central to person-centred education, emanating from Maslow's (1999) hierarchy of needs, is not just about reaching one's potential at the expense of others in the learning group but requires dialogue and interaction within the group as a whole. This is for me is fundamentally the main difference between community education and the formal education sectors. While adult education and community education are increasingly viewed used as a tool for individuals to reaching their full potential, there is a distinct difference between the two. Adult education should really be viewed as an individualistic approach where the focus is on the self as opposed to that of the community.

Community education, in contrast, is viewed as a process of communal education placing community empowerment at its core. These different approaches to community and adult education have been highlighted in the Green Paper (1998) which acknowledges that community education is subject to a number of approaches and definitions. While the Green Paper recognises that community education is often viewed as an extension of second and third level education at community level, the approach adopted in the Green Paper emphasises the role of community education as an interactive process with active involvement from communities in the decision making process at both local and national level.

Following on from this approach the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000: 113) emphasises that one of the key characteristics of community education is its rootedness in the community not just in terms of physical location, but also in that the people have lived and worked there for many years, they have a deep knowledge and respect for its values, culture and circumstances, and an understanding of community needs and capacity.

It also contends that the collective goal, social purpose and political orientation of community education is to promote critical reflection, challenge existing structures, and promote empowerment, improvement so that participants are enabled to influence the social contexts in which they live. Community Education is education and learning which is rooted in a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation

within the community. It is distinct from general adult education provision, due both to its ethos and to the methodologies it employs (AONTAS 2000).

AONTAS (2004) also acknowledges a key difference in the community education approach and of the two definitions outlined in the White Paper it gives its support to the more radical definition of community education. This definition views community education as a 'movement and catalyst for social change which goes beyond a service delivery model of education and is rooted in an ideology of resource redistribution, empowerment, capacity building and social change and action. While AONTAS (2004) recognises the 'strong connection' between adult education and community education, it also stresses the fundamental differences between the sectors in that community education sets out to have a transformative effect on society. It views participants in community education as equals in the education process and sees it as a means of endowing individuals with the capacity for social action, a sense of collective empowerment and an ability to tackle social justice. Despite these differences as outlined, it remains that adult education and community education continue to be terms used interchangeably, particularly at institutional levels on matters relating to widening participation. A structure of community education networks has been set up that clearly defines it as a separate model from adult education, with recognisably different expectations and outcomes, however this distinction often remains absent from debates on access and participation at institutional and policy levels.

The White Paper acknowledges the role of community education in the 'pioneering of new approaches to teaching and learning in non-hierarchical, community based settings' (DES, 2000). It allows participants to challenge existing structures and enables and encourages them to influence the society in which they live. One of the key features of community education programmes is that they provide the supports necessary for successful access and learning, particularly guidance, mentoring, continuous feedback and childcare.

Community education provides a key programme which strives to bridge this inequality "The Back to Education Initiative" BTEI, provides opportunities for second-chance education to adult learners and early school-leavers who want to upgrade their skills. This initiative allows learners to combine education with family and work responsibilities. One of the participants of this study has benefited from this scheme. Annually ten per cent of the places allocated under the BTEI are reserved for the community education sector, while the remainder of places are allocated to the statutory sector providers.

Educational disadvantage:

In Ireland education is hypothetically free for all citizens. The formal education system is based upon meritocratic principles. It is assumed that ability, coupled with effort are all that is required for academic excellence within this system (Tovey and Share, 2007; O'Connell et al, 2006). Yet fundamentally when it comes to education in Ireland there is not a level playing field. Each year fee-paying schools continue to dominate the league tables as judged by university progression rates. According to The Sunday Times Parent Power Survey (Evelyn Ring, 2012) six of the top 10 schools in the country are fee-paying. However these results cannot be attributed to wealth alone. Participation in education at all levels is affected by multiple socio-biographic characteristics such as age, social class, disability, gender, and ethnicity, which interlink to affect student motivation and academic outcomes, resulting in educational disadvantage (Byrne, 2009; Smyth and McCoy, 2007). Educational disadvantage is distributed across society. Although it is arguably more visible in urban areas, it is also a problem that affects rural areas (NESF, 1997; Fourth Joint Committee on Women's Rights, 1994). Clancy, (2001) contends that there are not only barriers at higher education level but sees inequalities in education as deeply entrenched in an educational system that systematically places some at a disadvantage over others. Spring, (2007) contends there is a recognition of the need for a fundamental restructuring of the education system and a radical shift in how we approach educational disadvantage. In the boom years the attitude was to throw money at the problem. This failed to work so in times of austerity the only logical approach is to re-think the approach taken. Money is not necessarily the key. Research conducted by McCoy and Smyth (2003) indicated that even with the abolition of fees in 1996, social inequalities in access were actually greater in 1998 than at the beginning of the 1980s, highlighting that despite targeted interventions, people coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to enter higher education.

Following on from this, national research has demonstrated that inequalities both in participation and in outcomes remain a feature of the Irish educational system. The current system is increasingly determined by structures that deem points as more salient than a willingness to learn. In essence, the current education system encourages a competitive and market based approach which has replaced more meaningful models of learning (Dunne 1995). Smyth and Hannan (2000) argue that the problem with state policy formation is that it is more concerned with expanding participation rates rather than on addressing social class inequalities. The need for community education indicates that the current educational system is deficient and fails to cater for everyone especially those from disadvantage backgrounds. Boldt and Devine (1998) view educational disadvantage as a limited ability to derive equal benefit from schooling compared to one's peers and thus community education serves the ideal of a more equal society. Research indicates that children from disadvantaged households and communities develop academic skills slower than compared to children from more affluent groups (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009).

Although there has been a lessening of inequalities within Irish education within the last decade, it still hold true today that educational inequality between different social classes and genders still persists (Breen et al, 1990; Clancy, 1995; Hannan et al, 1996;). From the perspective of social justice, it is acknowledged that education makes a fundamental contribution to individual well-being, societal and economic development. Increasing the numbers progressing to third-level enhances the diversity of the student body making it more reflective of the widening demographic of Irish society (CSO, 2009a, CSO, 2006b; Skilbeck, 2001; Skilbeck and Connell, 2000). Education provided for in the community helps to build the self-esteem of learners, the lack of which is attributed to discrimination. There is a feeling of helplessness from people who have been let down by the education system. A report into early school leaving in Ireland found that 9000 people leave school before the Leaving Certificate every year. This figure has remained steady since the mid-nineties and the majority of people in this cohort are young men (Byrne and Smyth, 2009). They found that early school leaving comes about as a result of negative relationships with teachers, challenges associating with peers, a disturbed classroom environment and a poor academic impression of themselves. Although there are also other external factors which would influence a student's decision to leave. (Byrne and Smyth, 2009) reached the conclusion that there should be more opportunities to complete the Leaving Certificate outside of school and that education must be 'flexible, relevant, challenging and rewarding.

This is in some way reflected in current governmental and educational policies which are increasingly aimed towards the development of a society characterised by mass higher educational attainment, as well as one which embraces a philosophy of lifelong learning (DES, 2000; EGFSN, 2007; Walshe, 2009). The reasoning behind this is the high level of educational obtainment of its citizens is one of the key factors in attracting foreign investors to Ireland therefore widening participation for groups in society which are under-represented in higher education is a key strategic focus for the Irish government (HEA, 2004; OECD, 2006a; DES, 2003; Osborne, 2003; Trant, 2003). The role of the higher education sector in educating and contributing skilled graduates to the workforce is increasingly important particularly when the economic and social challenges facing Ireland at present are considered (O'Connell et al, 2009; IBEC, 2008). The higher the educational level attained, the less likely the risk of unemployment (CSO 2002). Therefore it is in the government's best interest to encourage a high level of educational obtainment. Progression to Third level results in a clear pattern of decreasing risk of unemployment for both males and females. Results from the CSO show the risk of unemployment for a person with only a primary education was over four times higher in 2002, than for someone who had completed a degree course (CSO 2002). The unemployment rate for those aged 25 to 64 with a degree or above was just 2.1 per cent compared with 7.3 per cent for persons whose highest attainment level was primary or below (QNHS, 2004).

Unemployed persons*, males and females in Dublin City whose full-time education has ceased, classified by level of education attained (%) 2002

Educational Attainment	M %	F %	P %
No Formal Education	1.0	0.7	0.9
Primary	27.2	21.9	25.2
Lower Secondary	27.2	28.2	27.5
Upper Secondary	13.5	17.9	15.1
Technical or Vocational Qualification	4.3	2.9	3.8
Upper Secondary & Technical / Vocational	1.6	1.9	1.7
Third Level (sub-degree)	5.3	6.3	5.7
Third Level (primary degree)	4.2	5.7	4.8
Third Level (professional qualification)	1.2	1.6	1.4
Third Level (degree & professional)	1.2	1.7	1.4
Third Level (post-grad cert. or diploma)	1.4	2.3	1.7
Third Level (post-grad Masters)	1.4	2.3	1.7
Third Level (doctorate)	0.2	0.2	0.2
Level of education not stated	10.4	6.4	8.9
Total unemployed f/t education ceased	14397	8462	22859

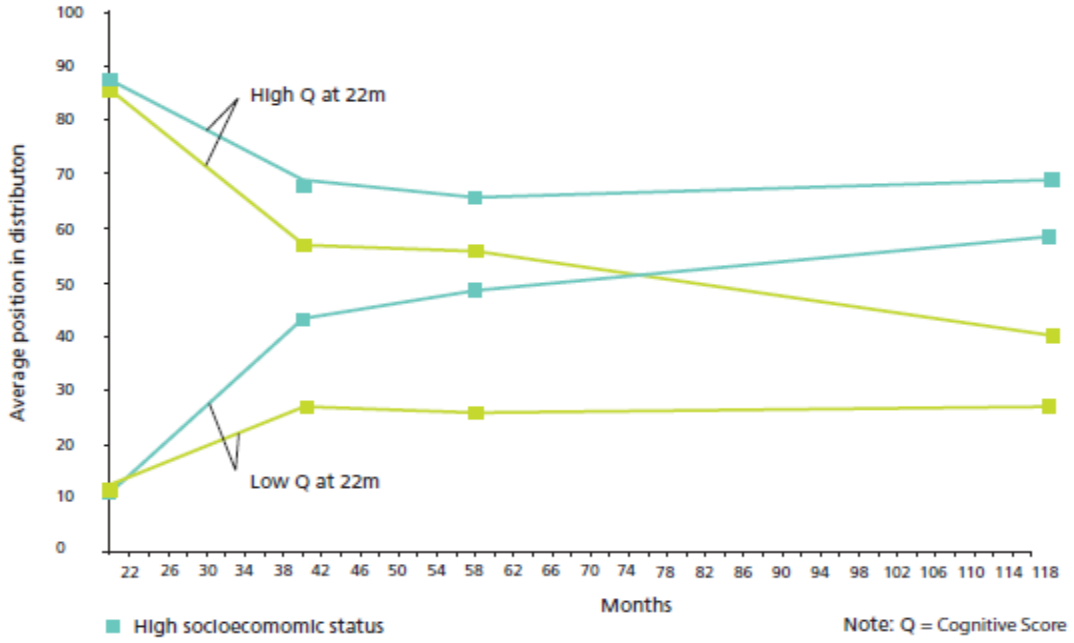
Analysis of the rates of progression to, and participation within higher education, based on the social background of students has consistently demonstrated that individuals from higher socio-economic groups are over-represented at third level (O'Connell, et al, 2006; Clancy and Wall, 2000). In contrast, for students from the lower socio-economic groups, the reverse of this trend has been evident (Thornhill, 2002; Clancy, 2001). Although in recent times this situation has begun to improve for some of these groups (O'Connell, et al, 2006). The re-introduction of college fees will inevitably see a decline in the numbers from these groups.

Indicators of the multi-faceted nature of educational disadvantage nationally include poverty, family structure and size, socio-economic status, unemployment, location and school performance of pupil. The challenge therefore is to tackle educational disadvantage from an early stage. This can be achieved by concentrating on several key areas which include improving school conditions, improving teaching methods and educating parents. The National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (2003-2005) was directed at promoting social inclusion, including educational disadvantage. It acknowledged educational disadvantage as something that was multi-dimensional in nature requiring a more integrated and holistic approach (MacVeigh, 2006).

Children from lower socioeconomic status homes often begin school with weaker language and literacy skills than do children from higher ones (Hart & Risley, 1995). Prior to school, students from lower- socio-economic families tend to have fewer literacy opportunities compared to their peers. Such differences may include having fewer books in the home (Evans, 2004) and attending lower-quality preschools, if indeed students have these opportunities at all (McCoach, O'Connoll, Reis, & Levitt, 2006). As has been mentioned socioeconomic status has been identified as a unique contributor to academic achievement (Raudenbush, 2004). Jones (1995) highlighted the fact that highly educated parents generally take steps to ensure that their children get placed in high ability groups geared towards college entrance and select schools that offer rigorous programs of study. By securing advantageous placement for their children, they attempt to create the necessary ambience for higher educational attainment and this factor can play an especially important role in children's college enrolment. Baker et al. (2004: 145) state that

> *"Given the competitive contexts in which educational goods are distributed and the feasibility of using economic capital to buy educationally relevant social and cultural capital, it is evident that those who are best resourced economically are best placed to succeed educationally".*

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds don't have this luxury. Combat Poverty (1993) reported that children living in poverty are at an educational disadvantage relative to children from more comfortable backgrounds. Persons from less advantaged education backgrounds, from lower socioeconomic groups and with less favourable economic circumstances in childhood were all found to have considerably higher poverty rates in adulthood than others. Breen, Hannan, Rottman, and Whelan (1990) argue that the Irish welfare regime was never intended to be redistributive because it was inspired by charity rather than equality. There is limited scope for certain areas of society to improve their economic circumstances. Even with the growth in the economy and the increased employment of social professionals, inequality has remained a central feature of Irish society in the early twenty-first century (Kirby, 2002).



Inequality in cognitive development of children aged 22 months to 10 years

Source: The Marmot Review (2010) ***Fair Society, Healthy Lives:***

Growing up in poverty can have a damaging and lasting effect on children, and the effects often persist from one generation to the next. Universally available, high quality early care and education helps to reduce child poverty in two ways: The above chart illustrates how dependent children's life-chances are on their early experiences. Children with a high cognitive score at 22 months but with parents of low socioeconomic status do less well than children with low initial scores but parents of high socioeconomic status. The chart also shows how much of this social differential in achievement is already in place by the time children start school.

