THE LONG TERM BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY

EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS:

Tensions between the developmental and economic points of view

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ABSTRACT

This study sets out to examine the long term benefits for those taking part in community education. This will be examined from the point of view of progression to employment which is often the primary requirement set out by those who fund the programme and the personal and social development which is core to the ethos of community education. There is a discrepancy between these two aspirations, which is currently one of the greatest challenges facing community education and those who work and manage these programmes. While a community education ideology prescribes a humanist, person centred approach, which is what we aim to provide, those who fund this sector are interested in the economic aspect with progression to employment their primary goal.

Other challenges which community education are facing will be explored including changes in the structures of this sector, FETAC accreditation, funding reductions and other cutbacks, as a result of the economic downturn. The research concentrates on a group of learners who completed the course in 2009 and who were all invited to take part in the focus group interview' they were asked to reflect on their experiences of community education, how they became involved in the first place and its role in their lives since they completed the course. This is the first research carried out from a longer term perspective on this programme and will provide the opportunity to explore the issues and challenges facing community education and will hopefully be of benefit to future programmes.

CONTENTS

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AONTAS   The National Association for Adult Education

DES   Department of Educationand Science

FAS   Foras Aiseanna Saothair

FETAC   Further Educationand Training Council

LTI   Local Training Initiative

NALA   National Adult Literacy Agency

SOLAS   Seirbhisi Oideachais leanunaigh Agus Scilleanna

TFE   Training For Employment

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis sets out to examine the long term benefits for the learners who take part in community education. It focuses on the past learners of a Local Training Initiative (LTI) programme which is funded by FAS, aided by Dept. of Social Protection and Westmeath Vocational Education Committee (VEC), and sponsored by Westmeath Community Development. The learners from the 2009 programme will be interviewed in a focus group situation to examine if they have experienced long term benefits from an employment point of view and also from a personal and social development aspect.

There is a breach in the approach to community education in terms, not only of accreditation, but the associated pedagogy, institutional practices, assessment modes and approaches to students. Preserving the ethos of community development, while at the same time meeting the requirements of those who fund the programme is a challenge to those of us working in this sector. The learners are predominantly early school leavers with negative experiences of education and they access community education for various reasons, some of which will be explored further in the thesis. Whatever their reasons for accessing community education, this is an opportunity to re-introduce education to them and to ensure that it is a positive experience and one which can have long term beneficial effects for them, their families and the wider community.

Policy dictates that all state funded training and education must be fully accredited where the only positive progression considered to be of importance

being employment. In fact, each year the future of the programme depends on their progression to employment, with some consideration now being given to further training and education. On the other hand community education strives to provide personal development and self esteem leading to empowerment, transformation and social equality. It is also seen as 'second chance' education and, if delivered successfully can lead to transformation in the lives of the learners and their families as the research carried out in this study will demonstrate.

While there is short term follow up of past learners in the months immediately after they finish the programme, to ascertain if they have progressed to employment, there has never been any long term research conducted on this programme. Most importantly there has never been any follow up regarding their personal and social achievements. The impact of assessments and examinations and how the learners react to these will be examined. Other challenges which they face will also be explored, for instance, specific learning difficulties which affected their early educational experiences and their family backgrounds which often does not value education. This will be done against a theoretical background of key theories and concepts concerning community development in general and its ethos while at the same time taking into account the requirements of those who fund this sector of education.

Community education is in danger of becoming formalised with the learners' personal and social progression needs being forgotten in the race to achieve accreditation and employment. In my view it is essential that the two are

integrated so that the learners can benefit from a combination of both approaches in the long term. This thesis will examine how the preservation of the ethos of community development can be attained through the provision of a supportive environment where learners can develop and achieve on a personal, social and academic level.

Community education in Ireland is generally state funded and supported by local community development groups. Since the inclusion of community education in the White Paper on Adult Education (DES: 2000) this sector has become embedded in the formal adult education framework. The current discourse around marketability and preparing learners for the workforce which can be described as neo liberalist, will be explored. On the other hand, there is an ethos within community education which is to prepare learners for 'life' with transformation and emancipation as the focus (Freire: 1970, Gramsci: 1925) With this in mind, progression in all its forms will be considered including, further education, training, employment, the personal and social development of the individual and the wider benefits associated with these.

1.2 Overview of community education

Community education can be defined in many ways and it is often intertwined with community development which according to the White Paper 'shares a common goal' (DES: p. 110). Community Development in Ireland, can be traced back to the co-operative movement, Muinter na Tire and community social service councils, all involved in activities which were aimed at improving quality of life socially, economically, culturally and environmentally. In the

1980s when unemployment and emigration were on the increase in Ireland, the Combat Poverty Agency was established to work with communities to bring about positive change. According to the Combat Poverty Agency[1] community development is:

> a process whereby those who are marginalised and excluded are enabled to gain in self confidence, to join with others and to participate in actions to change their situation and tackle the problems that face their community. (2000: p. 2)

Many individuals benefit significantly from community development and in particular community education where self confidence building, accreditation and progression to employment are all beneficial from the point of view of the learners as this research will demonstrate.

The Women's movement was instrumental in introducing the concept of community education in Ireland and began to emerge in the 1980s with small groups of women forming and organising classes which were very much based on their own needs. Connolly noted that they were markedly different to the adult education that the statutory agencies and universities offered beforehand and 'it is telling to look at the women's community education movement in Ireland as a model that has lessons for the entire arena of community education' (2008: p. 6). This was a break away from the patriarchal attitudes which prevailed previously in Ireland. In 2000 *Learning For Life: The White Paper on Adult Education* included community education for the first time and stated that

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[1] In 1986, the rate of unemployment in Ireland was 17% (232,000 people), emigration had reached 28,000 people per year and almost 16% of people were living in consistent poverty. Combat Poverty's priorities in the early days reflected the major social and economic challenges of the time: unemployment, emigration and the poor state of the country's finances.

community based women's groups 'have been central in the defining character of Community Education in Ireland and merit particular recognition for their contribution to date' (DES, 2000: p. 111).

This study concentrates on a programme which was set up in the mid 1990s, to cater exclusively for women from the local community and was an offshoot of the women's movement. This has now changed and for the past two years has included men, which is a reflection of the current economic situation, where men are keen to take part in courses which lead to employment. Other changes affecting this sector will also be discussed in further chapters of this thesis.

One of the advantages of community education is that it is located within the community and therefore accessible from a practical point of view. These programmes are generally run from private houses which are either leased or rented with some based in housing estates. Community education in Ireland has developed as a unique educational response to the diverse needs of adult learners, especially those who have gained least from formal education. (AONTAS, 2012: p. 22). It responds to the needs of the individual and the community, based on their life experiences, and is person centred. Because it is accessible, it is unique and the programme in question was set up in the centre of a local community, run from what was a private house, catering for local people and initially provided literacy and personal development training. Over the years this LTI programme and no doubt others, have experienced major changes, with the emphasis moving from personal development towards accreditation and progression to employment.

The introduction of the Further Awards and Training Council (FETAC) means that all training is now validated by them and must meet the requirements as set out by their quality assurance procedures. This results in a structured, curriculum based programme which for some individuals can produce positive results as this study shows. For others who are vulnerable, have negative memories of school or do not necessarily consider education a priority, the experience of returning to education can sometimes prove difficult. The professional approach to community education means that it is becoming more indicative of second or third level education which is contested by some. For instance it poses problems for those working in the sector who themselves have limited education levels, despite their years of experience and knowledge, and raises questions about their professionalism. The argument between professionalism and non professionalism is according to Mae 'inherently problematic because the inference is that any alternative to the professional approach is unprofessional or, indeed incompetent (2007: p. 26). This approach does not make allowances for those who have an interest in raising social awareness, increasing community activism and creating autonomy.

The learners on this programme come from disadvantaged areas, are unemployed and have low levels of education. Having carried out this research it is evident that education is not something which they necessarily aspire to and accreditation is not a priority for most. It is also evident that they found the assessments and examinations stressful and for some this may be a step too far, while for others it was described as a 'challenge' and one they gained confidence from. As the research will demonstrate, all 15 learners were invited to take part

in the interviews, 8 turned up, all of whom had fared well on completion of the programme. Approximately 50 per cent of the group therefore are not represented in this research and it is not known how this half progressed. Unfortunately it is outside the scope of this thesis to follow up on this and it could produce an alternative view.

1.3 Background to programme

In 1967 ANCO was set up as a statutory agency to provide vocational training to adults, which later became known as National Manpower and then FAS and has recently been restructured and will be known as SOLAS. A network of training centres were built throughout the country, based on the idea which was taking hold in Ireland at that time of training people for employment. Today, FÁS provides a wide range of development programmes targeted at local communities. The Local Training Initiative (LTI), the subject of this research, is one such programme:

> a project-based training and work experience programme carried out in the local community and run by local community groups. The programme allows local communities to carry out valuable and necessary projects of benefit to their communities, while at the same time training participants in areas related to the project work so that they can go on to gain employment or progress to further training. Anyone who is unemployed and over the age of 16, at any level of literacy is eligible. (FAS: 2012)[2]

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[2] Currently, the Local Training Initiative is supporting many organisations engaged in a wide range of initiatives including genealogy, environmental, heritage, tourism, theatre, sports, and coaching. Some projects are targeted at specific groups in society, such as women, early school leavers, men, homeless people, recovering addicts, prisoners, Travelers, etc.

Training For Employment (TFE) is one such initiative and is funded by FAS and sponsored by Westmeath Community Development with co-funding from the Department of Social Inclusion and Westmeath Vocational Educational Committee. It was set up in the mid 1990s exclusively for women from the local community and was a result of the move which began in the 1980s when such groups, mainly made up of women, began to emerge, mostly in working class areas as a result of high unemployment. It was a response to the barriers which women were experiencing when attempting to return to education, and based on the ideology of the women's movement. It fell into the category of non-formal education which meant 'education without qualifications' (Connolly, 2008: p. 4). The original aims and objectives of this programme were to provide personal and social development, literacy and numeracy training, FAS accredited training and work experience which would ultimately lead to employment. It has now evolved to include FETAC accreditation which is its main focus. Through funding from the Dept. of Social Inclusion personal and social development activities are still included in the programme.

This programme caters for adults who are mainly from the local area, unemployed, predominantly early school leavers and lone parents ranging in age from twenties to mid fifties. Initially it was run on a part time basis and concentrated mainly on improving literacy skills and providing personal and social development training, with the emphasis on work experience. While progression to employment was always a requirement and an important goal by which the success of the project was measured, it has recently become the main aim of the programme. The original ethos of community education and the

women's movement is in danger of being eroded, with the emphasis of accreditation, qualifications and employment taking precedence over personal and social development.

