Measuring Success in Adult Education: Recognising Diverse Outcomes From a Diverse Sector

SARAH COSS

Abstract

This article explores the experiences of a group of women who having achieved success in education and returned to the adult learning environment again. A creative methodological approach allows the women to describe in their own words experiences of educational success and motivations to return to learning. Discussion points predominantly focus on outcomes that fall outside those typically measured. These include alternative interpretations of success; benefits of diverse learning groups; personal growth and bias, and connections and friendship. Questions of success and outcomes in later life are also explored. Conclusions identify the importance of recognising the diversity of experience in adult education, the varying methods of measuring success and the need to ensure learner stories are heard.

Keywords: Measuring Educational Success; Diverse Learning Environments; Measuring 'Soft Skills'; Educational Outcomes and Ageism; Learner Stories

Introduction

In my work as a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 5 Applied Social Studies tutor, I am tasked with encouraging my learners to employ their sociological imagination (Mills,1959). Often, the role of the social researcher involves the ability to do just this - to see the extraordinary within the ordinary. Through my working relationship with the women who are the focus of this article it became apparent that their experiences within adult education were noteworthy and that others could benefit from listening to these learner voices. The AONTAS Adult Learner Journal theme of 'success' brought these women to mind for the reason that they had all achieved significant success, both educationally and professionally, before they returned to the learning

environment again at a lower level on the NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications) than they had previously experienced. SOLAS, an agency of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, reported that 15,212 (17.9%) of all 2019 Lifelong Learning enrolments had a third level degree (Dulee-Kingsolving and Guerin, 2020). The women at the centre of this article have all studied at third level, including post-graduate study. More significantly, their own descriptions of learning experiences across their lifespan fit closely with what was termed by Cyril O. Houle in 1961 as 'Learning-orientated learners' (cited in Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2011, p.55). These learning-orientated learners 'seek learning for its own sake', have been engrossed in learning 'as long as they can remember', choose 'serious programs on TV and radio', and are 'avid readers'. Learners in this category 'join groups, classes and organisations for educational reasons' (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2011, p.55). While much research focusses on the educationally disadvantaged, this article explores the experiences of a group who are not defined as educationally disadvantaged. The research seeks to qualitatively consider the experiences of these learners to uncover and explore how their experiences of progression and success align with the value placed upon learning using a hierarchical framework such as the NFQ.

Back to Education – A Contextual Examination

The women at the centre of this article met while participating on a Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) course at QQI Level 5 on the NFQ. BTEI courses lead to a range of accreditation at levels 1-6 on the NFQ. This particular course, co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Social Fund (ESF) was part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020 (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2020).

The BTEI typically targets individuals and groups that experience particular and acute barriers to participation and are more difficult to engage in the formal learning process. In Ireland, such courses are run by a range of education providers, including the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). In 2012, BTEI Operational Guidelines were issued by the Further Education Development Unit to Vocational Education Committees (VECs) to assist them with managing, administering and delivering programmes using this funding stream (the VEC was re-structured to establish the current ETBs in 2013). At the time of writing, no updated BTEI guidelines were available (although new guidelines may be issued to coincide with ESF Plus 2021-2027 (EU Funds Ireland, 2020).

In the 2012 guidelines it is stated that priority for spaces on BTEI courses should be given to those most educationally disadvantaged. Furthermore, in order to ensure that funding is reaching those with lower educational attainment, 'not more than 30% of provision may be aimed at adults who have already achieved certification at upper second level education' (Further Education Development Unit, 2012, p.6). Eligibility for BTEI courses, including free tuition, includes those with less than upper-second level education but also includes the following categories, summarised below:

Category 2a and 2b - Persons entitled to, or dependants of persons entitled to:

- a medical card
- an unemployment payment
- a means-tested welfare payment
- working family payment (formerly known as family income supplement)
- participate in VTOS or Youthreach

Category 3 – All persons with less than upper second level education who are not eligible under Category 2A e.g. persons not in the labour force, persons in employment

Category 4 – others. For this category, fees are charged for participation on the course.

