

# Reclaiming University Adult Education: A Freirean Approach to Widening Participation and Tackling Educational Inequality

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## **Abstract**

*University Adult Education previously played an important role in enabling non-traditional adult students to access third level study. Renewed government efforts in the United Kingdom to tackling educational inequalities focus primarily on schools, although the widening participation strategy places an onus on universities to play their part. This paper highlights research with learners engaging in university Adult Education and examines their learning journeys. The paper argues that resourcing universities and colleges to provide educational pathways for adults to re-engage with education has wider long-term and inter-generational benefits for families and communities and thus makes an important contribution to tackling educational inequalities.*

**Keywords:** Adult Education, community, widening participation, educational inequality, lifelong learning

## **Introduction**

Attention to adult learning has waxed and waned over the centuries. It has always been something of a 'poor relation' in the education system, having broader definitions and more funding available when the economy is booming. However, in times of austerity, this sector shrinks dramatically and definitions about what counts as adult learning shrink accordingly, often being reduced to what some may term 'really useful knowledge' i.e. training and skills for employment. We do not dispute the need for everyone to have access to the kind of learning opportunities which they deem to be most suitable to their needs. Indeed, the opportunity for individuals to gain skilled employment is a key benefit not only to those individuals but their families, communities and wider society.

The purpose of this paper, however, is to argue that adult learning should not be relegated simply to skills focused training for those with low levels of qualifications. We contend, rather, that Adult Education in its broadest forms and settings is an important tool in tackling the systemic problem of educational disenfranchisement by young people in areas of social and economic disadvantage and should be encouraged and supported, regardless of financial constraints. Specifically, as our background and current experience is in higher education, we argue the need for universities to take seriously their duty to be accessible to all citizens. To that end, higher education needs to reach out pro-actively to under-represented communities and recognise this as an important part of their work. Our paper draws on qualitative data we have collected from adult learners with whom we have engaged in many different settings. It is our intention in this paper to allow the voice of the adult learner to be heard, in terms of the benefits (and challenges) which education has presented to them. We hope that these anecdotal but wide-ranging experiences contribute to the rich tapestry of adult learning data in Ireland, the UK and further afield, which can lend its weight to the case for sustained and adequate funding for adult learning.

### **Barriers to learning**

The links between educational underachievement and poverty in the UK are widely acknowledged (House of Commons, 2014; Leitch *et al.*, 2017; Machin, 2006; Nelson *et al.* 2013). Raffo *et al.*'s (2007) detailed review of the literature in this field highlights that whilst there is broad agreement of the links between education level and poverty, the causes and therefore the necessary responses to tackle this issue are widely debated. Thus, Francis and Wills (2012) argue that whilst family background is still the highest predictor of educational achievement, current solutions focus primarily on market solutions such as increasing consumer choice. Demie and Lewis (2011, p. 245) additionally link educational achievement with poverty and class and argue 'Social class has been shown to have significant effects on educational outcomes and future life chances even when educational achievement is high'.

Considerable efforts have been made across the education sector as a whole to understand and improve the educational outcomes of young people, and in particular, those experiencing multiple deprivation (Hillman and Robinson, 2016; Bowes *et al.* 2015). Demie and Lewis (2011) however, contend that there is a dearth of research examining the barriers to learning for white working-class young people. Their study highlighted low aspirations, alienation from the curriculum, lack of parental engagement, marginalisation of their culture, lack

of adequate housing, low levels of literacy and language deprivation as the main barriers to educational achievement for white working-class children. From an adult learning perspective, their study is interesting for the insight it provides into parents. The barriers highlighted by the young people in their study are indeed the same barriers which hinder working class parents from engaging in adult learning, or even with their child's learning. Numerous studies have identified the role of class as a determinant for participation in Adult Education (Thompson, 1980; Ward and Taylor, 1986; Martin, 1999). In their paper on education to promote social justice, Francis and Wills (2012) suggest the need for culturally relevant curricula that develops higher order thinking skills, in line with Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy. They also point to the responsibility of teachers (and schools) in challenging stereotypical professional low expectations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, whilst recognising the limitations of their role in the wider structural inequality of the system. In addition to the focus on educational under-achievement in schools, the barriers to learning have also been considered with regard to improving access to third level study for under-represented minorities. Since the focus in Northern Ireland (NI) is predominantly on students from the lower socio-economic groupings, this strategy encompasses those who have had a break in learning, as well as those progressing directly from second level education.