The effects of disadvantage become apparent by the time children start school. Once students begin school, differences between students from divergent economic backgrounds may be as much related to poor quality academic experiences and interactions as to home characteristics (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). This has an impact on children's educational achievement, health and employability, and quality early care and education can transform children's life chances, helping them to break out of the cycle of low achievement. The impact of childhood circumstances has an influence on adult poverty levels and operates partly but not entirely through the individual's own education level, social class, and labour market. Those with no second level qualification in particular face much greater risks of sustained low income than those with a third level qualification and subsequently their family as a whole can expect to have lower living standards.

As a result of this, there is a cycle of poverty by which the children of poor parents are destined to remain poor and marginalised. Economic status is a significant indicator of ability to access the labour market, of social mobility and of equality of access to life chances (O'Connell et al, 2006). Hannan and Ó Riain (1993) also indicated a strong link between levels of educational attainment and social mobility. There is also evidence to show that the improvement of a parent's educational level impacts strongly on the development of children and families. Research carried out by the ESRI (2009) which found children whose mother was less well educated were less likely to be in the highest reading quintile than the children of graduates. Reading performance levels were higher among children from Professional/Managerial families and those from the highest family income groups. Children from low income families were also more frequently absent from school. The chances of experiencing sustained poverty in adulthood vary enormously depending on one's childhood socioeconomic environment.

It is not only the inter-class differences in academic performance that emerge at early stages of development, but also differences in educational choices later on, that matter – and earlier choices may have a substantial impact on later performance. Economically generated inequality continues to be a major factor in inequality of outcomes for those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008-2013) highlights the continuing under representation of lower socio-economic groups in higher education and continuing spatial disadvantage and suggests that 'success has been more limited in improving educational outcomes for people from areas where we find concentrations of poverty and disadvantage' (HEA, 2008: 26).

Community Education therefore plays a key role in tackling this intergenerational disadvantage, insofar as is provides an access route into education to the most marginalised learners. Education also plays a crucial role in mediating between origins and destinations in providing employment opportunities, in alleviating and overcoming social disadvantage (Halsey et al, 1997). Early school leavers experience a range of disadvantages in relation to adult life-chances. Such disadvantages involve substantial costs to society as a whole in the form of social welfare expenditure, health services and imprisonment rates (Levin, 2009).

Conditions in schools can contribute to and reinforce disadvantage. This will become more prevalent in the coming years as schools will be forced to cope with the increased number of pupils. It was reported that there were 20,000 births recorded in the first quarter of 2011 alone. The highest number recorded since authorities began collecting three-monthly figures more than 50 years ago. Therefore increased demand for school places is inevitable. Total pupil enrolment in Ireland is projected to grow by about 70,000 between now and 2018 (O'Brien, 2012). This will put added pressure on conditions which are already beginning to show signs of strain under the current austerity measures implemented by the government.

Low performing disadvantaged schools often lack the internal capacity or support to improve. Often principals, teachers and the environments of schools, classrooms and neighbourhoods frequently fail to offer a quality learning experience for the most disadvantaged. The following factors have been found to improve the quality of schools in disadvantaged areas focus on improving teaching and learning, creation of an information-rich environment, building of a learning community, continuous professional development and involvement of the parents (Muijis et al., 2009). Hyland (2002) emphasises that to make significant improvements in this area the focus of change should be on the school as a whole and not just on individual teachers. A recent report by the OECD (2012) into supporting disadvantaged students and schools highlights five factors which can improve student completion rates and promote equity.

- Attract and retain competent leaders in these schools and provide good working conditions and supports.
- Development of positive teacher-student and peer relationship provide adequate student counselling, mentoring to support students and smoother their transitions to continue in education.
- Raise teacher quality for disadvantaged schools and students. A teacher's years of experience and quality of training is correlated with children's academic achievement (Gimbert, Bol, & Wallace, 2007). Yet children in low income schools are less likely to have well-qualified teachers.
- Pedagogical practices can make a difference for low performing students. promote the use of a balanced combination of student-centred instruction with aligned curricular and assessment practices.
- Disadvantaged parents tend to be less involved in their children's schooling, for multiple economic and social reasons. Policies need to ensure that disadvantaged schools prioritise their links with parents and communities.

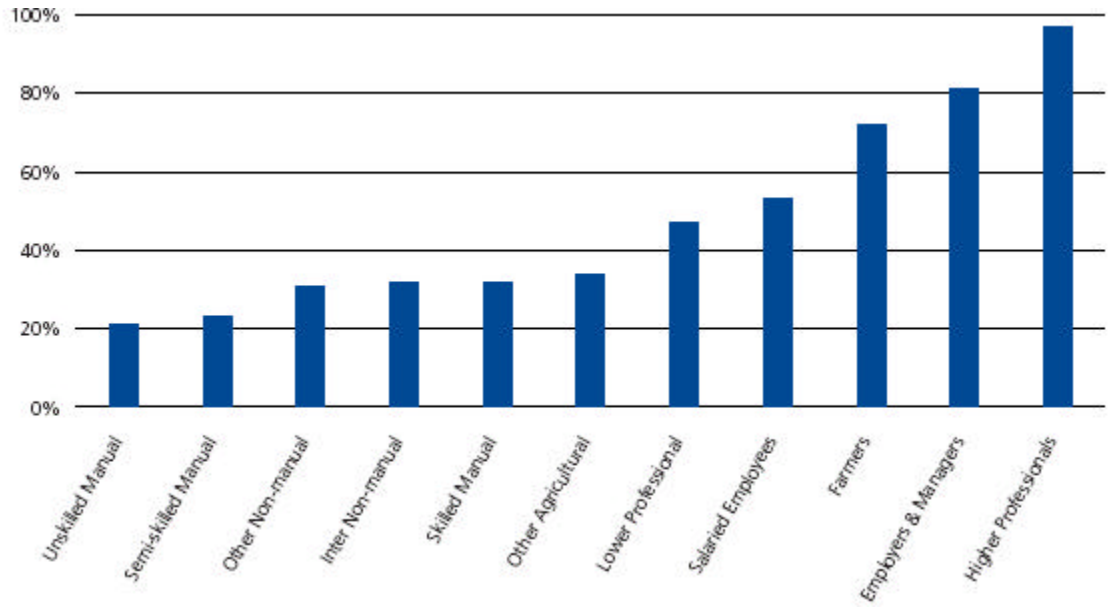
Conclusion:

Ó Riordáin (2012) explains that teachers with experience in a disadvantaged school will acknowledge that obstacles to student advancement lie in the lack of self-esteem and the absence of an educational tradition in the local community. Children are greatly influenced by the adult experiences around them and also by the expectation levels that society places on them. Therefore the challenge is to change the core belief of many children that they just aren't good enough. (Kelleghan, et al, 1995) suggest that whatever way equality of opportunity is defined, the provision of identical treatment for all children will not be sufficient to achieve equality. If equality of participation or outcomes is to be achieved it is necessary to treat pupils differently. Such a perspective enables justification of policies that allow educational systems and the state to allocate and target greater resources towards pupils who are viewed as disadvantaged and at risk of educational failure.

Access to third level:

There is a great deal of literature available on the inequity of participation rates and access to third level for students. Analysis of the rates of progression to higher education based on the social background of students has consistently demonstrated that individuals from higher socio-economic groups are over-represented at third level point (O'Connell, et al, 2006; Clancy and Wall, 2000). In contrast to this for students from the lower socio-economic groups, the reverse of this trend has been evident (Thornhill, 2002; Clancy, 2001), though in recent times this situation has begun to improve for some of these groups (O'Connell, et al, 2006). Research undertaken on participation rates at third level also indicates that students entering professional faculties such as law, medicine and dentistry are disproportionately represented by those coming from middle and upper class backgrounds with little change to entry patterns for those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Clancy, 2001; Lynch, 2006).

An Estimated Percentage of Age Cohorts Entering Higher Education by Socio-Economic Status, 1998



The graph above shows the estimates of the total number of third-level entrants in 1998 from each socio-economic group as a proportion of the number of 17 / 18 year olds in the population from each socioeconomic group (DES, 2003). Research undertaken on participation rates at third level also indicates that students entering professional faculties such as law, medicine and dentistry are disproportionately represented by those coming from middle and upper class backgrounds with little change to entry patterns for those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Clancy, 2001; Lynch, 2006).

Clancy's (2001) analysis of higher level education entrants shows also that less than 9 per cent of College entrants had fathers who were unemployed. The vast majority of third level students (83 per cent) come from families where their father's principal economic status was classified as being 'at work'. According to the Department of Education & Science, this illustrates clearly that students from the lower socio-economic groupings continue to be severely underrepresented in third-level institutions. In 1998, almost all children from the 'Higher Professional' group entered higher education by comparison with 21 per cent of children from an 'Unskilled Manual Worker' background. (Dept. of Education & Science, 2003)

Socio-economic Status of Entrants to Full-time Undergraduate Programmes in Publicly Aided Third-level Institutions 1991 – 2001 *

Socio-Economic Groups	1991-92	1994-95	1995-96	1998-99	2000-01
Higher Professionals	11.4%	10.3%	9.9%	11.4%	12.2%
Employers and Managers	14.8%	14.0%	15.1%	15.7%	15.4%
Farmers	18.5%	19.2%	18.2%	16.2%	15.0%
Salaried Employees	10.0%	7.1%	6.7%	6.2%	7.4%
Lower Professional	10.8%	11.9%	12.6%	13.7%	12.7%
Other Agricultural Occupations	1.9%	1.8%	1.3%	1.6%	1.5%
Intermediate Non-Manual Workers	7.8%	9.2%	8.2%	7.6%	7.5%
Other Non-Manual Workers	6.3%	7.7%	7.5%	7.7%	7.9%
Skilled Manual Workers	11.6%	12.3%	13.4%	13.6%	13.8%
Semi-Skilled Manual Workers	3.6%	4.0%	4.1%	3.8%	3.7%
Unskilled Manual Workers	3.3%	2.6%	2.9%	2.5%	2.9%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Source: Department of Education & Science, Supporting Equity in Higher Education (2003)

The persistent under-representation of the lower socio-economic groups in Higher Education is, to a large extent as a result of high levels of attrition at second-level and the fact that even those who achieve the minimum threshold for entry at the Leaving Certificate remain significantly less likely to transfer to higher education than their peers from higher socio-economic groups. As can be seen there are many barriers to students from certain backgrounds for participation in Third level. The National Plan for Equity of Access 2008-2013 (HEA, 2008: 69): contends that there has been a failure on the part of third level institutions to engage with local communities on issues relating to educational inequality, despite a strong focus on developing access strategies and initiatives targeting socio-economic disadvantage. However as the intention of this research is to take a positive view of progression to third level I would like to outline some of the achievements which have occurred to date. Many colleges and universities have made significant strides in providing programmes aimed at achieving equity of access for learners of all backgrounds, identities and abilities.

As a means of widening participation in 3rd level colleges adopted different approaches to alternative admissions. One provides access to higher education to the general student body, as well as early school leavers, through the augmentation of students' skills via access courses, PLCs, Certificates and Diplomas. The second approach allows points breaks for students sitting the Leaving Certificate but who may not have obtained enough points to access a specific course. An example of the first approach is the (TAP), Trinity Access Programme, and an example of the second is the (HEAR), Higher Education Access Route. O'Reilly, (2008) contends that access policies have broadly been concerned with the alleviation of 'financial and educational constraints' of underrepresented groups and have sometimes overlooked the social and cultural capital deficits that students from lower socio-economic groups have to contend with.

Nearly all colleges currently have an access office. The main focus of the access office in is to provide equal opportunity and support to all students so that they reach their full educational potential. Access Offices are strongly committed to significantly increasing the participation rates of all under-represented groups and to the creation of a socially inclusive learning environment for all. During the late 1990's each of the seven universities and Dublin Institute of Technology set up access programmes in partnership with disadvantaged schools and communities. These programmes offer a continuum of support from school to third level graduation (HEAR 2012).

The Community Education model also has proved very successful in attracting participants who may not have accessed third level through the more traditional routes. Its role in society is continually evolving and increasingly it provides its own internal progression routes to college and is not simply the branch of education that targets learners at early literacy or foundation levels (AONTAS, 2004). It has been acknowledged that education makes a fundamental contribution to individual well being, societal and economic development. Therefore the Community Education model can be used by a variety of learners at different levels, as it incorporates and recognises formal, non-formal and informal learning. It recognises that education is about more than the acquisition of knowledge and is also about growing confidence, sharing experiences, generating ideas and challenging systems (O'Reilly, 2008). Its flexibility means the sector can cater for learners at more advanced stages of education, and partnerships between third level colleges and community groups have developed as higher level courses increase in popularity. Increasing the numbers progressing to third-level enhances the diversity of the student body making it more reflective of the widening demographic of Irish society (CSO, 2009a, CSO, 2006b; Skilbeck, 2001; Skilbeck and Connell, 2000).

CHAPTER THREE

Research Design and Theoretical Perspective

3.1 Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to explain the research design, strategy of enquiry and data collection methods employed while completing this research. Initially I will examine and state my own ontological and epistemological positions. Subsequently I will explain the theoretical perspective, the methodology and research methods used in this research. This research design is following an epistemological assumption that is constructionists in nature, an interpretivism theoretical perspective using a phenomenological methodology informed by a narrative. It uses semi structured one on one interviews as the research method. These positions will be justified and the ontological and epistemological positions that underpin this research will be explored.

3.2 Epistemology

Ontological and epistemological assumptions are integral to an informed methodology (Stanley & wise, 1993). Ontological perspectives can be simplified to six distinct perspectives, materialist, positivist/empiricist, constructivist, and social constructivist, hermeneutic and critical theory (Byrne, Higgs & Horsfall 2001). Epistemology, according to Flew (1984) deals with how what exists may be known, central issues are the nature and derivation of knowledge and the reliability of claims to knowledge. Epistemological positioning is integral to researcher history and biography, personal values matter, beliefs and identities, subjectivity matters (Reismann, 1994).