The overall aim of the BTEI is to 'increase the participation of young people and adults with less than upper second level education in a range of part-time accredited learning opportunities leading to awards on the NFQ' (Further Education Development Unit, 2012, p.3). The primary target group is adults who have not completed upper second level education, particularly the so-called 'hard to reach' that experience strong barriers to participation, access, transfer and progression to other education or employment pathways. In the Irish Further Education and Training (FET) landscape, one of the three strategic priorities from the FET strategy 2020-2024 is 'pathways'. The goal is to offer clear pathways into FET, within FET and from FET enabling 'smart choices at all stages of people's lives and careers' (SOLAS, 2021, p.1). However, there is also an acknowledgment that pathways are not always in one direction,

and learners with a third level qualification can, and do, enter at lower levels on the NFQ (SOLAS, 2021). Although there is a distinct and pressing need to continue to ensure that we meet the needs of the educationally disadvantaged and marginalised in our society, we can simultaneously acknowledge the benefits that participation in learning can bring for all. The women at the centre of this research all met the BTEI eligibility criteria as stated above and accessed the QQI course because (at the time of studying) they were unemployed and receiving a jobseeker payment. They joined a wider group of learners from diverse educational and social backgrounds to participate in an accredited module leading to QQI Level 5 certification. This research sought to understand more about their motivation to return to formal education at this time in their lives and to hear their own accounts of personal success during this learning episode.

The teaching and learning that these women were engaged in included a pedagogy that sought to promote mutual learning, equality and solidarity 'driven by dialogue with and between learners and their teachers' (Duckworth and Smith, 2019, p.28). It involved radical adult education practices which sought to recognise and lean on learner experiences and existing knowledge as a starting point in the curriculum, offering a space for group members to interact, to share and to learn together. There was also a commitment to creating conditions whereby transformative learning could take place, in this instance, learning that can extend beyond the individual into the family and the community and includes a 'personalised critique and understanding of social inequality and the student's positionality with this' (Duckworth and Smith, 2019, p.28).

Discussions about education are dominated by measurement and comparisons of educational outcomes and these measurements seem to direct much of educational policy and practice (Biesta, 2008). One such neoliberal, managerial indicator used to measure and classify education is that of outcomes - a topic widely debated and discussed in adult basic education, further education and higher education (Tett and Hamilton (eds), 2019; Fitzsimons and McGrath, 2019; Fitzsimons, 2017; Finnegan, 2016; Grummell, 2014; Hussey and Smith, 2008; 2002; Biesta, 2008). Often, it is these managerial measurements that determine whether a learning course is successful or not. Chosen units of measurement have been influenced by the inclusion of the Human Capital perspective, in particular how the human capital model has been translated into measurable indicators of learning (Allatt and Tett, 2019). The human

capital model has led to a discourse that views learning in relation to economic potential, in what Allatt and Tett describe as a focus on productivity that comes at the expense of the type of knowledge that leads to the development of an individual's potential and greater well-being (Allatt and Tett, 2019). Some of this discussion can be summed up here using a reflective question posed by Gert Biesta: 'are we measuring what we value, or are we measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure?' (Biesta, 2008, p.35).

There is a position within education which maintains that although learning outcomes can be valuable if properly used, they have been misappropriated and adopted widely at all levels within the education system to facilitate the managerial process (Hussey and Smith, 2002). One research method we can employ to counter this reliance on tightly constrained statistical units of measurement is to seek out the voice of the learner to add nuance and descriptive depth to our definitions of what constitutes measurable outcomes and progress. Collecting learner voices allows us to gain a wider perspective on the many and varied successes of learners. Following a piece of research on learner progression within community-based adult learning, Janis Macintyre stated that learner opinions are often missing from debates and there is a need to explore progression from the points of view of the learners in order to ensure that we take account of their experiences (Macintyre, 2012, pp.187-189). Similarly, in their research with literacy practitioners, Allatt and Tett (2019) uncover stories of practitioners working within and around the measurement criteria to produce alternative data aimed at capturing the type of outcomes they were observing. The practitioners noted the difficulties encountered when using progression, qualification and employment as criteria for success and instead, detailed the use of tools such as learner impact statements to measure 'soft skills'. These are typically skills that are not accredited and are not easy to record, such as increased self-confidence and 'whole-life impacts' (Allatt and Tett, 2019, p.47-48). In a comparable manner, my research offers the women a space to tell us a little more about their educational journey, their experiences together and their outcomes, as told in their own words. In the act of sharing their stories, the women highlight the diversity of experiences within adult and further education and add qualitative depth to discussions relating to learner outcomes and learner success. The AONTAS Community Education 20 Years since Publication of Learning for Life paper states that:

> Quantitative assessments of lifelong learning participation that are based on metrics such as completion of a single minor or major award, mask the

life and learning experiences of the learners [...] Each learner has a unique experience and success means many things to different people (AONTAS, 2020, p.2).