### **Widening access and participation**

Widening access and participation is the key strategy across the UK that seeks to encourage students from backgrounds that are under-represented in Further and Higher Education, to progress onto third level study. Similar policy intentions are reflected in the Republic of Ireland, for example, in the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019* (HEA, 2015) which aims to support increased access and participation in higher education by targeting specific groups including mature students and students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

At a UK regional level, the Department of Employment and Learning (NI) aims to encourage and support those 'who are **MOST ABLE** but **LEAST LIKELY** to participate ... to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to and to benefit from, the higher education that is right for them' (DELNI, 2012, p. 2). Much of the emphasis however is on raising aspirations and attainment of young people in secondary schools which traditionally have a low rate of pupils progressing to higher education. Whilst there is clearly a need for such targeted interventions, we contend that a long-term strategy to tackling educational underachievement

must also target adults who have left school with few or no qualifications and who have been conditioned to believe that education is not for the likes of them. The *Access to Success* report highlights characteristics deemed necessary for learners to be successful, including ‘the aspiration to improve their educational level, confidence in their ability to do so, and the drive and determination to succeed in higher education’ (DELNI, 2012, p.24). These concur with a number of studies, including those focusing specifically on adult learning (Knowles, 1984; Chao, 2009; Merriam *et al.*, 2007). Although the DEL strategy acknowledges the need to target adult learners, particularly those already in the workforce, their assertion that the characteristics outlined above are largely determined at an early age, lead them (and therefore Institutions of Further and Higher Education) to focus primarily on younger students and increased intervention in compulsory education. Field’s (2003) research into participation in Adult Education in NI suggests that the majority of adult learners tend to be those who have already succeeded in the education system. A recent study of adult participation in lifelong learning in Ireland (CSO, 2018) found similar results, demonstrating that, across the island of Ireland, significant challenges remain in terms of attracting non-traditional adult learners into further and higher education.

The current research focuses on adults who have neither engaged previously in adult learning nor possess the characteristics deemed necessary to be successful learners. We contend that programmes underpinned by a radical Adult Education perspective, which respects the capacity of the learner to understand and make sense of their lived experiences, can lead to the development of such attributes. We further argue that it is the value placed on the learners’ lived experiences which ultimately enables them to engage and succeed in accredited learning.

### **Benefits of adult learning**

Whilst adult educators and adult learners across the decades have long known and often espoused the benefits of adult learning, the small scale and frequently anecdotal nature of much of the evidence has resulted in policy makers paying scant regard to the evidence and under-resourcing of such programmes. Indeed, we would contend that there is a lack of political will to support critical education that enables adults to question the status quo, to challenge structural inequalities and to engender social transformation.

However, there have been several recent large-scale studies which provide

evidence of the wider benefits of adult learning, beyond those of facilitating individuals to gain qualifications and employment. Field's (2012) review of lifelong learning concludes that overall, there is evidence to support the view that there are economic and health benefits to participating in Adult Education. Marmot's (2015) argues that education can play a key role in improving health and well-being. This view is further supported by the UNESCO's (2016) *Third Global Report on Adult Learning*, which presents compelling evidence on a world-wide scale of the ways in which adult learning specifically impacts positively on health. The Learning and Work Institute's (2017) report on the benefits of adult learning in the UK indicates how engaging in adult learning improves not only health and economic opportunities for the adults engaged in learning, but can have significant impacts on the next generation, on their immediate family and friendship circles, as well as their wider communities.

