

Research Summary:

‘Second chance learners’: an exploratory study of the choices, constraints, values and aspirations of some adult women learners in the FE sector

*“Without education I am nothing – for me this has been like winning the lottery”
(quote from a level 2 adult women learner)*

The Further Education (FE) sector in the UK has historically provided adult learners with an opportunity to retrain or given a ‘second chance’ for those who did not meet their full potential at school. Yet in spite of the valuable service FE offers generally and to adult learners in particular, the recent significant cuts to funding and the introduction of adult loansⁱ reflects its low priority in policy terms. These funding cuts and policy changes have implications for adult learners who attempt to re-enter education, particularly those who already have little economic capital or have not been able to reach their full educational potential previously. These disadvantages particularly affects women learners, who may be attempting study so they can return to work after having children or free themselves from low paid insecure work. Furthermore, adult learners are not only a low priority in policy and funding terms, this is also reflected in a lack of empirical research that represents the ‘voices’ of adult learners in the FE sector compared to traditionally aged learnersⁱⁱ. Instead, the majority of research of adult learners in FE sector focuses on university progression or employability rates of adult learnersⁱⁱⁱ. Although these measures of progression and economic value are important, this view has the potential to present women who choose not to progress to university or employment as unsuccessful. I argue that this approach to research and policy ignores the ‘voices’ of adult women learners and what they gain from FE in addition to employability prospects. This pilot study was designed to fulfil this research gap based on my experiences as a lecturer in the FE sector, where I gained an appreciation and admiration for the adversity and obstacles women learners in particular overcome in order to gain an education.

The Study

This pilot study was conducted in three FE colleges, representing the variety of locations (rural, urban and town), size and course specialities. Interviews were conducted with nine women who were aged 25 plus and studying vocational courses up to NQF level 3. The interviews used life history narrative methods and life history grids to detail respondents’ family background, educational experiences, choices and aspirations. The focus of the interviews being on understanding why women learners return to education and what they gain from it once they engage with it. Interviews with key staff were used to understand their perspectives of the benefits of studying for adult women learners in FE and the barriers that learners overcome to participate. The study was conducted over one academic year and institutions visited once, the PhD thesis plans to use similar research approach but will be larger in scale and involve at least two interviews per respondent.

Findings

The sample of women interviewed represented a variety of: ages (from late 20s to late 40s), ethnic origins, prior educational attainment, marital status and parental status. The women in this study reflect on how engaging in Vocational Courses in the Further Education sector has helped them to realise their long held aspirations. The women in this study articulate how education had helped them to overcome adversity, resist oppression, regain confidence and improve their well-being.

Key messages:

1. Women learners described their experiences of FE as emancipatory where they used education to escape difficult domestic situations and become financially independent.
2. Where women learners had been unfulfilled in their previous employment in low paid uninspiring work, they had talked about how their FE course had given them hope of achieving a better future.
3. The chance to do a course in FE had helped some learners positively address some of the negative learning experiences they had had in school.
4. The women learners who had children discussed how being back in education themselves had given them more confidence to engage with their child's teacher and help with homework.
5. A strong message from the learners who were also mothers was their desire to be a 'good role' model for their children and in particular for their daughters.
6. Learners noted that it was the support of other learners who could relate to 'their' situation and the staff, which had motivated them to stay on their course when it became difficult.

Conclusions

The women in this study reflected that although their initial goal on enrolment was to gain a qualification or employment, they had appreciated much broader benefits that they had not anticipated and these were of equal personal value. These benefits are not easily measured (or valued) in government statistics in the same way employability and achievement rates are, particularly in these times of austerity; yet they still added significant value to the women's lives. Although tangible gains are important to a achieving economic well being, benefits such as gaining hope, feeling more confident to help with homework, being a good role model to their children and improved well-being are also important. These softer gains that the women learners described are crucial, as they not only have the potential to improve the women learners' lives but that of their family too. This study provides useful insights into the lived experiences of adult women learners in the FE sector, and the potential for FE to transform their lives.

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ⁱ Association of Colleges. (2015). *Analysis of 24+ Advanced Learning Loans for the Association of Colleges*. Retrieved 6 30, 2015 from AoC: https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/2014_15%2024%2B%20Loans%20Report%20V1%201%20June%202015.pdf

ⁱⁱ Bloomer, M., & Hodkinson, P. (1997). *Moving into FE: the voice of the learner*. London: FEDA

ⁱⁱⁱ Blanden, J., Buscha, F., Sturgis, P., & Urwin, P. (2012). Measuring the earnings retruns to lifelong learning in the UK. *Economics of Education Review* , 31, 501-514.