

AN INVESTIGATION INTO ADULT LEARNERS AND LEARNING:
POWERFUL LEARNERS AND LEARNING IN THREE SITES OF
ADULT EDUCATION

By

Lindsay MacKenzie

A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education
University of Birmingham
March 2006

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the outcomes of learning by adult learners in three different contexts (sites) of adult education. My particular concern is with adult learners who are often socially excluded in and by formal learning contexts hence the sites of learning for my empirical research are (a) an Adult Basic Education Centre, (b) a Family Learning Centre and (c) a Nacro Centre. I use a range of data collection methods including keeping a journal, undertaking observations and fifteen in-depth interviews. I develop a framework around ideas of agency, power and structure, factors which impact upon adult education learners and learning, through existing research and literature from writers such as Bourdieu, Freire, Jarvis and Brookfield. The framework defines a concept of *powerful learners and learning* - learning which enables learners to acquire social and cultural capital and to make real choices about their lives. I use this framework to analyse not only my empirical data but also the government policies from the last twenty five years which support adult education. My findings conclude that learning opportunities need to be wide ranging, that few government policies lead to *powerful learning*, and that only one of the learners within my case studies can be described as '*liberated*'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Eight years ago I began a journey which many have travelled before me, a challenge which at times has seemed utterly daunting, but to which I became thoroughly addicted. My slightly unconventional route through higher education has been enabled through the support of many, many people, especially friends and colleagues in the School of Education. I began this intellectual journey because of the people I met there and the conversations we have had over endless cups of coffee, glasses of wine and the occasional bottle of champagne! The belief shown in me has allowed me to take what might be seen as a risk, of showing my inadequacies to the wider world through writing this thesis, but such has been my personal growth and development that I am now confident to carry this through. Thank you to you all for your support and encouragement.

No doctoral student completes their studies without the guidance of a supervisor, and I am no exception. My first supervisor was Dr Sue Butterfield who expressed such confidence in my ability that even I was convinced. I owe her a huge debt and am sad that her untimely death meant she never saw me complete my studies. When retiring Sue Butterfield 'handed me over' to Dr Helen Gunter saying 'you'll be all right, Helen will keep you on track'; and Helen did! Those of you who know me well will realise that although I may be good at organising other people I'm actually not very good at organising myself. Thankfully Helen's style of supervision suited me well and she has given generously of her time and shared her expertise with me over the last five years, dealing patiently with me when I was struggling and allowing me space when I needed it. Helen, now Professor Helen Gunter, thank you for your support.

Throughout the eight years my family have coped intermittently with a part-time mother and wife and to Martin, Gemma and Libbi I apologise for any neglect. At times I think they thought I was never going to finish it – I have, and can hear Jon's understated 'well done Mum' in my head. To my wider family, thank you too for your support, especially to my parents. I suspect that Dad may be one of the few people who will read the finished product! I hope you are all proud.

My interest and involvement in teaching adults was the beginning of this process and I should like to thank the students, tutors and managers with whom I have worked over the years. My involvement with RaPAL also encouraged me to pursue my interest in adult learning and I have appreciated support from this group of practitioners and researchers also passionate about adult learners and learning.

The biggest debt of thanks though is to those who took part in the research – learners, teachers, management and other staff from the three sites. I value the conversations we had and the generous way in which you participated in the research. For those learners who shared parts of your life with me, a particular thank you, it was a privilege.

Lin MacKenzie
February 2006

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Glossary

| | |
|-------|---|
| ABE | Adult Basic Education |
| ABSSU | Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit |
| ALBSU | Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit |
| BECTA | British Educational Communications and Technology Agency |
| BSA | Basic Skills Agency (previously ALBSU) |
| BSU | Basic Skills Unit |
| CoVEs | Centres of Vocational Excellence |
| DES | Department of Education and Science |
| DfEE | Department for Education and Employment |
| DfES | Department for Education and Skills |
| EAZ | Education Action Zone |
| EMA | Education Maintenance Award |
| ESF | European Social Fund |
| ESOL | English as a Second or Other Language <u>or</u> English for Speakers of Other Languages |
| FEFC | Further Education Funding Council |
| FLC | Family Learning Centre |
| LEA | Local Education Authority |
| LLN | Literacy, Language and Numeracy |
| LLPs | Local Learning Partnerships |
| LSC | Learning and Skills Council |
| LSPs | Local Strategic Partnerships |
| Nacro | Formerly NACRO National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders |
| NIACE | National Institute of Adult Continuing Education |
| NFER | National Foundation for Education Research |
| NLN | National Learning Network |
| NRDC | National Research and Development Centre |
| NVQ | National Vocational Qualification |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| ONS | Office for National Statistics |

| | |
|--------|--|
| OU | Open University |
| PATs | Policy Action Teams |
| RaPAL | Research and Practice in Adult Literacy |
| SEU | Social Exclusion Unit |
| SLSU | Skills for Life Strategy Unit (previously ABSSU) |
| SRB | Single Regeneration Budget |
| TEC | Training and Enterprise Council |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| WEA | Workers' Educational Association |
| YALP | Young Adult Learners Partnership |

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This thesis focuses on adult learners and learning and will be conceptualised through a theory of power, looking at issues of agency and structure. It will adopt an understanding of agency that helps explain how individuals act in the world and the social structures which frame and constrain them. The tensions between these two will be examined by looking at issues of social capital and identity with a specific emphasis on Bourdieu's theory of practice (1990a). In reviewing adult learners I acknowledge that my own experiences as an adult learner have shaped my perspectives in this study. Some of the current opportunities for learning afforded to adults will be investigated and interrogated to determine whether these can lead to the empowerment and emancipation of adult learners.

Individual learners reported in this study are accessing support from different kinds of provision and for many different reasons; not all of them are consciously 'learning'. For the purposes of this thesis, I am taking 'adults' to be people over the age of sixteen, and 'adult learning' as given in the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education's (NIACE) Adult Participation in Learning Survey (2004):

Learning can mean practising, studying or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training. You can do it regularly (each day or month) or you can do it for a short period of time. It can be full time or part time, done at home, at work, or in another place like a college. Learning does not have to lead to a qualification. We are interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished. (NIACE, July 2004)

It is hard to describe and quantify how much adult education goes on within the UK, or what it costs, but, in my opinion, there can be little doubt that it is a crucial and integral part of society (see appendix 1). Evidence from NIACE suggests that while nine out of ten people say they value education, one in four feel that it is 'not for people like them' (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2003, p1), which, for me, is of great concern.

1.2 Aims of the research

The aims of the research on which this thesis is based are to:

- establish a set of data derived from three different contexts which can be analysed in relation to the theoretical positions to be explored;
- establish a set of data which can be readily drawn upon in discussion of the research questions (see below).

These contexts are: a) an adult basic education (ABE) centre offering a range of adult education classes for the local community; b) a family learning centre (FLC) based in a community which has been through a period of major regeneration; and c) a centre run by Nacro (previously NACRO, National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders) specialising in preventative work with those at risk from involvement in the criminal justice system.

1.3 Research questions

The research focuses on adult learners and learning in an urban context and seeks to explore important issues related to the following questions:

1. What do we know about adult learners and learning?
2. What do we know about the contextual settings in which adult learners and learning are located?

3. Why is adult learning an issue and for whom?
4. How might a conceptual framework be devised that will enable the experiential accounts of adult learners to be described and understood?
5. How might the experiences of adult learners and learning shape and inform the development of localised support networks?

These questions have arisen out of my own work and from observations in other adult learning settings over several years, but also as a result of a literature review which shows that there is minimal research data illustrating these particular areas. Major studies have examined participation (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2003, La Valle and Blake, 2001) and some researchers have conducted significant studies in the area of literacy, for example, Charnley and Jones (1981) and the International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD 1997). Links between popular and higher education are discussed in Crowther, Galloway and Martin (1997). More recently a case study of individual learners for the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) has been undertaken by Downing (2005). There is now increasing research on working with adults within adult basic education (ABE) and English as a second or other language (ESOL) is now increasing, see for example Barton and Hamilton (1998), du Vivier (1992) and Hamilton and Ivanic (1999). Latterly there has been an important move towards formal recognition of issues in this area by the foundation of the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC). This was set up following the development of a national strategy which came out of recommendations in *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001a). NRDC are funding a variety of projects from consortia which examine issues within adult education which have been identified as problematic. However, few of these studies bear a direct relation to the questions underpinning my own research, though their findings undoubtedly contribute to my own understanding.

There is clearly still a gap in the existing knowledge base relating to the importance of non-traditional opportunities for learning for some adult members of the community. My research seeks to address this gap and I construct a theory around empowerment in which to place my findings.

1.4 *Theorising the study*

The issue of power, or lack of it, is central to this thesis as I examine the idea of powerful learners and powerful learning. The interplay between learning as agency, and the structures that shape learning also inform the underlying conceptualisation for my thesis. I intend to examine the social and economic structures which impinge on my participants, their sense of agency and how they position themselves in their world. It will use the concepts of social capital and identity and Bourdieu's (1984, 1988, 1990) theory of practice to help explain how individuals relate to their communities and show how they may become empowered and emancipated.

Several factors subsumed within this overarching framework are also examined: lifelong learning; social justice; equality of opportunity; local learning opportunities; learners as individuals; identity shifts; the importance of community in learners' experiences and the 'deficit' model of education.

Discourse on 'lifelong learning' is vast and well beyond the scope of this study. For an overview of issues and the current debates see Edwards (1997), Field (2000), and Field and Leicester (2000). Evidence from NIACE (July 2004) reinforces the importance of opportunities for lifelong learning and for such

learning to be genuinely available throughout the lives of individuals. My definition of lifelong learning encompasses all learning experiences and opportunities from 'cradle to grave' and therefore includes 'adult education' as one facet of this process. From this definition the adult learners in this study can be described as being involved in lifelong learning.

However, learning for employment is not the major remit for lifelong learning, although in some areas this is happening. If education is important and society owes all its citizens the opportunity to take part this should not be driven predominantly by economic factors. Issues of social justice and equality of opportunity are paramount and the need for localised learning opportunities is crucial to support this.



Figure 1:1 Spheres of impact

As individuals, adult learners are also influenced by factors such as where their learning takes place, the communities in which they live, and on a much wider front, the local and national policies which affect individuals' opportunities. Figure 1:1 aims to show the layers of influences impacting on the individual in each

setting. While many learners may see themselves as individuals, independent of their community, local and national policies will affect the type of provision they may access and the location of that provision. It may also illustrate how 'identity shifts' may be needed as learners move from one context to another and to show the relative lack of power of the individual within this situation, with much of the influence coming from outside their control. It is my intention to explore how learning, social and economic factors, the view of the individual as a citizen in their own and the wider community, all impact on each other, sometimes negatively and sometimes positively.

Empowerment, in itself a highly contested notion, is a further concept on which I base the theoretical framework of this thesis. According to Fielding (1996), empowerment is about being able to think and act critically so as to disrupt and challenge current structures. In exploring this concept I relate it to its corollary powerfulness, and use these concepts as a theoretical base to enable me to explain, describe and understand what these learners are experiencing. A learner cannot be taught the skills necessary to become empowered; it is not just a case of filling in the gaps in knowledge; empowerment depends on the community and culture within which the individual is situated and is closely related to issues of class. In this study many of the learners see themselves, and would be characterised as disempowered, but through education and learning some are acquiring a greater sense of powerfulness. The issue of power, or lack of it, is central to this thesis as I examine the idea of *powerful learners and powerful learning*.

Much adult education provision over the past thirty years or so has been based on the idea of adults as disadvantaged and disenfranchised because they lack the basic literacy and numeracy tools which will allow them to participate fully in their communities, and in employment. Such ideas easily lead to a 'deficit' model of education (see Barton 1994). The question of whether education is for the individual, their society or the government of the day is one which has been discussed over many years. Offering sufficient 'tools' to an individual just so they are able to deal with official bureaucracy, state benefit systems and so on, would not, in my opinion, be either honest or moral, but there are many people in this country who are in this situation. While empowerment may be very important it may not actually allow individuals to see themselves as autonomous learners and I therefore look to the idea of emancipation as being a step further than empowerment.

Emancipation is a key element of the work of Freire (1972) who was both a theoretician and philosopher. He believed that few human encounters are free from oppression of one kind or another. Perhaps his best known work was *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) in which he stated that education was the key to humanization, and thus to full emancipation. Although Freire's work was based in a different context to that which is the focus of this study, there is much to learn from his writing and work of the emancipatory theorists will be an important part of my research. Freire's argument is that the principal areas of dominance and oppression stem from racism, sexism or class exploitation, but religious beliefs, age, intellectual handicaps and political affiliation can also lead to oppression. Freire's emancipatory approach, like Fielding's (1996) emancipatory view of

empowerment, forms an important starting point for this study. I investigate the issues of both emancipation and empowerment, and what these mean, in my exploration of the reality and the theory of powerful learners and learning.

Other researchers have theories to help explain 'what is going on' within the case being studied, for example, Engeström's (1993) socio-cultural activity theory (SAT) can be a useful explanatory model. It may also be appropriate to look at the work by Lave and Wenger (1991) who examined knowledge production in 'communities of practice' and this, together with New Literacy Studies (Street 1995), could also inform my theoretical basis. However, while activity theory takes the individual as an actor and sees what affect actions upon it make and takes account of the social, cultural and historical factors of the situation, it does not, from my perspective, allow for issues of power to be explored and addressed sufficiently. Bourdieu's (2000) work on habitus, social and cultural capital may offer more regarding power, and feminist theorists, for example Lather (1986) Gore (1994) may also be useful to investigate. By reviewing these a theory will emerge which provides me with the language to enable me to describe, to understand and to explain 'what is going on'.

1.5 *The sites of the study*

There are three main sites for this study which are all located in a major metropolitan area in the Midlands of England, which, for the purposes of this study, will be known as Bridgetown¹.

a) Adult basic education: my own background as a tutor in ABE has given me opportunities to meet and work with people who, by some measures, could be classed as lacking the necessary skills and knowledge in educational terms, but who are often successful and happy with their lives. The Centre was in a suburb of Bridgetown, offering a range of day and evening classes to adults in the local community. This Centre has been providing classes for many years and is well known by local people. Changing priorities in the workforce brings some students into classes to keep up with increasing demands on skill level and knowledge base (DfEE 1999) plus pressure from the government to reach their target of raising 3.5 million adults out of low literacy by 2010 (DfEE, 1998). Students may be striving for public recognition of achievement or to enhance their work prospects. They may, as du Vivier (1992) found out, often arrive with practical needs and then find there are social benefits to the learning process and their goals and aspirations change. He says:

It is clear, then, that while literacy learning is concerned with skill development, students value the process not so much for itself, but for the changes that it brings in their lives. These benefits are multiple and varied, and they tend to be defined in highly individual terms. (du Vivier, 1992, p124)

One of the changes which has taken place relatively recently is the move from seeing literacy as skill and knowledge acquisition, to one where the social and historical situation of the knowledge production and use is crucial. This forms the basis of the New Literacy Studies, see for example Barton and Hamilton (1998), Hamilton (2000) and Street (1984, 1995).

Within my ABE group I had discussions over several years with a variety of learners about their aspirations and expectations regarding their lives. Over

twelve years I worked with a range of students in one to one and in group settings, met with other ABE tutors and programme co-ordinators and with other adult educators. Over three years I kept a journal in which I recorded my thoughts about them as learners and myself as a teacher. This also meant that the research carried out in this site was different from the other two sites because of the established relationships and my role as their tutor. For this study I formally interviewed two students, one tutor and a manager.

b) Family learning centre: the second setting for this study, the FLC, is a project for women where the main purpose is for support, between the women themselves and by using the variety of expertise offered by staff. At any one time there could be as few as one or two people there, or as many as twenty. I spoke with four as part of the focus group, completed three in-depth interviews and also interviewed three members of staff. Many of the women using this Centre have mental health issues and although it is called a Family Learning Project it would be true to say that the primary focus for the workers is the women themselves, not their children or partners. While the learning that takes place here may be very different from the more formal setting mentioned already it is also a significant part of these women's stories.

c) Nacro centre: the third setting is within 'Nacro' which is a charity dedicated to reducing crime and making society safer. Learners within this environment are required to attend in order to continue to receive benefits and as a direct route into employment. This is part of a national scheme to break the cycle of crime by effective resettlement and includes the need to provide individuals with the skills

they need for work. Nacro state that 60% of prisoners do not have the skills to do over 90% of all jobs (Nacro 2001).