FETAC accreditation in modules from level 3 to level 5 is now part of the programme and all participants also take part in HETAC level 6 training in Athlone Institute of Technology. This is with a view to breaking down barriers and introducing the concept of third level education, and ultimately encouraging the participants to continue on and develop their studies. With the inclusion of men on the programme, the group is now made up of about one third men. This has had an impact on how the programme is run and a change in the content of the programme was inevitable. While a considerable element of the personal and social development side of the training has been preserved, there is more emphasis on the academic side, making it difficult to hold on to the core values of the women's movement which had a distinctive ethos and approach.

AONTAS (2009) carried out a survey which measured the outcomes and impact of Dept. of Education and Skills (DES) funded community education, from the point of view of social, civil and health outcomes. The three main aims of the Government were the focus of this survey and are: enhancing learning; fostering empowerment, and contributing to civic society. It also measured the wider benefits of learning such as social, civic and health outcomes. This research demonstrated that there are wide ranging positive outcomes for learners which effectively tackles inequality. These results are pertinent to my study which

sets out to discover the long term effects of community education with a similar programme catering for a similar clientele.

1.4 The future of community education

Community education which stems from community development sets out to tackle poverty, exclusion and inequality. From an educational point of view it takes a humanist approach which is based on meeting the needs of the individual and providing personal and social development which leads to empowerment for the individual and greater awareness of the conditions that affect their lives. This in turn benefits the community and from a broader perspective, contributes to social justice, equality and emancipation. According to Tett:

> community education has a distinct epistemology and methodology that uses the lived experience and knowledge of people to build a curriculum that involves a long-term process of dialogue and negotiation through engaging actively and creatively with people in communities. (2008: p 25)

Using the lived experience of its learners as in feminist education is where community education begins. Friere argues that 'the individual should be encouraged to develop new understandings of himself and the world he lives in and affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming….as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead' (1970: p. 65). This view is based on empowerment and equality with a focus on the needs of the individual and ultimately the community.

On the other hand, globalisation has led to a discourse within adult education, where learners are equipped with training and accreditation specifically geared

towards the labour market. The progression of learners is a fundamental requirement for those who fund this sector of education, and it is often tied as a requirement for its continuation. This can be in conflict with the humanist ethos and principles of community education described above. However, there are differing perspectives regarding what progression is. In my research it became evident that while the attainment of accreditation had helped them in their quest for employment, which for most was their main objective, their self confidence was also greatly increased as a result of this. Therefore it can be said that community education provides its learners with confidence, self esteem and empowerment, leading to employment thereby encouraging transformation and ultimately social equality within a liberal model of community education.

1.5 Challenges facing community education

Following the ethos of community education can be difficult in an era of globalisation and neo-liberalist views where the emphasis is on 'meeting the needs of the economy' and where preparing learners for the labour market is seen as the ultimate goal. Stakeholders are more and more 'results' driven and are only interested in progression from the point of view of 'jobs'. Commodification of community education is another area which needs to be highlighted and is gradually creeping into community education. Running part time and evening courses for fee paying learners is now seen as essential to subsidising programmes. Lynch comments that 'the implications of neo liberalism and the marketisation of higher education where they are being run as businesses with the view that education is simply another market commodity has become normalised in policy and public discourses' (2006: p. 1). This is also

true of community education and has a significant impact on a sector which traditionally has been more concerned with social and personal development and humanist objectives.

Mayo argues that this shift to an increasingly economic agenda results in 'the concern to measure and label which had been previously more characteristic of schooling' (1995: p. 13). The introduction of accredited training and its accompanying administration and quality assurance requirements means that there is less time to concentrate on the learners and more time being spent on measuring and labelling and preparing for ongoing audits. Lynch argues that this surveillance of one's everyday work means that everything one does must be measured and counted and only the measurable matters' (2006: p. 7). More and more time is being taken up with administration thus leaving less and less time for the learners, who should be the prime focus.

While the funding situation had improved somewhat over the years this is currently under threat due to the economic downturn. When it comes to funding of education, the community education sector is possibly the weakest link. Changes in the global economy will inevitably impact negatively on community education programmes. In the meantime we are being led to believe that accreditation and qualifications are the way forward at every level of society. This approach to community education results in a bureaucratic approach taking up valuable time on administration and record keeping thus leaving less time for development work.

1.6 Organisational changes

Other challenges facing this sector are changes in the structure of FAS where the training aspect will merge with the VECs. Changes in the FETAC system which are currently being enacted will inevitably produce challenges with new approaches to the design and implementation of programmes. While this is playing out it is imperative that the needs of the learners are not forgotten. It is also crucial that the principles underpinning this sector are preserved, while at the same time being mindful of the requirements as set out by those who provide the funding. The uncertainty regarding the new structures being implemented, for instance FAS/SOLAS, together with wage cuts and reductions in staff have led to low morale within the community education sector. The learners are very aware of the negative publicity which the organisation has had in recent times and to people who are already disillusioned with the educational system this is not helpful. When learners speak negatively about their experience of school, as most in this research did, it is important that community education shows a different approach and aims to transform this attitude by engaging with the learners and providing the support that is required.

1.7 Ethos of community education

In the area of community education there are various opposing ideologies two of which will be considered in this study - humanist and capitalist. From a humanist point of view, Maslow's theory of human development, sets out the hierarchy of needs which begins with the physiological or basic needs for survival and culminates in self actualisation when one reaches their full potential, 'to become everything that one is capable of becoming' (1954: p. 91).

According to Maslow this can only be achieved when the individual develops a sense of self worth and value. The objective of community education is to provide a situation whereby learners are respected, their views and opinions are valued and their needs are met. It is imperative that this ethos is preserved by showing consideration for their requirements and aspirations. This provides the learner with a sense of security and self worth and allows them to explore what it is they wish to achieve from a short term and long term point of view.

Gender also plays a significant role as the findings chapter will demonstrate, with learners giving very practical examples of the impact of community education on their lives. They located empowerment at a very practical and common sense level. This was often embedded in the gendered and family context of care where women, as the primary carers, located their motivation and involvement in community education with a concern for their offspring, especially when they are experiencing financial difficulties. Luttrell when describing working class women's ways of knowing argues that 'they place their needs last either by choice or force and common sense stems from relational activities that are embedded in the care of and affiliation with others (1989: p. 40).

It is clear from this study that the learners, all women, were concerned first and foremost with their families welfare. For this reason some had looked for possibilities and opportunities for themselves only after they had reared their children. This situation will change slightly now as the programme includes male participants who may hold a very different view. The White Paper on

Education, 2000, stated that 'the community based sector is amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant component of Adult Education provision in Ireland and that it is under resourced and promised 'a more streamlined funding mechanism and long term funding' (DES, 2000: p. 116). Opportunities were certainly opened up for the learners who took part in this study as they outlined in the interviews. They described how being able to contribute to their families on a financial level is a positive outcome for them and contributed to their sense of self worth and confidence. It is unlikely that these learners would have accessed any other type of adult education at this point in their lives mainly due to lack of confidence and also previous negative experiences of education. This is where community education is relevant in that it provides easy access to the marginalised.

Community education has its roots in the women's movement where non formal education encouraged learning for its own sake and was not concerned with market requirements. This ethos must be preserved for the sake of the learners, regardless of the challenges and demands in today's capitalist society and a balance can be struck between the 'labelling and measuring' approach and the preservation of the non formal approach to education. This theme is explored in the interviews where accreditation, employment, progression and self esteem are explored.

Community development has historically, and certainly in practice, had an ambivalent relationship with the state and with democracy' (Shaw, 2008: p. 13). The onus is on those of us working in this sector and therefore in touch with

what is required at the grassroots to seek to highlight these concerns whenever the opportunity arises. In the light of what is happening in other areas of education and with cutbacks inevitable this particular sector could find itself under threat in a commodity driven economy.

1.8 Outline of thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction provides an overview and background of the LTI programme in question. The future of community education and challenges it faces are outlined as are the current organisational changes it faces. The ethos of community education and the requirements of those who fund the programme are examined.

Chapter 2: Literature Review sets the theoretical framework for the study by looking at government policies and the changes they are producing. It outlines relevant theories and literature in the area of adult and community development. The theories of Friere, Mezirow and Gramsci are explored among others.

Chapter 3: Methodologies outlines the research approach and covers the methodology used. It gives the rationale for carrying out this research, the theoretical perspective of this thesis, and the limitations of the research. It also covers ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: This section reviews the research findings gathered from the interviews which are grounded in a theoretical background. The qualitative approach was taken with a semi structured interview involving a focus group

drawn from a programme which concluded three years ago. All 15 participants were invited to take part in the interviews.

Chapter 5: Reflections and recommendations draws together the information gained in researching this thesis. It reflects on the findings regarding the background and ethos of community based adult education, the relevant literature and the views and opinions of the learners themselves.

1.9 Conclusion

This study aims to examine the long term benefits for those taking part in community education taking into consideration their personal and social development as well as their progression from an employment point of view. The knock on effect of community education, for the family and the wider community, will be considered and the results will be based on research gained directly from the learners themselves. The literature review will provide a theoretical background to community education.

This will also give me an opportunity to carry out and critically evaluate the work of this LTI project and the challenges it faces in the future. It will allow me to reflect on how the programme is delivered, the approach taken and above all the long term results for those who have taken part. It may also be of benefit to the future of the project in question and perhaps others regarding the design and implementation of these courses. It is hoped that the results will provide an insight into how learners fare in the long term and may produce some recommendations regarding future projects.

CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, there is a clash in the nature of what community education aims to achieve and the requirements of those who fund this sector. The theoretical framework for community education will be discussed, bearing in mind its background and ethos. This will be done against a background of social change, institutional reforms and government policies which affect this sector. The changes being encountered at present and the challenges produced will be considered from the perspective of the learners. The nature of the sector will be explored by drawing knowledge from disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, psychology and feminist theory.

2.2 Adult education theorists

Adult education theorists have made a significant contribution to the area of community education which must be considered when conducting research. Theorists such as Friere, who worked with the illiterate and poor of South America and who is considered one of the greatest thinkers in the area of education, especially adult education, will be considered. Freire argued that people are incomplete beings and that a problem posing approach to education would 'affirm men and women as beings in the process of becoming' (1970: p. 65). Gramsci who was imprisoned for his political activities, wrote what became known as the 'Prison Notebooks' in which he advocated a transformative adult education system which would lead to a critical

consciousness or 'conscientisation' as Freire described it. The oppressed only begin to develop when, surmounting the contradiction in which they are caught, they become 'beings for themselves' (1979: p. 142).