In the UK, Ireland and indeed across most of the Western world, Adult Education has been pulled in many directions, often depending upon policy agendas. Indeed, for many years, the skills agenda has dominated the discourse with the major funding focus on providing programmes to up-skill the unemployed to (re-) enter the workforce. This narrow agenda operates within a deficit model of society, whereby those with few or no qualifications are deemed in need of training or education, in order to fulfil their designated role within society, as a responsible citizen. Other community based non-accredited programmes may enable those who are on the margins of society e.g. those with addictions, mental health issues, homeless, to develop resilience and the ability to cope better with their problems – another version of the deficit citizen model. Approaches to adult learning which espouse Freire's (1970) consciousness-raising and collective transformation are frequently under-resourced and ultimately axed, when the opportunity arises. In NI, two prime examples of this are the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Ulster People's College. The WEA, which has a long history of Adult Education in the UK since it started in 1903, was first established in NI in 1910. Although it still operates in other regions of the UK and is committed to bringing learning to those who are most disadvantaged, the NI branch fell victim to funding cuts in 2014 and ceased operating (WEA, 2018). The Ulster People's College was established as a residential Adult Education college in 1982, to help tackle problems of socio-economic disadvantage and address cultural/political division. It similarly faced a funding crisis in 2011, resulting in its insolvency. Both organisations provided accredited Adult Education programmes, which created pathways to higher level study. Their closure leaves a huge gap in Adult Education for social change in NI.

## University Adult Education

Universities across the UK and Ireland have long established traditions of providing Adult Education (Durucan, 1986; Fieldhouse, 1996; Jones, Moseley and Thomas, 2010; Kelly, 1962; McIlroy and Spencer, 1988; Slowey and Schuetze, 2012) and NI is no exception to this. Whilst Queens University Belfast had a long-standing extra-mural department, which provided evening classes to adults, as a new university, Ulster University's contribution to Adult Education initially took the form of an Institute of Continuing Education (Hawthorne-Steele, Moreland and Rooney, 2015). Rogers (2014) makes a critical distinction between the extra-mural tradition, which was largely unaccredited community-based courses, organised by university departments, as opposed to the more recent continuing education tradition. The latter is viewed as a forerunner to the widening participation model, which sought to open the doors of universities to non-traditional students to gain access to courses of study already on offer within the university.

In his analysis of the demise of university Adult Education in the 1990s, Rogers (*ibid.*) suggests three main factors contributed to this. Firstly, an increased appetite for accredited Adult Education, which enabled those in employment to improve their career prospects (continuing professional development), coupled with economic pressure to up-skill the workforce in a rapidly changing technological environment (Further Education and Training). Both these strands of Adult Education remain core foci of government agendas and much of the literature in the field today. Secondly, changes in the education landscape with the creation of Colleges of Further Education, polytechnics (which later became new universities) and the development of distance learning contributed to a greater choice of sites for adult learning. In the UK, the *Further Education Act* (1992) relegated all pre-university level qualifications to the business of Colleges of Further Education, effectively cutting off the life-blood of many university Adult Education departments.

This policy was intrinsically linked to Roger's (2014) second point, the internal hostility faced by university adult educators from other departments across the university. Rogers (*ibid.*, p. 17) claims that this stemmed largely from the alternative educational paradigm operating within the extra-mural tradition, which 'did not encourage simply academic study but also frequently direct action based on sound understandings of the issues and contexts involved'. He suggests that traditional academics were reluctant to engage in community-based programmes, because these often pushed them into areas beyond their

expertise, and forced them to confront their limitations and accept instead that knowledge is contested and can arise from many sites of authority (Baumann, 1992). The constructivist view of knowledge and notions of university civic engagement are becoming much more widely accepted within mainstream sites of academia. There nevertheless remains a staunch core, whose views remain similar to Roger's (2014) earlier experiences of working in Magee University College's Institute of Continuing Education. Rogers (*ibid*, p. 18) cites the example of 'a major programme for the unemployed in Derry/Londonderry, some of them second and even third generation unemployed, the new University of Ulster Registrar of the day told us in no uncertain terms that a university was no place for such people.' Despite its shaky foundation, and notwithstanding changes in administration and geographic location, adult and community education has maintained a strong foothold in Ulster University academic life, predominantly through the remnants of the previous Department of Adult and Continuing Education (now housed within Youth and Community Studies) and more visibly, in the Centre for Flexible Education. Across both these units lies a strong commitment to recognising and valuing learning in its many forms and settings; providing educational opportunities for non-traditional students and particularly those from areas facing high socio-economic disadvantage; and perhaps most pointedly, understanding that learning opportunities need to start where the learners are, both geographically i.e. in their communities and in a format, structure, time, venue that suits them.