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) argue that there are 4 schools of thought or paradigms, positivism, social constructivism, critical theory and pragmatism. As this study is concerned with trying to understand the experiences of students as they progress from, the group centred approach of community learning to the more traditional autocratic style of top down learning, it was decided to take a social constructivist view. This contends that reality and knowledge are socially constructed, that is reality exists because we give meaning to it (Berger and Luckmann, 1985). This leads on to an interpretive perspective as the world and reality are interpreted in the context of historical and social practises. The fundamental question for this piece is the experiences of "the learner"

The approach taken for this research was of an interpretive nature and it was my intention to gain an insight and understanding into the reasons these students opted to progress to third level. The statistics for this piece are of little consequence as historically the numbers concerned are relatively low. Interpretive analysis is an approach to psychological qualitative research that aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon. Sometimes interpretive studies involve a close examination of the experiences and meaning-making activities of only one participant. Sometimes they may draw on the accounts of

a small number of people (Reid, Flowers & Larkin 2005). Within the interpretive tradition the world and reality are interpreted by people in the context of historical and social practises. An interpretive approach 'looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty, 2005: p.67). Typically researchers gather qualitative data from research participants using techniques such as interview diaries, or focus group.

This indicated to that the type of study which would be best suited to the research question would be phenomenological in nature. The thinking behind this was the intention to reduce individual experiences of a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence-"grasp the nature of the thing" (Von Manen, 1990. P. 177). The experience of progressing to college, what were the individuals feeling? Yet Narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories of life experiences and it was these stories that I had desired to document.

3.3 Theoretical Perspective

From a constructionist epistemology, interpretivism will then inform the theoretical perspective of this research. An interpretivism approach 'looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty, 2005: 67). Merriam (2002: 4) states 'Learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, the meaning it has for them, is considered an interpretive qualitative approach.' Creswell (2009) points out that constructionism is often combined with interpretivism. Characteristics of interpretive qualitative research include trying to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences and how people make sense of their experience (Merriam, 2002). The crux of the research question for this thesis was "the experience". It is this experience of the participant which is the backbone of the research although the interpretive eye of the researcher will have a bearing on the understanding and presentation of the data. The literature has many examples of differing research design. For example Grix (2002) sees interpretivism as an epistemological position rather than a theoretical perspective. I believe this research is still valid as Grix nevertheless aligns interpretivism with constructionism and as such this research design is not compromised.

3.4 Constructionism

Constructionism claims that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are trying to interpret (Crotty, 2005). It maintains there is no objective truth and rather meaning is constructed (Jupp, 2006: 38).According to constructionism,we do not create meaning we construct meaning. Therefore this meaning cannot be objective or even subjective as the process is one of interchange and exchange. The process of meaning making is constructed. Social constructionists argue that the world we experience and the people we find ourselves to be are first and foremost the product of social processes. It is the social reproduction and transformation of structures of meaning, conventions, morals and discursive practices that principally constitutes both our relationships and ourselves. This view would therefore be the

most appropriate for the research question of this thesis Creswell (2003: 8) points out that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences the goal of the research 'is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. This epistemological perspective is best suited to this research design as each individual's reflection on their respective journey will differ. Constructionism and phenomenolegy are so intertwined that one could hardly be phenomenological while espousing either an objective or a subjetivist epistemology. (Crotty, 2005)

3.5 Methodology

Kaplan (1973) suggests that the aim of research methodology is to help us understand, in the broadest possible terms, not the products of scientific enquiry but the process itself. It is concerned with how we can go about acquiring knowledge (Grix, 2002). As the research question is concerned with a personal experience, "progression from community education to higher education from a learner's perspective", it was necessary to determine the methodology which aligned itself to the research question.

Quantitative research methods use the process of counting and measuring of predominantly hard objective data in its approach. This method can be used on large or small groups to test objective theory by the examination of variables and making comparisons between these variables (Creswell, 2009). Although questionnaires are sometimes used in the quantitative research method the participants are predominantly provided with a limited number of predetermined response options so that the data can be measured quantifiably. Instruments are often used for collection and statistical analysis of quantitative research data.

Qualitative research method involves the collection, interpretation and analysis of subjective data such as the things people do, feel or say (Schwandt, 2007). In this method, individual in-depth interviews and focus groups are employed with the aim of gathering the opinions and feelings of the participants. The data is subjected to a process of interpretation where the researcher endeavours to extract the meanings or understanding of the participant's attribute to a specific social or human problem (Denzin, 2005). The analysis of this data requires its content to be categorised into common elements so that emerging themes can be identified. The findings of qualitative research are informed by themes that emerge, and the consideration of the significance of these themes Qualitative research aims to gather an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that govern such behaviour. Many different approaches can be used in qualitative research to collect data, such as the grounded theory practice, narrative research, phenomenology, classical ethnography, or case study (Creswell, 2007). Forms of the data collected can include interviews and group discussions, observation and reflection field notes, various texts, pictures, and other materials. Qualitative research by its nature can be time consuming and as such is most suitable when researching smaller numbers of participants. It was necessary to distinguish which one was most pertinent approach to use for the research question. There are two similar approaches which seemed applicable. The first is narrative

analysis, or the sequential analysis of data or literary elements. The other is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), or the reasoning behind events and processes in data or literary subjects.

3.6 Phenomenology

The emergence of phenomenological research was led by Giorgi and the Duquesne Circle in the 1970's (Wertz, 2005). Creswell (2009: 13) defines phenomenological research as 'a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by the participants.' It is the study of phenomena and requires a description from the perspective of those experiencing the phenomena. Phenomenologists must not assume that they know what things mean to the people they are observing (Wiersma, 2000). Phenomenology is predicated on the principle that 'experience should be examined in the way it occurs, and in its own terms' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009: 12) and is always questioning the 'way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings' (van Manen, 1997: 5).

There are certain essential features of the life world, such as a person's sense of selfhood, embodiment, sociality, spatiality, temporality, project, discourse and mood-as-atmosphere These interlinked 'fractions' act as a lens through which to view the data (Ashworth, 2003, 2006). The task of the researcher is to bring out these dimensions and show the structural whole that is socially shared while also experienced in individual and particular ways. A fundamental aspect to phenomenology is reduction our own experiences in order to allow us to connect directly with experiential lifeworld of the participant (Adams & van Manen 2008). "The overall aim of life world research", says Dahlberg *et al* (2008, p.37) is "to describe and elucidate the lived world in a way that expands our understanding of human being and human experience." In research, the researcher's aim is to explicate this intentionality to do with the directedness of participants' consciousness (what they are experiencing and how). Put another way, the focus is on the intentional relationship between the person and the meanings of the things they're focusing on and experiencing. A common issue in regards to phenomenology concerns sample size. It can be hard to get over to people that a single-figure sample is valid and there can be confusion between methods such as theoretical sampling used to ensure that participants are drawn from a spread of contexts, and statistical sampling which is concerned with quantitative reliability and often with differences between contexts (Glaser & Strauss 1967). If the sample size is increased a common misunderstanding is that the results should be statistically reliable. "The flexibility of phenomenological research and the adaptability of its methods to ever widening arcs of inquiry is one of its greatest strengths" (Garza, 2007, p.338).

3.7 Narratives:

Narrative inquiry is the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analysing stories of life experiences and reporting that kind of research (Schwandt, 2007). In adopting a narrative approach for this thesis it was my view that we can ascertain a greater understanding of the personal experiences of community learners who have made the transition to third level education. (Denzin, 1989) contends that a personal experience story is a narrative study of an individual's personal experience. Irish people have a rich tradition of storytelling and it is an integral part of our culture which is why I felt this method of study would yield the desired data required for this small piece of research.

In narrative research designs, researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people's lives, and write narratives of individual experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In conjunction with the community partners, it had been my intention to interview at least 10 students who have successfully completed the transition to third level education. Unfortunately given the time constraints and availability of willing participants in the end it was only possible to get eight volunteers. .A cyclical model of searching, recording, processing and researching was used, with each interview informing the next, and the literature informing the analysis of these interviews. Creswell (2002) describes a narrative study as one which is led by people's stories and these stories constitute the data a researcher typically gathers. This data was drawn from the personal experiences of community learners who have made the transition to third level education, with a view to exploring the motivation and the reasons for their desire to engage in third level education.

Cortazzi (1993) talks about a chronological order of narrative research which suggests using a time sequence so for this study. In order to achieve this it was necessary to focus on the individuals perceptions of college before, during and after they have completed their studies. In essence what I was endeavouring to do was to capture what third level education meant to them? Theoretically there may be common theme amongst these stories which could assist in highlighting some of the potential hardship that they experienced, to make the transition for future students smoother. In essence the narrative combines views from the participant's life with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Which ideally would be the method best suited to the research question as it would be difficult not to include my experiences in any study.

3.8 Interviews

Interviews provide the opportunity for a face to face meeting with the subjects of the research. This allowed me as the interviewer to probe responses and investigate motives and feelings based on the emotion in the response. This also provided an advantage over the questionnaire, where responses have to be taken at face value, but an interview response can be explored and teased out (Bell 2002, Robson 2003). Interviews are particularly suited for collecting data when there is a need to gain highly personalised data (Gray, 2004) as is required for this study. Interviews are useful to obtain information and understanding of issues pertinent to the purpose and specific question of a research project (Gillham, 2000). Tierney & Dilley (2002: 455) point to one utilisation of interviews being a desire to improve 'our understanding of the social contexts of learning.'

The framework of the interview schedule shall be within the life/oral history context. In other words, the interviews will endeavour to allow respondents to reflect upon and analyse events which enabled them to progress from community education. The focus of my attention shall be on the positives which led to the decision each person took. Using a life, oral history framework allows researchers to explore the underpinnings of the decisions which people make (Thompson, 1988). (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) contend that qualitative interviewing is different from everyday conversation as it is a research tool and a good interviewer must prepare questions in advance, and later analyse and report results. In qualitative interviewing, the researcher is not neutral, distant, or emotionally uninvolved. He or she forms a relationship with the interviewee, and that relationship is likely to guide the questions and focus the study. (Bowman, Bowman, & Resch, 1984) re-emphasis this point by explaining that the depth of understanding required to do qualitative interviewing makes it difficult for qualitative researchers to remain value free neutral toward the issues raised. Unlike surveys, the success of a qualitative interview rests on the skill of the interviewer, rather than on the quality of the questionnaire. A major advantage of an interview is its adaptability. 'A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate feelings, which the questionnaire can never do' (Bell 1999, p.135). Therefore, qualitative interviews are flexible enough to allow for any changing context. 'Interviews yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings' (May 2002, p.l2l).

There are three different types of interview options available to me unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews. Unstructured interviews are useful for exploratory investigations of new topics; semi-structured interview is more controlled by the interviewer and the structured consists of carefully and fully worded questions that are developed before the interview is conducted (Gillham, 2005). The semi structured interview would appear to be the one which is most suited to this project as it allows for greater flexibility in capturing peoples stories. Wisker states that the

Semi-structured, open ended interviews manages to both address the need for comparable responses-that is, there are the same questions being asked for each interviewee- and the need for the interview to be developed by the conversation between interviewer and interviewee- which is often very rich and rewarding (Wisker, 2001).

The interviews design was structured in such a way so as to cover certain topics that were most relevant to this research question, but were sufficiently flexible to explore the individual circumstances of each individual and the issues which were of concern to them as they progressed through college. The interviews were semi-structured life world interviews which provides for a 'planned and flexible interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008: 327).

Dewey (1938) alluded to the fact that people are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood as individuals only as their social context must also be considered. The topics covered in the interviews touched on their social background. There is evidence of a direct relationship between the social background of a person and his or her educational outcome. Individuals from poorer socio economic backgrounds tend to underachieve in the education system when compared with their peers from higher income backgrounds (Kelleghan et al., 1995). While mindful of the ethical issues it was necessary to assess family encouragement and assistance. Families have the prime responsibility for socialising young people towards learning. The organisation and structure of the home and the provision or not of opportunities for cognitive development may contribute to educational disadvantage, little or no out of school educational experiences and the absence of role models are all contributory factors (0'Flaherty, 1995).

Similar to other interpretative phenomenological analysis (Flowers, Knussen & Duncan, 2001) the interview schedule was not used rigidly but rather was a check list of topics and issues to be covered within the interviews. One of the strengths of interviewing is its ability to provide opportunities for probing (Gray, 2004) which is required for IPA. Throughout the interviews my role was one of an active listener and allowed flexibility in the schedule to pursue the elements the participants felt most passionate about.

The traditional family structure has undergone a structural transformation in the past four decades (Clancy, 1991) and this has had a significant impact on people's lives. A lack of a family tradition of educational obtainment can also be a contributing factor in the need for alternative routes to third level (Smith & Spurling, 2001) and by investigating the role played by the family in these interviews it was my desire to pinpoint the positive effects parents or siblings had on helping the graduate achieve their goals. Throughout the interviews there was a strong orientation to the fundamental question of the lived experience (Van Manen, 1997).

For community learners the pathways which they have taken bears little resemblance to their previous academic experience within education. As Wagner and Childs (2003) have previously found although universities pride themselves on their access programmes and allowing non-traditional students to enter degree programmes, there are very few cases where this translate into the restructuring of the course to cater for non-traditional students. The interviewee was encouraged to express their opinion on this statement as seen through their experience.

Smyth and McCoy (2009) contend that more highly educated adults have broader social advantages, including improved health status. Existing Irish research consistently finds that early school leavers are the most disadvantaged group in the labour market, experiencing low employment rates and wages, employment instability and longer spells of joblessness as well as lower job quality and entry into low skill occupations (Byrne *et al.*, 2009). Given the current recession and the fact that currently there are a large number of highly educated individuals unable to find work, I attempted to draw on the interviewee's experience of this.

3.9 Thematic analysis.

For the next phase of the study it was necessary to analyse the data received from the interviews. Aronson (1994) alludes to the fact that a philosophy of language underpins this approach: language is a direct and unambiguous route to meaning. The semi structured nature of the interviews allowed for a categorisation of the narratives organised by theme. The next step to a thematic analysis was to combine and catalogue related patterns into sub-themes. Themes are defined as units derived from patterns such as "conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989, p.131). Boyatzis (1998) describes thematic analysis as a process of encoding qualitative information. Thus the researcher develops "codes," words or phrases that serve as labels for sections of data. Themes are identified by bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone (Leininger, 1985). Themes that emerge from the informants' stories are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience. The coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together (Leininger, 1985). Constas (1992) reiterates this point and states that the interpretative approach should be considered as a distinct point of origination.

