



2012-06-01

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Recommended Citation

Mooney, Des (2012) "Getting Out of the House: an Examination of the Experience of a Group of Women Returning to Education," *Irish Journal of Academic Practice*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.

doi:10.21427/D71F00

Available at: <https://arrow.dit.ie/ijap/vol1/iss1/6>



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**“Getting out of the House”: An examination of the experience of a group of women
returning to education**

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Abstract

Using a qualitative case study method, this research focuses on a group of adult ‘returning’ students completing a childcare course. The study does not focus on the academic merits of the students, but rather on the experience returning to education has on the lives of the students. Methods used included the hosting of three focus groups, a questionnaire and observations. Using a holistic analysis approach a number of key issues and themes emerged. These themes include motivation to return to education; family; identity; education as a facilitator of positive risk taking behaviour; education and perspective transformation; impact of teaching on learning, and impact on peer relationships. This study concludes that there is significant impact on the families of the students with routines and issues around children and childcare prevalent. The study also noted the impact on the identities of the students as well as the impact on the peer relationships as a result of engaging in adult learning. In addition the study noted the relationship between teaching methods and student learning, with students feeling more involved in the teaching/learning process compared to previous experience. Significant also was the level of critical reflection and critical self-reflection the students engaged in as part of their learning experience. This study concludes with some recommendations that include greater participation with the student group in the organization of classes and curricula and more formal and informal dialogue between students and tutors.

Keywords: education; life-long learning; mature students; adult learning

“Each adult is different. Cognitive styles, learning styles, physiology, culture and personality are some of the variables. But if you are prepared to listen to learners, they may teach you what you want to know”

(Brookfield, 1986, p.25)

Introduction

Theresa only regretted the decision she made, to defer her college place, when she returned home with two kids, a broken marriage and an unsympathetic family. It took two years for her to make her new life; this included a return to education. Sophie said she didn't want to be one of those mothers who stayed at home after she had kids but for a long time she felt she had no choice. Rita said she returned to education because she wanted to make changes in her life. Angela spoke of her determination to go and do a degree and this being the first step while Georgina said that being involved in education has helped her become more focused in all aspects of her life.

Rogers (1969; 1994) writes of education being a facilitator of personal growth and change, while Illeris (2003) argues that most adults do not want to go back to education but do so because of personal or career pressures. Many participants in the study said that they had learned much by attending adult education, but that much of this learning was about facilitating change and adapting to new ideas about themselves.

The study concerned a group of twenty six adult ‘returners’ (Bird, 1999) to education; and the learning journey they undertook as they completed a child care course. The study group consisted of a group of women who undertook a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 5 childcare course. Qualitative in nature, this case study was bounded by time (nine months) and by a single case (one college). The main themes that emerged from this study include motivation to return to learning, identity, education as a facilitator or risk taking behaviour, perspective transformation, and, impact on peer relationships.

Knowles (1980) sees andragogy as; the art and science of helping adults learn; as ‘learner centred’ and ‘constructivist’ in nature. This study examined the role of the student in the construction of knowledge. The study also looked at the work of Jack Mezirow (1991; 1998), his ideas on critical reflection and perspective transformation, and how these resonated with the students. Significant also are communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where learning takes place as a product of social participation. The study also discussed ‘women’s ways of knowing’ (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986), and, the relationship between belonging and learning. In addition this study examined some of the criticisms the students had about the educational process and suggests ways in which these criticisms can be addressed.

Context

The study took place in a community college based in a school in the South-East of Ireland. Currently the college runs both day courses and evening courses for adults in a wide range of subjects. The study focused on a group of twenty-six female adult students participating in a ‘Certificate in Childcare’ course. All of the group save one

are mothers. The ages of the participants ranged from twenty-six to fifty-nine. Approximately one third of the group are currently working in childcare in some capacity. The remainder were working in the home, in other employments, returning to work having raised a family, or actively seeking a career change. This course consists of eight modules; six compulsory and two elective (from a choice of six). Five women in the study group had completed more than four modules, while fourteen of the participants were beginning the course and had completed none of the modules at the outset of the study. The other seven participants in the study had completed between one and three modules.