### **Background to the study**

For 15 years, the Community Development team at Ulster University have delivered the BSc Hons Community Development, a part-time professionally endorsed degree for those currently working or volunteering in the field of community development. The team have always been committed to ensuring that entry to the degree remains open to those who do not have traditional entry requirements e.g. GCSEs and A level or equivalent. To that end, the team facilitated entry for non-traditional students, via Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), as it is known in the Republic of Ireland. Whilst this initially involved applicants seeking individual guidance to complete an APEL portfolio, entry via the APEL pathway became so successful that the team devised an APEL short course, to enable a group of potential degree students to come together, share experiences and gain the information required to complete their APEL entry portfolio.

The APEL course has been delivered over 12 weeks one day per week and over one full week. It runs on the university campus and enables prospective degree students to gain an experience of third level study. As university students, they gain access to all of the university systems and tutors help to familiarise students with the software and systems that they will use when they commence their degree. Thus, students are given a tour of the library and inducted into the technology that will enable them to gain access to learning materials provided by the course team. The APEL course enables adults who have been away from formal education for some time to gain confidence in themselves and their capacity to learn. The programme adopts a Freirean pedagogy, whereby the tutors create a shared learning space, encouraging learners to work collectively, learn from and support each other. The APEL Community Development Pathway was granted external recognition by way of an Adult Learner STAR Award in 2016.

This ethos of collaborative learning, respect for the different perspectives that learners bring and recognition of the different places where they may be on their learning journey are core to the BSc Hons Community Development. We recognise that our learners do not cease to be non-traditional students upon entry to the degree. There is therefore a strong element of pastoral support throughout the programme; a good balance between traditional assessment e.g. essays and written work and other forms of assessment e.g. reflective practice, oral presentations, class debates. The team have successfully maintained 100% coursework assessments for this programme throughout its history and have ensured that formal examinations have not been used as a method of assessment. This is an ethical choice based on several key factors. Firstly, we acknowledge the huge stress and anxiety which such forms of assessment usually cause, particularly for those who have perhaps failed exams in the past. Of equal importance are our misgivings on the use of examinations as a method of assessment, which are in fact geared more towards memorising and regurgitating information rather than demonstrating an understanding of key concepts.

In addition to the degree and APEL programmes, the Community Development team have been committed to widening participation to non-traditional students via a range of other short courses, operated through the Centre for Flexible Education at Ulster University. We have developed these in collaboration with or at the request of community organisations, to meet a specific need or demand. One such programme is the Unblocking Potential,

developed in response to requests for a short course, like the APEL programme, that could enable adults to gain access to university courses other than Community Development. The Unblocking Potential programme was designed to encourage adults of any age, who had left school with few or no qualifications, to 1) re-engage with education; 2) understand the barriers which had hindered their progress in the education system; and 3) raise their self-confidence in their ability to learn. This enabled participants to develop learning and study strategies, which best suited their circumstances and raised their aspirations to further study. Viewed as a first step back into education, a particular feature of this programme is that it runs in a community venue. Recognising how difficult it is for adult returners to come into an educational institution, no matter how grand the building nor how awesome the latest technology, we believe it is important to provide students with a safe comfortable space, where they can begin a learning journey with others from their community. Teaming up with our colleagues in the Centre for Flexible Education, students can avail of bursaries to cover the costs of the course, thus removing the financial barrier. This course has been running over four years now and has been delivered across 10 different community venues. The need for this kind of programme has been recognised more broadly within Ulster University and we are working with our colleagues in the Centre for Flexible Education, to discuss how the Unblocking Potential programme could form a core part of a university-wide access level programme.