Summary

My perception of college has been shaped by my experiences and my social background. It was possible then to relate to many of the feelings and experiences that the participants expressed during the interviews. Therefore it was not possible for me to have an objective view. It was with this in mind that the research design was formulated. The theoretical perspective of this research is interpretivism informed by a social constructionist epistemology. It was comprised of a Narrative research methodology. The data was collected by means of one on one semi-structured interviews. These interviews were recorded using a software called Annotape which enabled me to index the relevant data. This data was then themeatically analysed to detect commonalities. The interview sessions were partially transcribed in the form of notes to aid in the analysis of the data. All the files were converted to MP3 format and are available for examination.The data recieved for the analysis was documented. The following chapter will present and discuss these research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

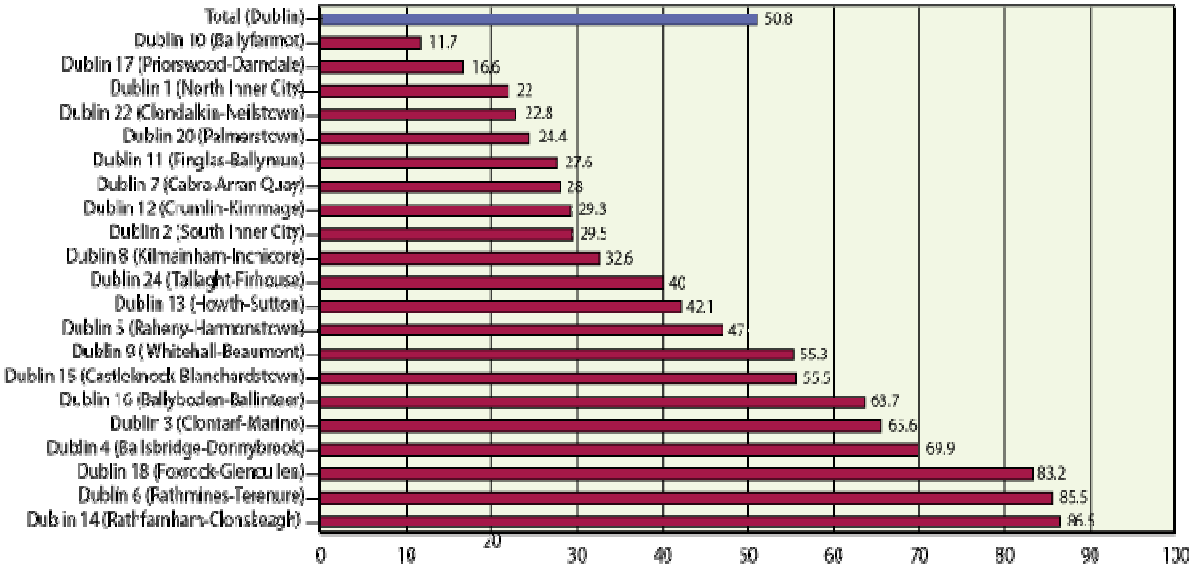
Presentation of Findings

4.1 Introduction

The study involved the interviewing of eight volunteers. Six of those interviewed are currently students while the other two have completed their studies. Of the six students still studying 4 are on the outreach program from UCD, and are pursuing a third level diploma under the umbrella of community education and would be considered mature students. The remaining two students have been able to attend college through the access programme which is run by the DIT. The aim of this programme is to increase the number of students from schools in inner city Dublin entering and completing higher education.

Although it would have been preferable to get a larger number of participants due to time constraints and my inability to obtain more people willing to participate in the study, it was necessary to be content with eight. Although small in number the interviewees provided both a diverse outlook and also had some common themes in respect to third level education. The participants were categorised in such a way so that the four participants which are currently studying provided the views and reflections on their experiences from the point of view of the way in which learning is achieved in Community Education. From the beginning there was a feeling that this group had more of a cohesive bond between each student than those who were attending college individually. There was an apparent strength of purpose and unity about the ladies from this group. This was in contrast to the remaining interviewees, although some had come from the same background of the former they had found there was a lack of a group dynamic when attending third level as a whole time student. The one thing which all the students had in common was they all came from designated disadvantaged areas, typically working class estates which were constructed in the 1930's. The graph below gives details of the admission rates to third level by postal district.

4.2 Social background: Admission Rates to Higher Education by Dublin Postal District, (%)



Source: Fitzpatrick Associates Survey of HEI 2004/05 and CSO Census of Population 2002.

There was a need to highlight the social background of the interviewees as this gives an indication of what is the norm for college participation amongst their peers. The average leaving age of the students was sixteen, the majority leaving after their Intermediate certificate. The average admission rates of the participants of students attending college from the areas in which the study was carried out is 31%. Yet none of the interviewees, even those who did well at school and had the potential to continue on to Third level through the more mainstream routes expected to attend college. The structure of the education at primary and secondary-level, and the lack of information, were identified as having a negative and limiting effect on student's choices post-secondary school.

"Third level never came into the equation" (Interview 4, 0:02:55)

"We were led to employment, college was there, but not readily apparent, employment was pushed upon you" (Interview 5, 0:03:50)

Although the majority of participants who assisted with this study were middle aged and entry to third level would not have been as commonplace then as it is now I felt there may have been some bias to the responses however as I interviewed students currently on the access programme the same theme emerged. Even though it has been acknowledged that there has been improvements made in respect of access to college from disadvantaged backgrounds it appears that there is still a need for more information to be provided to students in their early year's second level.

"It was the normal thing to just leave school and get a job" (Interview 7, 0:02:48)

"College was never mentioned in school or at home it wouldn't have been spoken about" (Interview 8, 0:04:20)

4.3 Early education:

To put each person's initial experience of education in context they were asked to reflect on their early education and social background. It quickly became apparent that all of the interviewees had attended schools which had large class sizes. The effect of this is of particular relevance in the current economic climate as due to cut backs class sizes are once again on the increase. The most widely quoted research regarding class sizes is the experimental Tennessee STAR project. This found that smaller classes, at least below 20, for the youngest children in school, have positive effects on pupil academic performance (Finn & Achilles, 1999, Nye, Hedges & Konstantopoulos, 2000). Some other research on pupil-adult ratios suggested that there is a tendency for teachers to devote less time to group instruction and more to individual instruction in smaller classes (Betts & Shkolnik, 1999). Anderson (2000) Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles (2003) alluded to the fact that the effects of class size in the elementary grades are more in terms of student engagement than effects on teaching, which is confirmed by some of the remarks made during the interviews. There was a definitive sense of isolation

"I was clever but I think I was just lost amongst the chaos" (Interview 2, 0:00:25)

The effect of this had created an early negative view of education with only 2 of the interview participants having a positive memory of primary education. To quote some examples,

"I was the quiet one who sat at the back and didn't want to be there, it was a large class of 42 and the bright ones got all the effort as they didn't need as much work" (Interview 6, 0:00:28)

"I was categorised into the "Dunce Row" primary was strict and they got hit, I didn't have a value of self-worth" (Interview 3, 01:48).

"I was a quiet child who was capable of a lot more "(Interview 2, 0:00:24)

There were only two positive reflections on early childhood education; although it is evident from their statements that this in part can be attributed to the encouragement which they received from the teacher which stimulated the joy of learning both refer to this, in the following quotes,

"I *loved it because I was good and because I was smart, and I got lots of encouragement*" (Interview 4, 0:01:04).

"*There was one teacher who would have been very influential when I was in first class, I had her for about 4 years and she was very encouraging; I suppose she kind of brought me out of myself, It's funny I kind of did a U-turn"* (Interview 8, 0:03:11).

It is fair to say that it is no coincidence that the only two interviewees to express a love for early education were also the only people to refer to encouragement from teachers. Which emphasises how students perceive the school experience, including self-evaluation of achievements and efforts as compared with peers, and feelings of disengagement from school is closely linked to both achievements and plans for future schooling (Fredricks 2004; Hallinan 2008).

"There were certain teachers that were good and they were the subjects I did well in, when you're a child your very susceptible to other peoples approach to things their enthusiasm and their passion and you pick up on this" (Interview 2, 0:02:10)

"They had a lazy way of teaching in a way that one girl would put her hand up and he would ask her all the time because she would get it right and he wouldn't have to explain it, if someone got it wrong he might have to do a bit of work" (Interview_3, 0:06:10)

The early childhood experiences had left many of the participants with a negative view of education so it was important to understand why they would be willing to immerse themselves once more into academic studies. The common theme which emerged from the interviews as the reason for this was one of personal fulfilment. In interview two one of the women explained that she spent a lot of time "job hopping" and at one stage left four jobs within the space of a year. She explained how she knew she was intelligent and adaptable but felt there was something out there more challenging. It was only when she enrolled in the women's studies course that she found the inspiration she was looking for. The curriculums of the schools which the participants attended generally doesn't allow for these types of subjects to be taught. Students are streamlined for the workforce and few are given encouragement or educated in regards to progression to third level. Only one of those interviewed ever filled out a C.A.O form but the application was never sent in. It was only after the intervention of a teacher that the form was posted. It was described by the interviewee as a life changing moment. Yet how many more students could be guided along this path to college which just a little more education and encouragement?

4.4 Guidance:

Another common theme to emerge from all of the participants interviewed was the lack of or nonexistence of career guidance. It would be natural to assume that currently there is at least some sort of guidance given to second level students as they approach their leaving certificate to outline the possible options or career paths which they can follow. However it was more through luck, determination and the intervention of dedicated staff that the students I spoke with were able to get onto access college courses.

Which in-turn makes the decision by Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn to cut guidance and counselling services in second-level schools all the more hard to understand? Eileen Collins mentions the fact that this decision is in direct conflict with Goal 3 of the National Children's Strategy 2000-2010, encompassed in the latest strategy towards 2016, which states "children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development" (The Irish Times Thursday, February 16, 2012). Studies carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute and Forfás both agree that not less but more time needs to be given to guidance in schools and that guidance contributes significant returns to the economy and, at a minimum, pays for itself. Given the importance of international trade to future growth, there is an additional focus on the key skills required for exporting companies (both multinational and SMEs/ foreign owned and indigenous) across sectors (Forfás 2012). It is necessary to have well informed guidance counsellors in all second level schools to help inform students of the shortages which exist in certain industries in labour market. Intervention in the early years of post-primary school will give student the opportunities to choose the subjects which will be of greatest advantage to them when they have completed the Leaving Certificate with a view to following a relevant course in Third level. Career guidance can improve the match between supply and demand by helping young people to search for a better fit between their interests, abilities and qualifications, and the available work opportunities

Respondents to a study commissioned by the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (FORFAS) stated that guidance counsellors were the most helpful source of careers information and the easiest way to access such information. Respondents also expressed a preference for individual career counselling. The report concluded that given the key role of parents in young people's career choices, the best way to reach parents with careers and labour market information was through the schools network. Research has shown that mature adults are more likely to seek advice about education from organisations and individuals known to them and that the most important of these includes employers, friends and service providers in their own communities (Preece, Weatherald and Woodrow, 1998).

In the ESRI's longitudinal study *From Leaving Cert to Leaving School* students expressed positive perceptions about career learning experiences in school but were critical of the limited time available for individual career discussions due to the guidance counsellors' dual role of

subject teaching and career guidance. The report highlighted the need to target career activities to Junior Cycle as decisions made there had significant impact for Senior Cycle and post Leaving Cert learning and work opportunities (ESRI, 2011).

Career guidance also plays a role in achieving social equity goals. It helps to ensure that education and employment opportunities are distributed equitably, and that people make the maximum use of their talents regardless of their gender, social background or ethnic origin. Many students living in disadvantaged areas are likely to be less familiar with educational and labour market information than others. These areas need that extra bit information to help in accessing these opportunities. These interviews have shown that each year capable and talented individuals fail to get the opportunity to progress to college through a lack of information. Becker (1975) suggests that a "human capital" approach has been adopted by many of the world's governments, this can be summarised as, viewing the success of each economy in terms of the degree to which its labour force is educated. Currently our educated workforce has been cited as one of the main reasons why multinational companies relocate to Ireland. According to the IDA (2012) Ireland offers a highly-skilled workforce, world-class Research, Development and Innovation (RD&I) and advanced manufacturing technologies that deliver continuous innovation and sustainable success in high value manufacturing. Yet without this highly skilled workforce Ireland's economy will stagnate, already there have been reports of companies requiring hiring people with specific computer skills from overseas.

4.5 Community learning:

Community Education provides people, who for one reason or another have not accessed college through one of the more traditional routes, another opportunity to do so. On a personal level it seems to coax the best from its participants and motivates them into striving to achieve their potential. One of the first things that struck me while speaking with community education students was their positivity and enthusiasm for the courses which they attended. The striking feature and the main advantage that it held for participants was it is based within the community, which made it readily accessible. In contrast to their experiences of main stream education participants felt that they weren't pre-judged.

"It was such a relief to be accepted somewhere with no leaving Certificate" (Interview_3, 0:07.15)

The ethos of this type of education is that it is community led, reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals. It was this personal approach which encouraged and motivated the students. All ascribed to a feeling of shared experiences, respect, interaction, and inclusion. Yet all these words still don't do justice to the sense of empowerment and freedom that Community Education has given to the women I interviewed. While discussing mainstream education with

them you got a sense of hopelessness and frustration. Each of them knew that they were personally unfulfilled and Community education gave them the opportunity to fill that void.

"The eyes of the women on the course were opened to a world which they didn't think they could interact with before" (Interview_2, 0:11.05)

4.5 Teaching style:

Another common theme which resonated from all those interviewed was the teaching style of the tutors and the environment in which the learning took place. As previously mentioned many of the participants would have had a negative association with their prior education and the classroom environment in general. To conduct the interviews it was necessary to meet with some of the participants at a neutral venue. The setting of the community college seemed the most feasible. It was the first time I had encountered any centre for community learning and my initial perception was the difference in the layout of building in comparison with other colleges I had attended. Although set in the grounds of a school, a great deal of effort and thought had been put into giving each person a sense of welcome. Flowers adorned the entrance hall, which was richly carpeted and had large comfortable armchairs spread out giving you the sense of entering a stately home rather than a place of learning. Large pictures were hung from the walls which had been created, and donated by past pupils that immediately gave you the sense of a caring attitude and an acknowledgement of the achievements of former students. This would coincide with the findings of (Bailey, Breen & Ward, 2011) students stated that the top three factors for their participation in community education were, that the people were really nice (69.6%), the surroundings were warm and welcoming (62.6%), and the provider had the course the learner wanted to do (57.6%).

Knowles (1970) mentions the fact that in the case of some adults the remembrance of the classroom as a place where one is treated with disrespect and may fail is so strong that it serves as a serious barrier to their becoming involved in adult-education activities at all. It is evident from the layout of the building which I was in, that a great deal of thought had been put into the design of the building to counteract this negative association. The classrooms themselves also followed this approach, as there was no formal equipment which one would associate with education. The chairs are arranged in a circular formation which is conducive to the feeling of inclusion and gave a more adult atmosphere. The lack of a blackboard helped to reinforce this.