Mezirow was inspired by Freire and Habermas among others, and was noted for his work in women's education in the United States. He argued that 'full development of the human potential for transformative learning depends on values such as freedom, equality, tolerance, social justice, civic responsibility and education' (2000: p. 16). Mezirow's portrayal of transformative learning is that adults can learn or be taught to think for themselves in a critical and rational way. 'A defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know to avoid the threat of chaos' (2000: p. 3). The function of community education is to encourage its learners to validate meaning through critical reflection of taken for granted assumptions and beliefs.

In displaying these traits as managers, co-ordinators and workers we can lead by example and demonstrate how education can be liberating and lead to empowerment and social justice. Brookfield in Mezirow & Associates, describes the connection between transformative learning and social action as being 'self evident' and states that he is 'unable to see how it can be anything other than an irreducibly social process' (2000: p. 146). However, there is a neo liberalist agenda which is interested in meeting the needs of the economy and community education has been influenced by this in recent years. There is a requirement by those who fund this sector to produce accredited training and

education. This has led to an increase in administration where quality assurance policies and procedures take precedence over everything else. This reduces the time we as educators spend with our learners and as Lynch points out when discussing the university sector and the rise of the neo liberal agenda effecting them 'everything one does must be measured and counted and only the measurable matters' (2006: p. 7).

Community education is becoming more results driven, with the emphasis on providing accredited training and education in an economy driven society. There is a danger that the importance of the ethos of community education with its emphasis on providing learners with a sense of confidence and empowerment will be lost. This neo liberalist approach leads to a culture of competition with a race for grades and results in the form of accreditation which threatens to reduce the level of communication and dialogue which is so important in encouraging reflection and awareness in the learners. This study concentrates on the learners and their progression both from a developmental and employment point of view.

Freire's experience of working with the oppressed of South America who were largely illiterate led him to believe that through the right kind of education people can be transformed and liberated. He argued against what he termed the 'banking' system of education in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits' (1970: p. 53)..   Jane Thompson in Mayo, argues that 'an option in favour of transformative education also entails that we engage with the logic of the system'. (1999: p. 6). People can learn and be educated either inside or outside a

formal education system and therefore 'education for education's sake', is an end in itself. It is apparent that all experience contributes to knowledge and as Fraser describes it 'we experience, we reflect, we generalise and then we act' (1995: p. 147)

2.3 Social capital and community education

Robert D. Putnam in Bowling Alone, claims that since the 1950s and 1960s there has been a serious decline in social capital which he defines as 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (2000: p. 19). Social capital is who you know, the clubs and sports organisation which you are part of and engagement in community activities. In my experience those from disadvantaged areas generally do not have a wide range of contacts and do not engage in clubs or sports organisations, therefore community activities including education are an important aspect of life. A report by the Irish Sports Council shows that people with low income are more likely never to have played any sport and that older people and women, particularly lone parents, are least likely to participate.(2007: p. 14).

Community education is seen as a way of building social capital in that its ethos in raising consciousness provides a sense of empowerment and builds the capacity of local communities. Crowther, Tett & Edwards carried out a pilot study to identify and quantify the social capital outcomes of community learning in Scotland. This concluded that 'friendships and associations had expanded their networks and positively changed the nature of their interactions with a wider range of other people'. (2008: p. 3).

This theme came up in this study also, when the interviewees spoke about 'feeling more confident' and in the fact that they had interacted with each other with some developing lasting friendships. They indicated that they were more willing to 'get involved' in activities. Research carried out by Townsend in Australia where there is a growing diversity of backgrounds and culture due to migration, shows that community-based education is often accessed by people as a form of social capital. However he goes on to state that:

> Most recent research in Australia and internationally on education and social capital is still tentative and speculative, and that much more data is required before definitive claims can be made about the links between adult education and training and the development of localised social capital. (Townsend: 2009: p. 56)

His study concludes that Adult and Community Education in Australia, has been forced to adapt to funding structures, rather than communities, which are based on state policies and are often linked to human capital development. In Ireland progression is a requirement and for the most part those interviewed in this study have found employment which for them is a positive outcome. In the process negative attitudes towards education may have altered along with a change in attitude and preconceived ideas. This is an important aspect of community education and demonstrates how there can be more than one positive outcome for the learners. As is demonstrated in the findings they valued the certification and this in itself brought a sense of self worth and empowerment. Coleman illustrates the importance of social capital within the family by outlining examples of how it can lead to enhanced human capital in the next generation. Both social capital in the family and social capital in the community play roles in the creation of human capital in the rising generation. (1988: p. 109). He describes the 'jobseeker' who uses social capital to secure a job on the premise

that it is whom you know and not what you know - in other words that it is our social capital and not our human capital that counts. The impact of this concept on the learners who took part in this programme means that their progression to employment may produce positive results for their families.

Putnam claims that social capital which can be described as selfish by some, is in decline in America but claims it is 'benefiting our own interests….social interaction fosters trust and communication and for a variety of reasons life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital' (2006: p. 136). The role of community development is to help bring people and communities together in collective action which can include education. The personal and social development aspect of community education can open up this possibility by providing a range of activities including sports which can help those who, as one participant stated had become very isolated – 'I had forgotten how to talk to people'. Being part of a group helps learners to integrate again and provides an awareness of what they are capable of doing. Freire suggests that people reflect on their situation and 'humankind emerge from their submersion and acquire the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled' (1996: p. 90). While it is apparent that membership of social clubs, sports and hobbies are on the increase, in some sections of society in Ireland, this does not mean that those from disadvantaged areas are becoming involved. Apart from the financial aspect of joining clubs, lack of awareness and low confidence prohibits them from getting involved.

Social Capital is less tangible than other forms of capital but is an important resource for both the individual and the community and can affect quality of life especially for the disadvantaged. However, policies which govern the running of community education are often based on functionalism and the two do not always compliment each other. Where there is an emphasis on accredited learning, resulting in timetabling and deadlines, there is less time for activities like sports and what are termed soft skills.

2.4 Barriers to accessing community education

When those from the lower socio economic groups access community education it is with a background and culture which does not value education. They often have negative memories of school and return to education with feelings of trepidation and sometimes resentment towards any kind of authority. Luttrell carried out research in a community education programme in a working class north-eastern city in the USA where she notes that the majority of adults in this neighbourhood drop out of or have no education beyond high school. She quotes one woman taking part in this programme who describes her early school experiences as 'uncomfortable and could not wait for the day when she could quit and go to work in the local box factory (1989: p. 33). As this study shows, most learners expressed a negative experience of school, with one giving graphic detail of how she was treated and another describing how her dyslexia was not identified throughout her time in primary and secondary school.

Women in particular experience many barriers when it comes to returning to education including lack of childcare facilities, inadequate finances and lack of transport. Access to information is a barrier which they also experience as they

are not aware of opportunities within their own community as highlighted by one of the learners interviewed, when she explained that she only found out about the project through a family member who was taking part in a community employment scheme. Lynch contends that 'one of the barriers to equality of access is lack of information' (1997: p. 18). More information could be made available by way of booklets or videos so that adults wishing to return to education can make informed judgements regarding course choices. There is a distinct lack of information, support and advice available for those in the lower socio economic groups.

2.5 Accreditation

FETAC accreditation is mandatory on all state funded programmes and places the emphasis on academic achievement, with outcomes and measurements being the priority. Exams, assessments and evaluations are very much part of the FETAC system. While this can be beneficial as knowledge is always valuable and can bring about change, I am concerned that it may undermine the ethos of community education. In my view the adult learner should have a right to determine what and how they learn as this in itself provides a sense of empowerment which leads to transformation. This is becoming a difficulty under a tightly structured programme which is what the current neo liberal approach requires. In Freire's view, education must reconcile the teacher student contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students. This is what community education needs to avoid as it will not work for learners who are already sceptical about education and its benefits. It is essential that the personal and social development and soft skills are incorporated into the training

and this will provide a varied and comprehensive programme which is inclusive and will bring about transformation.

2.6 Policy in adult and community education

When researching the long term benefits for those taking part in community education and taking into account the ethos of this sector, it is necessary to examine the underlying approach of Government policy. This will inevitably effect how community education is delivered and while funding is always a concern there are also more obscure issues which, in the long term affect the learner and which are explored in this section. There are differing views within the sector where from a state point of view accreditation and progression are seen as the ultimate goal. On the other hand, under the ethos of community development the needs of the learners are foremost with personal development and critical awareness being encouraged in order for the individual to reach their full potential.

AONTAS, the national adult learning organisation support community education and is committed to the concept of equality of access, participation and outcomes in community education and learners are central to their work:

> One of the three themes of the AONTAS Strategic Plan is voice. Under this theme a key objective agreed by membership is to support the capacity of learners to articulate issues of concern to them ant to influence policy and practice in adult and community education.
> AONTAS Annual Report (2011: p. 12)

Support for the adult and community education sector has never been more necessary and this should begin with supporting the learners. Since the

publication of the White Paper on Adult Education in 2000, which was the first formal recognition of adult and community based education in a government White Paper, there have been unprecedented changes in all areas of education. Organisations like AONTAS have developed and expanded their work, and provide valuable support and networking opportunities to both learners and those working in this sector. There are now Community Education Facilitators in every county in Ireland and they are involved in the promotion, development and nurturing of community based learning groups. They provide technical, administrative and educational support to both new and existing groups. AONTAS community Education Network comprises over 130 community education organisations nationally, was established in 2007 and is dedicated to independent voluntary community education groups who are committed to social change.

Women's community education fosters consciousness raising, a process forged in the women's movement. (Connolly, 2008: p. 7). Community education, particularly in the form of community-based women's groups were acknowledged as being one of the most 'dynamic and distinctive elements of the Adult Education sector in recent years' (Executive Summary, White Paper on Education p. 5). It goes on to note that its growth has been constrained by factors such as low levels of finance and other resources, detachment from other elements of the education system and inadequate research support. Some measures were put in place to address these issues however it would seem that things have not moved very far in the intervening years. Flemming states that 'funding for literacy and community education has been growing since the 1980s

but it still remains a modest response in the context of the total education budget' (2004: p. 2).

Certainly in the area of community education, and in the light of recent developments, it could be said that the move has been backwards in some instances. Cuts in funding, redundancies and reductions in hours for existing staff puts extra pressure on the system. As Shaw observes: 'economic objectives are increasingly applied to community development as policy….and translates into gate-keeping rather than enabling' (2007: p. 14).