The following section outlines the methodology used for our research with students engaged in the programmes highlighted above. We will then present our findings and discuss how these contribute to our understanding of overcoming barriers to adult learning.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to better understand how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can best support and engage with non-traditional adult students, i.e. students who have previously left school with few or no qualifications and/or come from a background where there was little expectation of progressing to third level study. The adult students who form the respondents for this research were part of three distinct groups:

1. A 2017 cohort of 36 Unblocking Potential (UP) students provided narrative-testimonies of their experience in formal and informal education.

2. A 2017 cohort of 25 APEL students provided narrative-testimonies of their educational journey from primary school to the HE access course they were currently undertaking.
3. 33 graduates from the BSc Hons Community Development were interviewed as part of our 10-year review of the programme, in 2014.

The approaches adopted in this research are qualitative, are grounded in the pluralist tradition which encourages critical questioning and reflection, and primarily involved analysing the written narrative-testimonies of our UP and APEL students and conducting telephone interviews with our former (graduate) BSc Hons Community Development students.

The narrative-testimony approach was selected because, in our view, it best captures the personal and temporal aspects of experience and includes in its analysis the nexus that exists between individual experiences and social, economic and cultural contexts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In such approaches, knowledge is created through the testimonies of lived experiences and the meanings attached to these experiences. In such ways, the ambiguity and complexity of human existence can be more fully illuminated (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Similarly, the one-to-one interview method (for our graduate students) was selected because of the opportunity to hear the voices of those who had successfully completed the journey from non-traditional, adult-returning student to BSc graduates.

Both approaches are grounded in the social constructivist school of thought where: subjective meanings, lived experiences and sense of identity are valued; knowledge and the learner are seen as interdependent; and learning is rooted in experience, culture and context (Bruner, 1986).

### **Data analysis**

The telephone interviews were transcribed to facilitate detailed qualitative analysis. The interview transcripts and the written narrative-testimonies were analysed by coding the data, categorising emergent themes and testing the validity of developing patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This recursive process is commonly referred to in the literature as content analysis (Stemler, 2001), thematic analysis (Kvale, 1996), or recursive comparative analysis (Cooper and McIntyre, 1993). To protect the anonymity of our current and former students, the following general descriptors have been assigned to

the opinions expressed in the transcripts and narrative-testimonies: UPS = Unblocking Potential student; AS = APEL student; GS = graduate student.

### **Findings and discussion section**

The following section presents and discusses the qualitative data from our three student groups and is based on their narrative-testimonies of their time at school, their re-engagement with learning, overcoming the barriers they faced entering HE and their accounts of the impact of successfully completing their undergraduate degree. To capture the sense of journey these students have experienced, the data is presented in the above chronological order.

### **Memories and legacies of school**

The data across the three student groups show that although some recall their school lives 'fondly' and spoke about 'encouraging teachers' and 'supportive parents', a far greater proportion recounted their time at school in negative terms. For these students, memories of school are dominated by 'feelings of fear' and the 'stigma of being poor':

I can still remember my first day, half of the class was standing crying [UPS].

I constantly felt on edge and I was aware of the authority the teachers possessed [AS].

I remember the feeling of fear in Primary school, of being afraid of getting something wrong [GS].

Education for a lot of lads in my school in the 1980s wasn't a priority ... social deprivation, unemployment and, in some cases, prison was all a lot of them had to look forward to [AS].

My friends and I came from a deprived housing estate ... we were labelled as scum ... we were seated at the back of her class and had to learn ourselves [AS].

Some pupils from families on the 'social class ladder' looked down upon other pupils who were not as well off financially as they were [UPS].

It was also frequently claimed that, because of social class labelling and, in some cases, gendered assumptions, many teachers had 'very little or no expectations'

for the young people in their care. Moreover, these low expectations were often matched by the low aspiration of some of these students' parents:

I remember telling our careers advisor I wanted to be a pathologist and he told me that career would not be for someone from my background [AS].