"It was very welcoming it would put a smile of your face, they had an open door policy and the teachers were always accessible" (Interview_4, 0:12.30).

All of these initial observations were re-emphasised during the interviews with the students who are currently on the programme as they all related to the fact that the classes which they attended were in a "safe" environment. They all mentioned the fact that the rooms are set out in a way

which allowed them to “open up”. This was important it was possible discuss some of the topics which were on the course and in doing so build up a sense of trust within the group. In this way many of the women felt “opening up” allowed them to share their life experiences and they all could relate to the social factors which had impacted on their lives. This atmosphere of sharing and trust created a strong bond not just within this group but also with members of other groups with whom I spoke with According to Knowles (1980) people tend to feel more "adult" in an atmosphere that is friendly and informal, in which they are known by name and valued as unique individuals, rather than in the traditional school atmosphere of formality, semi anonymity, and status differentiation between teacher and student. Within the classroom it is the behaviour of the teacher which influences the character of the learning climate more than any other single factor.

It was morale boosting for the women to find that their life experiences counted and that everybody had a story which they were encouraged to share

“We diminish our life experiences, we don’t count them at all” (Interview_4, 0:07.15).

One of the first assignments given to the women was an essay entitled “I am a woman that has lived a life, tell me your story” this was seen by many as a “Eureka” moment. They felt it was a very empowering exercise which allowed them to actually “name” these life experiences. Houle (1980) explains that this type of learning is learning that is achieved through reflection upon everyday experience and is the way that most of us do our learning. Jarvis (1987) contended that at the heart of life itself is the process of learning. With this concept in mind it seems the facilitators prepared educational materials which fitted directly into this type of adult reflective learning. These activities helped students to learn about their own self-development and their own feelings of empowerment.

Mezirow has acknowledged epistemic critical self-reflection as an important domain of transformative learning. This requires the learner to examine their assumptions and explore the causes, the nature and consequence of his or her frames of reference to ascertain why he or she is predisposed to learn in a certain way or to appropriate particular goals (Mezirow, 1998). This reflection created a confidence within the students and gave them that sense of self worth which had been suppressed by previous school experiences. One of the interviewees mentioned that she was surprised to discover she wasn’t “*stupid*” as she had been led to believe (Interview_6, 0:03.30).

The role the tutors played in transforming the student’s perceptions cannot be over emphasised. Every one of the interviewees alluded to this fact. They all referred to one tutor in particular and described her as an excellent motivator. In their words she encouraged the students and slowly opened them up to more academic reading and made this literature accessible to everyone. She constantly highlighted their progress and capabilities.

The teaching style appears to have been one of a student centred approach whereby the tutor facilitated the learner individually or in cooperative groups. Felder & Brent (1996) state that by posing problems, setting time limits, providing varying amounts of guidance, asking leading questions, choosing students to respond, or giving positive responses. The instructor can decide when the focus of discussion needs to be changed or the discussion ended. This approach instilled the group with a sense of self belief and quickly built up a confidence with each other. People who have a trusting relationship with a teacher or mentor are better able to take advantage of critical feedback and opportunities to learn (Cohen & Steele, 2002). This feedback was of great importance, both positive and negative and the facilitator constantly highlighted the class progress and highlighted their capabilities. She "upped the ante" and took them from the comfort zone gradually becoming more and more academic. As one participant mentioned

"The course was enjoyable and very academic but it doesn't feel like Third level education" (Interview_3, 0:11.37).

The group as a whole felt that there was a good understanding between the lecturer and themselves especially in regard to their origins. The subject matter was presented in a style which simplified the jargon; it wasn't presented in highly technical terms. This is in contrast to some of the opinions expressed by those who progressed from community education to mainstream third level. There was an initial sense of frustration with the presentation of course material, a feeling of academic snobbery. The language used to present some of the material meant extra time had to be devoted to deciphering the point the writer was trying to portray. There was an acceptance that attending college meant it was expected that a certain level of educational obtainment had been achieved but the language of some of the academic writings obscured the message and made it difficult to relate to. It was only when this had been stripped away that students found they could engage with the material.

"*You can't teach a person without them understanding what you are saying" (Interview_2, 0:18.09).*

Everyone who had been through the course expressed feelings of at times being overawed by the requirements necessary to meet deadlines and complete assignments. Yet the most powerful asset and motivational tool which all of the participants they had at their disposal was each other. The tutor had encouraged group learning from the outset and group study was encouraged.

"The study groups really help and what helps pull you along are the girls talking to the girls" (Interview_3, 0:11.38).

Inclusion was facilitated by endeavouring to obtain everyone's opinion. This had the effect of allowing each member make a valuable contribution. Johnson & Johnson (1987) have posted the statistics from studies that were conducted that clearly demonstrate the positive effect that

cooperative learning has on student academic achievement and social development. Once adults make the discovery that they can take responsibility for their own learning, as they do for other facets of their lives, they experience a sense of release and exhilaration. They then enter into learning with deep ego-involvement, with results that are frequently startling both to themselves and to their teachers. Teachers who have helped their adult students to achieve this have expressed repeatedly that this feeling is one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives (Knowles, 1980). As one participant expressed

"It's the best thing I have done in my life" (Interview_3, 0:12.30).

4.7 Group learning:

All the people I spoke with felt that group interaction was an invaluable resource to them when the course became a struggle. They all mentioned brainstorming, throwing ideas around, reassuring and reinforcing the confidence which had been instilled in them. In this way all the groups felt a sense of solidarity was created and nobody was left behind. Slavin, (1983) states that positive interdependence is the heart of collaborative activities that define collaboration and transform group work into teamwork. It is a key feature that has been emphasised by scholars concerned primarily with promoting students' academic achievement and cognitive development. As well as research concerned with students' holistic development. Chickering, (1969) argues that, in its highest form, the development of autonomy involves the development of freedom that recognises one's dependence and obligations to others. This was emphasised by the fact that the biggest benefit gained by the students from engaging in group activities was the bonds which it created. One woman mentioned that one of the outstanding things which she got from the course was observing the relationships developing among the group. These relationships were imperative to each other's success. Many expressed the view that sometimes they learned as much through informal discussions at the coffee break or in telephone conversations to each other as they sometimes did in the classroom (Interview_1, 0:5.55, Interview_3, 0:11.40).

These relationships which developed contributed to a low dropout rate from the classes. The average retention rate of the groups I spoke with was 84% which could have been higher as those who left, did so in the early stages of the course prior to a developing a relationship with their colleagues. Yorke & Longden (2008) tells us that the majority of students who leave first year have left by the end of the first semester. It is fair to conclude that the early experiences of these students have a significant influence on whether or not they will stay at college. This is equally true for adult learners who may be at the added disadvantage of having a low self-confidence and the thoughts of college work can be daunting.

This became apparent when speaking with the students who had progressed from third level studies in Community education and attended college on a full time basis. The first hurdle which

they felt they had to overcome was that of ageism. One woman who attended UCD on a masters course said at first she was intimidated due to her age, that she felt "*like someone's mother*" (Interview_6, 0:8.25). It was only through family support and encouragement that she stuck with it. She remembered that in her first few weeks she was in a state of constant panic. She felt intimidated by the educational obtainments of her peers and in general the size of the campus. She consistently questioned "what the hell was she doing there she didn't belong there". However as she began to become immersed in the course material and began to engage with her classmates she realised that it was "only me own stuff...insecurities" which were holding her back. She quickly found that she actually knew quite a lot more than her peers and actually her maturity and life experience was an invaluable asset as opposed to the hindrance. Byrd & MacDonald (2005) found that mature students, those who took time to pursue possible careers, had more strength in self-concept, self-advocacy, goal focus, and time management than traditional students. Research has established that mature students are self-directing and are in the middle of a process of growth rather than at the start of one (Rogers, 2002).

The experience of not belonging was a common theme in the four interviews I carried out with the students who progressed onto whole time masters courses from community education. The initial fear the participants mentioned was that of physically leaving their communities. There was a sense that people from different localities wouldn't have the same social background as themselves and that they would feel isolated in college. The need for social belonging for seeing oneself as socially connected is a basic human motivation (MacDonald & Leary, 2005).

One participant highlighted the fact that he thought "nobody from a similar background to his would go to college" (Interview_7, 0:11.40), another thought it would be full of "posh" people and she wouldn't fit in. (Interview_8, 0:10.10). Yet all of those interviewed said once they began meeting people and talking to them all of these fears disappeared. In fact many referred to the fact that the friendships they built at college and the diversity of backgrounds enhanced the overall college experience and gave them a broader outlook on life. As one women put it

"*College is not just about books but it's an expansion of self with limitless opportunities*" (Interview_2, 0:26.43).

Social networking can play a role in allowing students to keep in touch with each other and can also be a way to engage with fellow students. The majority of students questioned thought that they could stay in college and achieve their academic goals purely because of their own resolve. They expected to succeed because of their own determination or because they wanted "their children to have a better life." However most students indicated that, at some point, they did consider dropping out as the workload increased. Yet their reasons for staying in school are revealing. Some felt they would not be fair to themselves to dropout and almost all mentioned the intervention a particular person, an instructor, a staff member, another student who gave the encouragement, guidance, or support they needed to keep going. Personal connections which had

been previously unanticipated by the students were an added bonus and a critical component that improved the odds of the students succeeding. Research has shown that students who are socially integrated by forming peer relationships, interacting with faculty members and getting involved with campus activities are more likely to remain in college than those students who are not socially integrated (Tinto, 1975). First-generation students are less likely than their peers to engage in the university community, even though these students reap greater benefits from extracurricular involvement in college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). Social integration was a challenge for all the students but by meeting and engaging with fellow students helped allay these fears (Interview_8, 0:10.29). Both of the students interviewed that had attended college through the access course felt meetings with a project officer were really important, as there was nobody at home who could relate to her experiences. It was beneficial just to be able to have someone to talk with who understood any problems they were encountering adjusting to college life. Rickinson & Rutherford (1995) highlighted the importance of academic and emotional preparedness for the transition to higher education.

"*It is a slow process from being told you are good enough to actually believing it"* (Interview_6, 0:12.19).

Many would argue that most second level schools put more emphasis on with getting their students accepted into college than they put on preparing them for type of academic demands that will be made on them when they get there. Therefore the project officer acted as a vital point of contact for the students. He facilitated as an intermediary between the students and tutors when that extra piece of guidance or understanding was required.

Finance was also an important feature of progressing to college and a lot of the anxieties that this created were alleviated by the assistance of community education and the project officer. In the case of community education students this was facilitated by the easy access to books. The centres have small libraries of books which were relevant to the course material and this alleviated any financial burden which they may cause. Some of the participants expressed reservations in regards to accessing the libraries in UCD and Trinity. They initially found them intimidating and felt the shear volumes of literature available would hamper their ability to gain access to the information they required (Interview_5, 0:21.30). Only one of those interviewed mentioned the fact that there was no funding for his course and this made college tough at times (Interview_7, 0:14.38). All those interviewed had contributed in some way to their college education but few alluded to this fact.

The main motivating factor which emerged from the interviews was the sense that each of the students was embarking on something special. Britton & Baxter (1999) contend that often mature students have struggled to get to university, and have given up things to do so; therefore they usually are highly motivated to succeed in their studies. Although many mature students hope that their involvement in higher education will improve their prospects for employment, they

often appear to be driven to succeed by other personal factors. The inner needs and drives of a learner are identified as key motivations and it is argued that an individual's self concept plays an important role in occupational choice (McCann, 1999). Every person interviewed was the first person from their family to attend college. Rather than focusing on the barriers all of them highlighted the positive aspects and the sense of achievement which this provided.

"I am doing it for me, it was for no other reason than to prove I could do it, I am not stupid!" (Interview_6, 0:12.30).

There was also a benefit to the overall classes from having mature students attend. The lived experience left many students with fewer inhibitions when it came to questioning lecturers.

"*If you were a teenager 16 or 17 in school your listening to the lecturer and you don't know any better you have nothing to compare with we had to compare with lives and what we were living so you were more discerning, you weren't swallowing up what you were told*" (Interview_1, 0:05.30).

They would sometimes approach subject matter from a different perspective. Mature students, who often have considerable experience of the world of work, can bring a lot to group work and help younger members of the group to develop their organisational and presentation skills. Precisely because they have often struggled to get to university, and have given up things to do so, they usually are highly motivated to succeed in their studies (Britton & Baxter, 1999). They seem to understand the importance of active learning and they see no reason to accept what they are taught without question. They also recognise that higher education can help to equip them with skills they can use in their own communities. The first advantage of being a mature student is that you really want to study. There are also a huge number of supports available in most third level institutions to assist students such as academic supports, careers advice, health services, counselling services, disability services and so on.

4.8 Family Support

The importance of family support for the students returning to education cannot be overstated. Some of the participants found that studying placed demands on family life but found that open discussion at times helped to diffuse pressures. This was in the main experienced by the mature students and some expressed a lack of understanding within their family as to the reasons they were putting themselves trough the studying.

"It's the best step I have taken in my life, it creates change, and change is very good but for me it created slight tensions within my family" (Interview_5, 0:12.45).

Unfortunately no all the students attended college with the encouragement and support of their family as there was a times a genuine lack of understanding.

"The kids were great my husband wasn't, he didn't like it one bit but I got there in the end" (Interview_5, 0:13.00).

The feeling of isolation and struggle can be compounded if support from family and community is not forthcoming, particularly if there is no tradition of higher education in that family or community (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Many of the women found their children to be very supportive of them while studying. In many ways it gave them a common bound and several of them mentioned the fact of sitting down with their children as they completed assignments while the children did homework. In a practical sense it also allowed them to discuss education and general politics in ways which they would have not been as comfortable with before. It also gave the children a role model with the mother as the pioneer making college a tangible subject in the household. Roscigno & Ainsworth (1999) mention the fact that family background influences an individual's educational attainment. This is proven by the fact that many of the children of those interviewed went on to third level education. Those who had children who did attributed this fact as a direct result of their own studies.

"*My two daughters are currently studying in Tallaght IT and I don't think that would have come about if it wasn't for my journey"* (Interview_6, 0:14.18).

"I know my kids are going to college, I see the benefits I missed out on" (Interview_2, 0:23.07).