There is however some evidence of a long term strategy and a co-ordinated integrated role for adult education with the establishment of SOLAS. As part of this change, 'FAS Training Division will transfer to the VECs and those VECs will report to the new authority SOLAS in respect of Further Education and Training in Ireland' (DES: 2011)[3]. This will mean a single integrated sector which will, it is hoped respond to learner needs while also meeting national needs.

2.7 Progression and higher education

The Government's plan for National Recovery, 2011-2016, under Labour Market Policy, promises to provide an additional 60,000 places across a range of schemes and initiatives. Within this there will be 30,000 training places across the education and training system. They acknowledge that 'education is at the heart of a more cohesive, more equal and more successful society and will be the engine of sustainable economic growth'. (2011: p. 39). However, this report,

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[3] Information taken from 'A Consultation Paper on the establishment of a new Further Education and Training Authority – SOLAS – Department of Education and Skills.

which is 64 pages long, takes up five pages to discuss all forms of education, from early childhood care through to third level reform, but interestingly has only five lines dedicated to lifelong learning with community education only briefly mentioned and referring mainly to the integration of literacy.

Ruari Quinn, T.D., Minister for Education and Skills, in his foreword to the consultation paper on Literacy and Numeracy For Learning For Life, (2011-2020)[4] states that no child should leave school without having mastered the skills of literacy and numeracy. The government outline their strategy to improve standards among children and young people in Ireland and state that the fostering of these skills leads to a more just and equitable society. They state that despite the current difficult economic circumstances, they will seek to bring about significant change through a sustained national effort and set out the targets which they hope to achieve up to 2020.

According to Murtagh, The Government of Ireland Agreement - Towards 2016, 'represent a move toward the market paradigm from a social inclusion paradigm, corporatism is now more embedded in the Irish policy system by the strategies and structures put in place' (2009: p. 181). His research demonstrates serious failings in Irish adult education policies leading to a dysfunctional adult education architecture. He makes many recommendations one being the effective use of existing or diminished funds.

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[4] Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life. The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People. 2011 – 2020. Dept. of Education & Skills. http://www.education.ie/admin/servlet/blobservlet/lit

The National Strategy for Higher Education, 2010-2030 or the Hunt Report as it is referred to, includes submissions from various interested parties. AONTAS who, quoting from a CSO survey carried out in 2006, point out that only 8 per cent of Irish adults between the ages of 25 and 64 participate in Adult Education and Training. This compares to a figure of 25 per cent in the UK and Scandinavian countries. The report is interesting because it draws on over 100 submissions from individuals, companies and organisations. The public were asked to submit the top three issues they believe are central to the higher education system in Ireland. Most of the submissions include concerns regarding funding and there is extensive interest in the area of further education and training.

Various future plans have been recommended in this report for the higher education sector and this includes progression for those taking part in community based education and the issues which they face, for instance the availability of funding for those wanting to access part time higher education. In a market led economy and especially in the universities which are competitive and selective this 'alters the social profile of the student intake as higher academic entry standards strongly favour the socially advantaged' (Lynch, 2006: p. 2).

2.8 Banking versus libertarian education

With the introduction of FETAC accredited training to almost all areas of community based adult education, it can be said that it has now become more structured and recognised as a relevant form of education. It provides a stepping stone for those who wish to pursue further education and access to third level where required. However, it is essential that this does not lead to what Freire calls the 'banking' system of education which he describes as antidialogical and non communicative arguing that:

> the important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades.
> (1970: p. 105)

Freire advocates the communicative type of education which encourages people to examine, be creative and in the process, discover how to transform their world. Other experts in the field of adult education also advocate this theory and point to the fact that education for the sake of education is essential. Freire condemned the 'banking' approach to education which he described as a gift of knowledge bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.(1970: p. 53). He goes on to argue that this form of education projects an absolute ignorance onto others. Mayo too points out that since the Thatcher years in Britian, adult education has become 'concerned with measuring and labelling which had been previously more characteristic of schooling' (1995: p. 13).

Grummell (2010), Finnegan (2008), and others provide a critical review of policies and theories on adult education, arguing that educational policy is 'increasingly shaped by neo-liberal discourses that adapt adult education principles, for its own economic and political logic' (Grummell, 2010: p. 1). Government policy is concerned with the neo liberal approach to education thereby supplying the global market and providing learners with training which will render them eligible for the labour market.

2.9 Approaches to adult education

Emancipatory education is the radical approach adopted by Freire and aimed at changing not just the individual but society. Reflection and dialogue will bring about transformation because communication helps to develop critical consciousness. It encourages those who lack confidence to find their voice, explore their knowledge and experience and that of others thus developing their critical thinking. This can be enhanced in a group setting where learners can discuss and explore differing viewpoints, which affirms their capabilities and potential by allowing them to explore new ways of thinking. As described by one of the learners interviewed 'exchanging ideas at break-time was great' they have the opportunity to make meaning of their lives through interaction and discussion

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Mezirow, has clearly outlined transformative learning as developing autonomous thinking and 'involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight'. (2000: p. 8). An

interpretation of this is to make meaning by being critically aware of our own and others assumptions which can be achieved through communicative learning. Community education therefore has a role to play in providing this type of learning which can contribute to the transformation of the individual and the community. This can be achieved through the use of discussion, reflection and sharing ideas and opinions. While this can be difficult in a sector which is market driven, it is up to those working in the sector to create a balance between structured programmes and a more liberating type of education process.

In Northern Ireland The People's College which was established in 1982, was run on a voluntary basis, and influenced by the events which happened there during 'the troubles'. Tom Lovett outlines how the college was anti-sectarian in its approach and brought people from both communities together to promote social change. The main function of the college, according to Lovett, was based on Freire's phrase 'Cultural Action for Freedom' which is 'an examination and exploration of people's communities in all their complexity in order to encourage the embracing of options which improve people's sense of identity, integrity, security and dignity' (1988: p. 293). In a situation where the social and economic problems are compounded by violence and sectarianism, meeting the needs of the economy takes second place and despite many setbacks this college survived which in Lovett's view was due to its 'radical tradition'.

Mayo, when examining some of the interconnections between education and the state, in a capitalist society argues that 'one of the consequences of the changes that have taken place in recent years has been that adult education has become

more directly subjected to precisely that concern to measure and label which had been previously more characteristic of schooling' (1995: p. 143). The necessity for accreditation of all state funded courses requires structures that measure and label in order to comply with the requirements of the funders, who are driven by economic and political concerns. This means setting up a structured programme with timetables and a modular system which must be completed in a set amount of time, allowing less space for discussion, or dialogue.

Quality Assurance requirements leads to tight structures around performance management and the resulting paperwork and auditing taking precedence over everything else. Lynch outlines the implications of marketisation on the university sector which is concerned with performance, productivity and efficiency and 'the values of the commercial sector can be encoded in the hearts of the university systems and processes almost without reflection' (2006: p. 6). She sees this as a threat to creativity and is concerned that the social sciences in particular will loose status as they do not service the for profit sector directly. Community education from a state point of view must provide its learners with knowledge, skills and qualifications in order that they progress to employment. Developing self esteem, and encouraging alternative ways of thinking leading to transformation can be incorporated into the accreditation process with the use of an element of creativity and determination. Freire argued that there is no such thing as a neutral education process and 'the important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking'(1970: p. 105). Gramsci also supported the concept of transformative education which he argued could contribute to countering

hegemony, or the dominance of one class over another, and bringing about social transformation. Mayo considers Gramsci's work of great importance in the development of adult education due to the fact that he saw in the education and cultural formation of adults the key to the creation of counter-hegemonic action (1999: p. 53). The learners in this study achieved their accreditation while at the same time developing confidence and in fact it can be argued that the achievement attached to receiving accreditation can in itself enhance confidence and self esteem.

Putting the needs of the learners first, according to Freire means that the relationship between teacher and student must not reinforce oppression by attempting to control people's thinking (1996: p. 77). The teacher and student work together thereby creating a situation where the learner learns to make their own judgements and Freire would argue that education which is able to resolve the contradiction between teacher and student takes place in a situation in which both address their act of cognition. A problem solving form of education which includes identifying and naming your world, should be used. The important thing from the point of view of libertarian education is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking (1996: p. 105). Empowerment and liberation are central to Freire's work where he encouraged the individual to become aware of their world and to take control of it. He encouraged the raising of consciousness through dialogue which, in turn, he believed could change society, 'it is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, not to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours' (1996: p. 77).

Brookfield when describing what it means to think critically, claims that it is logically and practically impossible to engage in limited empowerment of learners 'once learners begin questioning the assumptions underlying conventional wisdom in academic subjects, they are likely to apply the same critical habits to analysing their own lives and the political structures in which their lives are lived' (1987: p. 171). This is an interesting concept and as shown in the research for this study the learners achieved significant academic success on the programme, therefore an element of critical thinking and consciousness raising has been achieved through this work.

Mezirow states that 'transformative learning is the essence of adult education and helps the individual to become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings and purposes' (1978: p. 11). The ethos of community development is in keeping with his theories which look towards the empowerment of the individual through critical reflection. Mezirow goes on to describe the learners' objectives, which can be short term, as ranging from personal such as getting a better job or helping their child to do their homework to social change which could include social movements or labour union education. The goals of the educator should be to foster the long term effects such as helping them to think autonomously.

> Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (2000: p. 8)

In order to achieve this, the needs of the learner must be the foremost goal of adult education and this is explored later in the thesis where the views of past participants in the course are presented, to ascertain what changes if any community education brought to their lives. Evidently the procurement of employment brought economic changes to the learners and with this a sense of security and empowerment. The fact that they 'could help out their children and grandchildren' provides a sense of satisfaction and as Coleman points out the 'whom you know and not what you know' counts, and can be beneficial. In fostering transformative learning efforts, what counts is what the individual learner wants to learn in a wider and social political context, (2000: p. 30). This it would seem is crucial to a feeling of empowerment for participants. Mezirow argued that 'taken for granted' assumptions should be challenged and alternative thinking encouraged. The role of adult education is to help adults to become liberated, socially responsible and autonomous learners (2000: p. 30).

2.10 Group dynamics in adult education

Connolly talks about the goal of the adult learning group which is 'to acquire new skills, knowledge and competences' (2008: p. 72). While this is the perception, in this study it became apparent that for the majority of learners there were other perspectives at play. While the goal of the programme is to provide an opportunity for learners to learn new skills, none of those interviewed actually had any interest in education. The learners had other reasons for taking up community education like 'getting out of the house' or 'getting a job' and receiving a training allowance.   However there are also the hidden agendas involved in any adult learning group for instance their previous experience of the

education system which invariably is negative. As adults, returning to education can be daunting to begin with but on successful completion of the programme it can also be liberating and empowering. In a group situation there are all sorts of undertones some negative, some positive and there are also the different stages which all groups go through, from forming through to adjourning. Throughout this process there is no doubt that a group dynamic emerges and Connolly outlines the complexity of groups and how 'while some form friendships and trust others cause conflict. Group centred tasks helps the group to discover mutually rewarding ways of working and encourages tolerance and respect (2008: p. 84).