I didn't really get on with the teachers and felt like they had given up on me. One told me 'you will not make anything of your life' [GS].

My form teacher told me 'Computers for boys – Home Economics for girls' [UPS].

There wasn't as much encouragement and influence from my parents and wider family [AS].

I wish my parents had believed in me more, valued education and pushed me to achieve [AS].

These, in some cases decades-old, recollections remain, of course, monotonously consistent themes in studies which have since regularly investigated the deprivation-underachievement nexus, e.g. Raffo *et al.* (2007), Francis and Wills (2012) and, more recently, Leitch *et al.*'s (2017) NI-based research which all highlighted limited familial support, low levels of educational aspiration among young people and their parents and low expectations on the part of some teachers as key inhibitors of attainment among working class school children. These same studies also concur that the most profound legacy of such experiences is, often, a long-term debilitating impact on an individual's self-confidence and self-esteem.

Many of the adult-returning students in this research who recalled an unhappy and unproductive time at school accepted that they 'had very little interest in school', and 'did not properly apply themselves'. However, several expressed 'deep regrets' about 'leaving school without any qualifications whatsoever' and spoke about 'carrying this sense of failure ... throughout [their] ... adult life':

Sometimes I didn't want to even bother at all [GS].

I was bored, unchallenged and lacked interest [AS].

I wasn't too bothered if I passed or failed my GCSE's, as I was under the impression that it wouldn't affect me getting work [AS].

[School was] ... a complete disaster that would impact the rest of my life [AS].

I am bitterly disappointed that I left school without any qualifications [GS].

If I had the opportunity to go back to school now, I would jump at it [UPS].

### **A local (re-)engagement with learning**

For many of the three student groups, the catalyst for their re-engagement with learning was the community-based access programme Unblocking Potential (UP). Although several respondents reported feeling 'extremely apprehensive' and 'very nervous' about returning to education, the consensus among these students was that such anxieties were significantly alleviated because the UP course was run in their own communities:

My life was in a real rut and I thought my whole life was just parenting [AS].

I suppose I thought if I don't go now, I might not get another second chance [AS.]

I was so unsure ... I even said to my husband 'what the hell am I doing?' [GS].

First night ... I could hardly walk into the class ... nerves nearly got the better of me [UPS]

[My friend] says 'come on, its only two hours in the community centre' [AS].

To be honest, no, I would not have gone had it not been local and not with friends and people from here I already knew [UPS].

These students also spoke about how the course was structured 'to suit the needs of ordinary people' and those with 'parenting responsibilities'. Opportunities for peer learning and peer support were also highlighted:

First session ... they just made us feel relaxed and told us they would support us [UPS].

Wasn't what I expected ... very informal ... serious but informal [UPS].

Cost [for travel] is a factor ... and so is time away from the kids ... took me less than five minutes to walk there [AS].

They even got us to agree start and finish times to suit the ones with young children [UPS].

Very clear instructions ... no problem if you didn't understand ... you just asked [AS].

Because most of us knew each other ... we kept in touch during the week and helped each other with the homework tasks [GS.]

We all spoke about our hopes and fears ... hearing the whole class one-by-one repeat my concerns really made me think 'wow, nobody is brimming with confidence here' ... it is such a relief to hear that you are not the only one going 'crikey, am I up to this?' [AS].

Some students contrasted the UP course with their time at school and others claimed that it helped them process the negative experiences of their early education:

The difference this time was, unlike school, we all wanted to be there ... we all wanted to learn [UPS].

Not at all like school ... [we were] made to feel equal to the tutors [AS].

Helps you understand how your early learning experiences impact on your attitudes to learning as an adult [AS].

The community [UP] course changed everything for me ... made me see that I wasn't stupid ... and could even think about applying for University [GS].

Such responses concur with Knowles (1984, p. 47) who argues that learning environments most conducive to adult learners should cause 'adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported' and that there should be 'a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers'.