The opportunity within the Nacro centre to meet with two tutors and two other Centre staff, to talk to four students in depth, and casually to talk to others working in their classes, offered a contrast to my own work in ABE. It also offered me the chance to talk to students who were not necessarily there of their own volition and to talk to them about feelings as well as practical outcomes.

1.6 Rationale for the study

The starting point for thinking about this research was looking at individuals and how learning impacts on their lives, especially in the way it offers empowerment and emancipation. In addition, individuals in the main do not live in isolation and communities have an important part to play too. The contrasts between the sites of learning which formed my case studies gave me the opportunity to see how each individual reacted to and within their local community and in the wider communities around them. It also enabled me to look at policies which informed the provision for learning in the various contexts and to review the literature and previous research into some of the issues which arose.

The rationale then for undertaking this study is to explore four interlocking imperatives, shown in figure 1:2 on the following page:

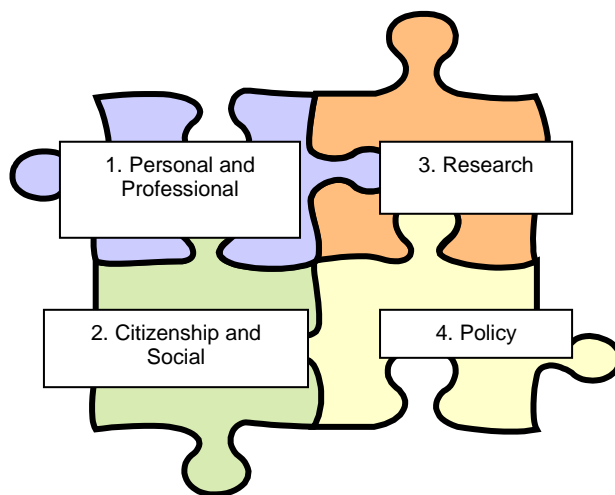


Figure 1.2: Interlocking imperatives

1. *Personal and Professional imperatives* include my own aspirations, achievements, experiences and the constraints within which these are framed. It also covers my role as a professional (teacher) and latterly as a researcher.
2. *Citizenship and Social imperatives* is about the participants within the different sites of learning; how they interact with and within their community and society as a whole. My conversations and discussions with a range of workers within each site also offer a different perspective which is helpful to give an informed view.
3. *Research imperatives* are those where I examine what other research has been carried out in the area and compare my own findings. There is a need for further work in this area to fully inform the final imperative which is policy.
4. *Policy*. How and where opportunities for learning are provided depends in many ways on how those resources which are available are deployed. Strategy is developed to address issues seen as the political imperative at the time. It is not necessarily a strategy which is best for those it purports to serve.

The three sites provided the opportunity to look at issues which may not immediately be considered when looking at provision of adult learning. The

difference between attending of their own free will and being 'required' to attend offers contrasting opportunity for looking at empowerment and emancipation. It allowed me to look at ways of identifying a need to learn something and finding ways to support that learning and, crucially, to examine the relationships which I maintain are necessary for learning to take place. These different sites enabled me to look at how learners become empowered and what forms powerful learning in contexts which are around us daily. In total twenty three interviews took place including the perspectives of students (participants) and those who manage the learning provision.

I began my inquiry by keeping a journal in which I reflected about my own and my learners' learning. This was followed by observations in the two other sites. Alongside this I used small group discussions to generate conversations about issues to do with learning and finally spoke in depth to individual students and to some of those involved in their learning. The work in the Family Learning Centre was part of a larger study and was, to some extent, framed by this (Edwards *et al*, 2002). However, all the individual interviews followed the same semi-structured format, regardless of the setting.

While working as an ABE tutor (1990-2002) I began to reflect on how my students changed as a result of joining a group to work on literacy. The demands on me to show the progress of all my learners, which in turn generated funding, caused tensions for me as I felt many of the benefits students gained were not easily calculable; they did not fit the boxes into which we were becoming increasingly constrained. Most of my ABE students had poor experiences, or sometimes no

experience, of compulsory schooling and yet something had persuaded them to risk further failure or ridicule to get something called 'education'.

Perhaps some of my feelings about these issues stem from my own personal experiences of compulsory education. I left school after taking GCEs, in which I performed averagely, and spent the next two years ostensibly studying for Advanced levels but in reality having a wonderful social life. It was only when the examinations came round that I realised how little work I had done and that, unlike some of my friends, it was not going to be enough. It took a further four years for me to decide for myself that I had to get a qualification of some sort and took a business-related RSA Diploma. This time I was one of three out of a cohort of twelve who passed the course. The learning suddenly made sense to me and I wanted to succeed, but there was an underlying feeling that it was now too late to carry this any further. Economic factors were an important influence at this stage, a qualification was necessary to succeed in the workplace and a job was essential for survival. It does perhaps illustrate an example of 'teachable moments' mentioned by Moore (1983), who believes in the 'intrinsic and fundamental worth of every individual soul' (p167). The advent of The Open University (OU) meant studying as an adult was acceptable and many years after leaving school I undertook teaching qualifications within ABE and also completed my first degree.

What this attention to my own learning has done is to make me question the importance of passing exams, receiving a certificate, or achieving learning outcomes. My own increased sense of self-esteem, confidence and identity are likely to be mirrored in the learners who I meet. Not everyone fits the model of

learning at the time of compulsory schooling; not everyone has the opportunity to take it up later. The OU and professional qualifications tend to be expensive; many people, especially women, may feel that limited family funds should not be spent on something for them. Formal education also takes time, a commodity which is not always available and may not be seen as a priority. I believe there are still issues for me in these areas but I am sure that I will overcome them. For many of the learners I have met these are still to be addressed.

1.7 *Structure of the Study*

The study focuses on what is known about adult learners and learning, the contexts in which they learn and who is interested or has an investment in adult learning. It aims to devise a conceptual framework which can describe the experience of learning and to examine the role of support networks for these learners. Chapter One has introduced the research and the case studies in each site. It also seeks to indicate some of the literature and theories which I will consider, in particular empowerment and emancipation. Chapter Two will develop a theory of empowerment, taking into consideration concepts of emancipation and power. It will draw on work by critical theorists, social capital theory and feminists and will aim to show a sense of agency and structure and how these connect, using Bourdieu's (1986, 1990) 'thinking tools' of habitus, capital and field. Chapter Three then moves to examine how and why adult learners come to learning, and how it enables them to become empowered, or not. Chapter Four is about how policy and provision is designed to support empowerment of adult learners. Chapter Five outlines the research itself, and describes the methods used and the rationale for doing so. Chapter Six examines the research findings from the case

studies. Chapter Seven is where I analyse the data and discuss the issues in detail and Chapter Eight offers my conclusions drawn from the study.

1.8 Summary

Many of the questions this thesis seeks to address come from personal experience and it is important to place myself as teacher, researcher and as learner within the study as a whole. They also arise from limited research into these less traditional models of adult learning provision and a corresponding gap in the literature. Although, as has been stated earlier, the NRDC has begun to undertake a variety of projects in this field, the lack of investment in researching the adult learning experience over many years will take time to remedy.

The range of sites of learning chosen can only be a small sample of those which exist, but they are important because they reflect the diversity of learning opportunities which exist locally and cater for adults who may otherwise not be obvious lifelong learners.

Having here introduced the study, in Chapter 2 I articulate the theoretical concepts underpinning the research and explore how power is accessed by those traditionally excluded from some aspects of society.

¹ Other communities within Bridgetown are referred to throughout the study. The main ones which are the sites of learning involved in the research are: Ledworth, Highfield and Southtree.

CHAPTER 2: BUILDING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 *Introduction*

In this chapter I provide a conceptual framework that will structure the study and enable the questions posed in the introduction to be answered. Drawing on political science and sociology via the work of Bourdieu (1990a, 2000), Giddens (1984, 1998), Hall (1999), Putnam (1995, 2000) and others, I explore the key underlying issues for the adults within the case studies and show that these are located in a theory of power. I initially explore agency and structure in relation to the adult learner; how these adults are able to exercise agency, which enables them to achieve their goals or opens up new goals to them, within the social structures which surround them. Next I will show that the interplay between agency and structure manifests as social capital, and that the capacity of adult learners to develop social capital is what determines how they are positioned in the world. The presence of social capital and the ability to utilise this effectively, leads via cultural capital to empowerment. I also discuss Bourdieu's (1990a, 2000) notion of habitus and then social identity, using the work of Jenkins (1996), and identify the relationship this has with power. Finally I synthesise these issues within a view of social justice to inform an approach that helps understanding of powerful learners and learning where transformation and emancipation is the end result.

Throughout the chapter I explore meanings, definitions and the interplay of aspects of adulthood which position learners in the world. These are agency, power, social and cultural capital, social identity and emancipation. Throughout this positioning adults are contained within and constrained by the social

structures of society. This exploration will enable me to consider a framework to analyse my data in relation to adult learners. At various points in my reading of the literature each of these becomes both necessary and yet insufficient because of the complexities of factors impinging on the adult learner. Ideally adult learners should be empowered and enabled by their learning in order to make choices. In fact I have decided that I need all of the definitions but offer a summary definition in *powerful learners and learning* as something which encapsulates the main factors involved. This chapter therefore takes each of these key aspects and discusses the interplay between them leading finally to the development of my conceptual framework.

2.2 Issues of agency

Within current political and social systems lifelong learning has gained both popularity and credence. Adults are expected to train and retrain within the marketplace and to keep up with technological advances just to maintain employment. But this ignores those individuals whose expectations are much less, those who cannot or do not work, who are not the 'decision-makers', those who are disempowered.

The belief that all interactions are socially constructed, in contrast to the positivist perspective¹, suggests that agency is important to enable individuals to make decisions and choices about their lives. In posing research questions around what is known about adult learners and learning, and why and for whom adult learning is an issue, it seems that reviewing agency and structure within the context of adult learning will enable a deeper understanding.

Agency is described as individuals' ability to act in their social world; the way they determine how they live their lives (Bourdieu, 1990a). For some writers this is seen as individuals having the disposition to engage with opportunities for action and the ability to interpret opportunities which are available (Gorard *et al*, 2001), but deliberative or agentic action may not always be transferred to other contexts (Dreier, 2000; Edwards *et al* 2002) and this needs to be acknowledged. For agency to be possible, the ability of individuals to engage, make sense of and participate in the world about them is crucial. Self-respect is needed to build self-esteem which can be reinforced or destroyed by experiences encountered throughout life. Perhaps one of the key concepts these viewpoints all have in common is the need for individuals to be reflexive and therefore, as Bateson (1972) suggests, to enable them to develop a capacity to take some control over their environment in order to enhance their actions within it.

2.3 Issues of structure

Social structures impact on everyone within any given society, as they both label and position all individuals within that society. It seems that these structures influence individuals in many ways which may be overt but are more often hidden from our conscious understandings. Overt social structures may include the places and environments which are often taken for granted, such as schools, colleges, universities, workplaces, churches, mosques and family, but they may also be implicit, operating in such a way to shape perceptions of and behaviours related to gender, social class, race and dis/ability. The dimension that these add to how individuals act in society are crucial, and must not be neglected in any

discussion of the issues, and resonate with feminist views of structural inequalities which lead to major social divisions, (see for example Skeggs 1997, Lovell 2000).

How individuals are positioned in society contributes to their social and cultural identity. Individuals will have experienced many social structures by the time they become 'adult learners'. Many will have grown up within a family and have attended compulsory schooling. Some will have been in the workplace, and may have attended courses in colleges. How these experiences affect them will be significant as individuals do not live in either a social or cultural vacuum. One of the problems with social structures is that power is not evenly distributed so access may be determined in part by privilege. In this study it will be seen that education is seen as a key resource which should be available to all members of society. I agree with Griffiths (2003) who takes a social justice view of education when she says that:

... it 'belongs' to individuals – but also collectively to all of us. Neither government nor collections of privileged individuals have the right to impose damaging competitive systems. (Griffiths, 2003, p23)

and with Martin (2000), who, when discussing the education of adults, feels educators should seek for justice and equality for all.

One of the key factors upon which social structures are predicated is power, and the next section considers this issue.

2.4 *Issues of power*

It would be impossible to include in a single section of this chapter a comprehensive review of the literature on power as this is immense. I have

therefore selected to use the work of Bourdieu (1988, 1990a), Foucault (1989), Giddens (1984), Haugaard (2002), Heywood (2000), Norton (2002) and Parsons (1963) as representative of some of the viewpoints on this problematic area, and helpful in a discussion of adult learners.

While there appear to be many factors involved in whether or not individuals are able to develop agency, here I want to consider power. In all individual actions, some manifestation of power relations comes into play; for instance, when individuals make choices to do something, or not to do something, when individuals ask someone else to undertake an activity, or when individuals refuse to do something that is asked of them. All these situations involve the exercise of certain kinds of power. Superficially, it could be argued that making choices is easy; however, choice is not an unproblematic concept. Many individuals find themselves in situations where they have no genuine choice, such as pupils in school, prisoners or members of groups which are socially, culturally or politically disenfranchised and they therefore tend to act as others require them to. These others are the ones with agency and therefore power; the power to make and impose choices. The many manifestations of the exercise of power in interchanges between individuals and groups pose real theoretical challenges; this partly explains why the concept is examined so widely and in such depth. This also explains why there is little consensus about the nature and exercise of power, and I bring some of these issues into the discussion which follows.

When thinking about power it is easy to become confused about terms which are associated with it. One of these is influence which, while associated with being

powerful, is different because it involves using persuasion and coercion which is utilized to make a case for individuals or groups to act in certain ways. This ultimately still leaves a choice. Although the nature of this persuasion may be hidden from those being influenced, they may still have the autonomy to choose to act or not. Another term associated with power is authority. Power may be distinguished from authority 'on the grounds that the former is based upon the 'ability' to influence others, whereas the latter involves the 'right' to do so' (Heywood 2000, p35), and Parsons (1963) usefully describes authority as the 'institutional counterpart of power' (p88). Authority used in this way as 'legitimate power' (Heywood 2000, p15) may be necessary to offer society the values and norms which help create the collective identity essential to its survival, but there is the danger that it leads instead to imposing rules and acts in a controlling capacity. Closely related to the issue of authority is that of legitimacy as this is the factor which allows power to be transformed into authority. While it is possible to view political legitimacy as purely being based on formal, legal rules it is important to also see that it can be construed as being involved in the ideological hegemony of society.

Modern social theorists, for example Bourdieu (1988, 1990a), Giddens (1984), Haugaard (2002) and Weber (1978) refer to conflictual and consensual power which describe social rather than political life. Power for Foucault (1989), while similar to consensual power, is significantly about the links between power and knowledge. He describes a version of power which depends on social control and sees practices such as examinations, and deciding what a child may learn, as the exercise of power. Foucault wanted to illustrate the way social control is made to

happen in modern societies by the use of disciplinary power while recognising that the ultimate goal of disciplinary power was normalisation and not oppression. Foucault calls this power-knowledge, which is when knowledge is developed by the exercise of power and then used in turn to legitimate further exercises of power.

There are other 'kinds' of power which appear in the literature. Positive power, although it is advisable not to interpret this in the 'normative' sense, can be compared with constitutive power (a postmodern term which is said to 'constitute' reality). 'Power with' is a term used by Norton (2002) in basic skills and is where agents share decisions; it is the power one exerts in a group, that is, the influence that individuals have. 'Power with' is based on respect for the person and not related to their role. 'Power from within' is where agents bring self-belief and confidence to bear on a situation and could be described as the aim for adult educators for their students. Other kinds of power are 'position power' or 'teacher power' conferred on individuals as a result of their role eg class tutor/centre manager, or as a result of individuals' own language use, class, or education. While position power may be inevitable in a school environment there is no reason to suggest that it is necessary in the education of adults, but there seems little doubt that it exists. Finally, there is 'personal power' which brings to bear the skills, knowledge, attributes and attitudes of an individual. When received well by others it becomes 'power with' and could then be viewed as allowing agency which benefits not just the individual but the collective in which they function.