This is where good facilitation skills and an awareness of the ethos of community development comes in, and while empowering the group through allowing them autonomy, there must be ground rules set out even in the most informal groups. In my experience if this does not happen, the group are in danger of disintegrating into anarchy and ultimately blame the facilitator. For the facilitator there is a fine line here between allowing freedom and setting boundaries. On the positive side the learners gain reassurance from knowing that they are not the only ones who are 'nervous' and lack confidence when faced with going out in the world to access employment for instance. They can be extremely supportive of one another, both on a personal level and also on an academic level and this is something which is encouraged in the case of this programme. During the interviews one participant explained that while she has managed to gain employment in retail, childcare was what she really wanted. Immediately another member related a story of someone whom she knew who

had been trying for ages for a job in childcare and had finally after many attempts been successful and encouraged her not to give up. It is reassuring to see this kind of support within a group and coming from a group member means a lot more than coming from a facilitator.

2.11 The learners

Group dynamics are very important and can help to create a feeling of security for learners who are nervous and insecure. For most people their experiences in their interactions with the state has been that of authority and subordination and this is borne out in my research results which explored the question of previous experiences of school and which will be discussed later in the study. If empowerment is the key to adult education then it is imperative that the learner's views and requirements are of foremost consideration and the programme content and outcomes should be based on this.

Adults and especially the women who took part in the programme which is being researched, feel the need to become independent and more autonomous. In fact that is one of the reasons cited by some of them for returning to education when they stated that they wanted to get a job and 'have a few bob of my own'. Some of them are lone parents, while others have reared their children and have what can be termed 'common sense' which Luttrell's describes as a cultural form of knowledge, a way to apprehend the world'. Luttrell's research involving both white and black working class women in a small town in North Carolina, illustrates how the women 'usually contrasted common sense with school intelligence and indicated that common sense can be ruined by too much

education or formal schooling' (1989: p. 37). For most of the women in this study, their entry to community education was a way of entering the world of work which they did not have the confidence or social capital to do without some help.

On the Nordic adult education system Connolly states that 'astonishingly, they are largely funded by the state, and adhere strongly to non-formal adult education – no qualifications, no examinations, no grades, no pass or fails'. (2008: p. 40). This is in complete contrast to the Irish system which demands all of the above. This is what community education initially set out to achieve in Ireland. Accreditation and all it demands came later with its importance being highlighted more and more. When I began working in community education fourteen years ago, the programme was not accredited apart from basic first aid and a certificate which was issued by FAS based on attendance. The emphasis was on personal development and literacy and numeracy training with arts and crafts and personal and social development as its core objective. There were no exams, assessments, grades, qualifications or the challenges and pressures which they bring to bear on the learners.

Over the years this has changed and now as co-ordinator it is a struggle to maintain the personal and social development element of the programme. I believe in education for the sake of education with the ethos on promoting confidence and self esteem being a priority. I also believe that this can be achieved alongside accredited courses provided the will is there and the learner's needs and aspirations are taken into account, rather than market forces and

globalisation which currently threatens to take over this sector of education. The learners are the important element here and as the findings will demonstrate the benefits of accreditation are only realised with the support and guidance which is provided through following the ethos of community education.

2.12 Conclusion

As with Mezirow, who conducted his first study on women who had returned to education in a community setting, Connolly too discusses the women's movement which emphasised the personal empowerment of individuals in a patriarchal society. This LTI programme was set up to cater for women from the local area and was run on a part time informal basis which of course has changed over the years. Globalisation affects everything from our entertainment to our education and it is inevitable that we as educators may feel inadequate or powerless to change anything. For those from disadvantaged backgrounds this feeling is even more acute if they already feel insecure, lack confidence and feel inadequate. This came through very clearly in the research where all those interviewed indicated their lack of confidence in their abilities prior to beginning the programme. Although the majority were interested in 'getting a job' they lacked many of the basic skills required to access employment. This together with their lack of self esteem increased their difficulty in gaining employment. Community education fills a gap by offering an opportunity to those with little or no education, to gain skills and qualifications, while at the same time providing them with a sense of self worth and empowerment.

Connolly states 'the golden rule in adult and community education is that the entire process begins with the participants'. (2008: p. 55). This is what the thesis sets out to do, by asking questions of the participants themselves regarding their impressions of accredited training and whether they found it helpful in their lives since completing the programme.

CHAPTER THREE – METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Introduction

In today's changing economic and social climate, education and in particular community education is facing many issues and challenges. Funding is being reduced with social welfare entitlements adversely affected, causing difficulties for those who traditionally took part in this form of education. Added to this are the varying discourses within the adult & community education sector which I have become aware of during my years working as a co-ordinator/tutor in a community education project. The official view of the relationship between state agencies and community groups is that of partnership. In Towards 2016, the Irish Governments Partnership Agreement (2006-2015) states that, one of its overall goals is 'nurturing the complimentary relationship between social policy and economic prosperity'. This view tends to mask the unequal relationship which actually prevails.

As far back as 1989, the Community Workers Co-operative are quoted, in a document compiled by Dr. Brian Motherway titled, 'The role of community development in combating poverty in Ireland' as stating:

> much could be accomplished by such a partnership if local groups had a say in policy and decision making. The reality however, is more often one of confrontation or cooption. In the latter case many groups more or less accept the terms or dictates of the agency in order to obtain whatever support is available. (p. 13)

This situation which was highlighted over 20 years ago has not changed in the intervening years. One of the main issues arising is the provision of accredited training which is promoted by the state agencies, versus non accredited training or personal and social development which community development is primarily interested in. There is a clash here which creates a breach in the approach to adult and community education in terms, not only of accreditation, but the associated pedagogy, institutional practices, assessment modes and approaches to students. Inherent in this is the fact that those who are the recipients, the learners, are not afforded the opportunity or given a platform to give their opinion.

As outlined in the previous chapter, adult & community education sprang mainly from the women's movement which concentrated on personal and social development with no accreditation involved. In 2007, the then Taoiseach, Bertie Aherne, Tanaiste Michael McDowell and then Minister of State Frank Fahy in their foreword to the National Women's Strategy (2007-2016) stated:

> there are now over two million girls and women in Ireland. Our challenge in Government is to enable each and every one to lead a fulfilling life, whatever her chosen path. (2007: p. 1)

Apart from the obvious fact that equality for women is still a long way off especially in the Dail[5] itself, this statement does not mention accreditation rather it emphasises the 'enablement' of individuals to lead a 'fulfilling' life – whatever her path. Shaw observes that politics play a part in community

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[5] In March, 2011 the overall percentage of women elected to Dail Eireann was 15%. Centre of Advancement of Women in Politics.

education and its policies and practices, and this potential for providing competing legitimacies for very different interests and purposes is part of the theoretical problem for policy analysis in this field (2007 p. 24). There are many competing views and arguments on what the approach community education should take. There is the 'economy driven' approach led by those who fund the sector competing with the developmental approach favoured by the community development ethos.

3.2 The research

I believe that now, amidst the current changes, is an opportune moment to reflect on the position of community education and most importantly, to do so from the point of view of the 'learners' who will be the focus of my thesis. Items which will be addressed will include:- looking at the purpose of accreditation and its results, both short term and long term, for those who take part in adult and community education. Most importantly it will examine the expectations and aspirations of the learners themselves. As previously pointed out in this thesis there is ongoing reflection and research regarding the programme, its learners and how they progress from a short term point of view, and with the emphasis on progression to employment. This will be the first time that the programme will be researched from the long term perspective with the focus on the personal development of the learners as well as their progression to employment. It is my intention to ascertain what their main objective was when they accessed community education. This is where the interviews will be useful in allowing individuals to reflect on the reasoning behind their return to education in the first place, and what expectations they may have had on commencement. These

expectations can then be compared with their achievements and ultimately their progression since completing the programme.

The interviews which will be semi structured, will allow the learners to reflect and examine their objectives and aspirations for the future and how their return to education may contribute to this.   Ultimately the objectives of the 'learner' will be considered and their needs and expectations examined. When we look at paradigms and how our ontological stance allows us to organise our world and give it meaning, it is possible that given the opportunity these learners might grasp the opportunity to actually examine their own needs more critically.

3.3 Epistemological approach

When carrying out research you must examine your epistemology and be aware of your own underlying views, opinions and assumptions. As researchers, we regard ourselves as people who conduct research among other people, learning with them, rather than conducting research on them (Ryan, 2006 p. 18). When it comes to knowledge, there are various paradigms which continue to change over time and these include the institutional component which is based on social political and economic factors. The intellectual component which contains the epistemological and ontological aspects forms the foundation on which a set of principles can be based.   This study will concentrate on the learner's and their experience of adult education from the personal and social aspect and will also discuss their progression from an employment point of view. If we as educators are to provide a 'transformative' educational experience to those who access community education, we need to explore the means of achieving this together

with the learners.   In research, quantitative methods provide useful insights on a larger scale in terms of statistical data.

For the purposes of this study, the Post Positivist or Social Constructivist approach will be taken using qualitative methods (Cresswell, 2003).   According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998 p. 3) 'qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them'.   This approach, which can assess the individuals more closely by conducting interviews in a group situation, should produce a more holistic result for the purposes of this study.   It maintains a core focus on the people involved in the research and according to Freire 'every thematic investigation which deepens historical awareness is thus really educational' (1996: p. 90).

In social constructivism it is acknowledged that the interaction between the researcher and the participant impacts on the results. While accepting that my own background may impact on the outcome, it is my intention to ascertain the learner's views and opinions and to explore these through using open ended questioning. According to Ryan, 'Post positivists strive to disrupt the predictability that can occur in traditional interviews' (2006: p. 18). In line with this approach, Ryan goes on to argue that we cannot simply access information with a view to arriving at an 'overall truth' and that while we may write with some authority, we must 'keep it reflexive and avoid dogma or authoritarian tones.