### **Overcoming the barriers to HE**

Upon successful completion of the Unblocking Potential (UP) and/or APEL access courses, a significant majority of these adult students applied for entry onto the BSc Hons Community Development course. The broader literature highlights that the world views of adult learners are formed by internal and

external influences and past/present educational experiences; and that these views in turn form a push/pull dynamic between the adult learner's motivation and their barriers to learning (Chao, 2009). The adult learners in this study claimed to have been primarily motivated to do so for two main reasons: firstly, 'to get the chance to go to Uni after messing up at school'; and secondly, to 'be a positive role model' to their children:

It would be amazing to have a degree in 3 years' time, something I never thought I would do in my lifetime [AS].

More than anything, I wanted to be a good example to my kids ... show them that school and education and learning are important [GS].

However, despite being sincerely motivated, many students highlight a range of barriers (perceived or otherwise), which they had to overcome as they entered HE. Without question, the most frequently cited barrier was their lack of confidence. The consensus here was that 'encouragement', 'small wins' and 'peer support' were the key factors in overcoming the 'whole self-confidence issue':

My biggest fear is confidence ... I get nervous talking under pressure and I end up rambling on [AS].

It can be very stressful meeting new people ... you don't want to make a fool of yourself [UPS].

It took time, but I learned to rebuild my confidence. I find it amazing that I was able to put my foot back into a classroom [AS].

I fear that my bad experiences in school will make me disheartened during the [degree] course [AS].

I felt confident to be there in that classroom. I have now become involved in a better education system [GS].

Doing this course has helped to build on my confidences and help me be involved in a classroom setting again [UPS].

Just a little 500-word essay ... tutor says 'well done, great work' ... I am thinking 'wow, maybe I can do this' [AS].

We all pull together ... tutor says 'it's ok to help each other' ... everyone helps everyone [AS].

As Merriam *et al.* (2007) have argued, adult learners are more likely to overcome, or at least mediate, barriers around re-entering education when attempting to do so also involves: the opportunity to make friends and meet other people (social relationships); a desire to serve their community (social welfare); and an ambition for employment enhancement (professional advancement).

Students in the current study also mentioned fears of 'not fitting in' because no one in their family had ever gone to university and the challenges involved in 'juggling study and family commitments'. Fears of failure and 'letting people down' were also cited:

At the start, I was thinking will other students even accept me ... I always just thought university was only for people with money [GS].

Even the thought of it (HE) is quite daunting ... I have some worries about juggling work, children and the degree all at once [AS].

Being a carer for my mother can mean my life can be hectic at times [UPS].

This will be challenging as I have two jobs and I am a single parent [AS].

I fear that I will start to doubt myself ... this is something I have thought about and to fail would be a massive knock [UPS].

A big fear for me would be letting myself down and other people around me [AS].

### **Transformative learning**

According to the accounts of many of these adult-returning students who subsequently successfully completed their BSc Community Development degree, their learning journeys has had a transformative impact on their personal and professional lives:

It was a great time in my life and I met some amazing people. In many ways a whole new world of possibilities was presented to me all because I was encouraged to believe in myself [GS].

I'll tell you this ... I am a very different person now ... a million miles away from the boy who left school with absolutely nothing [GS].

Never thought I'd say this, but I hope to become a Sports Psychologist [GS].

Beforehand, I never felt capable ... doing the degree has transformed my confidence ... I see posts advertised now and think 'why not? I could apply for that' [GS].

The degree was just the start for me; I became hooked on University study and have recently completed a MSc in Human Rights and Criminal Justice [GS].

I am in the same post but feel so much more confident in my ability ... I feel as though I am taken more seriously; and in truth, I take my role more seriously [GS].

These data chime with Learning and Work Institute (2017) report on the benefits of adult learning in the UK which found that adult learning not only improves the life-chances of the individual learner but also their immediate family, friendship circles, and their wider community. In addition, it is clear that these graduates are now fulfilling Gramscian (1971) roles in their own communities as 'organic intellectuals' – utilising their newfound skills and knowledge to the betterment of their, often acutely deprived, neighbourhoods and encouraging learning therein.