The course is aimed at students who wish to return to work following absences, those currently in work but without qualifications, and others who are interested in the subject of childcare and education but have not yet decided to work in the area. The course also attracts people who are interested in a career change and quite often see childcare as a complete change from their previous norm. A number of students in the class used this course as a stepping stone towards further study, and having completed and gained their certificate, went on to complete a follow on course; for example Special Needs Assistance, FETAC Level 6 Psychology and Social studies and Social Care degrees.

There was quite a mix of educational experience among the group with eight of the participants having left school prior to completing their leaving certificate, while eighteen of the women in the group had completed theirs. Of this group five had gone on to do third level subjects; three in University settings and two in Institutes of Higher Education.

The type of employment available with a Level 5 Certificate in Childcare is in areas such as pre-schools, playgroups, nurseries, after-school/homework groups, private families or as au pairs. Traditionally these are areas where men have not worked and consequently this is reflected in the number of men attending the course. In fact in the

researchers three years teaching this class, there have only been two men who participated in this course.

Rationale

Piaget (1963) writes of cognitive conflicts brought about by new learning and of the disequilibrium or destabilisation of existing ideas. In order to return to a state of equilibrium the learner must assimilate these new ideas into existing thinking or accommodate these changes (Bhattacharya & Han, 2001). Alheit (1994) argues that “living a life’ has become more problematic and unpredictable. It is a laboratory for developing skills whose usefulness is unknown (Antikainen, 1998). In his study ‘In Search of the Meaning of Education’ (1995) Antikainen uses the term ‘significant learning experience’. This is defined as, “those which appeared to guide the interviewee’s life-course, or to have changed or strengthened his or her identity” (Antikainen, 1996, p.70). Antikainen notes that significant learning experiences consist of; a certain sort of life-event, a change-event, and may include a creative achievement or a meaning which is new from the learners’ standpoint.

Merriam (2005) describes transitions as periods of change in our lives that seem to alternate with periods of stability. These periods together form a life structure; “that is the underlying pattern or design of a person’s life at any given time” (Levinson & Levinson, 1996, p. 22; as cited in Merriam, 2005, p. 3). This life structure according to Merriam is solidified and maintained during stable periods and questioned and changed during transitional periods of our lives. “What is important in this model is that change is fundamental to adult life” (p. 3). This study is interested in the reasons why adults return to education, and the influences, consequences and effects of this decision. In addition this study is interested in ways in which the institution accommodates adult learners in fulfilling their personal and educational goals.

Aims of the research

Studies show that students want to be part of a socio-economic class or peer group and use education as a way of achieving this aim (Miller, 1967; Rubenson, 1977; Cross, 1981). Other studies note that participants are using education as part of a process of meeting previously unmet needs (Maslow, 1954; Knowles, 1980). Previous studies (Edwards, 1993; Martin, 1998) also expressed concern about the academic progress and the impact of returning to study on mature aged women (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) discusses the paradigm shift or changes in received beliefs and shared assumptions that occurs, and argues that third level institutions must provide a comfortable environment for students to make the change, and poses the following; “one wonders, in a competitively structured higher education climate, if this can be achieved” (Crotty, 1998, p. 7). Hooks (1994) argues for a progressive holistic education, what she refers to as ‘engaged pedagogy’; one that is responsive to the specific situation of each particular group of students. Hooks (1994) also recognises that education takes place not only in the classroom but wherever people are;

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (Hooks, 1994, p. 13).

The central aim of the research is to examine the effects, or impact, of returning to education on this particular student group. These include external factors such as family, peer groups and identity; and internal factors such as teaching methods, tutors, and peer groups within college. The aims of the research include identifying aspects of the adult education experience that assisted the learners in some way and aspects that took away from the experience in some way.