Methodology: Life Histories, Codes and Conversation

This research includes the significant contributions of five women, participating across the globe and two significantly different time zones! While research based on just five cases makes it difficult to achieve qualitative depth, I had prior experience of working with these women in a teaching and learning environment. I was confident in their ability to reflect and consider their experiences and furthermore, to provide stimulating and interesting statements which could inspire future research into this cohort of adult learner. All findings included in this article are generated from an initial creative exercise with a follow-up focus group taking place online, full details of these methods are outlined below. Leaning on the work of Letherby (2003) and Oakley (2000; 1999) and following from previous research methods I have undertaken (Coss, 2017; 2016), I used a series of open-ended activities and 'codes' (Freire, 1993) based on the overarching theme of success to allow participants bring as much of themselves as possible to the research process. During our focus group, I once again put my trust in the mantra 'the group can take care of itself' (Sheehy, 2001, p.33) and trusted that these women would engage in a vibrant and explorative facilitated discussion together. The unstructured nature of my research activities provided qualitative depth by enabling respondents to talk about their experiences within their own frames of reference, drawing upon meanings with which they were familiar and allowing those meanings of events and relationships to be understood on their own terms (May, 2001). The research was co-constructed (Bryman, 2012; May, 2001) and participants were invited to approve and comment on a first draft, including choosing their own pseudonym to use. Furthermore, it was an ethical consideration of mine that prior to participation in this article, all of the women had completed their period of formal learning and were no longer in an assessment relationship with me at the time of research. The responses of the women included in this article are summarised, stylised accounts, unless their words appear verbatim and where this is the case it is noted using double quotation marks or indentation. The women took part in a reflective exercise which I entitled *Draw my Life: Education Edition*. Guidance was given to the group, which included the direction to:

> […] draw, write or record your educational experiences to date, across your life span. Think about any educational experiences that come to mind; any setting; any level; any people... essentially any time that you determine you were engaged in learning something.

Participants were invited to add images/words/colour/symbols that reflected their thoughts and feelings about these educational experiences, and finally, to further reflect on which of these educational experiences they would describe as 'successful', making a note of why they considered them so. Following from this exercise, a series of codes were used within a focus group to stimulate conversation. These codes will be explained in more detail during the discussion of the findings.

Early Experiences of Success

The 'Draw my Life' exercise was enlightening for me from the very beginning of this research process, because the beginning is exactly where these learners started. Although the prompt given did include the phrase 'across the life span', I was struck by how prominent the early educational experiences were, both in the life history work and later in the follow-up focus group. The word love was used many times in relation to schooling, with this love of learning fostered from a young age through socialisation, including the positive expectations of family, institutions and peers. Maggie Feely (2015) shared the stories of adult learners who experienced trauma in their early educational experiences and the subsequent importance of learning care when working with emotionally vulnerable adults. In sharp contrast, it was enlightening for me to listen to each one of these women independently make their declarations of love from such a young age:

> Henrietta - I just loved my primary school. The teachers used the Froebel method and we were engaged in active learning and immersive activities from the very beginning. There were a lot of trips to museums, gardens and exhibitions and everything just seemed to be intuitive and fun.

> Florence – I started primary school at the age of 3! I loved school, I always did, a small country two-room school with lovely teachers...

> Jade – Belonging to a school was very important to me, I was diligent and I had a role organising and helping others – I loved that role...

> Sonja – Fádo fádo! A small two-room national school in the country. Look! I even drew a picture of it, the Master's room and the junior room! I really liked school, I loved learning...
>
> Rachel – I *loved* school, especially primary school. I loved everything about it: the teachers, my classmates and learning. I was lucky it was easy for me.

While it is well documented that our early experiences can shape our later ones, particularly when we apply a psychodynamic lens (Tennant, 2006), it was insightful nonetheless to hear these women talk about their very early experiences when such open-ended prompts were given. Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, the group also named success in their early schooling with all of the women identifying that this was a setting they felt comfortable and capable in, with comments including terms such as: 'top of the class'; excelling; having fun; and having confidence. Skills named included: having a good memory; early and competent reading skills; coping skills; and strong social skills leading to feeling part of a tribe. Collecting the educational histories from adults who have had positive early experiences allows us better understand how these events shape the adult learner and subsequently informs our practice. However, like many adult learners, for most of the women the continued journey through education was not without difficulty despite their positive early-years experiences. At this point in the article I will take the opportunity to give some context from the women's lives to allow us understand more about the journey through adult education for each of them.