This is one of the unseen benefits of encouraging community students to progress to third level. Yet it is one when educational providers are putting forward the cases for funding is not readily transparent. Rather than breaking the cycle of disadvantage what community education has the potential to do is create a cycle of educational obtainment. One where successive generations expect to attend college and take it as a given. The positive effect of this cannot be over emphasised when you consider extended family. Expectation levels can be increased exponentially. The attitudes and aspirations of parents and of children themselves predict later educational achievement. International evidence suggests that parents with high aspirations are also more involved in their children's education (Gutman and Akerman 2008). This in turn can lead to desire for greater academic achievement.

4.9 What progression has meant on a personal level.

It goes without saying that attending third level education will have a positive effect on your employment prospects. However for the majority of the people expressed the view of having obtained much more than mere employability. Self-fulfilment was the main motivation of the more mature students but by pursuing this goal it also opened up more avenues for them. The common theme to emerge from those on access programmes was a desire to improve life circumstances and increase the possibilities of job prospects. This was their main motivating factor. As McGarthy & Duffy explained education and the holding of educational qualifications is now the currency for employment and it is the lack of such qualifications that are the major contributors to poverty and social deprivation (1999). Community education represents value for money for the Department of Education and Science as even with conservative estimates; learners who start to volunteer as a result of community education provide a high return of €28.8 million to the State and a low return of €9.1 million per annum (page 175 more than just a course). Yet for the majority of the interviewees it held much more than mere monetary gain.

"It was a brilliant experience not just the education but also the friendships which were built up" (Interview_1, 0:16.36).

It provided students with an increased level of confidence. Some of the mature students who had families felt over the years they had lost some of their self identity, becoming wives and mothers. College allowed them to embark on a journey of self discovery and as they described it provided them with a new lust for life. It provided them with the ability to engage in more in depth conversations and ultimately had a very positive effect on their children (Interview_2, 0:24.20).

As one woman put it, education gave her the power to formulate an argument and also to see both sides of the argument. Where previously she would pretend she understood something education has given her the confidence to question. She realises that questioning is acceptable if you wish to gain an understanding of a subject. It is ok to say I don't know. (Interview_4, 0:20.20).

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion of the Research Findings:

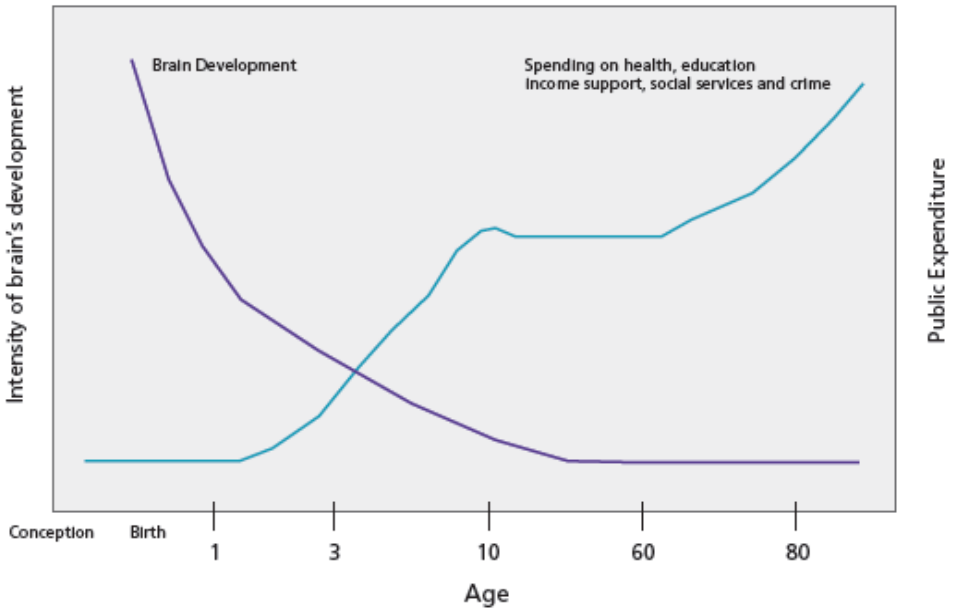
The first common theme to emerge form the discussions with all of the people who helped with this study was the detrimental effect that large classes have on some students. In 2011 the Department of Education's increased the pupil-teacher ratio in a bid to save €75 million (Irish time, August 4th 2011). The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) were of the view that it was a retrograde step. They felt it would have the effect of cutting the range of subject options, making class sizes bigger, giving less focus and attention to weaker students in the classroom and that ultimately the students would lose out. This would be in keeping with the experiences of the majority of the people I spoke with during this study. They attributed larger classes as having a detrimental effect on the overall learning experience due

- Intimacy: Teachers they felt could not get to know their students as well as they could if classes were smaller.
- Some students were afraid to ask questions or participate in a large class.
- Meeting individual teachers can be difficult or impossible when class size is very large.
- There are more distractions for teachers in large classes, such as latecomers and people chatting while you are teaching.
- Large classes sometimes became out of hand when students were working in pairs or groups.
- There was limited space in some classrooms and overall some of the facilities were criticised by students.

These points are particularly relevant for primary school children. My daughter currently attends a school where the average class size is thirty. If I struggle with two children at home, how can we possibly expect teachers to adaquately ensure that all the childrens educational requirements are met with such large numbers. According to research what inevitably occurs is when teachers face a larger class they feel compelled to adopt a more didactic or more disciplined style. Having a larger budget however will not necessarily gaurauntee a better education and an examination of how funding is allocated might prove more benefical. That is, more spending on schools has not led reliably to substantially better results.Hanushekand Woessmann (2011) . Bressoux, Kramarz, and Prost (2009) found beneficial effects of smaller classes for low-achieving students in France, but Bénabou, Kramarz, and Prost (2009) do not find anysignificant effect of the French policy of education priority zones which channel additional resources to disadvantaged schools. What appears to be the most beneficial option is investment in early education .

5.1 Importance of early education:

Children learn rapidly from their very first days, and their experiences in their early years lay the foundations for their subsequent educational attainment. Children's early years are in effect the first stage of the education system, though in Ireland it is by far the least resourced stage (OECD, 2010).Reviewing the findings of international research on human capital, Professor James Heckman concludes that the economic return to investment in children's early years is higher than the return to investment in later childhood.



Brain development and public expenditure, by age.

Source: E. Melhuish (2010)

Ireland's spending on services for young children is particularly weak by international standards. A large proportion of social expenditure for young children in Ireland takes the form of cash benefits rather than services.The relationship between attending pre-primary school and better student performance at age 15 is strongest in school systems that offer pre-primary education to a larger proportion of the student population, that do so over a longer period of time, that have smaller pupil-to-teacher ratios in pre-primary school and that invest more per child at the pre-primary level of education (OECD, 2011). It is self evident from this that by investing the early education of children this can lead to greater benefits in the long term for those students who wish to progress third level.

5.2 Teacher Quality:

Another common theme to emerge from the interviews conducted was the effect that teacher quality can have on the childhood experiences of learners and this is enormously important in determining student achievement. The inability to identify specific teacher qualities makes it difficult to regulate or legislate having high-quality teachers in classrooms. However if you look at the way in which the education system is based in Finland you can get some ideas of the way in which improvements can be made as students from Finland outperform peers in 43 other nations in mathematics, science and reading skills. In Finland All kids start at the same level, no matter what socio-economic background they have. They learn the basic knowledge, skills and attitudes of lifelong learning, which is consistently paying off with better academic achievement in later grades. These primary schools are places where playing and learning are combined with alternative pedagogic approaches, rather than mere instructional institutions (Maes, 2010).

All teachers are prepared in academic universities. In Finland teaching is a prestigious career. Children aspire to be doctors, lawyers, scientists and in the same breath teachers. They are respected and appreciated; they are highly qualified requiring a Masters degree for full time employment. This would be contrary to the experience of many Irish teachers.
Finland improved its public education system not by privatising its schools or constantly testing its students, but by strengthening the education profession and investing in teacher preparation and support. Teacher based assessments are used by schools to monitor progress and these are not graded, scored or compared; but instead are descriptive and utilised in a formative manner to inform feedback and assessment for learning. Great emphasis is put on pupil and teacher trust and well-being. The complete opposite of this approach has been highlighted by the participants in this study. Their experiences are those of the Irish system are in complete contrast to this approach. This approach proven in Finland and akin to that of Community education must be adopted in primary and secondary level schools.

In Finland the curriculum is far less academic. Finnish schools receive full autonomy, with teachers experiencing considerable independence when developing and delivering their own individual curricula. Combinations of alternative pedagogic approaches, rather than mere instructional methods are utilised by the teachers. The pedagogical freedom experienced facilitates greater creativity, pro-activity and innovation. This naturally allows a greater degree of individual emotional well being, that no doubt plays a role in fostering positive learning role models and environments: positively shaping the minds of teachers and pupils alike.
All students in Finland receive a free education from when they start at seven years of age until they complete their university studies. During their educational journey all pupils receive free school meals, resources and materials, transport and support services. Professional Learning Communities are integral to sharing and spreading good practice in a collaborative manner. A no child is left behind approach means that all classes contain a mixture of ability level pupils, with most classes containing two or more teachers who focus on those needing additional support. By

having professionals working in conjunction, the needs of the pupils can be better met within a happy and familiar environment. Not to labour the point but I found it striking that all the positive aspects of the Finish education system is apparent in the approach taken by many of the partners in Community education. What was also glaringly apparent was the negative aspects highlighted by the participants in the interviews are the very things which have been excluded by the Finish authorities to create one of the world's outstanding education systems. The counter balance to the participants early school experiences came through the teaching methods employed by the tutors in community education.

5.3 Group Interaction

Cardinal Newman argued that people learned more from been in contact with each other than from formal classes.

> "If I had to choose between a so-called University which dispensed with residence and tutorial supervision and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a University which merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years… I have no hesitation in giving the preference to the later…" (Newman, 1852; p. 35).

The later appears also to be the case in community education as strong friendship bonds of friendship were built amongst the groups of students whom I interviewed. Like the Finnish approach each group sublimely they took the "no one gets left behind" approach. Collins (1986) obtained evidence that groups develop subcultures or norms for behaviour that differentially support learning. These friendships were central to much of the learning which occurred and were a strong motivational factor for success. Springer, Stanne and Donovan (1999) found that the course achievement of students working in small groups was greater than that of students who did not work cooperatively. Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified that friendships and student communities will influence student development and interaction with peers provide powerful learning experiences and help shape the emerging sense of self. This was verified and experienced by those of whom I spoke with. Interaction between each other was as beneficial to many of groups as classroom time was.

Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, and Terenzini (1999) found that non classroom interactions including discussing issues related policies, religious, arts, and so on, had significantly positive effects on knowledge acquisition and academic skill development. Talking at the breaks gave everyone an opportunity to discuss their feelings in a more familiar environment. This reinforced for many the learning which had occurred in the classroom. In this way the process of learning was emphasised. From a sociocognitive perspective, learning is a cognitive process embedded in social contexts, so both social and cognitive factors influence the outcomes of learning processes (Tierney & Rogers, 1989).

Learning is socially constructed during interaction and activity with others, so there is interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). This type of learning took longer to occur when it came to the transition to third level. While difficult to quantify, the impression I got from the interviews was that much of the first year at college was spent adjusting to the new environment. A substantial amount of evidence has suggested that the nature of an institution's social or relational environment as well as students' interaction with peers will affect students' acquisition of subject matter knowledge and academic skills. So although much has been done to enable this, if third level instituitions could draw on the Community approach but broaden it on a wider scale it would I feel be of great advantage to the student body as a whole. Barr & Tagg (1995) capture the essence of this shift by describing it as the movement from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm

It would involve shifting the focus from how institutes and educators instruct and teach students, to how they can help the students to learn. Helping to shape the environment and conditions that promote student progression will enhance the learning experience as a whole. Braxton et al (2000) explored different learning styles in an attempt to identify those which positively influenced social integration in first year students.

The study identified active learning as being the style which encouraged social interaction the most. Therefore is if institutions adopt a more active learning approach this would do more to encourage students to become involved more in the social aspect of college.In summary, students' interaction with peers plays a central role in how students think about themselves and college. It is the dominant force on general personal development. Interaction with peers has the potential to stimulate reflection on students' knowledge and currently held beliefs and values and, perhaps, lead to new ways of thinking about and understanding the world, the other peers, and themselves (Rickinson & Rutherford 1995).

5.4 Looking to the future

The most striking thing for me and what I will take from this study is the sense of hope which attending community education and college can provide for the future. The positive effect this will have going forward on the children of the participants is apparent and has been voiced by many of them. Yet there have been few rigorous independent studies of the effects of parent or family education programs on parents' behavior and attitudes (Layzer & Goodson, 2001), and even fewer that statistically show the paths by which such programs affect parents' engagement with their children's learning at home and at school. Parental involvement is a key component in children's school success (Park & Palardy, 2004). Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey (PFI) found 88% of students whose parents had earned at least a bachelor's degree had parents who expected them to finish college compared to 44% of students whose parents had graduated from high school or who had less than a high school diploma (Lippman et al., 2008).

Parents who have attended college have shown they value education. Their past achievements can become a benchmark for their children to follow. Higher achieving parents can foster those things that are important in their children and prioritise academic success. In contrast, those who have not attended college generally do not have the financial means or aspirations to raise higher-achieving students. College-educated parents are typically more aware of the long-term benefits of acquiring a college degree, and thus they share this information with their children. Bandura (1986) sets forth the social learning theory that students learn their homework habits at an early age.Parents who have experienced disciplined study habits construct an expectation for children to also perform those desired behaviours.Their children practice and learn the behaviors and the consequences of those behaviours.

Therefore, it is likely that parents who achieved the goal of an advanced collegtend to encourage disciplined study habits in their children. On a personal level I can see this manifesting itself within my own family. My brother is currently completeing a PHD and my nephew mirrors his study behaviour when it comes to his own studies. This has led to an expectation of academic achievement which would not necessarily have been prevalent within the household previously. Parents who have not had much success and positive reinforcement in their own schooling sometimes withdraw from further academic challenges. This was apparent in many of the interviews I conducted whereby some mothers found it difficult when it came to assisting children with their homework and was a motivating factor in them returning to education. The reverse of this also occured as some also alluded to the fact while they were studying the children joined in and it became a group family activity. It was one of the hidden benefits which returning to college provided for some participants.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

This research set out to ask the question what is *"The experience of progressing from Community Education to Third level Education from a learner's perspective*"

This question was driven by my personal experience of progressing from as an apprenticeship to Third level education. Personally for me the first year of college was the most difficult as I struggled to adapt to the new environment and the difference in teaching styles when compared to apprenticeship. Ultimately participating in college has has a profound affect on my life and has opened many doors for me which previously would not have been unaccessible.This led me to question how difficult is the experience for students from community education. Ultimately for those who have taken the step, did they feel that they had gained as much from it as I did?