A significant contribution to social theory is made by Giddens (1984) and he uses his theory of structuration to explain issues of power. Structuration is a theory of the balance between the subject-centredness of hermeneutics and phenomenology (which see individuals as creators of society) and the object-centredness of structuralism and functionalism (which focuses on society and sees agents as the effect of social order) and is where time-space² and actors 'bind' a structure, or put more simply by Schuller *et al* (2000) as, when social practices produce and are produced by structures. Individuals are 'purposive agents' because they have both reflectively thought out what they are doing and have used implicit knowledge. Giddens describes the former as 'discursive consciousness knowledge' and the latter as 'practical consciousness knowledge'.

While structures give ontological security to this theory they are also tied to legitimacy and domination. They only exist because of the meaning given to them by society, hence a wealthy person is only seen as such because of the meaning given to money. Haugaard (2002) reviewing Giddens' view of power says:

...power is generated by structural reproduction which takes place in the moment of agency. (p149)

This linking of individual power and agency is an interesting concept but may not offer enough explanation. What seems to be crucial is 'collective agency', that is, the ability of communities to act in order to effect some change in their lives. But does this collective agency only come from the individual agency of those involved or does the very nature of being involved in a community which is able to take action cause the generation of individual agency?

2.5 Issues of social capital

I now turn to examine the idea of social capital. Recent work by political scientists and sociologists offers an interesting perspective on the importance of social capital in modern society. Cattell (2004), Hall (1999), Preston (2003), Putnam (1995, 2000), Schuller (2003) and Schuller *et al* (2000) are among the writers who help inform our understanding of this concept which is based on social relationships and trust. Social capital builds up over time and begins in the family, but differs from human capital as it is primarily about reciprocity, mutuality, trust and common good, not the individual benefits accrued by human capital. Individuals may have high human capital, be high earning, but still have low social capital due to their lack of time for family and other social activity.

Writers agree that there is a connection between social capital and civic participation but some, Hall (1999), Preston (2003) and Schuller (2003) also draw attention to the correlation between high levels of civic engagement and educational success, which may be of particular significance for this study:

...education has a transformative and subversive potential to produce various types of participation [in civic life]. Preston 2003, p236

Education may have different effects in engendering social capital dependent on the individual and Preston (2003) offers three categories of outcomes through learning. These are:

- ◆ Atomistic - although involved in civic life there was little engagement with their community, due possibly to structural restrictions
- ◆ Networking – had social networks around learning or had used learning to construct these networks but not formally involved in civic life
- ◆ Altruistic – appeared to be involved in acts of civic participation and to show reciprocity

Education for those in the first category had resulted in a solitary form of civic life, as found by Putnam (1995) in the American context. For some of those in the networking category the learning had actually led to involvement in fewer social networks, rather than enhancing existing ones or providing new opportunities. This category also showed evidence that, while gaining cultural and economic capital for themselves, they were at the same time excluding others. The altruistic category (similar to Putnam's [2000] notion of 'bonding' social capital) showed individuals who had:

biographies which reflected an educational or other experience that has enhanced their sense of individual efficacy or agency... (Preston 2003, p237)

Preston (2003) therefore warns that civic action is constrained and shaped by structural considerations, and that researchers need to take heed of individual biographies when defining what is meant by civic participation. This theme is echoed by Cattell (2004) when investigating generational effects, who suggests that possession of high levels of social capital for some communities may not be possible because of poverty, exclusion and erosion of workplaces.

A key component of social capital is around trust. In America Putnam (1995) found that one of the factors influencing a decline in social trust was that of women leaving the home to go out to work. Other factors involved reduced number of marriages, higher levels of divorce, increased mobility of families and increased use of technology, especially the internet. Hall (1999), looking at the British context, found similar erosion of social trust, particularly amongst the young, but he also found that high levels of social capital have been sustained, partly by the increased participation of women in the community. The importance of trust is encompassed by Ranson in the following quote:

Our active participation in creating the projects which are to shape ourselves as well as the communities in which we live provides the sense of purpose to work together with others and to secure trusting relations with them. (Ranson 2000, p274)

When examining the dynamic relationship between agency and structure Cattell (2004) found tensions between these, especially when investigating the reasons for breakdown of cooperation and trust. She suggests that stability, integration and solidarity are needed for social capital production. It is perhaps of significance that Hall (1999) finds there is less class solidarity, probably because of the increased emphasis on individual achievement rather than on class divisions, and also because of the reduction in trade-union membership amongst the working classes since the 1980s.

If it is important to appreciate the link between engendering social capital and education, it is also important to appreciate that social networks need to be varied to give individuals the opportunity to find suitable support for their particular endeavour. The importance of having the appropriate connections would appear to be strongly linked to class (Cattell 2004; Hall 1999), with the middle classes having an advantage over the working classes, both because they have opportunities to move outside traditional closeknit communities and because they can meet diversity more easily through casual meetings and conversations. It is interesting to note here that if, as Cattell (2004) suggests, social exclusion results from a lack of, or little involvement in, social, economic and political life and a lack of integration and power, then social capital is essential.

It seems that social capital may offer the link in terms of agency and structure which I suggested earlier, bringing together institutional factors (gender, class, ethnicity, etc) with the individual and community factors.

There is little doubt that the social structures within which individuals function will play a major part in their ability, or otherwise, to develop agency. Central to the research questions is the importance of education and the contention that society owes all its citizens the chance to take part. Although compulsory schooling succeeds for some, it does not for others, and it is predominantly these individuals who I am concerned with in the case studies. Perhaps it is worthwhile considering what 'being educated' actually means. Ranson (1994) offers a useful definition:

Is to be introduced to the culture of a society, to learn its language, know its rules of behaviour and acquire respect for its moral codes. (Ranson 1994, p6)

and this, I believe, implies gaining an element of power for oneself, through a sense of agency, leading to powerful learning.

While possessing social capital may be part of the answer Gamarnikow and Green (1999) agree with Bourdieu (1986) that some definitions of social capital do not sufficiently acknowledge the economic contexts and social inequalities in society. It seems that Schuller *et al's* (2000) perspective, which 'requires us to look at the social phenomena from different angles simultaneously' (p29), may help with one aspect of this, but still leaves issues of economic contexts to consider. Lovell (2000) draws attention to the difficulties which gender adds to issues of capital when balancing life as a woman:

...the manner in which women's embodiment of social capital for their families may prevent them from accumulating sufficient cultural capital through

educational investment to enter the lists as intellectuals in their own right without being too heavily disadvantaged. (Lovell 2000, p23)

However, there is a need to be wary of thinking that social capital can answer all society's problems. It is evident (Field 2003) that social capital can be engineered by those in a position of power and this leads to criticisms of normalization, but it is also true that by raising social capital resources may become more visible to those who traditionally have been less involved in their communities.

2.6 *Issues of agency and structure*

The previous discussion seeks to show that there are tensions between agency and structure, and that how individuals think and act is determined, at least in part, by the structures in which they exist, for example the family, the college, the community. It is timely now to consider Bourdieu's (1990a, 2000) view of these tensions through his thinking tools of habitus and field and about how capital is utilised. Bourdieu (2000) links agency and structure together when he says that the principle of action:

...lies in the complicity between two states of the social, between history in bodies and history in things, or, more precisely, between the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms (those of the social space or of fields) and the history incarnated in bodies in the form of habitus, a complicity which is the basis of a relation of quasi-magical participation between these two realisations of history. (Bourdieu 2000, pp150-151)

The way that Bourdieu combines the objective social world which shapes individuals together with the subjective experience of being in that world, in his theory of practice, is helpful. After all, individuals do not live in isolation. Habitus is embedded history where a disposition is created, based on life experiences and tacit knowledge, which enables the individual to function as an effective social agent. Bourdieu talks about habitus as a structured and socialised body, which

structures both the perception and actions within the world. As others have suggested, for example Gorard and Rees (2002), patterns of participation in learning opportunities are bound closely to family behaviour, and Bourdieu believes that family and home life are the fundamental shapers of habitus and lead to subconscious choices. Habitus in many ways seems to be the comfort zone for an individual:

Habitus as a system of dispositions to be and to do is a potentiality, a desire to be which, in a certain way, seeks to create the conditions of its fulfilment, and therefore to create the conditions most favorable to what it is. In the absence of any major upheaval (a change of position, for example), the conditions of its formation are also the conditions of its realization. (Bourdieu, 2000, p150)

However, the habitus will constantly be re-evaluated, reinforced or modified by experiences and will, at the same time, inform how a person walks, talks and interacts in society:

...durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively 'regulated' without being in anyway the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor. (Bourdieu 1990a, p53)

Haugaard (2002) describes the habitus as a mediating structure. Examples of this in practice might be students who had bad experiences in school who, if they return to any learning environment and find that they are unable to cope with, for example, written tasks, may accept that this is 'not for them' and remove themselves from the learning situation, without exploring other options. Their disposition has been confirmed. Had they met success within this different learning environment (or field) they may have begun to change their disposition. As Bourdieu states, while our dispositions can and do change, this may be a slow process:

Dispositions are subject to a kind of permanent revision, but one which is never radical, because it works on the basis of the premises established in the previous state. (Bourdieu 2000, p161)

Fields, for Bourdieu, add a dynamic aspect which is missing from habitus. A field (for example, adult education) is an arena of struggle which is characterised and created through the staking of capital, to gain acceptance and legitimacy. Some succeed while others do not. According to Gunter (2005):

Each field is a structured system of social positions held by people and institutions. The nature of social positions defines the situation for people, and the field is structured internally as a set of power relations. (2005, p33)

The structures within which individuals function, for example the family and schools, help form the habitus over time and therefore build history into individual dispositions so that encounters make individual agents what they will become. 'Habitus is that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forth-coming' (Bourdieu, 2000, p210). So while structures both structure individuals because of their history and inform how they are disposed to act, they also offer opportunities to act differently in a field (for example, adult education) by offering new opportunities and new ways of thinking.

Capital for Bourdieu is described as 'resources' or scarce goods within social relations which are needed to gain power and status within society. Key forms of capital are: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital, and it must be evident that these are all powerful commodities which impact on the individual. Up to this point I have concentrated on social capital but it seems, especially in the field of education, that the capacity to gain and use cultural capital may be even more significant. Some writers (for example Ecclestone 2003) suggest that social capital is essential in order that individuals can gain

cultural capital, and that there can be movement within social spaces as when economic capital can be 'cashed in to obtain cultural capital in the next generation' (Jenkins 1992, p140). While many aspects of social capital are positive it should also be noted that it can reinforce exclusion, underachievement and poor cultural capital (Field, 2003) and that 'access to social capital appears to be associated closely with the capacity to negotiate uncertainly in adult life'. (p269).

From the perspective of education cultural capital is significant. It constitutes three elements: the *embodied* elements include things that are learnt and the language individuals use, and their accents and dialects; the *objectified* element is the cultural goods which individuals may have, art, texts, and other objective signs of learning; the *institutional* elements are the certificates and qualifications that individuals gain throughout life. Crucially, symbolic capital (credentials, prestige, reputation) is only produced when cultural, economic and social capitals are exchanged or converted within an institutionally recognised and legitimated authority, known as a field. As a consequence of gaining symbolic capital the individual, within that field, is imbued with symbolic power which, in turn, may be used as symbolic violence against others within the field. The recognition of who actually *has* authority and legitimacy is a problem. The doxa, or how individuals within the field understand the rationale for that field, is socially produced within the field itself and explains 'the game' to be played out within the field. A doxa therefore, according to Bourdieu (1990b), works as misrecognition of the truth and offers an explanation of failure in something as poor playing in the game by the individual concerned, rather than in questioning the nature of the game itself.

Codification, according to Bourdieu (1990b), is a normalising activity which gives authority to the activity being coded, even if all the 'players' within the field are not in agreement with it.

But maybe Bourdieu's view of agency becomes, as Noble and Watkins (2003) suggest, simply an effect of structure which loses sight of an individual's desire to act and reflect, which they refer to as 'agentic reflection' (p530). While Bourdieu insists that habitus is not habit it can be argued that acting in the world has to be habitualised, but that when necessary, individuals reflect and then change their position and habitualise this new position. It is only once actions have been habitualised that they can then become part of the habitus and therefore below conscious decision making. The pragmatist concept of 'situated action' offered by Shilling (2004) also involves a degree of reflection by the individual and:

...recognizes that people's belief in a given world and the efficacy of established ways of acting are *repeatedly* negated by lived experience.
(Shilling 2004, p479)

This constant reflection on action and creation of new habituations are caused by a 'creative revelation' (which may be the result of a crisis, for example) and lead to changes in the individual which are described as 'disruptive selves' (Shilling 2004). In many ways this would appear to be what happens in 'identity shifts' (Edwards and MacKenzie 2005) and it is perhaps useful to discuss social identity now as, according to Putnam (1995, 2000), social identity is a crucial aspect of social capital production.

2.7 Issues of social identity

Research by Edwards and MacKenzie (2005) shows that the giving and receiving of support, which they call 'relational agency' (p 291), appears to allow individuals to take more risks and expand their learning trajectories. These findings echo those of Gallacher *et al* (2002) when examining the learning careers of adult returners to learning where social relationships were important and where social identities were reconstructed during the process of engaging in education as an adult.

Individuals' sense of their own identity is crucial when considering what is understood by the word 'power' but, as Jenkins (1996) states, individual identity is not meaningful in isolation from society. The main premise of Jenkins' work on social identity would seem to be that individual identity, embodied in self-hood, which is itself socially constructed, is unique and offers difference, while collective identity is about shared understandings and is about similarities. Together these make social identity, which is constituted by:

the ways in which individual and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities. (Jenkins, 1996, p4)

It is important to note that the relationship between these two areas (individual and collective) is crucial and that social capital may help answer the question:

How can we fruitfully bring into the same analytical space the active lives and consciousnesses of individuals, the abstract impersonality of the institutional order, and the ebb and flow of historical time? (Jenkins, 1996, p26)

A significant contribution to writing in this area has come from Bourdieu (1984, 1988, 1990a) who, influenced by Heidegger³ offers a theory of social practice (mentioned earlier) based on habitus, which is similar to Giddens' (1984) practical

consciousness knowledge. Both these concepts also have something in common with Foucault's (1989, 1993) epistèmes, which are described as layers of historical knowledge and thought. Bourdieu bases his theory of practice on the idea of 'class', incorporating Weber (1978) and Marxist viewpoints, giving a model which combines economic factors and status. Bourdieu's theory, or logic of practice, is based on the interaction of habitus, cultural capital and field but I would argue, is significantly about the social identities which individuals and collectivities come together to create.

Identity can therefore be seen to be integral to how individuals are in the world, and it may be that discovering one's social identity offers space for the production of agency. As Jenkins notes:

Social identities exist and are acquired, claimed and allocated within power relations. (1996, p25)

and thus come full circle to the notion that power, or the lack of it, is central to how individuals are positioned in the social world in which they live.

2.8 *Issues of empowerment and emancipation*

Much has been written about power in the social and political contexts, see for example Foucault (1979,1989,1993), Giddens (1984,1991), Lukes (1974), Marx (1867), but here I want to explore issues of power and how agency interplays with structure, and what this means for the individual and society. Power can be used in a positive way, for example where it enables productive exchanges leading to mutual gain, or in a negative way, as when it involves force or manipulation, and therein lies the danger, particularly to educators. While Bourdieu (1990a, 2000)

offers ways to understand how individuals are positioned in the world, and in *The Weight of the World* (1999) begins to offer a way forward, he does not explicitly offer a theory of emancipation. However, the work of Freire (1972, 1973) and Mezirow (1991, 2000) does offer a basis on which to begin.

Freire (1973) strove for humanization of mankind(*sic*) and one of the ongoing strengths of his work is the way it was built on dialogue and encouraging debate and challenge. He found that when people have access to the language and ask critical questions they can begin to take on some of the power for themselves. He believed in his workers immersing themselves in the community to get a feel for it before beginning to ask probing questions in 'culture circles'. Freire's method of using individuals' language and familiar objects in the learning environment are followed by ABE teachers everywhere, probably most obviously in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and in very basic groups, where there is a great dependence on language experience⁴. Freire believed in dialogic, collaborative education, which surely is at the core of an andragogical⁵ approach. Shor (1980 cited by Brookfield 1986, p137) agrees with Freire by seeing the function of the teacher to "provoke students' separation from mass culture and then to assist in a critically aware re-entry into that culture" (p137).