Directly after school, in the 1970/80s, Florence worked for years in a civil service job that she hated:

> From day one I hated it. It was so boring…it was incredible! I spent my lunchtime going to the agencies to see what else was available but there was just nothing, it was shocking. I mean, it was just emigration or get a job somewhere and just hang on to it.

Florence described feeling trapped - long hours working shifts meant she couldn't pursue a night course. Eventually, she took the decision to take a career break to attend a PLC course, then extended this career break for another two more years to complete her undergraduate studies. This was an overwhelmingly positive experience for Florence, and although she returned to her job due to financial necessity, she did enter education again at a later stage to achieve her

Masters in Journalism and subsequently gained what she described as a dream job working as an advocate and activist with a human rights organisation, which included work in New York and work with the UN. Following a company restructure that involved a permanent move of the offices to New York, Florence was made redundant in 2019.

Jade went from formal schooling into nursing (pre-degree nursing), and she progressed in this field. She recounted a time at a senior-level meeting when she suggested ideas which went unheard only to witness the same ideas raised at the following meeting by a doctor, however on this occasion those same ideas were met with enthusiasm. On leaving this meeting, Jade spoke to another colleague to help her process what had occurred, and alongside Jade's understanding of the gendered dimension to this encounter, she recalled her colleague informing her 'you don't have a ticket to the party, he is a doctor and you are a nurse'. This, among other motivators, was the reason Jade returned to formal learning to complete a Master's degree. Jade then moved away from nursing into personal coaching and on entering the BTEI classroom in 2019 was out of work and on jobseeker's benefit, describing herself as 'recently retired' (a descriptor we will return to later).

Sonja's early love of school was somewhat shattered by a difficult transition to secondary school, including a personal tragedy with the illness and death of her mother. During these difficult years she persisted and after completing a 'good Leaving Cert' she followed her (self-employed) father's advice and gained 'a pensionable job in banking'. Sonja was engaged in education throughout her time in banking and although progressing well in her career over the years, she decided to pursue a degree in UCD – an undertaking that involved huge personal sacrifice with classes for five nights of the week. Throughout her studies, Sonja continued to work in the bank, but was made redundant in 2018.

Henrietta also entered the workforce after completing her secondary education, being 'of an age that allowed her have a great career without having gone to university'. Henrietta did return to learning as a mature student, nurturing her passion for psychology to pursue a degree in UCD. Although 'life got in the way' Henrietta went on to 'plough her way accidentally up the career ladder' to a very high level completing professional courses along the way and working in a high-status role including living and working in different countries around the globe.

Rachel is the youngest of our group of women, with almost two decades in the difference. She described a more traditional route into higher education. Rachel spoke insightfully about the culture in the school she attended in the midlands in Ireland where the expectation was that you went to college, which she did, choosing to live in Dublin to fully immerse herself in the experience. After her degree, Rachel also entered banking in the area of human resources, and in relation to education and training described how 'in banking, you always had to do something'. Yet, in parallel to the stories above, Rachel was made redundant in 2019 which led her to access a BTEI course near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The information above tells us a little about the women's individual life histories, but what brought them all together in a relatively small Adult Education Service in South Dublin?

Motivation and Persistence

During this period of unemployment Florence, Sonja, Henrietta and Jade - four women in their early 60s who never met before - each saw a flyer for a QQI Level 5 Psychology class in their local Intreo or Citizen's Information Office. Rachel would join the group later, finding the course on the fetchcourses.ie website (Further Education and Training Course Hub). When discussing motivation to return to learning there were a range of reasons given. These reasons were predominantly linked to what educational functionalism might typically view as latent (unintended, unrecognised and unforeseen) rather than manifest (intended, recognised and expected) functions of education. Jade stated:

> I wanted to make friends. I also was feeling lost, because I went from a very stressful, very busy job to a very quiet period. I was struggling. What do I do with myself? What do I do with my time? What is my purpose in life now? I suppose, like a lot of people, I was my job for a long, long time, so I was reflecting 'Has Jade got any worth? Outside of my work, is Jade as a person worth something?' I was struggling with all of that, so the course came at just the right time.