From a social constructivist point of view, research contributes to our overall understanding of the world. The goal is to rely as much as possible on the learner's views and the more open minded the questions the better. Through the use of careful questioning and being aware at all times of the direction the interviewees are going, I will strive to be as open minded and flexible as possible. Ryan states that 'knowledge cannot be divorced from ontology and personal experience' (1996: p. 17). She goes on to state that research in this model requires an ability to see the whole picture, to take a distanced view or an overview and requires patience, honesty, courage, persistence, imagination, sympathy and self discipline alongside dialogue and debate. It is important at all times to be aware of the limitations of the research. While it is the intention of the researcher to empower the individual being interviewed, it is according to Ryan, imperative that tools such as the concept of discourse, the concern with power, the value of narrative and the need to be reflexive are employed.

Ethics and issues of reliability and subjectivity will be important at all times throughout this research and reflection will be the core part of this process. Mason states that qualitative research should be systematically and rigorously conducted and that 'this is based on the belief that researchers cannot be neutral, objective or detached from the process they are generating and should instead 'seek to understand their role in that process ' (2002: p. 7). I intend to take a subjective role in the process and to strive at all times to be open minded, reflexive and prepared to change my interview approach if and when necessary.

3.4 Methods

The qualitative approach taken demonstrates how phenomena can be studied in their natural state. It is 'singularly attractive to the would-be educational researcher, it fits naturally to the kind of concentrated action found in classrooms and schools' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison: 2000: p. 26). This 'naturalistic' approach is constructed through interpretations, meaning and experience expressed in the participants' interviews.

These interviews will take place with participants who completed the programme three years ago. This will provide valuable information on what the participants themselves expected prior to beginning the programme, why they accessed adult education in the first place and will ask participants to reflect upon what they hoped to achieve on a long term basis. By interviewing past participants a broader view will be achieved with the benefit of hindsight on the part of the learners. It will demonstrate if, in their opinion, they have benefited and in what way.

3.5 Focus groups

A focus group interview is 'a way of listening to people and learning from them' (Morgan, 1998: p. 9). The use of focus group interviews, which is a qualitative approach, was considered best here as the group already knew and were comfortable in each others company. The group were able to open up ideas, discuss them and interact with each other providing support when appropriate. A semi structured approach was taken with ten questions prepared beforehand. Inevitably, given the informal approach to the interviews some

unexpected themes emerged which are discussed later in the findings chapter. Although the group were initially cautious, they quickly became interested and were eager to share their opinion. The interaction between the group was vibrant and productive and there was a supportive atmosphere which helped those who would normally find it difficult to speak out. The interview took almost two hours to complete and was transcribed later. I used a colour coding technique to develop themes and used pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

3.6 Ethical considerations

My role as Co-ordinator of the centre had to be considered from the point of view of my own epistemology and my stance on the subject in question in that I had to be careful that this did not impinge in any way on the views of the learners. It was also important that the learners did not view me as judgemental in any way and that I created a situation where the learners viewed me as being involved with them in the process of learning and exploring the subject in question. I took time to explain what the research was trying to achieve and how they could contribute by describing their experiences and opinions. I felt that it was important that they were aware of how important their opinions were and this helped to set the scene and reduce any feelings of apprehension. According to Ryan;

> one of the opportunities and challenges posed by this approach is that the researcher recognises the common humanity that connects researchers and the people who participate in research. (2006: p. 18)

All participants signed a consent form before commencing and I spent some time explaining the background and purpose of the interviews so that everyone was at ease. I explained that I would be using a recorder and perhaps taking

some notes, neither of which seemed to daunt them at all. I also assured them that all information would be confidential in so far as I would not be using their real names. They were also offered the opportunity to have a copy of the transcript before the thesis was submitted so that they could alter any information if they felt it did not represent their views.

3.7 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to review the research position, design, approach and key issues being addressed. It provides an overview of the methods employed and a description of how the interviews were conducted through the use of a focus group with a semi structured approach. My own stance based on my experience of community education was taken into consideration as were the ethical constraints associated with this type of research. This study examined the long term benefits for those who take part in community education with the ethos of community development together with the requirements set out by the funders in mind. The research is underpinned by a social constructivist perspective, using the experiences of learners as the main source of knowledge. A qualitative approach helps to examine the situation in its social context through the opinions of participants themselves who give meaning to their experiences. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality for the learners are also considered.

CHAPTER 4 - RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

As the previous chapter outlined, the focus of this study is to ascertain the long term benefits of community education, from the point of view of the learners themselves. It will focus on some past participants of the community education programme, to examine what progression they made in their lives since completing the course in 2009. This is approached from their point of view by focusing on their achievements, from a personal, social and economic point of view. The data is then analysed and findings and analysis are drawn together. The ethos and background of community education is kept in mind throughout as is the economic requirements of those who fund the programme.

The focus group interview took almost two hours to complete and all interviewees had a good opportunity to express themselves and were quite comfortable doing so as they already knew each other very well from their time on the course. This chapter begins by setting out a brief profile of the interviewees and the themes which emerged from the interview and their conversation. This is done in the light of the literature review and the ethos of community education with the policies and procedures which govern this sector of education also being considered. Finally an analysis of the findings is included based on the theoretical framework as outlined in the literature review, and includes my own reflections.

4.2 Profile of interviewees and programme content:

The following is a profile of the participants who took part in the interview:

Age of Group	Average Age of learners: 45 years old (Ranges from mid 20s to mid 50s)				
Gender	All Female				
Previous Education	Less than Junior Cert: 2 learners	Junior Cert: 3 learners		Leaving Cert: 2 learners	Other: 1 learner
FETAC Qualification on completion of course[6]	1 Level 3 Cert: 1 Learner	1 Level 5 Cert: 1 Learner		2 Level 5 Certs: 4 Learners	3 Level 5 Certs: 2 Learners
Progression since leaving the course	Childcare: 1 Learner	Retail: 4 Learners	Business Studies: AIT 1 Learner	FAS Course 1 Learner	Not Progressed 1 Learner

An important aspect of this particular programme is that with the help of funding from the Dept. of Social Protection a good level of personal and social development is provided. This is available in the form of help on a one to one basis, for instance if a learner needs encouragement, guidance or in some cases practical help with assignment writing, this is possible.

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[6] FETAC courses on offer in the centre include the following: **Level 3** Certificate in General Studies;
Level 5: Certificates in Business Studies, Childcare, Social Studies and Community Health Services

The personal development aspect usually takes the form of facilitation sessions from qualified external trainers in group sessions. The social activities take the form of sports, introduction to relaxation techniques and educational day trips. The Health Service Executive also facilitate sessions on healthy lifestyle and positive mental health strategies.

As previously stated all 15 participants of the 2009 community education course were contacted and invited to take part in a group interview. Eight turned up on the evening and the interview was semi structured with plenty of time allowed for discussion. It is evident that those who took part in the interview have had excellent progression. However, as already pointed out, one of the weaknesses of the interviews is that it does not show how those who did not take part in the study have fared and it is possible that they have not done as well. Following up on their progression would be very interesting but unfortunately is outside the scope of this study.

The interviews began by asking the learners questions on their previous experience of school and went on to discuss their reasons for accessing community education. It then went into more depth exploring their opinions of adult education, the positives and negatives from their point of view and their progression since leaving the programme. The group discussed these topics and described their experiences of community education.

4.3 Themes

Themes which arose included their negative experience of schooling and explains why most are early school leavers. Their expectations and reasons for returning to education were also explored and seems to be predominantly with a view to accessing employment with very little interest expressed in the educational aspect of the programme. They described their learning experience while taking part in community education and the social aspect from their perspective. Progression was discussed extensively with the majority stating that they were very happy to have a job. One learner had not progressed as regards employment and a second had just completed a FAS course and was seeking employment. Another theme which came through very strongly was their sense of being able to help their families financially now that they were employed. Their economic backgrounds and the lack of finances came across as being one of the abiding problems in their lives, and will be discussed in further chapters of this study. Having said that, the confidence and self esteem which they derived from taking part in the programme was probably the most prominent theme which came through as explored in later sections below. The personal and social development element of the training is seen as positive and in the view of the learners helps to reduce stress.

> **G** I think it helped to have other stuff happening other than the assignments and all that, it was a break away from learning and studying all the time

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4.4 Experience of school

When asked about their experience of school only two stated that they liked school, six stated that it was a negative experience, expressing very emotive and powerful negative experiences of schooling;

> **A** When I was in school you got a slap across the head when you didn't know something - and you were put sitting at the end of the room - I hated school'

> **B** I wanted to know what was wrong with me, that's why I went -back to education, it bugged me - to know what was wrong. In school I was at the back of the class, you knew you were the same as everybody else but you were treated different. You were told you were stupid. I didn't know what dyslexia was - I didn't know the word or what it meant. When I was on this course people listened to me when I said I had difficulties. I went and had a professional assessment done and confirmed that I am dyslexic. One out of five has dyslexia I learned this through the course I did after leaving here. I learned a load about it'.

Kathleen Lynch, when discussing the socio-economic conditions of different classes in Irish society, states that 'in terms of academic attainment, what is clear is that there are significant social class differences in educational attainment at both primary and second level…surveys indicate that literacy difficulties at primary level are far more concentrated among some social groups than others. (Lynch, 1997: p. 11). This is borne out in the two quotes above and is a reflection on how class differences do exist possibly in all levels of education.

Freire considered mainstream education to be what he termed 'banking education' where the teacher is the giver of information, the oppressor, and the

student the receiver, the oppressed, and talks about self depreciation which he argues is:

> another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalisation of the opinion the oppressors hold of them….when people are constantly told that they are 'good for nothing', know nothing and are incapable of learning anything…. in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (1970: p. 45)

These two learners experienced, first-hand, this feeling of being 'good for nothing' and believed that they were incapable of learning with the result that they both not only hated school but were what we term 'early school leavers'.

> **A** I hardly went to school at all and left at 13 to help to take care of the family.

While these are possibly two extreme cases, at the same time they are typical of what happened at a time when education came from a hierarchical position and did not necessarily value human diversity or equality. The National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) and AONTAS have been instrumental in bringing the problems of illiteracy to the fore in Ireland, and providing literacy support, especially in the area of community education. Nowadays there is support available for those who experience learning difficulties, in primary and secondary schools. There are 'special educational needs' (SEN) supports for children who have learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn or access education. The Education for Persons with Special Needs Act, 2004 states that the provisions made for people with special educational needs;

shall have the same right to avail of and to benefit from appropriate education as do their peers, to assist people to leave school with the skills necessary to participate to the level of their capacity in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society.
(2004: p. 5)

There are also procedures in place through the Dept. of Education and Skills to cater for those from disadvantaged areas with several schemes having been rolled out in recent years. These schemes set out to ensure that the most disadvantaged schools benefit from 'a comprehensive package of supports' and benefits both primary and post primary schools (Dept. of Education and Skills. Accessed 8/6/2012).