Evidence shows that the ethos of working in basic skills and ESOL means that tutors would hope that their students become 'critical learners' who are able to create their own future rather than just accept what happens to them. Brookfield (1987, 1995) advocates both critically reflective teachers and learners so that people do not perceive themselves as helpless within the world:

When the world is perceived as fundamentally uncontrollable, and when major events in our lives are viewed as unpredictable and inexplicable, we feel powerless. Individuals trying to make themselves into critical thinkers or hoping to encourage this capacity in others are trying to replace this sense of powerlessness with the conviction that the world is *not* governed completely by accidental happenings beyond our understanding. (Brookfield 1987, p56)

Mezirow (1991) too believes in critical reflectivity and his 'perspective transformation', where an individual critically reflects and adjusts their way of interpreting experiences, compares with Freire's 'conscientisation'. The idea of 'transformation' is one taken up by other writers (see for example Foucault 1993, Merrill 2005, Preston 2003), all of whom see the importance of learners being transformed during the process of learning. The idea of creating 'powerful learners' who are involved in 'powerful learning' suggests that this transformation is necessary.

As stated in Chapter 1, my reading of the literature and experiences as an adult educator have led me to consider that oppression and emancipation are on a continuum, with empowerment somewhere between the two. Humphries (1996, 1997) has a particularly negative view of how empowerment works within society. First by containment; this is when the demands of oppressed groups are accommodated or incorporated by the prevailing dominant group without there having to be a radical change in social structures. Secondly by collusion; when subordinate groups accept the unequal terms and obtain resources in direct competition with other oppressed groups. He further maintains that it is only amongst *existing socially powerful groups* that there is a discourse of empowerment, so that it is:

not the oppositional agency of the poor and disenfranchised, but the enforcement of the concerns of hegemonic groups. (Humphries, 1997, 4.9)

There is, however, no consensus about what is meant by empowerment, and Fielding (1996) suggests that it is no longer a useful term:

... a fundamental imbalance of power remains a recalcitrant reality for huge numbers of people in many aspects of their lives. The technical possibility of 'negotiating actions within particular contexts' may be formally true, but, in a lived sense, persistently and painfully false. (Fielding 1996, p411)

There are issues about a process view of empowerment which suggests that in empowering another, the individual or body loses power themselves although they may well retain control. Teachers in schools and those in adult education classes now have little control over the curriculum they teach nor, in many cases, how they teach it nor, given the current workforce reform agenda, if they teach it at all. Fielding (1996) suggests that the 'vocabulary of liberation is deliberately used to entice and dupe' (pp402-403); promising change but then controlling the process so that it is restrictive.

Even the emancipatory view of empowerment (towards the other end of the continuum) is problematic as viewed by feminists and postmodernists. If the true desire is to disrupt current positions of power so that the powerless can become increasingly involved, then simply enabling them to gain some skills or knowledge does not disrupt the structural constraints which surround them. Following Foucault (1989), Fielding (1996) suggests that those who advocate emancipatory empowerment do not take account of 'the distortions, limitations and partiality of their newly imposed regimes of truth' (p408). Gore (1993, 1994), like Bourdieu (1990a, 1998), dislikes the terms powerful/powerless, seeing power as being exercised not possessed, and acknowledges that educators cannot do everything for everyone. It is suggested by Fay (1987) that empowerment is when the powerless come together to achieve some goal as they are then empowering

themselves, and Griffiths (2003) identifies the need for an individual to have a voice which is heard and listened to and, crucially, is validated by others. Fielding (1996) disputes this and suggests that the term empowerment should no longer be used:

Those of us who wish to shape the world more closely to the intent and the integrity of our aspirations must match them with language that affirms what we wish to become, rather than with language that reminds us of what others wish us to remain. (Fielding 1996, p414)

At this point it is important to recognise that empowerment and emancipation are not the same and, as critics of Mezirow (Clark and Wilson 1991; Inglis 1997) point out, an empowering approach is not automatically emancipatory unless it leads to some kind of action. Unless the learner is aware of the constricting power structures in which they are situated they will not necessarily know that they could be challenged. This is the dilemma for the adult educator: to aim merely to empower individuals or to strive for emancipation where there is progressive social change:

Put at its simplest, the purposes of learning can be seen as ranged along a continuum from emancipatory to oppressive, according to the degree to which they enhance or limit our life opportunities.... learning may simply reaffirm a position of little power in the social division of labour, rather than transforming that position or the social division of labour more generally. (Foucault, 1993, p2)

It also needs to be acknowledged that, while empowerment may not be a 'political' term, emancipation is. Lather (1991) writes from the postmodern feminist perspective about emancipation in which she attempts to offer a truly liberatory outcome, and within this acknowledges that there is always a political dimension when discussing emancipation. But the main concern of many individual learners and their communities may centre around more basic needs and concerns, and

perhaps educators need to remind themselves that, as Tusting and Barton (2003) state:

... learning for adults is always related to their real lives, their real problems and their real issues ... (p32)

This means, crucially, that adults are unlikely to become liberated in isolation from other people because, if collective agency is important and social groups and structures enable individuals to flourish, then they will not be alone in their endeavours.

For groups who have been traditionally excluded or disadvantaged it may not appear to them that they need emancipating, they may not want to challenge or change the world in a truly liberatory way. This is perhaps a timely reminder of Foucault's (1993) statement that, while it is possible to empower it is *not* possible to confer emancipation on another because 'liberty is a practice' (p162).

Emancipatory learning aims to promote greater equality and social justice. It draws on feminist pedagogies, critical thinking, conscientisation and transformative learning. From the literature on adult learning it is evident that there are many examples of emancipatory learning (Foley 1998; Freire 1972; Martin 2000; Thompson 2000) but also that the intention is not always well-received by those it seeks to serve. Students may question the reason they are being treated as equals in the teaching-learning relationship which runs counter to the expectations of many. An examination of current government policies makes it apparent that adults with low literacy skills are actively encouraged to access education, but the results of this are measured in terms of meeting targets and getting people into work, not in terms of benefiting the individuals or communities

in which they live. Educators and policy-makers should therefore be aware of the language in use and the hidden policy agendas which surround society so that all concerned aim for a truly liberatory experience for all learners.

In the light of this discussion I am tending towards viewing empowerment as a useful beginning, but see emancipation as a more appropriate concept from which to develop my conceptual framework. The important aspect of emancipation here is activism. The activism implied in the term emancipation means that adult learners cannot be passive in the learning process. It allows them to utilise power and make choices, both individually and collectively. Only by this participation can learners engage in powerful learning which is ultimately learning which allows the learner to make real choices.

2.9 *A conceptual framework*

The use of typologies is helpful when trying to gain a perspective on a complex and multi-faceted field, such as adult learning. A typology can use very structured 'tight' definitions, or, after Mitchell (1979), definitions which allow 'loose' classification or categorisation of types. Some writers (Hodgkinson, 1996) suggest that 'typing' is 'a very basic instinct' (p89) and that individuals need to be able to impose order to enable them to shape their understanding of the world. Any typology I propose is going to be informed by my own histories and beliefs and it is therefore necessary to accept that in many ways it is a personal construct, but one which is informed by and located in debates (as illustrated) within the social sciences. In order to pursue the research questions through the literature review

and framework, I propose using a typology which I call 'powerful learners and learning'.

It will be evident that power is both a complex and a contested term. Writers do not agree on what the term means, or how one 'gets' power, but it is clear that power is significant and of central importance to this thesis. Notions of empowerment and emancipation have been around for many years and in this chapter I have explored issues raised by some of the key writers. It may well be that the term *empowerment* is better replaced, as Fielding (1996) suggests, by one of *enablement*, and that the real focus of education for adults should be on providing opportunities for learning which allow transformation, emancipation and liberation. Despite the evidence from Fielding I have decided to continue to use the term empowerment, partly because it contains the word 'power' within it, which for my conceptual framework is crucial.

The theory of structuration and hence practical consciousness knowledge which is offered by Giddens (1984, 1998) helps the researcher understand many issues from a social theory perspective and has interesting connections with the work of Bourdieu (1990a, 1998). It does seem that while human capital is sufficient for individual agency to occur, social capital is needed for collective agency and this is important for society as a whole. However, while social capital plays a part it seems to need the support of other resources in the way of cultural and economic capital, and using Bourdieu's notion of habitus offers a way of paying attention to both the history and the person and their context to help understand how people are in the world. By exercising agency through intellectual work and practice it is

possible that, as Bourdieu *et al* state ‘what the social world has done it can, armed with this knowledge, undo’ (1999, p629).

The typology I propose (see figure 2.1) is one which may help with ‘loose’ definitions and classifications.

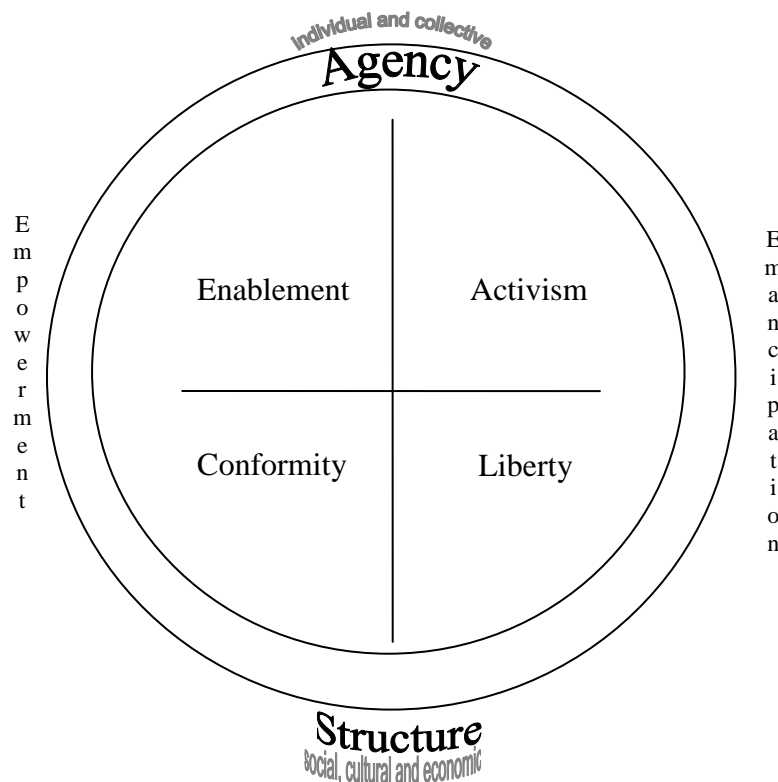


Figure 2.1 A conceptual framework to explain 'Powerful learners and learning'

The overall purpose is to explain my view of powerful learners and learning. On one side is adult learning which offers empowerment; on the other is adult learning which leads to emancipation. The grid is surrounded by two circles. The one shows the influence of agency for these learners – both individual and collective. The other shows the influence of structures - social, cultural and economic, within which these adults live. The quarters on the left I have called

'conformity' and 'enablement'. Learning that empowers but conforms creates no real choices for the learner; learning that empowers and enables goes a step further and purports to create choice (for example, a student completing the national skills test achieves a qualification which is not yet recognised by employers). The quarters on the right are called *'activism'* and *'liberty'*, and characterise increasing opportunities for choice for the learner. My assertion is that while adult learning ranges from formal to informal, from intentional to casual, there are many constraints on a truly liberatory outcome and that, despite what might be an overt *intention* for adult learning to offer the transformation and critical thinking and activism needed to lead to emancipation, this may not be the final outcome.

Learning which purports to be empowering may simply be a different way of controlling, with the individual in a position of having little or no 'voice', despite having the technical skills and the knowledge to participate in society and contribute through employment. This may however be a relatively comfortable situation for the individual and moving towards a more communitarian view of adult learning may be both challenging and disturbing. There is little doubt that education has a significant part to play and Martin (2000) makes this point forcefully when he describes education as a 'weapon' to help reach liberation.

This conceptual framework contributes to descriptions of 'what is going on' for adult learners in this study; it will allow suggestions for 'what might be done', and allows explanations of 'what is, or what ought, to be'. If adult learners are to be 'powerful learners' I would suggest that they need to be increasingly active in

making choices about their learning and their lives, and those of their communities. While the process view of empowerment (Fielding 1996) may encourage learners to remain in the left two quadrants of my diagram, a more emancipatory approach could facilitate a shift to the right-hand quadrants.

This grid enables mapping of what is found in the literature and in the data to see if the opportunities afforded adult learners are controlling or liberatory. I describe the participants' learning experiences in these terms to find out first, if adults within the case studies are learning at all and, secondly, whether they are offered sufficient support from educational policies and from those involved in teaching or guiding them to allow them to reach emancipation.

2.10 Summary

This chapter has reviewed some of the literature dealing with issues of power, and explored the influence of agency and structure on agents as they make sense of their lives. It has reviewed the concept of social capital and examined the conceptual tools of Bourdieu, ending with a discussion of the place of empowerment and emancipation in adult learning. Finally I have constructed a conceptual framework, which I call 'powerful learners and learning', to enable me to undertake a robust inquiry of published research, policy interventions, research design, analysis and theorising around adult learning.

The following chapter will focus on adult learning and education and how adults access learning opportunities, or not. It will explore some of the major themes in adult education and learning and discuss factors which influence learning. This

chapter will begin to frame the case studies so that in the analysis I am able to reflect on the multidimensional nature of adult education, from informal to formal, casual to intentional.

¹ The positivist paradigm believes that reality is objective, that human beings are rational individuals, and that human behaviour can be explained in the same terms as natural sciences ie can develop generalisations and laws from observing phenomena. It denies the subjective nature of the human being (Cohen and Manion, 1980).

² Time-space comes from Heidegger's (1962) work where all things exist in time and space , Giddens (1991) sees these as inseparable, hence time-space.

³ Heidegger , a 20th century German philosopher, who wrote about 'Dasein' to exist or to be (1962). For Bourdieu ((1984, 1990a) this is theorized as the flowing together of past and present through the process of becoming .

⁴ Language experience is where teachers work by acting as scribe to the words of the student developing reading and writing skills building from single words to phrases, then sentences.

⁵ Andragogy is a term used by Malcolm Knowles (1970, 1978) and describes a way of teaching adults, in contrast to pedagogy. It is discussed further in chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION

3.1 Overview

Learning can involve a very wide variety of undertakings. It may be a capacity to recognise and engage with available resources, it certainly does not always have to be formal accredited learning. Although it can and does enable individuals to gain employment, it is far more than this, as Aldridge *et al* encapsulate here:

The right to learn means the right to question and analyse, the right to access information and reflect, and to make informed decisions affecting one's individual life and community. Learning is more than the acquisition of pre-defined pieces of knowledge or qualifications for functional purposes – although it also includes this dimension. Learning is an ongoing, lifelong and life-wide process for individuals and communities that leads to empowerment and emancipation. (Aldridge *et al* 2002, p3)

This chapter discusses three of my research questions:

- a) why is adult learning an issue?
- b) what do we know about adult learners and learning?
- c) what do we know about the contextual settings in which adult learners and learning are located?.

It examines barriers to learning and learning and teaching styles. It draws on the work of Freire (1972), Habermas (1978), Knowles (1977), Mezirow (1981) amongst others, and examines the notion of self-directedness and reflexivity. It goes on to look at the individual as part of society and the implications for education of this. At the end of each section I use my conceptual framework of 'powerful learners and learning' to position the outcome for adult learners on the map of *conformity to liberty*.

3.2 What is adult learning?

This section explores the issues behind one of the most influential writers about literacy, Freire (1972), who believed in education for liberation, not for oppression. He stated that, while nature is imposed, culture is not and therefore believed in

critical education. Freire felt that social reality is both made by people and can be changed by people. Education, in Freire's opinion, should help raise critical awareness to help people understand and respond to their social reality. Many adult educators would agree with this sentiment, but it is nevertheless a contested area.