As this research was investigating the real life world experience of the participants it was phenomenological in nature. The data was collect using one on one semi structured interviews and was Narrative in style as the research attemted to capture each individuals story.

6.3 Conclusions

The aim of this project was to document the experiences of students as they progressed from Community Education to third level education. The objective was to capture the stories of the students and the various emotions which they felt. The resultant stories have been summarised and the pertinent points which emerged have been discussed in detail in the previous chapters.

It was not my intention nor did I expected to find any different experiences from those available in the literature, or from my own personal experiences. One interesting theme to emerge was the effect that class sizes has on pupils and this would warrant further investigation. While researching the literature for the project I found alot of what is happening in the education sector to be frustrating. The logic behind cutting funding to certain areas seems short sighted in the extreme when these savings will be spent two fold on crime prevention and social welfare. The Finish system of education is a model that could and should be replicated in Ireland. The Leaving Certificate both for students and teachers is an out dated model that needs redisgn. It simply leads to rote learning. It gives pupils from wealthier backgrounds an unfair advantage as money can buy the best grinds and teachers.

Since my college days many new initiatives have been implemeted which gives some students the chance to access college. This is encouraging but much more could be achieved with a revamp of the system.

6.3 Recommendations

These recommendations are based upon this research and emerge from the analysis, presentation and discussion of the findings. The recommendations are as follows.

Recommendation 1:

In regards to the Leaving Certificate more continuous assessment is required. The current system encourages rote learning and is more about how students cope with examination pressure rather than a test of intelligence. Alternative methods such as the applied Leaving Certificate should be introduced on a broader basis. This offers students both experiential and academic learning methodologies and allows every student the opportunity of reaching their potential.

Recommendation 2:

Since the beginning of the current recession reduced public finanaces have led to the increase in classroom sizes. Although anecdotal evidence is available of large classes having a detrimental effect on learning, as mentioned by interviewees of this study. A further study is required to prove conclusively the adverse affects this has on students

Recommendation 3:

Progression to college should be promoted in every secondary school from first year. The transition to third level should be streamlined so it becomes seamless as the progression from Junior Certificate to the Leaving Certificate. All students should expect to attending college at some level.

Recommendation 4:

Parents need to be educated in the options available both to themselves and their children. Community education can broaden it's scope if it can manage to become embeded in psyche of parents and the fabric of second level schools.

Recommendation 5:

Teachers generally come from the middle classes background therefore it can be difficult for them to relate to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and vice versa. The Irish requirement for those wishing to become primrary school teachers is a major stumbling block which should be removed. This would encourage more students from this type of background to enter the teaching profession and they would be better equiped to relate to students fron similar backgrounds.

Recommendation 6:

There needs to be shift in the perception that only college is only for the wealthy. Granted the re-introduction of fees will put added pressure on students. However there are options available to alleviate this. The majority of instituitions have access programmes such as TAP in Trinity and HEAR in the DIT, which assist students who wish to attend college. All students should be aware of these programmes

Recommendation 7:

The appointment of a Community liaison officer should be put in place. Many third level colleges are appointing student retention officers in an effort to hold onto students something similar should be implemented within the community. Duties of the liaison officer would include the following:

(i) Provide information and assistance on progression routes to parents aswell as students and outline the benefits of third level education.

(ii) Provide assistance and act as a intermediary betweeen second and third level.

(iii) Encourage colleges to become more active in communities and to ensure students are made familiar with campus life and encourage the social aspects of third level.

Reflection

The main aim of this research was to explore the experiences of Community learners as they progress to third level education. Having come form a similar background meant that this topic was one that is very relevant to me professionally and personally.When looking at the research questions it was my desire to give a voice to the participants and allow them to tell their stories. I believe that I have done so and allowed their experiences to speak through this research.

I have enjoyed carrying out this research. It has taught me alot about my social background and made me reflect on some of my decisions, while reflecting on the decisions of the interviewees. Indeed it has only recently dawned on me that I must be a feminist! It was refreshing to experience the transforming effects that education can bring to peoples lives.

Words like empowering, and enabling are words which I had previously associated with community education but it is only through speaking with those who have experienced it that it became possible for me to put this in context and place them in a real life scenario.

It is my hope that a thesis such as this can in some small way contribute to future understandings of what it is like from the students point of view to make the decision to return to education and encourage others to do likewise.

The research data that was collected was rich and meaningful to both the participants and myself. It could only be explored minimally in this dissertation due to space constraints. I consider this to be my first step on a journey whereby I will encourage people to engage with community education and to promote the benefits of a college education.

Concluding remarks

I cannot over emphasise the positive feedback which was portrayed during the interviews. There are many words to describe the feelings expressed but to summarise I have taken just some which to me represents the embodiment of what a community education provides.

Confidence:

It's apparent that one of the main factors which contributed to students progressing was the confidence instilled by the tutors. This is a significant goal for all educational instituitions and encourages students to become life-long learners. The most important component in meeting this objective seemed to be the way the teachers built on their students' prior experiences, thereby helping them develop this confidence. Life skills and knowledge were counted. This would is reflected in Vygotsky theory that, "learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function" (1978, p. 90). Vygotsky described the central role played by language in an individual becoming aware of, and making meaning from, "lived experience." Vygotsky conteneded that construction of knowledge is embedded in cultural and historical settings, which adheres to the approach taken by facillitators.

Empowerment

The text book definition of empowerment means being given the authority or power to act as you wish. However in the context of the learners in this study , knowing that they were empowered was more important than actually exercising that power. The empowerment came from the knowledege that they had the required intellect to achieve at college.This was constanly re-inforced by the tutors.Which helped build the foundation of confidence. With this sense of empowerment, students

Accomplishment

A feeling of accomplishment is the sense that you have brought something about by your own efforts. Confidence is the belief that one's behavior will, for the most part, lead to successful completion of tasks or projects. This sense of accomplishment was achieved by assigning work that was challenging but ultimately was achieveable. The students talked of "upping the ante" and "pushing the boundaries". What was important to the students was the feedback and this sense of achievement. It instilled a desire for more, which encouraged further progression. A sense of accomplishment provides closure, a necessary factor in believing in one's ability and one's capacity to be successful (Pierangelo. R, Giuliani. G, 2002).

Perseverance

Perseverance means to pursue a goal in the face of difficulty, discouragement, frustration, or opposition. Continuing when the going is rough meant that the students had built enough confidence to continue. It was never expressed to them that it would be easy but they learned from this that there is a direct relationship between effort and achievement. Once this was realised they became less frustrated and more resilient, solution oriented, willing to push on and be goal oriented.

To conclude I would like to thank once again all the participants. I have learned much more form speaking with them than I ever could have from any literature. As Stevenson said "Books are good enough in their own way, but they are a mighty bloodless substitute for life." (Robert Louis Stevenson, 1877).

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Appendices:

Appendix A

Participant Information Sheet

Research Project Title*:*

"The experience of progressing from Community Education to Third level Education from a learner's perspective?"

I am currently undertaking an MA in Higher Education in DIT Learning Teaching and Technology Centre and I would like to research the experiences of students who have progressed from Community Education to Third level Education.

Please take time to read the following information and don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything you would like me to clarify or if you would any additional information.

About the study

It has been my personal experience that the transition to college can be a difficult one especially when it is being accessed from one of the non traditional routes. Following discussions with colleagues and tutor I felt that there would be merit in the selection of this topic for my Master's thesis research. The research design requires a qualitative research element, which will involve the interviewing of any willing participants who have engaged in community education and progressed on to Third level. The interviews are very informal and are generally along the lines of a narrative. It is basically a chance to tell your story or experiences as you saw it while pursuing your particular course.

Should you decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form which is attached for your information. If you do decide to take part but subsequently change your mind you are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

If you experience any problems with the research, then please bring this to my attention immediately. If it is not appropriate to address your concerns to me, then you can contact my supervisor, Mr. Vincent Farrell, whose contact details are available at the end of this document. Again, all information collected during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and all participants will be anonymous. Should you require copies of our conversation and subsequent transcripts, you are welcome to request same. The results of the research will be used to write my MA thesis which will be submitted in mid July 2021.After the thesis is examined it will be stored in DIT's Learning and Teaching Library where it will be accessible to its students.

Contact for further information

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Thank you for reading this and for taking the time to consider participating.

Appendix B: Interview consent form.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: "The experience of progressing from Community Education to Third level Education from a learner's perspective?"

Name of Researcher: Alan Farrell

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐
3. I understand that my responses will be recorded and submitted in MP3 form as part of the requirement of this Thesis and all participants will be kept anonymous. ☐
4. I agree to take part in the above project. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix C: Interview questions.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study.

As per the participation sheet this conversation is being recorded for transcription purposes and your identity will be strictly kept anonymous at all times.

Part One: Context of the Experience. Early Education and social background:

Looking back as a child, do you think you enjoyed going to school?

Have you good or bad memories associated with your formative years in relation to education?

Do you thing those memories helped form your view on education?

Was educational obtainment encouraged in the home or among your peers?

Were you encouraged as a child by teachers or parents to contemplate going to college?

Would you have been the first to attend college from your family?

Part Two: Details of the Experience.

Why do you think you chose to participate in community education?

Initially did you find the atmosphere of community education welcoming and encouraging?

What do you think were the main positive aspects of community education which enabled you to achieve your potential?

Do you think the way in which the classes were structured encouraged group learning?

In what way did the tutors structure the lectures to make their topics interesting and stimulate the group?

Do you think the group motivated and helped each other to succeed?

What do you think was the driving force behind your decision to progress from community education to third level?

Part Three: Reflection on the Experience.

Had you any pre-conceived ideas of college and did it live up to those expectations?

How did this experience differ from Community education?

Were you at any time over awed by the demands of third level?

Were you surprised at the workload?

Was there a lot more self motivation required for third level?

Was the learning more Independent?

Did you find family encouragement helped you while progressing more so than your peers?

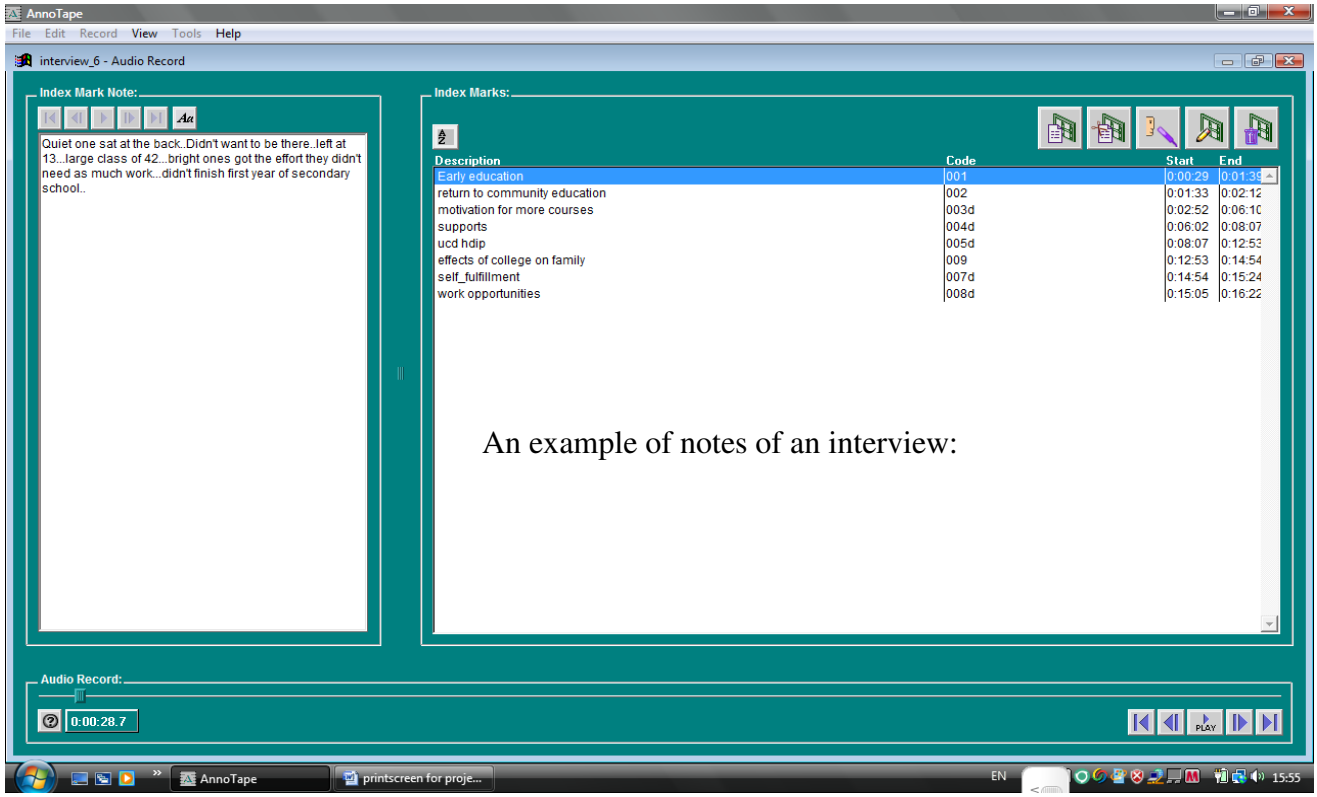
Was it enjoyable?

What do you feel you have gained? In regards to you personally, financially, confidence, outlook on life and lifelong learning?