Separately, Florence described herself as being in a similar place of reflection and contemplation in her life, and Sonja also mirrored these feelings, adding another factor that would make the learning experiences of these women all the more poignant – the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions and lockdowns in Ireland were a feature of their

learning episode together, and one which was explored and reflected on throughout the research conversation. On this topic, Sonja stated:

> I saw the leaflet in Intreo. We were made redundant in work and I had been working in various temporary jobs but that had all finished and this was a time when there was nothing happening. So, I started the course and when COVID came it was a saviour – it took on a greater significance, it gave me a focus and a purpose. I got hooked on Psychology and I continued all the way (to achieve a Major Award in QQI Level 5 Applied Social Studies).

When listening to these women discuss their experience of occupying liminal spaces (Turner, 1974) – those periods between what was and what comes next - I was interested to learn more about why they chose adult education, and more particularly, why they chose a relatively pressured accredited course complete with the associated assessments, paperwork and deadlines. What emerged from their discussions was that while certification was not necessarily the goal, and most certainly wasn't their first priority, there was a pull towards formal, structured education and a recognition that this was a space and an activity where they would be comfortable. Neo-liberal and managerial measurements can exclude an analysis of the many and varied motivations for returning to education. Henrietta expressed some of the reasons for her choice to return to education at this stage in the following way:

> The adult classes have been a joy as they have come at a time when I needed something to keep my brain alive, I needed to meet new people. I needed something that built on my experiences but did not make me feel uncomfortable. I don't play sport well, I don't mix with large groups of strangers well, my health will not allow me join a tennis or golf club and I think I'm still too young for Bridge. But I love learning. It's always a good day when I learn something new. And I learned a lot and enjoyed it all.

While some of the women initially expressed that the accreditation was not important to them, further discussion among the group highlighted the associated benefits that accreditation can bring to the (perceived) status of a course. The following exchange shows how the group shifted in their thinking from initial comments that certification did not matter or was not a factor in their choice, to a recognition of the value of accreditation:

Jade: To me, certification did matter, not because of the qualification but because I didn't have any experience of the organisation or the courses. I knew that it was in some way accredited, I knew that there had to be a certain standard, I knew that there had to be somebody delivering it that knew what they were talking about. To me, it validated the organisation and the course.

Florence: That is important. I never thought of it that way.

Rachel: Maybe at the back of our consciousness we knew that because it was QQI it would meet a certain standard, so even though the cert. itself wasn't important we knew ourselves that it had to be a certain level.

Sonja: But it was lovely to get the cert. in the post – it's an achievement! I got a buzz out of that.

Learning Outcomes: Participation in a Diverse Learning Group

As part of my research process I sought to understand more about the nature of outcomes for these women, more particularly the aspects of their learning experience that they would identify as an outcome. I knew from my role as a BTEI coordinator entering data and 'pulling reports' that there were particular outcomes captured and recorded. Within the Irish setting, recent government funding schemes overwhelmingly focus on progression within learning and learner destinations into employment or further learning (Guerin and Hegarty, 2020; Dulee-Kinsolving and Guerin, 2020; 2019), with the UK producing regular statistics that also include 'Earnings' in their measure of outcomes in Further Education (Department of Business, 2014). The topic of learner outcomes was introduced by way of codes during the focus group with images depicting each of these 'destinations':

- The NFQ ten-level framework infographic and a QQI certificate to represent Learner Progression and Accreditation
- An instantly recognisable image of a workplace to represent Employment, and
- A pile of Euro notes to represent Earnings.

A further image was used (with prior consent) which included a reflective statement written by one of the group members:

> It is difficult to explain but to listen and learn…was mind blowing. It gave me an insight into the mind and the workings of mind, which enlightened me in aspects of my own life and those close to me. To say that it was lifesaving is an understatement…Our group got on really well and I made some lifelong friends which are now, so important to me. Without them, I do not know how I would have survived.

These codes were left on view for a while to allow time to individually and personally reflect and react to each. When I felt enough time had passed for them to be processed, I asked the women to share their thoughts on their outcomes over the period of study within their BTEI course. The reactions and responses of the women were diverse, and there was more emphasis placed on gaining employment than I had expected, particularly given that some of the women had previously described themselves as retired (this will be discussed later). What was very clear though, was that there were a wide range of outcomes identified that did not fit into any of the aforementioned statistical categories and these were the outcomes that the women led with when they discussed this topic.