Methodology

A qualitative case study was chosen as the best method of gaining the most information for the study. Bromley defines case study as “a systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (Bromley, 1990, p.302, as cited in Zucker, 2001). Studies show that one of the advantages of this approach is the “close collaboration between researcher and participants, while enabling participants to tell their stories” (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). Through case study, participants are able to “describe their views of reality and this enables the researcher to better understand the participants’ actions” (Robottom & Hart, 1993, as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545).

This case study is descriptive in nature. Robson (2002) notes that the descriptive approach is used to portray an accurate profile of a person’s events or situations, requires extensive previous knowledge of the situation to be researched or described, and; may be of a flexible or fixed design (p.59). This type of case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). The analysis of the data incorporated a holistic approach; as the “researcher examines the entire case (Yin, 2003) and presents descriptions, themes and interpretations and assertions related to the whole case” (Creswell, 2007, p. 245). The study also incorporated narrative approaches so as to allow the students explain their experiences. As is the nature of qualitative inquiry, findings are not representative of all women (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008, p. 460).

The research design incorporated a series of activities. These included a review of the literature, administering a questionnaire and collecting the responses, hosting three focus groups, analysing the data, and, presenting the findings. It was presumed that the data collected would be reliable since it represented the students’ interpretation of their experiences. Denscombe (1998) writes that using multi methods produces different kinds of data but that this is likely to improve the quality of the research. Both Yin

(2003) and Patton (1990) cite the use of multiple data sources as a strategy for enhancing data credibility in case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554).

Another rationale for using multiple sources of data is the triangulation of evidence. This is the process whereby data from the literature review, questionnaires, focus groups, observations, and field notes are used to link the findings for the purpose of increasing the credibility of the data. Triangulation involves the practice of viewing things from more than one perspective and, “increases the reliability of the data and the process of gathering it” (Tellis, 1997).

The data analysis began by collecting all of the data and sorting it into groups; (a) questionnaire, (b) focus groups transcripts, (c) follow-up emails, and, (d) field notes and observations made throughout the study. The data was then grouped together according to category. “A vital part of the reflections undertaken by the qualitative researcher will be to attempt to identify patterns and processes, commonalities and differences” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Denscombe, 2003, p. 272). This method is known as thematic analysis. Braun & Clarke (2006) write that this type of analysis tends to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data (p. 84). Eventually six key themes were identified:

1. *Motivation to return to study.*
2. *Impact on the family.*
3. *Perception of self as adult learner: Impact on identity.*
4. *Communities of practice: Impact on peer relationships.*
5. *Teaching and learning methodology: Impact of teaching on learning.*
6. *Impact of education as a facilitator of self-efficacy and positive risk-taking behavior.*

Findings and discussion

Research demonstrates that there is certainly significant impact in the lives of adults who return to education following an absence (Arksey et al., 1994; Edwards, et al., 1996). Indeed it could be argued that there must be consequences as a large part of the adults' decision to return to education is a desire for change, either personally or professionally. Given the level of 'baggage' one acquires over the years it comes as no surprise that there would be some impact. However in the present study the level of impact was unexpectedly high. Families are affected, identities are challenged, relationships with peers and others change, attitudes to teaching and learning experiences are compared and contrasted, and, decisions and choices that the students make as a result of engaging in learning are all part of the consequences of returning to education. These are now discussed in more detail.