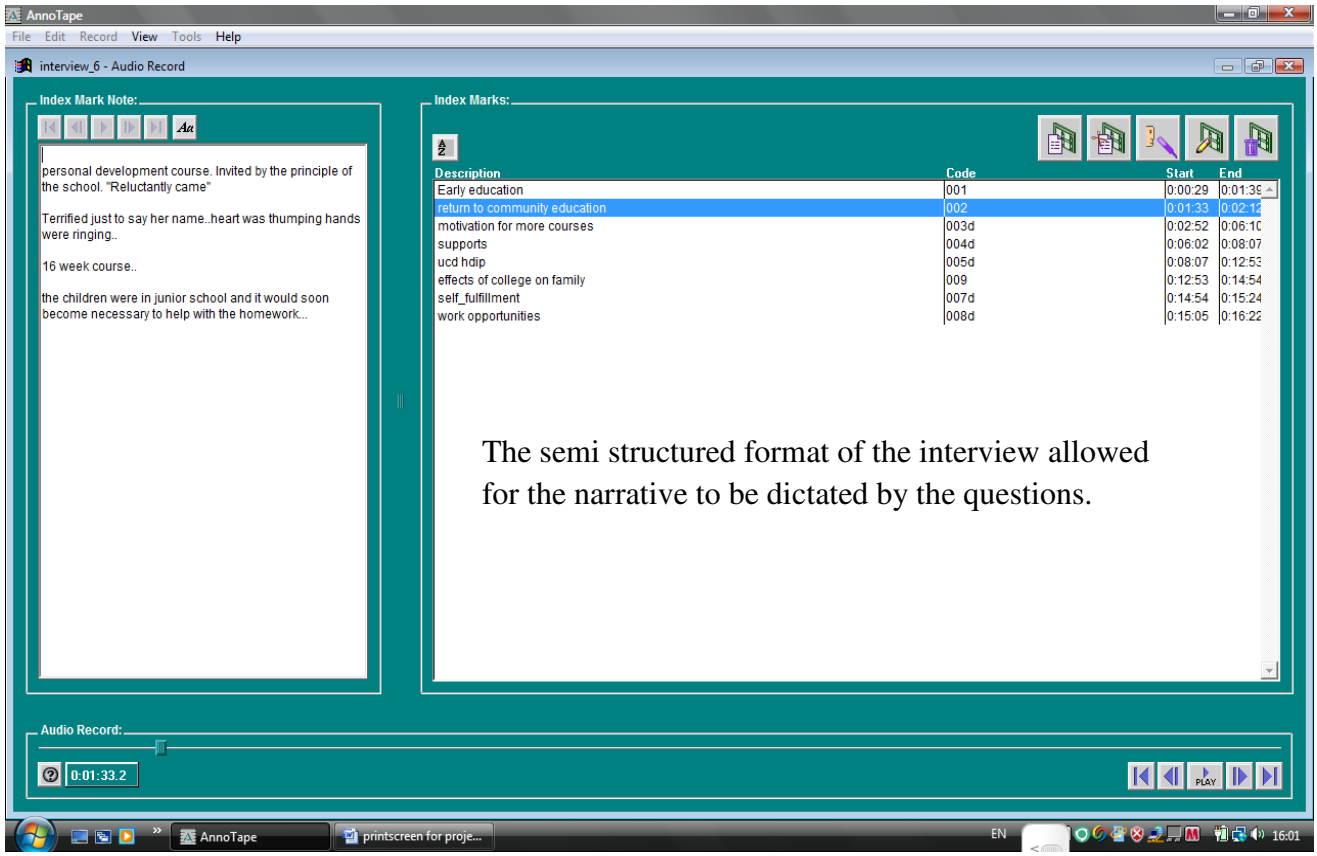
Would you encourage others to take this route and what advice would you give them?

Do you feel it has improved your life circumstances and would you do it again?

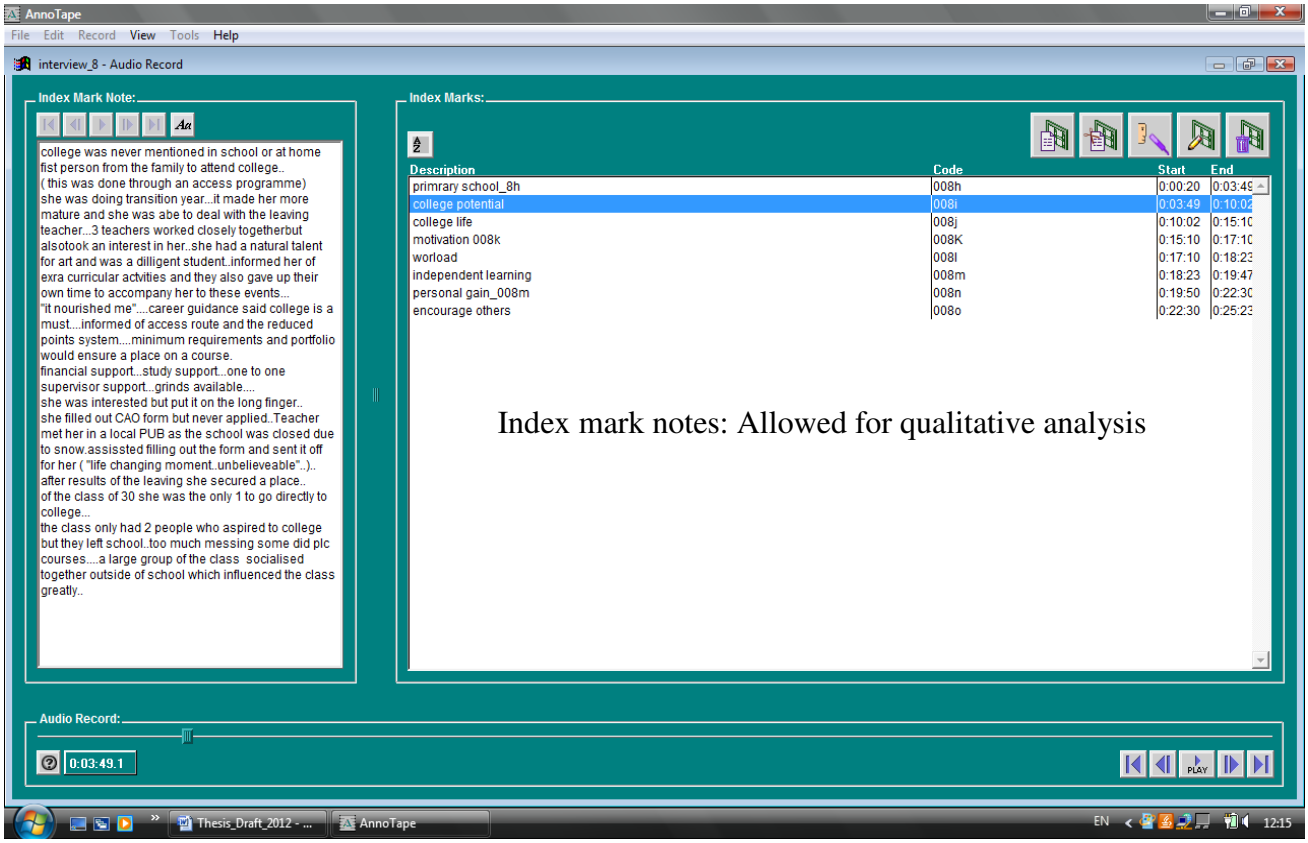
Appendix D: Sample Notes taken from Annotape:



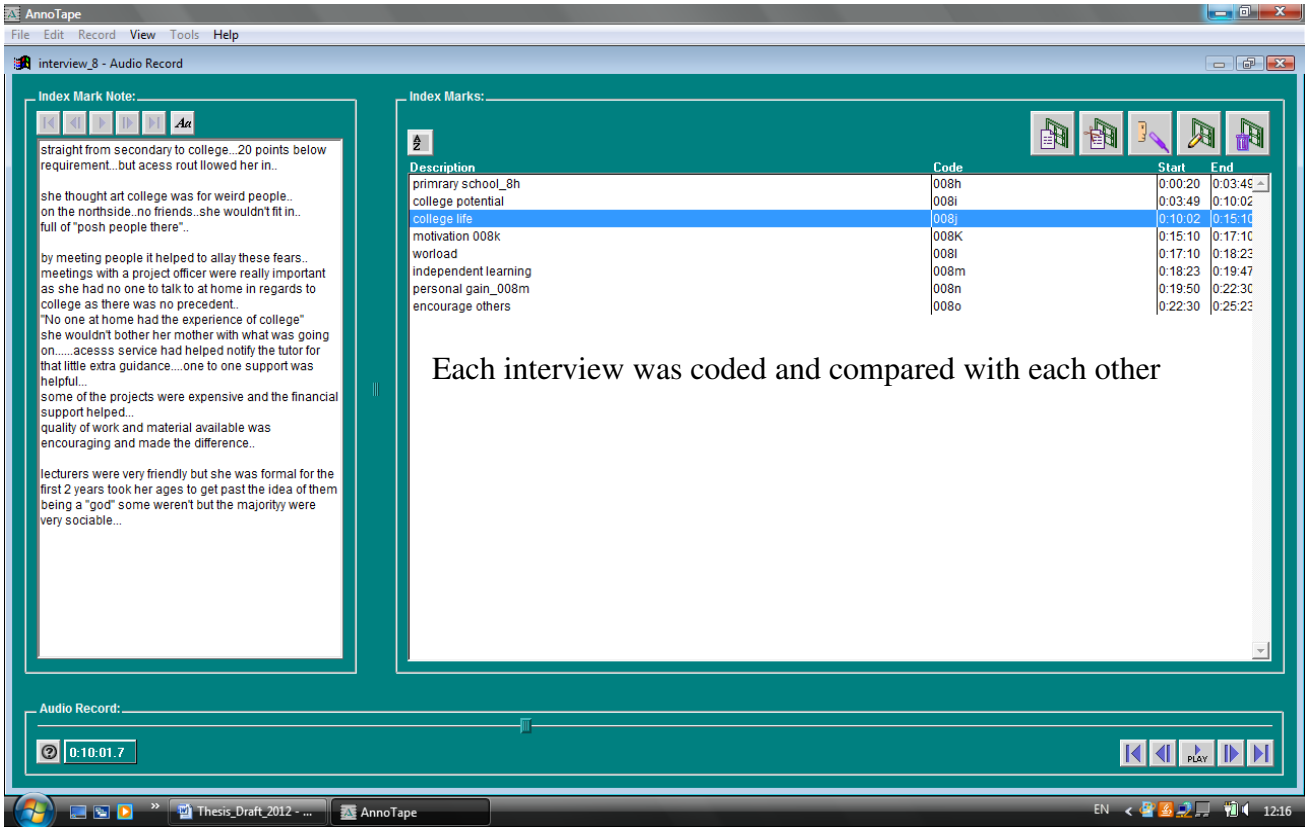
An example of notes of an interview:



The semi structured format of the interview allowed for the narrative to be dictated by the questions.



Index mark notes: Allowed for qualitative analysis



Each interview was coded and compared with each other

Example of Notes taken from an Interview:

Primary School:

loved school...very local school...maternally well looked after in presentation and lunches...
very giddy in school....messer...
Secondary she matured and became interested in the subjects..kept a good balance between the divisions in the class between the conscientious students and the dossers..
40 % of class on Mondays would be wrecked after weekends.. Class of 30 girls in primary school..
(smaller in comparison to some of the other interviewees).
Enjoyed school..no significant memories from primary school...more mainly secondary...

seemed to wake up at 12 or 13...primary not a vivid memory
one influential teacher in primary...encouraging, brought her out of herself..took her aside...told her she had great potential..

College Potential

college was never mentioned in school or at home
fist person from the family to attend college..
(this was done through an access programme)
she was doing transition year...it made her more mature and she was able to deal with the leaving teacher...3 teachers worked closely together but also took an interest in her..she had a natural talent for art and was a diligent student..informed her of extra-curricular activities and they also gave up their own time to accompany her to these events...
"it nourished me"....career guidance said college is a must....informed of access route and the reduced points system....minimum requirements and portfolio would ensure a place on a course.
financial support...study support...one to one supervisor support...grinds available....
she was interested but put it on the long finger..
she filled out CAO form but never applied..Teacher met her in a local PUB as the school was closed due to snow. Assisted filling out the form and sent it off for her ("life changing moment..Unbelievable"..)..
after results of the leaving she secured a place..
of the class of 30 she was the only 1 to go directly to college...
the class only had 2 people who aspired to college but they left school..too much messing some did plc courses....a large group of the class socialised together outside of school which influenced the class greatly..

College Life:

straight from secondary to college...20 points below requirement...but access route allowed her in..
she thought art college was for weird people..
on the north side..no friends..she wouldn't fit in..
full of "posh people there"..

by meeting people it helped to allay these fears..
meetings with a project officer were really important as she had no one to talk to at home in regards to college as there was no precedent..
"No one at home had the experience of college"
she wouldn't bother her mother with what was going on.....access service had helped notify the tutor for that little extra guidance....one to one support was helpful...
some of the projects were expensive and the financial support helped...
quality of work and material available was encouraging and made the difference..

lecturers were very friendly but she was formal for the first 2 years took her ages to get past the idea of them being a "god" some weren't but the majority were very sociable...

Motivation

Motivation? personal motivation...so happy to be in college and get the opportunity....start to realise what this could actually mean...it could open loads of doors...she started to "get into the subjects" loved the programme...really wanted to be a professional artist...3 excellent teachers whom she could discuss her work with and her project
"the more she spoke to them the more her work would develop"
one lecturer instilled the nothing is impossible..no limits..."a lot of inspiring people in the college"

Workload

very heavy workload...
3rd and 4th year...small group...good community
as a group they stayed back after college together
9am to 9pm was commonplace..
some competition within the group...community of people built up across the years from 1st to third year and discuss the work..." it was great actually"

Independent learning

1st and 2nd year was very structured timetable..
However within this there was some classes which encouraged you to develop your own critical thinking..some of the classes were way over her head.....everything she thought she ever knew about art was out the window when she went to college...learning to develop your own independent thinking about

Personal Gain

Definitely gained from going to college..just so much more opportunities...

Finished Degree and had a few years off..then decided to do a masters..there was a piece of work she wanted to research..

To obtain lecturing work all the jobs required a masters..2 years full time..lots of ideas left after the masters..so it led onto PHD...there is a link and steps between the degree masters and phd. Degrees have become pretty standard now..3 years degree 2 years masters...

Most jobs now require degrees...

Encouragement for others to attend college

When her brother was approaching the leaving certificate she encouraged him to go to college and apply for the access program.
Through the experience of his sister he was able to also progress through 3rd level and is currently studying for a PHD.
The access gave added supports and one to one and finance..
Some neighbour's children also sought advice when approaching the leaving..
the experience of the access programme and CAO was shared..(seems to be a snowball effect)..

Career guidance at the local school was given a low priority...the CAO form was overlooked..
She would advocate following the access route to college..

Only 2 years ago this student wasn't aware that it was necessary to complete the CAO form to access 3rd level

He didn't know about Plc courses as an access route to college..

Job opportunities and pay are so much better now due to her completing third level.