A starting point is to investigate whether teaching adults is fundamentally different to teaching children. This is not as straightforward as it may seem and the next section will explore this more fully.

3.2.1 Andragogy

The term 'andragogy' was first introduced in the 1920s, but the name most closely associated with the term recently is that of Knowles (1970, 1975, 1978). He describes andragogy as a series of assumptions about learners which should be considered alongside a pedagogical model of assumptions; it is not a theory of adult learning. These assumptions are: self-directedness, wealth of experiences, needs generated by life situations, competency-based learners and performance-centred in orientation to learning. (Knowles, 1970, p55). He sees pedagogy and andragogy as opposite ends of a spectrum with both being useful at some time with all ages of learners. Knowles (1970) also offers certain conditions of learning which need to be present for a positive learning-teaching transaction to take place. These are:

- the learner feels a need to learn
- the learning environment is characterised by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences
- the learners perceive the goals of a learning experience to be their goals

- the learners accept a share of the responsibility for planning and operating a learning experience, and therefore have a feeling of commitment toward it
- the learners participate actively in the learning process
- the learning process is related to and makes use of the experience of the learners
- the learners have a sense of progress toward their goals (p69-70)

Considering these assumptions it is interesting to note that, while most adults might wish to be self-directed learners, many are not. This can be seen in ABE groups where the teacher tries to encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning and the students are very resistant to this (Journal, p 20). The varied life experiences which adults bring to classes may help to make them capable of critical reflectivity, both individually and as a group. It is also not true to say that all learning takes place because of life situation needs as some adults enjoy learning for learning's sake (du Vivier, 1992).

In his discussion of learning Mezirow (1981) compares emancipatory learning to Freire's notion of conscientisation. He suggests the term *perspective transformations* which involve:

... the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. (Mezirow 1981, p125)

He advocates 'education for perspective transformation' and feels Freire does not fully explore the 'stumbling blocks' during the 'transformation in perspective' (which is when there is a change in individuals' personal paradigms) which would seem to occur. There needs to be reciprocity and equality; students need to have access to other perspectives. I like the idea of perspective transformation, feeling that there are times when this does occur during the learning process, and it

begins to show how learners can move from being in the receipt mode of *conformity*, through a more involved process of *enablement* to active participation in *activism*, as suggested in my conceptual framework.

My experience in adult education suggests that when a teacher offers tuition which meets the needs identified by a student it would appear that a learner-centred process is being managed in an humanistic manner; but unless there is input from the teacher, individuals are unlikely to move beyond their current paradigms of thinking, perceiving and behaving. Every learner, to progress, needs to learn to reflect critically on their way of seeing things and have alternatives suggested to them, not just learn things in a mechanistic way because someone else has decided they should learn this skill or that piece of knowledge. The development of a critically reflective approach is the job of the teacher (Brookfield, 1986, 1995), but peers may play an important part in this too, and all parties are likely to be changed by the experience. There is no definite outcome to any learning experience but where there is fundamental change the learner is likely to look anew at their personal, social and occupational worlds. Mezirow (1981) also talks of *critical reflectivity* which he describes as the awareness of *why* we attach the meaning we do to reality:

Helping adults construe experience in a way in which they may more clearly understand the reasons for their problems and understand the options open to them so that they may assume responsibility for decision making is the essence of education. (Mezirow, 1981, p135)

This can be described as 'epistemic cognition' and is important if an adult is to reach the level of transformative learning described by Mezirow.

Reflection is also a factor for Allman (1983) who thinks it is as important for students to be part of the decision and evaluating processes as to be part of the actual learning. She looked at andragogy and particularly at Knowles' (1978) work and took it a stage further:

... in all aspects of adult development, the movement appeared to be in the direction of gaining ever increasing amounts of control over our thinking and therefore our lives. (Allman, 1983, p119)

The idea that adults might have control over their own lives is centrally significant to my theoretical argument. The following statement perhaps captures what andragogy is:

Andragogy should be conceived as a philosophically and theoretically based approach to the education of adults which derives from the emerging theory of adult development and which rests upon an identifiable set of assumptions about the nature of adult beings, the nature of learning, education, knowledge and adult development. (Allman, 1983, p119)

Not all adult educators are comfortable with the notion of andragogy and Houle (1972) questions whether adults are self-directed learners who learn what they need to learn. He sees collaborative teaching and learning as based on a curriculum which is learner-centred and where the activities utilise the experiences of the learners who should also be involved in the goal setting and evaluation of the learning. He talks instead of 'learning orientated' adults who are constantly investigating new things, even if they are not immediately applicable to current life situations. Houle (1972) therefore sees programme development as more important than the teaching, and defines adult education as:

the process by which men and women (alone, in groups, or in institutional settings) seek to improve themselves or their society by increasing their skill, knowledge or sensitiveness; or it is any process by which individuals, groups, or institutions try to help men and women improve in these ways. (Houle 1972, p32)

Tough (1976), too, feels that it is not possible to claim that all adults are self-directed learners; he prefers to talk of 'major learning effort and purposeful learning' equating these to 'learning projects'.

The discussion about what is meant by 'self-directed learning' is an issue which divides theorists in their views of what constitutes andragogy. Knowles (1975) suggests that self-directed learning is a process where adults take the initiative in designing their learning experiences, in diagnosing their own needs, in locating resources and in evaluating their learning. This definition may just mean that individuals are acquiring the skills and knowledge they need with the minimum of 'professional' help. Another definition, discussed by Brookfield (1986) and the Nottingham Andragogy Group (1983), which refers back to Freire's principles, which suggest that self-directed learning occurs when the adult:

- ♦ begins to regard knowledge as relative and contextual
- ♦ view the value frameworks and moral codes informing their behaviour as cultural constructs, and
- ♦ uses this altered perspective to contemplate ways in which they can transform their personal and social worlds. (Brookfield 1986, p47)

Many learners may never become 'self-directed' in these terms, but most could learn to work independently, by designing learning activities, identifying needs, finding appropriate resources and evaluating the learning, *if they wanted to do so*, and this is the critical factor. It is interesting to note that nearly all forms of cognitive activity involve interaction with external influences; in other words, it is difficult for individuals to change their perspective without other people being involved in some way or another because of the limits individuals impose on themselves. This has implications for self-directed learners who are exploring

ideas and areas outside their own area of expertise and puts added emphasis on the importance of peer group support in this situation. Learners who do become self-directed will be making choices and active decisions about their learning and will therefore be moving into the right-hand quadrants of my 'powerful learners and learning' typology, towards *liberty*.

3.3 Why do adults need to learn?

One of my research questions is: why is adult learning an issue and for whom? This section begins to articulate some of the reasons why learning is an issue for some adults. Returning to the theme of emancipation, I briefly turn to Habermas (1978) who, like Rogers (1961), sees life as a quest for self-emancipation. Habermas draws heavily on the work of Freire when he identifies three kinds of learning:

- technical (skills necessary for life)
- practical (interpersonal)
- emancipatory (self-understanding)

Charnley and Jones (1981) found in their research that adults undertaking literacy instruction were concerned with increasing their self confidence, their social skills and their self image as well as wishing to reach accepted standards of reading and writing laid down by organisers of learning programmes. Students' perceptions of their success were therefore on two levels, emotional and goal-related.

Looking at needs and interests Kidd (1973) proposes that it is only when options are known that individuals can decide what they need. Their choice may be severely restricted if they are only offered what their interests suggest, as they

may not have the experience to decide what *could* interest them. As far as the curriculum is concerned, it is obvious that any new knowledge needs to be used and applied to individuals' own contexts, to support retention of the information gained. What is important about learning has to do with *changes in the learner*, not the teacher or subject matter. This statement, is compatible with Bateson's (2000) definition of learning, 'The word "*learning*" undoubtedly denotes *change* of some kind' (p283). This is, however, disputed by Kelly (1955) who believed that the content of the learning, ie the curriculum, is critical, rather than the learners themselves. This is not a view I support.

The model presented by Groombridge (1983), based on work by Houle (1972), offers another perspective on learning. This model suggests three categories for learning: *prescriptive*, popular (or *personal*) and *partnership*, and Groombridge asks the questions '...who decides what is to be learned, what is worth learning?' and '...who decides when what was to be learned has been satisfactorily learned?' (p12). The '*prescriptive*' situation is like traditional schooling where the curriculum and syllabus is laid down and the learner is dependent on others for 'what counts as knowledge'. It appears from current writing and research that many people oppose these methods, but most adults will have learned from 'experts with authority' eg when learning to drive, or in studying for A levels. Sometimes this mode is successful but it can also be ineffective or even harmful. The *experts decide* when we have learned *their knowledge* to *their* satisfaction. It is contrary to my own philosophy of adult learning.

The *personal* (individual) or *popular* (group) learning situation is when the group or individual decide what they need, what is good for them and when they have

learned it *to their own satisfaction*. They may refer to experts (eg a textbook or a well-known person in the field) but there is no formal curriculum. It is completed satisfactorily if it is felt that this is so, for instance, if the audience enjoyed the performance of a play. It is more 'adult' than *prescriptive* methods but not everyone will have learned enough in this way, although that is for the individual to decide and judge. The feminist movement is an example of this mode, so are the Pre-school Playgroups Association and Housing Co-operatives. It is, according to Groombridge (1983) '...clearly of major human, social, cultural and political significance (p 15)' and forms a major component of informal education.

The *partnership* learning situation occurs when what is learned is negotiated between the learner and those responsible for teaching them. Curricula are flexible and liable to change. While 'experts' may be referred to so will students' own life experiences, and satisfaction is achieved when individuals recognize through reflection that they have progressed in insight, sensitivity or mastery and when the teacher recognises they have taught not only the subject matter but the processes of study so that learners can continue on their own. There may be tests involved so that the learning can be publicly assessed or accredited which is important to some students. It is a mode commonly found in basic skills classes.

The particular strengths of this mode of learning are that it:

- ◆ it recognises that knowledge can be generated in different ways (through training, experience, scholarship)
- ◆ it can be organised in different ways
- ◆ it can be validated in different ways (formally or experientially)

(Groombridge, 1983 p16)

My personal experience shows that a model of partnership learning is what many teachers of adults try to achieve by seeking to give their students transferable skills, the ability to problem-solve and to be reflexive.

Students need to see the immediate goals and accept them as important and accept that increased confidence helps motivation when they feel that they can alter the learning situation to meet their own needs (Kidd 1973 and Rogers 1986). Throughout my teaching career and in other contexts working with adults I have recognized that increasing individuals' confidence is crucial in any learning situation and perhaps feedback is one of the best ways of doing this. My journals over a three year period of working with adult learners are filled with references to feedback, and the importance of this. Jenny Rogers (1989) also stresses the importance of feedback (given in the right way and often enough) and offers the following figure of a learning cycle as a model of good practice:

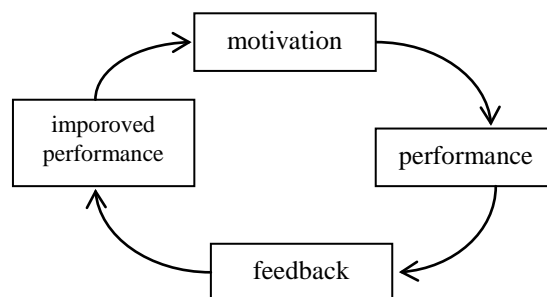


Figure 3.1 Learning Circle (Rogers, 1989, p58)

A case study in the Irish context by du Vivier (1992) concentrated on the students' perceptions of what caused their literacy problems and many students in his study offered more than one reason. These were split into:

- ♦ *circumstantial* (eg time off school to look after other siblings, health problems leading to missing schooling)
- ♦ *school-related* (disinterested teachers, being ignored and left at the back of the class), and

- ♦ *personal* (diagnosed as dyslexic, played truant, 'switched off') (pp45-59).

However, du Vivier argues that it is unlikely that the sole causes can be attributed to the students themselves. There are other factors which should be considered, such as the failure of the education system itself and the social and economic deprivation which many of the students experienced. What must be remembered is that the reasons for a lack of basic education can be complex and diverse. There may therefore be a need for adults to gain access to learning opportunities which allow them time to grow in confidence and self-esteem in a supportive environment *before* they begin to move into a more active phase. This is illustrated in the quadrant called *enablement* in the powerful learners and learning framework.

3.4 What factors influence learners?

In addressing the question 'what do we know about adult learners and learning?' it is necessary to look at some of the factors which influence adult learners. These appear, from the research literature, to include: need (both emotional and practical), learning and teaching styles, motivation and group dynamics, all of which are now discussed.

Armstrong (1982) in considering 'needs' found three sets of causes of 'poverty' and 'urban deprivation' which have been attributed to:

the poor themselves, poor communications within local authority bureaucracy and fundamental social and economic inequalities within contemporary capitalism. (Armstrong,1982)

There is perhaps a link with the work of Maslow (1968, 1970) and his hierarchy of needs which suggests that adults whose basic human needs for warmth, shelter

and food are not met, cannot move to a level where they are able to benefit from education. Work by the National Literacy Trust (Bird, 2004) suggests that for those in the most challenging circumstances help may be needed to, for example, secure accommodation, pay off a debt, or deal with a health problem, before any learning can take place. Many individuals have little success or cause for celebration in their lives. It is therefore understandable that reaching the level of self-actualisation, which is where an individual maximises their potential, may be a long journey for some. This may also have a bearing on individuals' sense of self esteem which, according to research findings from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Emler, 2001), suggests that lack of self esteem is a risk factor for depression, for teenage pregnancy and for victimisation by others, and consequently for failure within the formal education system.

In 1999 Moser reported for the government on adult basic skills in *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: a Fresh Start* (DfEE, 1999). It is generally agreed that the number of adults¹ in England with poor basic skills is approximately 7 million, or 23% of the population (DfEE, 1999). Many of these people will be socially disadvantaged, homeless, jobless and possibly in poor health.

Moore (1983) mentions the importance of dialogue between student and teacher and agrees that educators should capitalise on 'teachable moments' which occur within individuals' lives. Teachable moments are generated when an individual is in a state of readiness because of significant life events (Cross, 1981, p238). Moore makes the point that when children are learning they are often both *instrumentally* dependent (that is they have an inability to undertake an activity

without seeking help) and *emotionally* dependent (needing affection, approval or reassurance) on their teacher. While an adult may be instrumentally dependent they should never be emotionally dependent. He describes autonomous learning as the learner's ability to identify learning needs to solve problems and identify skills they lack and information they need and, according to Moore (1983), this applies to most adults, most of the time. He says:

Adults have a natural desire to learn especially to solve problems in their everyday lives, but also to enlarge their knowledge and experience. (Moore 1983, p163)

Learner characteristics respond to different styles of teaching. They are cognitive styles. Each learner explores and then decides on the most effective learning method for them. There are also psychological differences between everyone and each adult will respond differently, therefore educational programmes must be structured to allow each individual to meet their own particular needs. There is no 'one fits all' model, a point which will be returned to in the following chapter.

There are many examples of good practice in adult education classes where much effective teaching occurs, but for true learning to take place the learner has to be prepared to enter into a transactional process rather than expecting to be taught in a one-way process. Often the learner *and the teacher* are changed by the transaction that takes place during learning.

Although, according to Rogers (1989), some learning takes place by individuals just being exposed to the subject, most adults need motivation to learn, wherever it comes from. Some overcome huge barriers to return to a learning environment.

Many have bad experiences behind them and come to adult learning with genuine fears and lack of confidence in themselves.

Being a 'motivated' learner is not the only requirement for success. Research into drop out rates from ABE classes revealed that students often arrived in ABE expecting that:

...the tutor had the knowledge and authority and would 'learn' them.(Teale and Ballantyne, 1990, p4)

because this was their previous experience of education. For these learners there is little expectation that they will be active participants in their learning and so they are likely to be placed in the *conformity* quadrant of the powerful learners and learning grid.