Moreover, and from a Freirean perspective, these data also evidence the patent benefits of the culturally relevant and dialectical pedagogies in the Unblocking Potential, APEL and Community Development degree and the development of higher order critical thinking skills among these adult-returning graduates. In such ways, these adult learners concomitantly embrace and embody Freirean notions of critical pedagogy.

These respondents also spoke about the transformations their learning journeys have made in terms of their family and community lives. Here, these students talked about: 'setting a really good example around education' for their children; making their home 'more conducive to learning and studying'; and 'making a difference' in their 'own areas' by applying their new skills and knowledge 'to the betterment' of their communities and 'encouraging other people' therein to avail of the opportunities within community-based Adult Education.

I now instil values in my children that education is continual and that there is no expiry date for learning [GS].

I'm now able to set a really good example to my 8-year-old daughter - I want to show her through studying myself, how important it is to reach your full potential [GS].

Best thing is now I feel confident to guide and help my kids with their homework [GS].

My community has lots of problems ... doing the degree (in community development) has helped me to help my community [GS].

Lots of people round now realise that they messed up at school ... I am involved in lots of local education projects [GS].

I hope to continue working within my local community and make as much positive change and influence as possible [GS].

The data we have analysed here speaks to several ongoing debates around the long-term impact of educational inequality and the best methods to create a more inclusive educational landscape for adult-returning students, their families and communities.

The decades-old accounts of unhappy and unproductive times at school and the somewhat predictable long-term consequences in terms of self-confidence and self-esteem paint a particularly depressing picture and highlight that such experiences come with a substantial social cost. Moreover, it is clear that firstly, for many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds little has changed (Leitch *et al.*, 2017) and secondly, these negative experiences play an important role in the inter-generational transmission of educational failure and more generally, significantly inform familial attitudes towards learning.

### **Conclusion**

In terms of creating an inclusive educational landscape, this paper makes clear that there are patent benefits for everyone of HEIs re-engaging with non-traditional, adult students in their own communities and on their own terms. In order to do this successfully, those providing adult learning opportunities must adopt culturally relevant and dialectical pedagogies. They should also be cognisant that the motivations and barriers to their learning are, as Chao (2009)

argues, created, formed and changed in three spaces - the cognitive, emotive and environmental dimensions.

The narrative-testimonies of our adult students ably demonstrate the social value and transformative nature of such learning on personal, familial and community levels. The historiographical presentation of these testimonies evidences the impact of learning approaches grounded in the principles of critical pedagogy. In other words, these learners' own words illuminate their nascent recognition of: 1) the inherently political nature of education; the relationship between social justice and learning; and 2) the emancipatory capacity of such learning to awaken their critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Moreover, many of these adult learners have also returned to their communities to articulate the needs of working-class people, encourage other adults therein to re-engage in education and their children to follow the example they now set.

On a broader, macro level, a decade of austerity in the UK and Ireland and recent shifts in both jurisdictions towards a yet more commodified HE sector have relegated the importance of (properly funded) community-based programmes aimed at widening access for non-traditional students – including adult returners. Thus, the current landscape for such inclusive interventions is challenging to say the least. Despite recognition by the DELNI (2012) report of the role that environmental factors play in creating barriers to education and its clear identification of the need for HEIs to engage in community outreach, the political vacuum in NI has created a stagnation and lack of clear strategic direction.

In a recent timely and thought-provoking paper, Aideen Quilty and her colleagues at UCD outlined 'a vision for social justice within education' and further called 'all education actors' within the university and community sectors to 'imagine a new educational landscape' a landscape which should 'span multiple entrance and progression pathways, inclusive pedagogies and attractive physical and social environments' (Quilty *et al.*, 2016, p. 41). It is our hope that this paper, which gives expression to the voices and lived experiences of our adult students, makes a modest contribution in terms of realising such a landscape.

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