Others interviewed expressed feelings of just being glad to complete their education which they perceived as follows:

> **E** With me it was a case of having to go in every day and just go through the motions. I hardly every did any homework and there was no remarks on that in my house, my mother was too busy with the others and anyway I had to help out with the housework and things, I had no interest in school and couldn't see any use in it anyway

Another learner explained how she had a part time job by the time she was 13 and was contributing to the family income which was seen as more important than schooling.

> **D** I used to be in from school by 3.30 and going back out the door straight away to do housework and mind the kids for a woman in town that owned a shop. I had to walk about a mile there and back and would be wrecked by time I got home at 7 or 8 o'clock. I'd be falling asleep in school next day.

Despite the efforts of organisations like AONTAS and NALA, and community education, according to Kathleen Lynch, there has been a laissez faire approach to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Lynch argues that it is not

surprising to find that mature students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are not adequately represented in higher education (1997: p. 10).

4.5 Reasons for returning to education

Participants reasons for returning to education were varied from wanting to get out of the house, having reared their children to wanting to know why they couldn't learn while in school. Two knew that they wanted to do childcare but none expressed any interest in the educational side of the programme. However the one binding opinion was that all had the intention of accessing employment on completion of the course, with the specific aim of improving the family circumstances. For most their husbands or partners were either unemployed, had taken early retirement, or were in part time work. Prior to commencing the programme the learners did not possess the confidence, skills or qualifications to access employment and this was their abiding reason for joining the course.

> **F** I almost had forgot how to talk to people or to do anything. I needed to get out of the house and get a job and do stuff and to keep my brain going.

> **A** My husband only works on a part time, casual basis and I want to help out my daughters and my grandchild so I needed a few bob of my own so I thought if I had a little job where I could have a few bob and not be asking him all the time

The majority of those interviewed were interested in finding employment and this seems to be typical of those who access community education.   While unemployment is an accepted part of life for them it is only when they have reared their families that they begin to consider their own lives. The fact that for

most of those interviewed, their partner or husband was unemployed seems to have been a factor in their motivation to access community education.

There is also a psychodynamic element where the reasons given leave out one very important fact which is that for the majority of those taking part in LTI programmes a training allowance is available.   For some of the older women who have been at home rearing their families this may be the first time they receive a 'payment' into their own hands. For single parents it means that their income doubles as they receive both their single parent allowance and the training allowance although this is all in the process of change at the moment. For various reasons the participants do not acknowledge this fact, as with the focus group, when after asking them directly, only one was prepared to state that she was interested in the monetary aspect.

> **C** I had started beforehand (in VTOS) and we didn't get paid so when I heard that we were going to get paid, well that was an incentive for me

Apart from this learner no one else in the group commented on the allowance even when I put the question directly to them.   For some this may be down to pride but perhaps more importantly, the fear of losing any welfare payments they or their husbands are already receiving. This is an indication of the uncertainty which they live with and the lack of trust towards those in 'authority'. One aspect which seems to be largely ignored is the economic background of community education learners. This for them is a defining aspect of their lives and causes major stress for them and their families.   It became apparent through the conversation that these learners are economically disadvantaged and that this

has a huge bearing on their lives. According to the combat poverty agency, people who left school early or without qualifications are more prone to poverty. Those who live in disadvantaged areas where there are few employment opportunities are also at risk. These issues around lack of funds, as can be seen from the study means that most access the programmes for purely financial reasons.

An interesting aspect of the research was that they did not consider the 'educational' aspect when returning, nor did they mention personal development. When the question was teased out a bit further by asking 'what did you expect from the course', only three, who had already taken a part time course in another centre, had any idea of what the course might entail. One had heard about the programme from a family member:

> **E** I only heard about the course by accident, my sister was working on a community education scheme here, I didn't know this type of course existed, I didn't know ye existed. I thought it was a fantastic opportunity – brilliant

> **H** I had heard that ye went on trips and did enjoyable things like that

This is yet another example of disadvantage as only one had looked up the course on the internet and knew that it offered childcare training which was the area of work she was interested in. There are many reasons for this lack of awareness on what is available in the community, one being the lack of computer skills or indeed access to computers. However that is only one reason as can be seen from the interviews where overall people who are economically and socially disadvantaged are not generally aware or interested in anything to do with education or indeed community development. Most interviewees

described their school experience as negative and of little importance in their lives. As Lynch points out, in relation to higher education 'there is a lack of information, guidance and social supports available' (1997: p. 18). This is also the case at community education level where it is down to word of mouth with little or no guidance or proper interview procedures. It is usually 'by accident' as the above learner described that they get to hear about the services available meaning that there are some, probably the most disadvantaged, who never get the information. The White Paper on Adult Education, in their section of adult guidance and counselling recommend various procedures which can help people to 'make choices about their lives and to make transitions consequent on these choices'. (2000: p. 156). While the information is available, unfortunately it is often not accessible for those who are most disadvantaged as they usually do not have access to computers and are not actively seeking information.

As the discussion developed it seemed that all of them were aware that they would be 'doing a lot of computers'. Overall they had very little expectations or concept of the actual course content, nor were they concerned about it.

4.6 Learning experience

The interviewees all stated that community education was completely different to their experience of school and the main consensus was that they were 'treated like adults'. One interviewee said, 'I was called by my first name instead of 'you'. Another, who had left school early, claimed that, 'if I had been treated differently in school I would definitely have stayed on'. Community education has the ability to provide this type of 'safe place' as espoused by Rogers and to

avoid the 'banking' system of education that Freire talked about. By treating the learners with respect, and allowing them to develop as individuals, using a person centred approach to education, where dialogue and communication is allowed to develop, transformation and empowerment can be achieved.

A discussion developed around this topic and it was clear that the collective opinion was one of positivity towards the facilitative approach used in the delivery of the programme. This was in stark contrast to their previous experience of school and education.

> **A** You felt that you could speak out and say what you think or ask a question without being told you were stupid. I never did that at school.

Career guidance was discussed and seemed to have been useful with one describing it as 'helping me to think about what I might like to do for the first time in my life'.

> **B** Listening to everybody's opinion at break time was great when you are here you are with the same group and you are comfortable'.

This is an element of community education which is imperative in developing and empowering the individual in that it provides a forum for self expression and exploration of ideas. Another gain is that they seem to be more aware of what is going on in their locality and have the confidence to take part in events.

> **C** I look forward to going out now and go to the centre most weeks. I helped out when they were organising a going away party there last week and it was good

H Yes I have done a few courses in the centre as well. We done flower arranging for Christmas

Three of them had continued on to complete other courses since 2009 and the majority stated that they would be open to further training in the future. However this was with a caveat that will be explored more in later sections as there was a feeling that the exams were a bit too much like school, and that they weren't prepared for the 'homework'. Community education has the power to provide excellent personal and social development to its learners provided the balance between that and accreditation is maintained.

It is apparent they felt a great sense of achievement having got over these challenges and completed the course. The extra help provided by staff when putting assignments together and preparing for exams they felt was 'brilliant'. On being asked if they had recommended this type of education to anyone else they claimed that they had and one is currently trying to get her husband to join since men are now included on the course.

As the African proverb goes:

> ***If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation).***

4.7 Progression

Seven of the eight interviewees have progressed, two to further education and 5 to employment. When asked was this their aim on commencing the course, most answered yes. As stated earlier some just wanted to get out of the house but with the confidence and skills they acquired during the course they were keen to

continue on and employment was the answer for them. One is now in her second year in Athlone Institute of Technology, having first completed the Access course there. One is unemployed, but intends to return to either education or employment in the future. Her reason for not returning is that she has two young children and 'has no family support' at the moment.

4.8 Accreditation

When asked about accreditation, all eight were adamant that while they enjoyed the personal development provided on the course, albeit limited due to lack of funds and time constraints, they felt that the accreditation and receiving certificates on completion provided a big confidence boost.

> **F** I thought I couldn't learn, I thought I was too old to start again. I did -
> find it difficult at times, with exams and so forth and having to do
> homework. But when I went for interview and was asked about my -
> qualifications I felt so proud to be able to say I had a business certificate'.

The findings produced some interesting results for instance the majority of those interviewed had negative memories of school. Probably as a result of this their reasons for accessing community education had little or nothing to do with the education aspect and more to do with personal aspirations like getting out of the house, getting a job or as previously discussed financial gain through the training allowance available. Their experience of attending a community education programme seems to have been positive with all expressing their satisfaction with having taken part. One of the important themes which emerged is their altered impression of education which it is hoped will have a knock on effect for their families. The social aspect was also important with some having made

friends and feeling more confident in themselves. When asked about progression seven out of the eight secured either employment or had undertaken further education. Overall the main gain for these women was their feelings of self confidence and esteem and their delight at having achieved their 'certificates'.

The main themes which presented were their prior negative experience of school, their reasons for accessing community education which was predominantly to gain employment and help their families. Their learning experience while on the course was positive overall with the personal and social development aspect appearing to be quite important to them. Progression for this particular group was excellent and there is evidence that their confidence and self esteem have improved, in part due to taking part in the programme and gaining employment which gives them a sense of empowerment. Their families were of foremost importance and this came across as being one of their main reasons for accessing the course in the first place and ultimately securing employment.

It is up to us then, the educators, to strive to make the experience a positive one for them by providing a process that creates change within the individual in the hope that there will be a 'knock on' effect for their families and community. It is heartening to note that in most cases there is some transformation even if only in the fact that they change their attitude to education and its benefits.

> **C** It gave you a feeling for education and maybe even going on to college later, what it was all about and it wouldn't leave you as nervous. I would definitely be encouraging my children to continue in education but this is another way into education. It opens other doors.

One learner who left school at 13 and is now in third level commented;

A I'd never have believed I could have gotten where I am - that I could have this option from the time I left school to be able to do this - to be able to go this way and to get a real qualification

While the group described the pressures of having to complete assignments and exams as being stressful it became obvious that the extra help and guidance which the centre offered, together with the developmental aspect was key to them completing their course successfully.

B The help we got and being able to say I can't do this and knowing that you would get the bit of help was what kept me going.

A I know I was a pain some of the time because I remember going into the office and saying I can't do this and then with a bit of encouragement - well - several times I was giving up but I didn't

H I was useless at computers, couldn't even turn it on and the help I got with that was great. It made doing the assignments easier and now I have got myself a laptop and I am able to email and use the internet as good as the children

When examining the results of the interviews, it would seem that the lines between accredited training and personal development become slightly blurred. This is due to the facilitative approach taken by the staff and tutors in the centre' The interviewees placed huge importance on the achievement of the 'certificates' and pointed out that the help and guidance they received contributed towards this. The full group agreed on this despite the fact that for some the experience was slightly stressful due to the exams, assignment writing and homework which they were expected to complete. The centre is in a

position to provide the 'extra' help which the learners spoke about, in the form of guidance and support and this is key to them completing the course and having a positive experience.