So why does a student come to classes? Rogers (1989) reminds us that adults generally attend classes on a voluntary basis, although this may not always be true, (and for example is certainly not true for all the Nacro learners in this study) and this contrasts sharply with the statutory schooling of children. Du Vivier (1992) adds that:

Given the fact that they are free to leave at any time, it is largely the student's own perception of progress that determines whether they will drop out or stay in tuition. ...it is the student's evaluation of the benefits of literacy learning that imbues the process with meaning. (p17)

I like the definition of 'motivation to learn' presented by Knowles (1970), which is when a student experiences "...self-induced dissatisfaction with present inadequacies, coupled with a clear sense of direction for self-improvement" (p58). He goes on to say that when a student is more deeply motivated to learn those things he[sic] sees the *need* to learn which links with Maslow (1968) and Rogers

(1961) who see 'needs' as the basis for motivation to learn. Both these writers take a humanist approach to adult learning and belong to the organismic paradigm which believes in an inner drive towards maturity by increased autonomy, responsibility and self-direction. Self-esteem is one of these needs and lack of it certainly seems to be a problem for many students who attend ABE classes and may well explain the need for these students to attend groups which offer a very safe and supportive environment. If the organismic paradigm is predictable and restricts cognitive competencies then like Brookfield (1986), Freire (1972), Habermas (1978) and Mezirow (1981) I should look to the contextualist paradigm which takes into account the personal and historical context within which individuals live their lives. As Brookfield (1986) states:

...facilitating learning is a transactional encounter in which learner desires and educator priorities will inevitably interact and influence each other. (Brookfield 1986, p98)

Motivation can be intrinsic in individuals in their desire to fulfil various needs, or it can be extrinsic, for example as a result of external factors such as a bereavement or job change. Individuals can learn to be self-motivating, which often produces the highest levels of achievement. Du Vivier (1992) suggests that adults reach 'a state of generalised motivation which is determined by their level of awareness and understanding of their difficulties.' (p23) and, together with other practitioners finds that 'Negative experiences of school tend to colour an individual's expectations of tuition and may inhibit them from seeking help' (p23).

These differences between individuals in their reasons for being in education in the first place obviously affect their motivation to remain there and their effect on group dynamics. Du Vivier's (1992) five kinds of literacy provision and

Groombridge's (1983) three kinds of provision may help to explain why even motivated learners drop out if they are wrongly placed in a group which has a different philosophy from that they expect or require. Unlike Carl Rogers (1961), who found adults often enjoy learning for its own sake, Kidd (1973) suggests that there is little point in learning something which can never be used. What is important about any learning is the change that takes place as a result of it and the potential shift of learners within the 'powerful learners and learning' typology from the left to right-hand quadrants.

3.5 *Barriers to learning*

There are potentially many barriers to learning for adult learners. In this section I concentrate on particular groups of learners who may be excluded from a range of provision. Although accurate figures are hard to come by, it appears from data available (NIACE, 2004) that only one in four adults, at most, are currently engaged in any kind of formal or informal learning. Of these, most are already in paid employment. This means that the current provision is not reaching those who are most in need of help. As reported by Renewal.net (2003a), gaining employment is the way out of the poverty trap for those disadvantaged in society, but to obtain work people need appropriate skills, and the kind of skills demanded are becoming more and more sophisticated:

People from disadvantaged neighbourhoods may be excluded from work, even if they have the right skills for the job, because they lack 'employability'. This includes attributes such as the confidence to take risks, the ability to make decisions, a readiness to assume responsibility and the ability to communicate clearly. Today's companies tend to be small with flat structures and they expect workers to perform several tasks, including managing parts of the process. When employers complain about new workers with 'no common sense' they may be referring to quite high level, learned cognitive functions. (Renewal.net, 2003a, p6)

Some potential learners may be struggling with memories of previous negative experiences at school and may expect adult provision to offer more of the same, including humiliation and failure. Changing this perspective is difficult, but taster courses seem to be a useful way of both reassuring and hooking resistant learners into provision. There are, however other reasons why adults do not take up available opportunities, and these include issues of venue, accessibility, child care and travel costs. Particular factors which are seen as barriers to those disadvantaged adults entering into a learning situation are:

- poverty
- discrimination
- mental illness
- lack of confidence
- unemployment
- displacement/ uprooted
- lone parenthood

(Renewal.net, 2003b, p2)

They may also be unaware of what provision is available and this is a reason to ensure information is not just in written format but is disseminated by word of mouth, within local communities.

There appears to be a particular problem for young males (Burrows, 2004 and NRDC, 2004), who have relatively low levels of literacy and are likely to be unemployed. This appears to stem from their childhood experiences which then have a negative impact on them in adulthood:

Young men are ... prone to high levels of permanent exclusion, in particular those from poorer, disturbed or disrupted families, those in care and those with learning difficulties. (Burrows, 2004, p7)

Several projects are now running designed to attempt to reduce the marginalisation of this group by offering provision in places where these young

males gather and socialise. Overall, informal learning seems to be an important factor in breaking down many of the barriers which prevent participation (Barton *et al*, 2004).

3.6 *What are the contexts for learning?*

Another of my research questions is: what do we know about the contextual settings in which adult learners and learning are located? This section addresses the question by exploring the various contexts where adult learning takes place. It is important to accept that learning can and does take place in many different contexts, not just in formal situations. Hamilton (2003) states that:

Learning does not just take place in classrooms and is not just concerned with methods. (Hamilton 2003, p1)

For many learners, community or voluntary provision may be more appealing than the formal provision offered in colleges and adult education centres. For over 100 years the Workers' Education Association (WEA) has offered courses to working men and women in the UK, particularly targeting those who, for whatever reason, have missed out on an adequate formal education. Much of this provision is tailored to local needs and is offered in partnership with community groups. The WEA has always believed in the importance of lifelong learning.

There is a difference between formal and non-formal education, with the latter often being perceived as less important, and those who do not participate in formal education seen as somehow 'disadvantaged'. Brookfield (1986) points out that being disadvantaged is a social product reflecting much wider problems and not a personal failure. There are some groups who see formal education as totally irrelevant to their lives and over twenty-five years ago both The Russell

Report (1973) and The Alexander Report (1975) recognised that non-participants in further education and higher education tended to be working class adults in low paid jobs, or unemployed. Current government targets, aiming to encourage 50% of England's 18-30 year olds to continue into higher education by 2010 (DfEE 2000) reinforce this evidence, and it is certainly true that increasingly employers require a more highly skilled, adaptable workforce.

Many 'new' and innovative venues are being used for informal learning including mobile buses, pubs, and internet cafès. The move towards lifelong learning as a government imperative, and the growing number of possibilities for involvement in learning, should be viewed in a positive way. However, while many see informal learning as a step towards formal learning this is not necessarily the view of learners themselves, as Cullen *et al* (2000) note:

Participants often do not perceive themselves to be 'learning', particularly when it takes place in an unstructured setting. This perception is an important factor in overcoming resistance to participation. (Cullen *et al* 2000, p1)

Several studies of community education which led to social change were carried out by the radical educator Lovett (1980). He looked particularly at initiatives which have taken place in Northern Ireland. He based his work on Freirean principles and is particularly interested in poverty and deprivation generally, mentioning semi-skilled and unskilled workers who suffer from a range of economic, social and educational deprivation. The organisers of these community schemes took a sympathetic but critical approach to the prevailing community ideology. Participants were helped to develop a sense of working class history and culture, using dialogue to identify issues and to investigate major themes in

their lives: opportunities for serious analytical study and acquisition of skills were an integral part of this provision.

Lovett, like Rogers (1992), feels that mass movements nationally for social and political change are helped by local community action, maybe by indicating what the new society might look like, but feels it is unlikely that formal adult education would ever offer this kind of community education. He suggests that it would be a mistake to see the formal sector of provision as necessarily the most valuable, and considers that pressures to make provision too narrow should be resisted.

Du Vivier (1992) identifies with an ideological philosophy and sees a 'social action' mode as one of his five areas of literacy provision, which use consciousness raising, empowerment and increased autonomy leading to social change. He feels the predominant provision within ABE is the 'learner-centred' approach, which again concentrates on the individual. However, his 'participation' model of student *needs* acknowledges that many students find benefits of increased literacy, not only in concrete cognitive terms, but also in allowing them to participate fully in their social context. Within his study this was perceived as extremely important to many students and continues to be in later research (Barton *et al*, 2004). The community action and social action models of adult learning provision are examples of how learners can use their own agency and collectively with others, move through the 'powerful learners and learning' grid to *liberty*.

3.7 What makes learning effective?

Offering adults learning opportunities is only one side of the issue; ensuring that the learning which takes place is effective, is another. Effective learning is dependent on many factors, not least that the student wants to learn what is on offer. As Brookfield (1986) states, there seems to be general agreement that adult learning is most effective when the learner is involved in the planning and evaluating of the learning; when they are encouraged to become independent of the teacher and increasingly self-directed; when the learning takes account of their past experiences and is relevant to their current life situation; when the teacher is a facilitator rather than didactic pedagogue and where sufficient care is taken to cope with the variety of learning styles preferred by students.

Dewey (1916 cited in Brookfield 1986, p15) describes how educational activity needs to engage learners in a constant process of inquiry and exploration. This is then followed by action grounded in the exploration, then by reflection on the action, then by further exploration, and so it continues. This seems similar to Kolb's (1984) 'learning circles' in which he advocates an experiential model of learning. Kolb also acknowledges that different kinds of people may prefer different learning/teaching styles and suggests that:

- *diverger* learners, who prefer 'watching' and 'feeling', need a humanistic teaching style,
- *accommodator* learners, who prefer 'doing' and 'feeling', (choose active experimentation and trial and error methods and often show characteristics of being successful self-directed learners) need a functionalist teaching style,
- *converger* learners, who prefer 'doing' and 'thinking', need a structuralist teaching style and
- *assimilators*, who prefer 'watching' and 'thinking', need a behaviourist teaching style.

If this is correct it would certainly help develop the variety of strategies and methods teachers working with adults might use with any one group of students. If we also consider Gagne's (1975) view, that an adult's prior experience and learning makes them unique and idiosyncratic learners as they filter new information through current knowledge and experience, then this means that a teacher can never predict how a student will respond with any accuracy. Over thirty years ago Kelly (1955) found that what people teach is inseparable from who they are, and that this means every teacher has unique expertise; this might explain why some students learn effectively from one teacher but not from another. Kelly also points out that the more personally important knowledge is, then the more effective it is.

More recently Jarvis (1985) has described two models of education: *education from above*, which is functional to the social system and tends to be teacher-controlled and *education of equals*, where the student takes a full part in the learning process, and is in line with my own philosophy. This theme is taken up by Teale and Ballantyne (1990) in their review of student drop-out rates when they suggest that the latter involves the student 'taking risks' (p4) and is about growth, change and empowerment. What most adult educators are agreed on is that the 'deficit' model, where the learner is seen as 'lacking' in skills or knowledge, is an inappropriate approach. Martin (2000) reminds us that adults already have a status as citizens and what they need from education is the knowledge to make sense of their world and to therefore be able to act, with others, to change it.

Teachers have the potential to help students understand 'how they learn best', in other words, to identify the kinds of learning styles they personally respond to

best. To do this teachers need to understand learners' requirements and be both attentive and responsive to their students. Learners want education which is relevant to them, and they also want appropriate support from their teacher. These relationships are coming to be seen as crucial to successful learning (Barton *et al*, 2004), as are those between students themselves. There is evidence (Edwards and MacKenzie, 2005, Gallacher *et al*, 2002) that individual learning careers, or trajectories, can and are disrupted allowing learners to reposition themselves, but that this process is not linear and will vary from individual to individual. Crucially, the very nature of learning trajectories is that they are embedded in social relationships

As a long-term advocate for adult learners, Mace (1992) identifies two kinds of teacher, the 'teacher-researcher' and the 'teacher-instructor'. The former offers students various alternatives rather than solutions to questions and enthuses them to investigate for themselves. The 'teacher-instructor' tends to give the answers and rules and also determines the context for learning. Mace states her preference for the 'teacher-researcher' model which is empowering for students. She believes the only effective way of learning is by doing and this may be especially so for adults where short-term memory becomes less efficient. Beginning with individuals themselves and making the learning personal (i.e. by using language experience; incorporating hobbies, interests etc) and relevant to them as individuals, is more likely to allow them to retain the necessary motivation to continue in a learning environment and obtain the skills they need to progress.

Learning styles and preferred learning activities will differ from one adult to another, differences caused by physiology, personality and culture make it difficult

to generalise about adult learning. However, theorists have found that some common themes appear and Brookfield (1986) offers the following list of 'principles of adult learning':

- ♦ adults learn throughout their lives;
 - ♦ they exhibit different learning styles and learn in different ways at different times for different purposes;
 - ♦ as a rule they like learning activities to be problem-centred and meaningful to their life situation;
 - ♦ past experiences affect their current learning (either positively or negatively);
 - ♦ their perception of self as a learner will affect effective learning;
 - ♦ adults show a tendency to self-directedness in their learning.
- (Brookfield 1986, p31)

From this section it will be seen that not only do the learners themselves have choices to make about their learning, but so do the teachers working with them. By adopting a constricting, inflexible, one-way transmission model, as implied by Jarvis's (1985) 'education from above' teachers are contributing to keeping learners within the *conformity* and, at best, *enablement* quadrants of the 'powerful learners and learning' typology. By adopting the concept of 'education of equals' teachers are giving choices to learners, and thereby allowing them to move, through their own actions, towards *activism* and *liberty*.

3.8 The adult learner

Having started this chapter by looking at the notion of andragogy (Knowles, 1970, 1975, 1978) I now return to look again at what is known about adult learners. This is an area with a huge literature and there is only space here to include those I consider particularly useful for this study.

Piaget (1972) thought certain changes would occur in formal reasoning during adulthood because adult experiences in work and social relationships would alter the adult thinking processes. This is a 'contextualist paradigm' rather than

'mechanistic' or 'organismic', both of which enjoyed theoretical currency in the 1970s. Piaget's theory was based on the idea of *qualitative transformation*: it was not just a case of acquiring more knowledge. When an adolescent begins to use reflection and experience to interpret and predict, they can then perhaps be said to be an adult.

A contextualist paradigm assumes that what individuals think and how they think happen because of their interactions with their social and historical contexts and because individuals are constantly changing. Riegel (1973) followed on from Piaget's work by deciding that it was the contradictions in reasoning logic that were interesting, that is, when the adult discovered the important questions or problems. The Nottingham Andragogy Group (1983) relates the concepts and methods of Freire to andragogical principles, leading to adults becoming social beings, products of history and culture, that is, adults who are contextually located. They are encouraged to think critically and this compares sympathetically with Brookfield's (1987) view that adults who are critical thinkers are able to put their lives into a broader social context:

Critical thinkers make explicit the connections between the personal and the political in their lives. They are aware that individual crises often reflect wider social changes. (Brookfield, 1987, p57)

Allman (1983) describes a 'plasticity' model of adult development combining the contextualist paradigm and organismic thought processes. She sees adulthood as a time of lifelong cognitive development, which changes our approach to adult learning:

To me it seems indisputable that whenever in life there is potential for development the function of education is to enable it; and to achieve this

function the educationalist must understand both the nature of what might be realised as well as the process by which development proceeds. (Allman 1983, p108)

As Piaget suggests (1972), we do not remain static in developmental terms during our adult lives, as interaction with others and life experiences have a continuing effect on us. The contextualist paradigm, therefore, assumes that *what* people think and *how* they think emerges from transactions or interactions with their social and historical contexts. This differs from the mechanistic paradigm (when man is determined by internal and external factors) and the organismic paradigm (Maslow, 1970 and Rogers, 1961) which puts emphasis on people as the active agents in their own development which unfold according to inherent predispositions of our species.

If Wenger's (2000) premise that the acquisition and transmission process of learning is embedded within 'communities of practice' is accepted then how workplace learning and apprenticeship models of learning actually work can be studied. Learners are situated in the community, with which they are familiar and where they are accepted. The learner needs to 'follow the rules' and learn. This is possibly what Bernstein (1997) means when he says that discourse is not just about knowing what the rules are, but how they work.

New Literacy Studies (NLS) are based on work by Street (1995) in which he developed the idea of autonomous versus ideological approaches to literacy. This is equally useful in general terms for the education of adults given that literacies (written, spoken, symbolic) are fundamental to most learning that takes place. It suggests a theoretical perspective which is both culturally sensitive and critical. Changing priorities for a productive workforce have required different skills and

abilities. As illustrated by the quotation at the beginning of 3.5 on barriers to learning, it is no longer acceptable simply to have 'a skill' and an ability to complete a specialist task. Much work is now completed in teams, often undertaken as project work. This demands different skills of communication, some of which are complex. There are also the ever increasing demands of other communication media, such as the semiotic systems involved in computer packages like Word for Windows.