Hussey and Smith examine how learning outcomes can be divided into different categories, with their final category, 'Membership inclusion, self-worth' being a category they name as 'very useful' (Hussey and Smith, 2008, p.108). This category reflects the learner's affinity towards participation and worthwhile contribution to the group where the learning takes place. The first of the outcomes discussed related to the benefits gained from membership and participation within a diverse group of adult learners, benefits which included personal growth and learning. In particular, the women discussed with fondness some of the young (early to mid-20s) members of their class commenting on their 'intelligence', their balanced and relaxed attitude to study, their 'different way of learning' and the fun and energy they brought to the classroom. Florence described this dynamic as 'amazing' and Jade stated that 'one of the benefits I got was meeting those people and really loving meeting them'. There were other similar remarks about the unique outcomes achieved from having a diverse adult learning environment, with Henrietta stating the 'mix was wonderful', adding that 'we heard experiences we'd never have come across normally and we learned so much from, and about, each other'. Sonja reflected on the typical life experience of 'living in our own little bubbles that we are born into, where our work and our education dictate where we go and the people we mix with'. She added that this learning group represented a 'whole different world, and it

is so healthy and good for us'. Diversity within any educational setting should be enabled wherever possible, and funding and recruitment mechanisms are key in this regard. The benefits provided by peer-to-peer activities, particularly when we include a diverse range of experiences and knowledge, provides a depth of learning that simply could never be provided by the teacher-student relationship alone. Jade in particular was quite reflective on this topic, and this outcome had featured previously in her individual reflective 'life history' work. In the focus group she grappled with how to express her thoughts and feelings on this, eventually stating:

> I don't know how to put this…but how and ever, I'll just say it…It was the first time in my life that I came into direct contact with young people from a lower-socioeconomic group that wouldn't have had the advantages that I had. And also other cultures, people from other cultures. I found that so enlightening and so interesting, and I would hope that they found it the same in reverse, I don't know if they did, but we were so different that actually even if I learned absolutely nothing about Psychology, I loved coming into class.

Learning Outcomes: Capturing Imagination and Uncovering Bias

In keeping with the journal theme, I sought to explore with these women what they deemed to be success. My motivations here were to uncover and explore how their experiences of 'progression' and 'success' align with the value placed upon learning using hierarchical frameworks such as the NFQ. Some of the women's opinions regarding certification have been detailed above, but there were further discussions relating to success. This topic was introduced as part of the life history work and repeated in the focus group with a relevant visual image and a referenced extract from the AONTAS quote above stating 'success means many things to different people'. Early in the discussion Jade stated that success is when something 'captures your imagination', adding that she 'didn't stop when the classes stopped and continued to read all sorts of things'. The women then launched straight into naming smaller, individual personal learning that took place while completing particular activities or tasks, using examples that perhaps would not typically be considered in the overall picture of success. Rachel started with her QQI Level 5 Social Studies research project describing it as different to her previous experiences of learning during her degree where tasks felt more like a 'tick-box exercise'. In comparison, Rachel valued this learning activity as 'a real achievement' because the topic was personal, the overall research task was daunting, and on completion she 'felt really proud of

it'. Other notable successes named included journal tasks involving personal reflective work, in particular from a QQI Level 5 Intercultural Studies module. Sonja continued the act of critical reflection within the focus group noting the success she gained when she reflected on and acknowledged personal bias and experienced consequent personal growth:

> You were looking at your own life journey and…it's about bias I suppose, because we all do have bias and this was the first time I really acknowledged that I do have bias. From examining our own exposure to other cultures along the way I reflected that I was very sheltered growing up and it was so good to go back and look at that and see how things have evolved and how we have evolved…there was a personal growth in it.