Motivation to return to education

It was apparent that many of the participants in the study were undergoing transitions in their personal lives and were motivated to return to education as part of this process. Among the principal motivations for participants to return to education was a desire to change something within themselves. Research supports this view (Aslainian & Brickwell, 1980; Merriam, 2005; Knowles, 1973, 1998; Lynch, 1996; Merriam, 2005). Also noteworthy is a desire on the part of the students to be role models for their children, of a 'moral imperative' (Gilligan, 1982) to care for others. Other motivating factors noted by the participants were for reasons of career advancement or change, regret at not having gone to college when younger, and personal development reasons. A couple of the participants spoke also of peer pressure as being the main factor behind their decision to return to education, but having benefitted from the decision. As one participant commented:

“I did it to get them off me back , but I'm glad I did it....I consider this to be the first step of my return to work, but not until myself and the kids are ready. The funny thing is that now I am back at college I feel under more pressure because the same people are asking me what I am going to do next!”

Impact on the family

Almost every area of an individual's family is impacted upon, altered or challenged in some way, particularly as a consequence of a woman returning to education as traditional male-female roles shift to accommodate the 'new'. Routines need to be changed, children need to become more independent or resourceful, partners need to adapt to their 'significant other' being otherwise unavailable for large amounts of time, and to their need to fill in the gaps domestically and possibly emotionally within the family (Scott et al, 1998; White 2006; Arskey et al.,1994; Edwards et al., 1993). These changes along with the struggle to cope with the demands on time placed on the students can have the effect of making the student feel neglectful towards their family.

The effect of returning to education on the women in this study was most keenly felt in their attitude towards their children with many students speaking of feeling guilty of having to change child-minding and/or bedtime routines. Also feelings of being neglectful towards their partners and of asking their partners to alter their habits and routines were felt. As one participant explained;

“My children go to my mother's house at nine o'clock (*in the morning*)...and again I'm home from work and I'm getting ready to come down here, they're not home so I don't see them until the next morning. It's hard”

However a number of the students also spoke of the family getting used to the new routines, over time, of their partners and children being proud of them and of being happy to support them, and of this being among the reasons why they continued with the course when it got difficult.

Perception of self as adult learner: Impact on identity.

Over the course of the study the group noted changes in levels of self-confidence and a number of students spoke of feeling happier within themselves. There appeared to be an identity shift with many participants acknowledging that as well as developing as learners they were developing as people (Rogers, 1994). Some of the students spoke of

the challenges placed on their identity with the addition of new life orientations in addition to ones that already exist (Illeris, 2003). One woman spoke with passion, and no little pain, about the impact on home life, relationships, finance, and personal stress levels, caused by her decision to return to education. When asked was she going to quit she replied “absolutely not”.

Changes in belief systems were also noted as a result of the development of new understandings (Edwards et al., 1993; Wisker, 1996) and there was much evidence of critical reflection and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1998) among the study group. While some of the students worried that they were being selfish, taking time away from families and enjoying both the change and the ‘time to reflect’ it became apparent, particularly with the students who had completed more than three modules, that the increased knowledge, independence and self-worth had the effect of helping the students cope with the more negative effects of returning to study, e.g. time demands, assignments and family issues. Somehow the fear the students had early on in the course has been replaced by a curiosity and confidence. They also questioned the way the classes are presented, asking for less reading of notes and more group work and class discussion; as one student put it “we can read at home”. They are, it appears, effectively contributing to their own learning by being more confident and open, and have reasoned that group work, in the context of a child care course, is the best way for them to learn.

Communities of practice: Impact on peer relationships.

As with changes or shifts in identity being noted as supports to learning so too was the influence of peer relationships. Many participants spoke of forming new friendships and of having informal study buddies’, helping them with assignments and group work, as well as helping in times of stress. Students spoke of having parallel peer relationships within college and outside with some of the students speaking of missing their old friends because they were so busy with their college work. Peer group relationships were seen as integral to the learning process, and a learning process in itself, and the findings echoed writings on the subject of learning and social

participation involving the integration of the individual within the larger whole (Courtney, 1989; Brookfield, 1986; Merriam and Cunningham, 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Gibson, 2005). In addition many of the students' experiences reflected the writings of Lave & Wenger (1991) on communities of practice with students involved in the shared domain of interest, experiencing childcare in a personal *and* academic way. As one participant stated:

“Having completed many of the modules with some of the girls we talked, gave out and helped each other throughout the course....It has made it easier to attend when you know the people here. The class are a lovely inspiring group of women from all social and opinion holding groups and there was a sense of being in it together”

Teaching and learning methodology: Impact of teaching on learning

Brookfield (1986) writes that there is no general theory of adult education. He outlines six principles of effective practice of facilitating adult learning; participation is voluntary; respect for all participants is paramount; facilitation is collaborative; praxis; the process of action, reflection and experimentation; is continuous; facilitation aims to promote a spirit of critical reflection; and; facilitation aims to nurture self-directed and empowered adults, (Brookfield, 1986, p. 9). In addition both Tough (1979) and Tennant (2002) attempt to describe attributes of successful education facilitators. Successful adult education facilitators view themselves as participating in a dialogue between equals; are open to change and new experience; seek to learn from helping activities; are genuine in entering into personal relationships with learners rather than consistent adherence to the prescribed role of the teacher; accept and trust the learner as a person of worth (unconditional positive regard); and; have empathy for the learners perspective (Tough, 1979; Tennant, 2002).

Students in the current study identified the tutor as crucial to the learning process and there was much comment made as to whether the tutor of a particular module was genuinely engaged with the subject or not. Students spoke of the negative impact on

learning of tutors not being organised and failing to show adequate guidance to the class. Group work and class discussion were identified as the most popular method of learning while lecturing and reading to the class emerged as the least popular. Student's spoke of wanting to be involved in the teaching/learning process but the findings of the study indicate that the students were not comfortable with the idea of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1980; Tennant & Phillip, 2002; Brookfield, 1986) at this particular point in their learning. Others questioned why the workload in one module was so much while in another the workload was very little. The use of handouts was very popular as was the use of personal experience to highlight practice or a theory. These findings reflected the study groups' feelings on the appropriate use of class time, guidance, the linking of theory and practice, the perception of the tutor as being organised, and, the subsequent impact on their learning. Examples of comments from the group included the following:

“We're not just sitting there. The tutor's giving us examples of real life things that we can relate to. You remember things like that. I feel like it's an experience rather than a class. Openly debated opinions, self-expression and even jokes allow for the information to be both discussed and learned”

Impact of education as a facilitator of self-efficacy and positive risk-taking behaviour

Bandura (1977; 1994) describes self-efficacy as a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Bandura described these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave, and feel. From an analysis of the responses the participants identified attending adult education as part of a process of increasing their levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Hammond & Feinstein, 2005). This has in turn led to many engaging in positive risk-taking behaviour in their decisions around education, careers, and their personal lives. Hammond & Feinstein (2005) note that “some women with poor school attainment become engaged in a positive spiral of growing self-

efficacy” (p. 282) and taking courses can play an important part in this process. Hammond & Feinstein also note that “low efficacy may be transformed by participation in adult education” (p. 281). The findings of the study would support this with many of the respondents identifying clearly that education was part of their “developmental journey” as one participant put it. Of note also is that many of the study group only took on the new challenges when other responsibilities allowed them to do so.

The findings of this study also concur with the views of Hammond & Feinstein (2005, 2004) when they hypothesise that participation in adult learning and levels of self-efficacy reflect a two-way dynamic (p. 266). Once the students began to have more self-belief they turned their attention towards what they could achieve within this new framework. This in turn led to students being more capable of believing that the decisions they were making about their lives were not only achievable, but the right thing to do. As one student put it:

“I wanted to see what it would be like to return, it was brilliant but hard work, anyway it helped me get organized...now I am planning to study for a degree in Social Studies”

Recommendations

When making recommendations it is worth noting that the process of returning to education as an adult is not an easy one. The task of balancing work, family and peer relations with returning to education requires a certain amount of dedication. Any amount of changes will not make it an easy process. However there are perhaps some ways in which course providers and the students themselves can help the process. In addition it must be noted that these recommendations are made in context of the study undertaken.