Another realisation for me was that most of these women had returned to education in the hope of improving the lives of their families through gaining employment, and not for purely personal reasons. This is a reversal of the hierarchical attitude where women were in the role of homemaker and the man provides the income. These women felt that they should contribute to the family income also.

Apart from one who hopes to complete her degree course, none of the other learners seem to have any long term plans regarding what they want to do going forward and are quite happy as they are now. This is possibly a reflection on the socio economic background of the learners who could all be described as disadvantaged and therefore not professionally ambitious beyond getting a job. It may also point to gender factors, with these women seeing themselves first and foremost as the carers and homemakers, as all those interviewed were female. Women tend to take 'caring roles' in society because this is something which they feel they are 'able' or confident to do, as they have experience of rearing their own children.

As educators all we can do is sew little seeds and hope that in the space of time they will grow and spread. In the meantime confidence in their abilities as human beings, and a sense of empowerment and achievement is a good starting

point and overall, this seems to be the winning factor for all the learners. From a humanist point of view, meeting the needs of the learners by offering a choice of subjects together with support and guidance, both empowers and builds confidence at the same time. Learners come to the realisation that not only do they have the ability to learn but they can actually enjoy the process. They discover new abilities and develop new skills while at the same time building up a portfolio of accreditation which enhances their chances of becoming employed. However it must be borne in mind that this only represents half the group and there is no way of knowing how the other half fared.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the main themes which emerged from the group interview and gives examples of the answers and discussion which took place. Overall it would seem that the programme content works well with those interviewed being positive regarding their certification and the personal and social development aspect of the training. It is obvious that when the right approach is taken, that of a facilitative approach to learners, the learning experience can be positive with all claiming that they would recommend community education.

CHAPTER 5 – REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This study examined the long term progression of the learners on a community education programme which is state funded and sponsored by a community development group. A qualitative approach was taken and a sample of learners from the 2009 programme were interviewed to ascertain what progress they had made since completing the programme, from an employment point of view and also from a personal and social development aspect. The focus of the study was to ascertain if community education can provide the skills and qualifications relevant to entering the workplace while at the same time offering transformation through the integration of personal and social development.

This chapter will attempt to analyse the key findings of the study and draw conclusions based on this analysis. The first chapter provided an overview of the programme and community education in general. The White Paper on Education (2000) is discussed in the light of how it influenced the whole area of adult education as is the women's movement which was instrumental in introducing the concept of educating women. The stakeholders and their neo liberal influence is discussed as is community development and its ethos and how the two can be amalgamated within community education.

The challenges currently facing this sector are described, including the current changing socio economic climate, and changes in the structure of FAS and FETAC, which all have an influence on the programme in question.

Government policies including the White Paper on Education (DES: 2000) impact on community education. The literature review demonstrates the theories of people like Freire and Mezirow who espoused transformative learning alongside Rogers and Maslow's humanist approach.

5.2 Ethos and challenges

The ethos of community development versus the requirements of state funded programmes is an ongoing challenge for those of us working in this sector. Community education aims to meet the needs of the learner by creating a safe environment where they can grow and develop their skills and knowledge. Rogers argues that the goal of education is the facilitation of change and learning and argues that as facilitators we should 'trust the capacity of the human individual for developing his own potentiality, and permit him to choose his own way and his own direction in his learning' (1969: p. 114). On examining the results of the research carried out for this study it is obvious that learners do experience some change in their lives. By taking the step into community education and securing employment the learners describe how this has contributed to changes in their feelings of confidence and self esteem. They also express feelings of positivity towards education which was not evident before and which, it is hoped, will be passed on to their families.

Accredited education can be seen as preparing learners for the labour market and there is a belief that qualifications are essential in order to fully function in society today. However, the personal and social development of the learners is imperative in the long term as it not only helps them to complete their

programme successfully but also leaves them with a lasting positive impression of education which will ultimately benefit their families and the community. Those who completed the course claim a level of confidence which they had not experienced before and an awareness that education can be a fulfilling experience, something which they will pass on to their children. A sense of trust is built up with a reduction in feelings of resistance to authority. Social networks are formed through participation in community education which fosters social capital while progressing to employment is important in the lives of the learners also.

5.3 Findings

Having completed this research it is apparent that it is possible to preserve the ethos of community education while at the same time meeting the requirements of those who fund the programme. It would seem that this approach provides a confidence boost which raises self esteem while at the same time providing the learners with the skills and qualification to progress to further education and employment. The findings brought up a number of very interesting conclusions and also questions. They show clearly that the learners had little interest in education when they commenced the programme. The majority had negative memories of school with some stating that they took part in the programme just to 'get out of the house'. However, the majority wanted to gain the skills and qualifications to access employment with two very specifically stating that they wanted a qualification in childcare. Other than wanting to gain employment they had little or no expectations or knowledge of what the programme had to offer and did not have any concept of what community education was about. In

my experience of working in this sector for the past fourteen years I would say that this is a fairly typical view.

As explained in the findings there is a training allowance available to most of those taking part in this type of programme and for various reasons it is felt that they cannot divulge this information. This is often due to the fact that their partners or husbands are in receipt of benefits or allowances which they are afraid will be impact negatively on them.

Overall their experiences on the programme was very positive, with seven out of the eight interviewed having progressed to employment. Their sense of empowerment at having been able to make a difference in their lives and that of their families was, for them, very positive. However, the fact that half the group did not take part in the research must be taken into account and it is possible that they did not fare so well and have not progressed. It could also be the case that they too benefited.

5.4 Accreditation versus transformation

There is resistance to the accreditation of community education and this is understandable in that it can lead to programmes being taken over by bureaucracy, and becoming labour market focused, concentrating on producing individuals to service the economy. On the other hand as this study shows community education gives individuals who left school early and have little prospects when it comes to employment or accessing mainstream education a second chance. This second chance may be grounded in an economic need but in

some cases, there is transformation in the sense that education which has previously been seen as unimportant and unattainable in their lives, now becomes enjoyable and something to be aspired to. There is the added benefit of gaining employment and the sense of empowerment that brings

Freire argues that the educators should consider themselves as partners of the students and 'must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power': (1970: p. 56). The challenge for the educator then is to create a situation where accredited training can be delivered efficiently, while at the same time providing a forum where learners can question, discuss and understand. This in the words of Freire is 'problem posing education' as opposed to what he terms the 'banking system'.   However, this process will take time and as Brookfield warns, 'if we become imbued with this term it will inevitably lead to feelings of failure when major change does not happen and educators must work in conjunction with others to achieve this….critical reflection must be a collaborative   project (2000: p. 146).   Community education has enormous potential to achieve a balance between what is required by state while at the same time providing transformation for the disadvantaged.

5.5 Existing knowledge

As the literature review shows existing knowledge in the area of community education points to the importance of the empowerment of the individual through a transformative learning process which is emancipatory for the individual and ultimately the community and society.   While the research was limited to a small group of learners, nevertheless it shows clearly that there has

been some level of transformation from a long term perspective. Community education sets out to raise confidence, provide accreditation and progress the individual – which in itself is empowering and transformative for learners who on commencement, have very low levels of self esteem. There is evidence that those learners have become more outgoing just by the fact that they are in employment. The majority of learners who took part in this study engaged in community education for purely economic reasons and this is also the reason they are now employed. Therefore, in their estimation they have progressed and transformed their lives to some extent.

5.6 My reflections

The implications of this study for the theory and practice of adult education is, in my view, positive. It would seem that accreditation is in itself empowering and can build confidence and ultimately social capital if it is facilitated from a humanist approach. As educators if we are to help learners to transform we must be conscious of how we facilitate this learning which according to Mezirow should create a change in perspective and frame of reference. Brookfield, shares this understanding and believes that 'an act of learning can be called transformative only if it involves a fundamental questioning and reordering of how one thinks or acts' (2000: p. 139).

For these learners economic survival is one of the incentives for accessing community education in the first place. It is then up to those of us working in this sector to create a situation where the learners will be equipped with the

skills and qualifications to access employment while at the same time allowing time and space for a transformative educational experience.

5.7 Recommendations

The ethos of community education must be preserved by providing a humanist approach to the facilitation of learning with the ideals of people like Freire, Rogers and Mezirow firmly in mind. From the results of this research it is evident that the learners succeeded in attaining the skills and qualifications required to access employment, thereby meeting the needs of the funders, while at the same time achieving confidence, self esteem and a feeling of empowerment.

Further studies in this area which would delve deeper into the long term benefits for those taking part in community education would be advisable. Using a broader sample of past learners and following up on those who did not progress to further education and employment would possibly give a more balanced result. It would also be advisable to include the educators, facilitators, tutors and others working in the area to gauge their awareness of the ethos of community education and the policies and procedures which govern it. It would also be interesting to follow up on those interviewed for this study to see how they progress with their lives over the coming years.

5.8 Conclusion

As a result of carrying out this study, it is clear that there are long term benefits for those accessing community education. From a short term point of view the benefits are that of progression to employment or further education. From a long term point of view empowerment of the individual through the learning process thereby resulting in a higher level of confidence and self esteem is evident. Changing attitudes towards education is also a benefit and is seen in the research this led to employment and an improvement in the family finances which was for them a positive outcome.

Radical change can be achieved with an approach to education which results in the empowerment of the individual. By availing of a second chance at education, which can lead to employment, their financial situation will improve leaving space for further growth on a personal level. The fact that through taking part in community education their self esteem and confidence have also been enhanced means that this can be a win win situation for the learner.

Community education can reach beyond the bureaucratic requirements of funding regulations and auditing, and fulfill its ethos. According to Tett:

> Community educators thus have an important role in making sure that the complexity of the intellectual, emotional, practical, pleasurable and political possibilities of learning is not reduced to the apparent simplicity of targets, standards and skills. (2006: p. 105)

This thesis set out to discover the long term benefits of community education from a developmental point of view as espoused by the ethos of community

development. Alongside this the economical requirements of those who fund this sector of education is considered. The results demonstrate that there is some crossover of the two approaches with learners displaying feelings of confidence and empowerment on receiving accreditation. This is achieved through maintaining a supportive approach which leads to positive results.

From my own point of view it would seem that the onus is on us as educators to aim to provide a holistic approach to community education. This includes meeting the requirements of the funders while at the same time maintaining and preserving the ethos of community education.

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