The NLS treats literacy and language as social practices rather than the technical skills which may be learnt in formal education. Within this way of working, context is crucial and there is an acknowledgement of different cultural meanings. Street (1995) describes social literacies which are when literacy is seen as social practice and it varies with the social context in which it is practised. This means it cannot be the same in another context and students need a choice in the kind of literacy they learn. NLS also acknowledges that there is a negotiated process of meaning-making as well as meaning-taking, because language is dynamic and interactive. It is not one thing to everyone and cultural and social factors will determine the positions of individuals.

3.9 Summary

The conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 2 helps to describe, explain and make sense of the research investigated in this chapter regarding three of my research questions as given at the start of this chapter which are: a) why is adult learning an issue? b) what do we know about adult learners and learning? and c) what do we know about the contextual settings in which adult learners and

learning are located? This chapter has sought to explain what adult learning is and what conditions are necessary for learning to take place. It finds that learning can be both formal and informal and that both are important. In addition it seems that funding regimes need to be flexible to accommodate the types of learning opportunities that many currently excluded learners need and, although there is now an acceptance that informal learning is important, there remain issues of how it should be funded and accredited.

Above all it can be seen that adult learning is a complex process and that there is no one way of approaching how it is undertaken. Adults are complex beings in a complex society and one of the reasons why adult learning is so important is because of the ever-changing demands of society. As Aldridge *et al* (2002) state:

Through learning, people develop the skills to understand their environment, to connect and to make sense of their experiences. Through learning, people gain the confidence to express themselves on their own behalf, and to become agents in transforming their own lives. Through learning, people acquire the means to shape their environment and to contribute to the building of civil society. (Aldridge *et al* 2002, pp3-4)

An important characteristic of adult learning is an ability to think dialectically. This means that individuals are able to explore contradictions, discrepancies and ambiguities in a situation. It is a fact that adult educators must recognise and nurture, so that adults can *themselves* develop and grow and, together with others, make changes to the world, thus creating 'powerful learners and learning'.

The use of my conceptual framework in this chapter has allowed me to analyse what adult learning can offer individuals and communities in the way of enhancing their life experiences and the importance of adults taking responsibility for their own learning, utilising resources and facilities which are available to them. It

shows that there are many and varied reasons for adults being involved in learning, and as many for them *not* being involved.

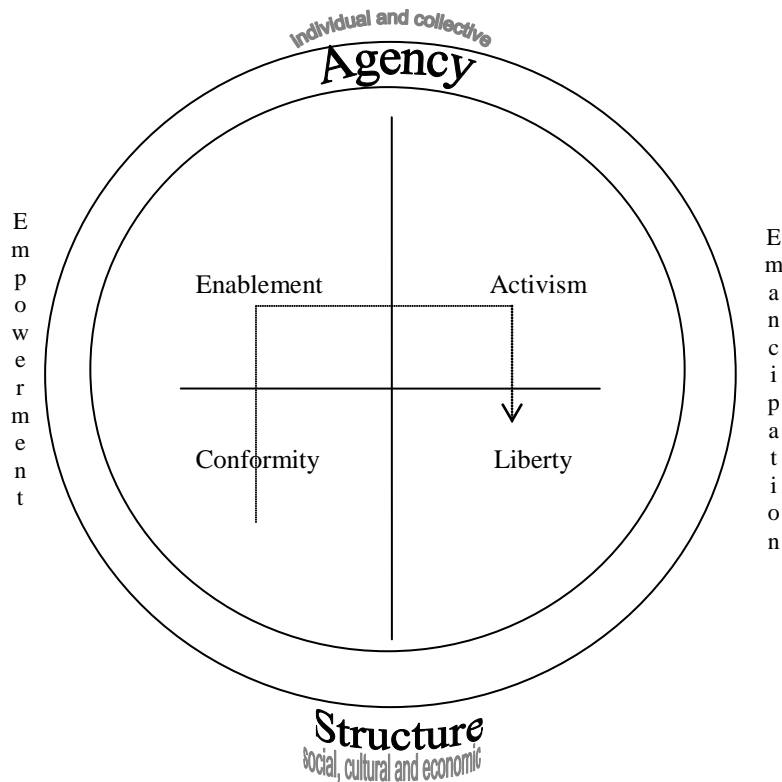


Figure 3.2 Powerful learners

The framework has allowed me to show that some provision of learning opportunities can lead, at best to enablement, and that the social nature of learning is also crucial, as are the relationships which result. Different kinds of opportunities are needed to suit different people at different times in their lives and informal learning tailored to particular communities is as necessary as formal education. Transformations, as a result of learning, give adults the potential to move across the grid towards *activism* and *liberty*, shown in figure 3.2 by the dotted line.

The following chapter will look at policies and provision for adult learning, reviewing major educational policies which impact on adult learners and the provision that is made for them to learn. In line with my typology 'powerful learners and learning' I intend to examine the potential for current policy and provision to support an empowering and emancipatory philosophy.

¹ By adult, the DfEE mean people over the age of 16 years.

CHAPTER 4: POLICY AND ADULT LEARNING PROVISION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will review policy documents and changes within adult education, first nationally, then for the region in which my sites of learning reside. I then take each site in turn: a) adult basic education, b) family learning centre and c) Nacro, and examine what impact some of these policies have had on the three sites. Appendix 2 outlines major policies or changes which have impacted on adult learning, many of which are included in this chapter. The chapter also addresses issues of social exclusion and policies which might seek to raise social and political awareness to develop social capital. It will examine lifelong learning policies and plans and, through the use of my conceptual framework, *'powerful learners and learning'*, it will reveal what, within policy and provision, might lead to empowering and emancipatory outcomes for adult learners.

4.2 A brief history of adult education policy

It would be impossible to include here all education policy so the emphasis is on adult education over the past twenty years. However, certain other legislation or policies are included to 'set the scene'.

The Education Act of 1944, created the post-war structure for adult education by allowing local authorities to support voluntary association providers, but it did so in very general terms. The Russell Report of 1973 emphasised the value of outreach and community initiatives in adult education and wanted to see them incorporated into the official structure, but the funding cuts and political reversals

of the late 1970s and 1980s imposed pressures upon both the mainstream of adult education and voluntary work outside this, stifling much innovation. The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Reading and the Use of English in 1975 (The Bullock Report) emphasised the importance of '*A Language for Life*' and of paying attention to adults' needs and interests when offering this. Over twenty years later the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) report (Kennedy, 1997) on widening participation in further education, offered useful and practical suggestions for encouraging adults into education and set the scene for the (DfEE, 1998a) Green Paper *The Learning Age* and the (DfEE, 1998b) *Further Education for the New Millennium*. In 1999 *Learning to Succeed*, a joint paper from the DfEE and the DTI, was launched which stressed the importance of bringing adults into education and setting up policies to support this¹.

The nations' lack of literacy skills came to the notice of the general public through the major British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) literacy campaign in 1976 called 'On the Move'. In October 1979 a report was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education and Science from the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education (ACACE). This was to advise on the best way of moving forward after three years of the 'literacy campaign', which had taken place from 1976-79, to address the number of adults with poor literacy skills. The report identified groups and types of people who are deprived of basic skills, calling them 'hidden and largely defeated'. These were:

- those living in socially deprived communities
- members of ethnic minorities, including recent immigrants
- the unemployed
- the physically and mentally handicapped
- special age groups such as young single parents, older workers facing redundancy, pre and post retirement groups

those in and released from penal establishments. (ACACE 1979, p10)

At the time of the report it was stated that the political commitment to ABE needs to be "strong enough to withstand financial pressures of the present time" (p28).

It went on to say:

"a clear and cogent lead from the Secretary of State for Education and Science ... to bring home at all levels of the education service the extent and urgency of the need for ABE, and to urge upon local authorities the priority that should be given to its development;" (ACACE 1979, p29)

It is also interesting to note that even at this stage it was recognised that there was a place for 'drop-in' centres for ABE as a contrast to the more formal learning situations, and these have now become an established part of ABE provision fulfilling a particular need for adults who cannot commit to regular classes or who chose not to do so.

Since this report the most significant document to date for basic skills education has been the Moser Report (DfEE 1999), twenty years later, which highlighted the scale of the problem in England regarding poor basic skills; with up to seven million adults in England having difficulty with literacy and numeracy (DfEE 1999). This report led to significant changes with the introduction of the basic skills 'core curriculum', (DfES 2001b) a new qualification for tutors and national tests in literacy and numeracy, with the introduction of the (DfES, 2001a) *Skills for Life* strategy. The National Tests², introduced to give a nationally recognised standard for basic skills ability, are purported to measure all the basic skills but, it is significant that while spelling *is* tested there is no writing component. The core curriculum, while it does include sections on writing seems to view this at a purely functional level and does not give space to the more creative and imaginative side of writing. Passing the test may indicate a level of competence which is not a true reflection of real ability in one of the key areas. The importance of basic skills

was acknowledged by the setting up of the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU)³ which operates across all government departments to ensure adequate attention is paid to literacy and numeracy skills.

For mainstream adult education the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council in 2001 was a significant factor as funding then came to further education from them, rather than via the FEFC. Adult education also moved away from the province of the LEAs which made post -16 provision more complex. The year 2002 brought *Success for All* (DfES, 2002c) which shifted the emphasis of further education onto 'learner choices' and the intention to set up centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs). This move to improve vocational qualifications was boosted by the 2002 Green Paper *14-19: Extending opportunities, raising standards* (DfES, 2002b) which also looked at issues of social exclusion. From 2004 young people⁴ aged sixteen to nineteen from lower income homes, who opt to remain in education, are entitled to be paid an educational maintenance award⁵ (EMA) by the government.

The 2004 Spending Review saw a change in funding available for adult education. In the previous years the investment in adult education via the Learning and Skills Council had been significant (around £3 billion in 2004/5), but priorities have shifted and schools, universities and childcare are now the priority areas, with adult education lower down the list. While funding is available, it is already committed to ongoing policies, for example, payment of EMAs. The situation in further education colleges is also worrying, with the cost of courses not classed as priority being set to rise by as much as 15%. Both basic skills provision and level 2⁶ qualifications are part of the government targets and, as such, are excluded

from this problem, but this does not help other areas such as general interest classes, which can be the catalyst for adults to re-engage with learning. Charles Clarke, as Secretary of State for Education, pledged £1.6 billion between 2003-06 to tackle poor basic skills. It is little surprise that improving the basic skills of the nation is a priority for the government, given that the cost to industry of poor basic skills is estimated to be in the region of £10 billion annually (NIACE, 2003).

There are many initiatives across the UK which depend on partnership between two or many different agencies. One example of this is the Foyer Federation, which was established in the UK in 1992. This offers nationwide an opportunity for young people aged 16-25 to have access to housing which is dependent on their participating in education and training opportunities. The partners involved may be varied including, for example, housing associations, ConneXions, charities, local businesses, colleges and faith groups. They do need local authority support and can be relatively expensive to run, but have a proven record of success with up to 75% of those leaving schemes being in either education, training or work (Foyer Federation, 2005).

A further example of partnership in action is that of the Young Adult Learners Partnership (YALP), which is a joint initiative between the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the National Youth Agency, and was established in 1997. The statistics regarding young adults in the UK reveal over 600,000 (NRDC, 2004) who are not in formal education, training or work. These are commonly referred to as 'not in employment, education or training', or NEETs. This partnership seeks to influence policy by researching the attitudes, needs and aspirations of young adults and offering practical suggestions for meeting these.

One of the findings of this research has been the need for flexible approaches to learning for this group (sixteen to twenty-five year olds) and while integrating this with other learning, to acknowledge the importance of literacy, language and numeracy in their learning experiences (NRDC, October 2004).

The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in adult learning is growing. LearnDirect, which was introduced following the Learning and Skills Act (2000), meant callers were sent a video 'Get On', together with a list of courses in their area, both formal and informal. This scheme continues to be publicised in the media and is widely accessed. Other national schemes are 'UK on-line', which offers courses via the internet, and the National Learning Network (NLN) which is a partnership between the DfES, LSC, NIACE and British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) and others. The NLN has received in excess of £156 million to develop the use of information learning technologies and has recently included the adult and community learning sector in its remit. The Extended Schools policy (DfES 2002a) also offers ICT and e-learning facilities for the local community. Within projects currently undertaken by the NRDC there is exciting work using a variety of technologies in teaching and learning basic skills including the use of WebQuests, m-learning (using mobile phones) and CyberLab (Mellar and Kambouri, 2004). NIACE, together with the Open University, is also involved in a project, funded by the Community Fund, into whether on-line learning can help overcome social exclusion, and the SEU has recently consulted on the benefits of using ICT to promote equality of opportunity. It is only right that developments in the use of ICT with adult learners continue, so that they are not disadvantaged compared to the younger generations who are exposed to ICT throughout their schooling. There needs to be a word of caution

however, so that we do not get caught up in the idea of ICT being the answer to every learner's needs.

Widening participation is part of the *Skills for Life* (DfES, 2001a) policy and of the Extended Schools policy (DfES 2002a). By providing adult education in local communities, being based on partnerships and having a 'skills for families' philosophy, the government hope to encourage both the participation of those currently excluded from learning opportunities and to encourage neighbourhood renewal. There is a need to encourage new learners into the 'system' if the following targets are to be met.

Table 4.1: Targets for improving skills of adults in UK

| | | |
|----------------------|-----------|---|
| LSC targets | 2003-2006 | 1 million adults to reach level 2 qualification |
| LSC targets | 2010 | 40% adults in workforce to have a level 2 qualification |
| Basic skills targets | 2004 | 750,000 adults to improve their basic skills |
| Basic skills targets | 2010 | 1.5 million adults to improve their basic skills |

The National Adult Literacy Survey (2001) showed that 75% of all taught learning is work-related and that 60% of vocational training is undertaken by employers. This appears to add weight to the argument that tutors of vocational courses need to have sufficient training to enable them to teach both the basic skills and the vocational aspects of their programmes. In addition, less than 20% of adult learning is provided by further education colleges, adult education or higher education. Already adults who lack the necessary basic skills are offered workplace training by many employers; there are projects for 'learning in the community' which may be in leisure centres or other localities; specific groups may be targeted, such as the unemployed, offenders, or those with specific

learning difficulties, and provision may also be based in the home or on-line. A new fund has been set up, Widening Adult Participation Action Fund (WAPAF) to develop projects to facilitate the widening participation agenda. It is managed for the LSCs by NIACE. It is important to appreciate that while conventional adult education may be cost effective, many alternative provisions could prove more expensive as hard to reach adult learners often have additional expenses, for instance in travel and childcare (Gallacher *et al*, 2000, NIACE 2004).

Many of these policies will have implications for my study and will be discussed further in the following sections. Education for adults is complex and cannot just be framed by educational policy, it depends too on their social and economic environments, which makes it impossible for a 'one-size fits all' approach. My conceptual framework will enable me to illustrate how these tensions are played out. It is interesting to note that in government's educational policies the emphasis is on individualism and of knowledge as a commodity, while their social policies accept that the involvement of community is essential in areas such as family learning (Edwards *et al*, 2002). There is still much progress to be made before adult learning is embedded in neighbourhood renewal strategies.

4.3 Local policy

This section will look at local policy and initiatives in Bridgetown and how these impinge on adults and adult learning. According to government statistics (DfES 2004) adult participation in learning for sixteen to sixty-nine year olds⁷ had risen in 2002/3 to 77.3%; this indicates a 1.6% increase since 2001/02. Figures for participation in Bridgetown show that 66.3% of the adult population were

undertaking some form of learning, 10% below the national average. Many local policies are based on partnerships (a recurring theme throughout Bridgetown initiatives) and include: City Pride⁸, Family Support Strategy, Educational Action Zones⁹, The Ipress Studio, Reachout, and the Core Skills Development Partnership. New Deal for Communities, created by a partnership of Health and Education Action Zones, enabled programmes in both Kingley and Anderby to target very disadvantaged communities. Across the city Sure Start supports families with children under five years old and this can lead to educational and other opportunities for parents.