Florence also named the success connected to personal growth and how participation on the course led to her taking a 'much deeper look' at herself, declaring that she 'learned an awful lot about herself, without knowing it initially'. For Henrietta, success outside of certification was also named, leading her to conclude that rather than it being all about the award, it was much more about learning and meeting like-minds. Rachel sagely proposed that perhaps because they already hold recognised qualifications that the other outcomes become more important. She expanded on this by describing how instead of the course acting as 'a stepping stone to get a good job' it was more about expanding personal knowledge and having your personal awareness of self and others 'challenged to some degree'. The group seemed to agree with this proposition. Radical adult education practices that embody critical reflection on individually held attitudes, personal beliefs and wider social norms should be a central core of the adult learning experience. This research provides concrete examples of transformative learning, as identified by the women themselves, evidenced through this challenging of personal awareness of self and others. As the conversation on the topic of success began to wane, Jade brought the discussion full-circle by concluding:

> I would think of much more basic stuff: turning up on the day, just getting there. For me, a big thing was mental health […] If you are attending and you're mingling with others you are supporting your own mental health, and probably the mental health of others.

Outcomes: Connections, Friendship and Personal Growth

Following from the above quote, what came through strongly and emotively during the research were the benefits regarding connections, friendship and personal growth. When COVID-19 hit, these connections took on an even greater significance. As stated earlier, a reflective comment from one of the women was used as a code to stimulate further discussion in the area of connection and friendship. A major outcome that was uncovered during the research was the particular value of the course to those who felt they were in a stage of transition. Early in the focus group when discussing motivation for joining the course, Florence revealed to us all some of her thoughts and feelings during this time:

> At that stage in my life I was retired. Well, I don't know if I was retired or if I was just out of work, I don't know what I was! But I found myself unexpectedly living alone and I wasn't in a great place in my life so it was an absolute lifesaver.

These benefits from participation on the course were echoed by other women in the focus group, particularly the four women who were of an older age and were experiencing a period of liminal reflection and contemplation. Henrietta responded to the statement with the following piece:

> I'd have to echo what Florence said that I found the course lifesaving, and I suspect many others did too. Many of the class were at another crossroads in their lives either voluntarily or otherwise and I think it was so very important for them to realise that they were (are) not alone [...] It was very bonding, the group dynamic was special and wonderfully nurtured.

Like many education centres, when our physical doors closed in March 2020 there was a pause and a re-group while we established our new ways of working with our learners. As an adult education service, we quickly surveyed all of our learners inquiring who was willing and/or able to continue remotely. Approximately one third of our learners remained engaged with us; one-third stated that they now had care responsibilities that precluded their participation in learning, and the remaining learners (those who would fit into the category of educationally vulnerable) never responded to our various attempts at communication. Perhaps due in part to the prior educational successes of the members of this research group, they all indicated an interest in continuing to study remotely and all returned to an online classroom once this facility was

offered. Jade described the course, during COVID-19 times in particular, as 'an absolute godsend' adding:

> It gave me an anchor in the week, it gave connections, it gave purpose, it gave an interest, there were so many things I learned along the way about myself, about others, about the topics.

While discussing the various benefits and outcomes of participation on the course, Sonja named an added dimension for those who were living alone during the COVID-19 lockdowns:

> Yes, it was an anchor and a focus and we were part of something outside of ourselves. And after the class Florence was my anchor. We discovered we lived very close to each other and we started to meet for a cup of coffee on the wall down the road and that was hugely important because I live on my own and Florence lives on her own.

Florence added, 'It was hugely important. I met Jade for coffee and Henrietta for coffee…we drank a lot of coffee!' The friendships remained firm ones, with the women talking about their activities since COVID-19 restrictions eased including coffee meet-ups, dinners out, and even holidays together.

Outcomes and Ageism

As mentioned previously, employment featured more highly in the discussion regarding outcomes than I had predicted, which I reflect now most likely highlights an inherent personal prejudice that led me to conclude that due to their age profile many of these women would not be seeking employment following this course. On the contrary, the 'destination' of employment was a destination that many of the women were actively seeking, although they outlined barriers faced in this regard. Henrietta welcomed the inclusion of employment as a measurement, however she expanded this to add that 'employment on its own' did not sound like a destination, instead preferring 'progression within employment and personal progression within oneself' adding that she always needed 'a purpose and a reason'. Rachel, who is in her early 40s, has gained employment and is no longer studying (a fact that led to Sonja expressing how they really missed her when she left). Duckworth and Smith (2019) describe a type of outcome called 'critical social literacy' – the ability to navigate the complexities of different social groups and settings. Through their research they provide us with an example of critical social literacy which includes the