There is a need in adult education to recognise fully the contribution adult learners can make to an adult education course in terms of their prior knowledge and experience.

This experience and knowledge should be drawn upon in the planning and design stages of a course, particularly one such as childcare where the students in many cases are engaging in the practice while unaware of the theory. Perhaps there are better ways of connecting the two. The learners are the main stakeholders and will ultimately define the success or otherwise of a course. Clearer evaluation techniques and discussion with students prior *and* post courses could test this idea.

The study group discussed the perceived disparity between courses in terms of level of difficulty and time required to complete work. At the moment each module is either ten or twelve weeks in length. This could be amended with some modules shortened to eight weeks (from twelve), while others could be lengthened to fourteen or sixteen weeks if necessary. The process would involve the analysis of the learning outcomes and assessment process for each module.

In addition the study group cited differences between one tutors methods and another's. At present a tutor on FETAC level 5 courses does not need a teaching qualification. He or she however does need a suitable qualification in the subject as well as experience in the area they will teach in. In the long term the subject of trained tutors will have to be addressed. However in the short term more meetings between tutors to discuss teaching methodology and curriculum would greatly improve tutors teaching methods. In addition better communication between tutors could greatly improve the links between the subjects. For example if the art teacher is more aware of what the child development tutor is working on with his class he may be in a better position to use this information to help the students make better, more creative, links between theory and practice. One class might talk about attachment while another might creatively explore attachment and thus enhance the learning experience for the students.

Regarding the delivery of classes and the ability of adults with young families to attend college up to three nights a week, the use of the internet is recommended. The posting of class notes, PowerPoint presentations, handouts and other useful notes regarding the course would be of great assistance for students unable to attend. In addition this would

also allow the students to read notes in preparation for a class. Also access to the tutor via email and possibly mobile phone is recommended. This would allow for discussion of the topic at times that suit the student and tutor. It should be noted that some tutors are doing this at present but the practice is not widespread. It could be argued that some students freed from the need to attend college might get lazy but there is a requirement that each student attends a certain percentage of all classes in order to attain certification, and this need not change.

Recommendations for students

There is a need to recognise that not all students are computer literate. As part of the Certificate in Childcare course which is the focus of this study, one of the optional modules is European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), the computer literacy certification programme. It is recommended, especially for students who are not comfortable with computers, that they do this module as soon as practicable. This will in time be of great value for the student, especially if the tutor is using the internet to access and transmit information to the class. It will also prove invaluable when the students are completing assignments and projects and serve as a useful tool for any further programmes.

It is further recommended that students and tutors engage in formal and informal sessions where the classes are discussed. This would offer the student the opportunity to speak frankly to the tutor about the course, the teaching methods employed and other issues that he or she may have on their mind.

Conclusion

This study looked at experiences of a group of adult returning to education. Certainly the role of 'others' is significant, with many in the study group suggesting that they not only enjoyed the company of their colleagues but at times needed them. Relationships and their place in the teaching and learning process were highlighted by this group, as was the role of education in the area of positive risk taking.

Rogers (1994) writes of experiential learning not as an end product, but rather in relation to the conditions for learning, and of learning, involving the 'whole' person. Identity issues were significant in this study, with members in the study group stating that they enjoyed the changes but had struggled with them. These changes included a renewed confidence and self-belief in themselves and their abilities.

The study also revealed that many in the class had engaged in a high level of critical thinking and this had in turn led to a high level of debate and subsequent learning in class. It was notable that the perspectives of many in the class had changed as their confidence grew. The students' initial fear in first year of adult education had by the end of the second year been replaced by a curiosity and high level of critical thinking and reflection (Mezirow, 1991). Also of note were the students' criticisms of teaching methods employed and of their need to be heard in this regard. The challenge for the tutor in this process is to be attuned to the needs of the students.

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