ability to read social relations in the workplace and wider society (Duckworth and Smith, 2019, p.35). For Rachel, her higher education was still the most important qualification when seeking and gaining employment in her field, although she did acknowledge that she was more aware of job vacancies seeking person specifications that included 'a social studies element'. Rachel stated that due to her new learning, particularly in relation to equality and diversity, she definitely felt more confident in her ability to demonstrate this knowledge at interview level and also use it in any subsequent work. The remaining four women are, as yet, not engaged in paid employment, although they discussed a desire to do so, particularly to gain part-time work or work supporting others in their community. Florence is currently exploring the prospects and training requirements involved in gaining work as a Special Needs Assistant in a school setting. She participated in the conversation on employment explaining 'I would love to use my Level 5 for work of some kind, but age is a problem' to which she laughed, adding that there was nothing much she could do about that! Jade came in on this point, with a more direct observation:

> I found, and I think Florence will agree with this, that your chances of getting a job after the age of 60 are nearly zilch. We live in an ageist society. We have all had experience of applying for jobs and I know we didn't get the jobs because of our age and nothing will convince me otherwise, even though we were very well qualified.

There was also a revisiting of their own role within the classroom with Jade recalling a time where they were involved in a paired, peer-to-peer activity supporting other learners with referencing and writing skills. Jade declared 'We can be used! We have experience!' adding that it would be great to be able to link with younger people to support them, either inside or outside the classroom setting. Two of the women disclosed that they had applied for volunteer roles within the literacy services, but at the time of interview neither had heard back from the organisation, which led to the following exchange:

> Florence: They never got back to me.
>
> Sonja: Nor me!
>
> Florence: I don't get that…we're not dead!

However, what was quite startling for me to witness during the final conversations were statements that might indicate the presence of internalised ageism. Despite all of the many and varied outcomes the women described - outcomes that benefitted themselves individually but also their learning group, their wider community and arguably society as a whole - there was a strong feeling of anxiety expressed that they were 'taking a place' from others. Sonja stated, on behalf of the others, 'we were always conscious of taking up a space for a younger person' with Florence adding 'We've had our shot, we've been lucky. If I thought I was taking a place from someone else I would happily say no'. The women recalled recommending the course to their peers and said 'they didn't apply because they felt they didn't want to take up space that could be used by a younger person'. Jade circled back to the statistical measurement of outcomes and added her concluding thoughts in relation to age, a comment to which others whole-heartedly agreed:

> In the older age group, it has to be something outside of money, work status or even getting a job. It has to be about what you are getting outside of that. I took a long-time campaigning in health to remove outcomes and replace it by benefits. Benefits are much wider and deeper than outcomes will ever be, certainly in the older age group. So, when they are looking at outcomes for learning in our age group, I think they're looking in the wrong place.

Conclusion

Our system of 'progression' through the NFQ and the overemphasis on managerial measurements of success overshadows the multiple possibilities for what constitutes success in learning. Using collaborative research and unique learner voices this article provided an interesting and emotive account of what motivated these adults to return again to accredited learning, uncovering motivations that sat alongside employment opportunities and a typical understanding of progression. While a small sample size precludes generalisations or any attempt towards a grand theory, collecting the educational life histories from 'successful' adult learners gives us insight into how important formative educational experiences are, which may in turn assist in our practice with those who are educationally vulnerable. Adult learning practices that promote critical reflection of our social norms in relation to equality and expectation allow our learners opportunities to reflect and transform. The diversity of adult learning groups in FET should be promoted and protected by utilising funding mechanisms that provide suitable educational spaces for the most vulnerable while also recognising the learning benefits enabled by

diversity of experience. Diverse learning groups become the site for a range of educational experiences that extend beyond the learner-teacher relationship.

The examples of success named by these women include significant and socially beneficial skills such as identification of personal bias, an understanding and awareness of self and others, and a protection of mental health. Outcomes described as 'lifesaving' and 'anchoring' are evidently of incredible personal importance to the learner yet they are not the type of benefits that are officially measured as outcomes. Furthermore, individual and personal success in the arenas of self-awareness, self-confidence, relationship and connection permeate to wider social circles leading to an increase in positive outcomes for others. In tandem with previous research I have conducted (Coss, 2017), it seems evident that if we don't take steps to name these experiences as successful learning episodes, then we can't recognise and measure them. In the current FET context, as has been shown above, significant learning outcomes that are not systematically recognised are at risk of being devalued, marginalised or trivialised.

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