The Family Support Strategy was created in 1997 and offers a way of coordinating the work of various groups involved in work with families, for example, Sure Start and the Children's Fund, and enabling departments to work together to make the most of available funding. The University of the First Age (<http://www.ufi.gov.uk>) was founded in Bridgetown and targets teenagers, especially those in care, who need intervention in their education. Anytime Anywhere Learning is based on e-learning, City Learning Centres (CLCs) offer sophisticated ICT as a resource to both schools and the local community, and the Bridgetown Grid for Learning (BGfL) serves parents as well as pupils.

The Bridgetown Core Skills Development Partnership (CSDP), which is a 10 year project, aims to embed core skills development strategy across the whole city. Amongst other targets it is intended to significantly raise levels of adult literacy, language and numeracy; tackle low literacy for groups of disadvantaged young people; develop IT key skills and reduce the overall number of adults with skills below level 1 by 50%, by 2010. It involves many agencies including: libraries,

youth centres, Sure Start, workplaces, ConneXions, Job Centre Plus and Bridgetown Voluntary Service Council (BVSC). Perhaps one of the most significant factors is that there is an acknowledgement that there can be many varied venues and providers of basic skills and that it is essential to develop these opportunities if the objectives are to be met.

The Bridgetown Adult Education Service (BAES) offers community based learning and aims to do this by:

- Providing learning that enables adults and their communities to develop and to succeed
- Stimulating and responding to the demands of hard to reach learners
- Developing innovative responses to the delivery of Basic Skills, ESOL and first step accreditation (BAES, 2003, p3).

BAES offers provision through more than sixty centres and many community venues. It is funded by the LSC via two grants: the FE contract, worth £6.5 million, funds vocational basic skills and accredited courses; the Adult and Community Learning (ACL) contract, worth £4.1 million, funds non vocational and leisure learning (BAES, 2003). In 2002-03 there were 23,029 enrolments on basic skills and accredited courses in Bridgetown of which 2,477 were for literacy classes. In terms of ICT provision Bridgetown offers the following as good practice: the use of interactive whiteboards in all main adult education centres, the use of wireless networks for community groups, and the introduction of an electronic tutor and learner resource area for all learners (BAES, 2003, p7).

Research carried out into the experiences of young working class men and their experiences of education and training in Bridgetown and Springfield (Donnelly and Millichamp, 1999) shows that working class men and African Caribbean young men are particularly vulnerable to both under achievement and social

disadvantage. New Deal for eighteen to twenty-four year olds in Bridgetown showed that a high proportion (68%) were male, 45% were from minority ethnic groups and 28% had no qualifications at all. Of those who did have a qualification only 31% had an NVQ2 or equivalent (Donnelly and Millichamp 1999, p5). The challenge for these men was to access the training they needed to gain the qualifications they required, to then move into work which paid sufficiently well for them to live on. Recommendations from this research included the importance of integrating basic skills with vocational training; the use of computers for both reading and writing, and, significantly, that training could be provided in non-standard venues such as pubs or football clubs.

In 1996 Bridgetown Reachout was set up. This was initially a partnership between Fresco College of Adult Education, the Open University, the University of Bridgetown and Bridgetown City Council. Since 1999 the partnership is only between Fresco College and the University of Bridgetown. It was created to offer flexible pathways to higher education for underrepresented groups, first in Newby and Ledworth, now in Newby and Highfield, for people who could not access conventional provision. The support offered ranges from initial advice and guidance to mentoring support during degrees, and is staffed predominantly by volunteers. Despite uncertain funding it manages to survive, and the successful outcomes shows the vital importance of support networks to learners.

Skills for Life (DfEE 2001a) also set up Pathfinders in nine regions, one of which was Bridgetown. In addition there was a prison education pathfinder which examined the basic skills standards and curriculum in six prisons in and around Bridgetown. Being a Pathfinder area has meant that innovative projects have

been possible and that funding has been available to initiate these. Bridgetown may therefore claim to be a community of learners, a learning city, City of Excellence, but one has to question whether this community involves everyone, or only those who fit particular criteria.

The Core Skills Development Partnership, seen as a model of good practice in other regions, would appear to be an effective example of 'joined-up' policy in a metropolitan area where the city is leading in some areas and cutting across established boundaries. An initiative such as Reachout, while a relatively small project, has an empowering effect on those who access it and is a model which, given adequate funding, could be developed elsewhere. There would seem little doubt that opportunities exist within Bridgetown, if learners know where and how to access these, and are able to do so. Both these examples show how learners can be supported to become more independent and therefore able to move from *conformity* and *enablement* to *activism* and *liberty* on the 'powerful learners and learning' grid.

4.4 How policy has impacted on provision of adult education in the three sites

As the previous two sections have shown, there is an abundance of policy and initiatives which impact on adult learners. *Skills for Life* (DfES 2001a) defines adult learning as: training in the workplace for adults who lack basic skills in literacy and numeracy; learning in the community, for example leisure centres and neighbourhood venues; specific groups, for example unemployed, offenders and those with specific learning difficulties; and, adults learning on-line or at home. This section will focus on the implications of particular policies for my three sites. I

now select two policies for each site and discuss how, within that site, this has affected adult learning. The issues discussed are: ABE - media involvement and ICT; FLC – regeneration and funding; Nacro - sanctions and employment.

4.4.1 Adult Basic Education

One of the important policies for basic skills education has to be the national campaigns which have taken place since the government formally became aware that there was a large proportion of adults who lacked basic skills. In 1975 it was estimated that as many as two million adults had severe difficulties with reading and writing; in 1979 this had risen to more than three million (ACACE 1979). Notably, one of the many recommendations the Council made to the Secretary of State was:

that the "closest possible relationships be established between the agencies of adult basic education and the broadcasting authorities" (ACACE 1979, para 96, p47)

It is now thirty years since the first media-driven initiative to improve basic skills began with the BBC running the 'On the Move' campaign. This not only raised national awareness of the problem but offered a helpline for interested individuals to ring. It was a resounding success and caused the expansion of basic skills provision, staffed almost exclusively by volunteer tutors. Since 1975 there have been other initiatives and series¹⁰, but in 2000 the government, as part of their *Skills for Life* strategy, produced the 'Gremlins' campaign. This was met by many practitioners with horror as it shows very negative images of those with poor basic skills, but despite concerns it did appear to get results, with many thousands ringing the helpline and being directed to suitable classes. Over the years there have been significant numbers of participants in basic skills classes who have joined following media campaigns which have either made access to appropriate

classes easier, or have taken away some of the stigma which still attaches to those with inadequate basic skills.

One of the areas which has grown and developed exponentially over the past two decades is the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and this impacts on our lives in many various ways. ICT, together with e-learning, has formed part of many recent policy agendas (DfES 2002a, 2003b). All adult basic skills provision should now include some use of technologies; there is much educational software specifically for use in basic skills work, and then there are classes held in libraries (with internet access) and some provision in centres which offer drop in facilities, where individuals work on computers with tutor support available. Having a relatively 'safe' environment in which to experiment with technology can be crucial and despite many households having computers these are often not used by the adults in a family, but are the province of their children. In Highfield, where the ABE centre is situated, there is a library with computers with internet access. Groups can negotiate with the librarian to have a session at the library where everyone has an opportunity to use the internet. For many this is a liberating experience and once they have the skills and confidence to 'surf' they return in their own time to use the computers and some set up personal email accounts.

The introduction of the theory element to the Driving Test presented significant problems for many adults, not just those with low basic skills. The ABE providers in Bridgetown were quick to respond to this new 'need' and classes to support this very specific learning were set up, including in my case study site. Not only was the test new, but to many the means of administering it was too. A significant

number of adults had not used a computer before and had to learn both the basics of this skill (for instance, following instructions displayed on a screen, how to use a mouse, identify what certain symbols mean) and the theory of driving, they also had to learn how to answer multiple choice questions. The ability to practise all these skills and rehearse the questions enabled them to complete the tests without disadvantage and also gave the participants a peer support group with a common purpose. It is also apparent that, while there are still many who do not possess even the most basic skills, there is a growing proportion of the population who are gradually slipping further behind in terms of more advanced and specialized skills, such as using ICT. For younger people this may well be a conduit to learning, but for many older people it is too different a medium and therefore needs supported and sympathetic introduction. Adult basic skills classes is one environment where this can be facilitated, provided the curriculum allows it.

4.4.2 Family learning centre

This section will focus on a family learning centre in Bridgetown, which is in an area recently subject to major regeneration. The family learning centre is part of a larger community centre which is set amongst social housing grouped into cul-de-sacs around shops and a pub. Residents have, in many cases, lived on the estate all their lives and seen it change into its current 'regenerated' state. A Mori poll conducted for the Campaign for Learning in 1998 revealed that 'the home is the most important learning environment for UK adults' (Hammond and Gough, 2000, p3). If the family is the first 'community' to which most individuals belong then it begins to be clear why policy has begun to look at family learning.

While the family learning centre has an established history of engagement with the community for over fifteen years, it has recently been under pressure from the city council, which pays some of the wages and part funds the project, to conform to certain policies. One is about non-smoking in council buildings, which they have resisted so far, but the pressure is growing. In addition, they now receive some of their funding through the Sure Start scheme which, while they focus on supporting *women*, is focused on her as a *parent*. This centre (which includes a drop-in, money advice, domestic violence support and so on) is intended as a support network and as a way of providing essential services to this inner city community. While it was not intended that it should offer this only to women, the reality is that they form the majority of clients using the centre, with current users actively discouraging men from attending, and it has become a peer support group. All the workers are women. The centre also offers short term learning projects in collaboration with, for example, adult education and community arts services via the Ipcress Studio. It appears that the family learning centre allows participants to generate forms of social capital which in turn leads to societal cohesion, albeit of a fairly small community.

Regeneration is a major factor for the inhabitants of Ledworth which is where the family learning centre is situated. In 1998 the SEU published a report *Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*, which was followed by *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan* (SEU, 2001). This strategy aims to address issues of worklessness, poor health, poor housing and levels of crime within the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods by involving communities and residents in decisions about change. In line with other strategies this was to be achieved by the use of

partnerships which, perhaps inevitably, proved to be very bureaucratic. The residents were encouraged to participate so that their interests were served and there was to be 'training' to enable individuals to be represented on Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). Ledworth now has new housing in a pleasant environment but there is little in the way of 'community feel' for the residents, thus throwing into question the notion of 'partnership' as discussed by Tett (2005). The family learning centre, which was there prior to the regeneration, is still there, offering the same service to local women; many families have relocated off the estate and new ones have arrived. Funding is still an issue and a concern for the project leaders, and tensions have changed with the links to Sure Start.

The following quote from the centre for research into the wider benefits of learning makes depressing reading:

Education impacts on parenthood in a number of ways that are particularly evident for women. The most poorly educated are the most likely to become parents at the earliest ages and also to have the most children. There are also intergenerational and interfamilial effects... There is an element of career fulfillment in the sense that opting for maternity may be a preferable alternative to an unskilled job with poor pay and prospects...this choice typically closes off or makes more difficult the realization of other career opportunities through educational routes. (Blackwell and Bynner, 2002, p16)

Sure Start was introduced in 1999, not only to raise 'the social, emotional, physical and intellectual status of young children' (Bagley, Ackerley and Rattray, 2004 p598), but also to tackle issues of social exclusion for the immediate family. Their funding is dependent on meeting targets, on getting results. The Sure Start network is made up of partnerships between all agencies who may be involved with the child or family: health visitors, care workers, social workers, domestic violence specialists, debt management specialists, teachers, nursery nurses, and so on. It could be argued that the aim of the family learning centre is to encourage the generation of forms of social capital which leads to greater cohesion within the

community, but it would appear that some policies are actually running counter to this aim and I intend to explore this further.

4.4.3 Nacro

This section looks at how policy has impacted on learners in the Nacro site. Most of the participants at the Nacro centre were not there voluntarily. This is a major difference from the other sites and one which, given current policies, may be significant. In the *Skills for Life* white paper (2001a), the government proposed using sanctions to 'encourage' unemployed adults to take advantage of basic skills education. The Research and Practice in Adult Literacy group (RaPAL) and National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE, 2001), amongst others, made representation to the Learning and Skills Council and the Social Security Advisory Committee challenging the pilot schemes. As Mace, on behalf of RaPAL stated, in a later response to consultation on the extension of the pilot scheme in 2003:

No-one learns well through fear. Both teaching experience and research evidence tell us that many adults with limited literacy and numeracy skills carry a history of having been (or felt) intimidated or bullied in their school education. The very last thing calculated to kindle an eagerness to take a new start in this area of learning is to be required to do so under threat of further impoverishment; the greatest barrier to learning can be precisely the sense of being a classroom conscript. (Mace, 2003)

Both RaPAL and NIACE supported the idea of incentives, seeing these as potentially useful tools to encourage participation. Despite pressure from many directions the scheme was finally approved and launched nationally.

One of the major shifts in policy since *Skills for Life* (DfES 2001a) is the integrating or embedding of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) within vocational programmes as evidence suggests that:

...people's willingness to work on their LLN skills is enhanced when they can improve them in the context of the vocational programme which is their primary motivation (Jupp and Roberts, 2005).

The Social Exclusion Unit produces data about re-offending rates of those who have been in prison. Of prisoners released in 1997, 58% were reconvicted within two years. For the eighteen to twenty year olds this figure was 72%, indicating that they are a significantly vulnerable group. Although these figures dipped slightly in the 1980s they are now rising again and are of importance within the *Skills for Life* agenda because lack of education, lack of employment, lack of housing and family networks, are some of the factors attributed to re-offending. Nacro, working with disadvantaged, disenfranchised young people and those on the edges of the penal system, aims to support and educate so that individuals stay out of prison.

The younger client group at Nacro work initially on their basic skills and are then, provided they have met certain targets (both learning and behaviour related) 'allowed' to progress to a vocational course in bricklaying. During the work they complete on their vocational course they will also work on basic skills within that context, and this does seem to help them appreciate the need more effectively than when working on basic skills as a stand alone course. The notion that one can 'do literacy' or 'do numeracy' on one day a week and then continue on either a course or in life itself without coming across literacy and numeracy in action is somewhat puzzling anyway. New Literacy Studies (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Street 1995) maintains that 'literacy is a practice' and cannot be viewed purely as a set of skills to be learnt in isolation. The transferability of LLN skills from one context to another is important too, and is enhanced by being embedded in the

vocational course so that the learner begins to perceive of themselves as 'a bricklayer' and begins to think from that perspective.

The older client group in the Nacro centre are there, predominantly, at the behest of the Job Centre where they are registered. They attend basic skills classes to improve their chances of gaining employment. Many are required to attend for a block of time as part of their 'New Deal' arrangement and would lose benefit if they did not do so. New Deal was intended to bring individuals into employment and was not envisioned simply as a way of giving them an income, but statistics from the Social Exclusion Unit say that 40% of those who get a job after participating in New Deal for Young People return to claiming Jobseeker's Allowance within six months (SEU, 2004). This appears to indicate that the education and training inputs to New Deal, certainly in employment terms, are not very effective. My study aims to see how these policies, apparently of sanction and threat, lead to effective adult learning.

The following section moves to the issue of learning as a lifelong undertaking, from the assumption that you can never reach a state of knowing everything, and that even what we do know does not stand still. There is an expectation, from our involvement in the European Union and to meet market forces, that all individuals will take advantage of learning throughout their lives, but it is important to know if this is for their own enrichment and development, and therefore on the right-hand side of 'powerful learners and learning', or to meet the demands of ever increasing skills needs in the workforce, and therefore on the left-hand side within *enablement and conformity*.

4.5 *The imperative of lifelong learning*

It will be evident from the policies introduced by this Government that lifelong learning is firmly on the agenda, but there are also concerns that some of the choices offered through formal systems are reducing. Where previously there was Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and European Social Fund (ESF) available, these are now ending and there are few new sources of funding taking their place. This means that those who want to do courses may not find appropriate ones in their location and while, in theory, every adult should be able to carry on in some form of education provision, these are quite narrowly prescribed, for instance, LearnDirect, UK-online, and level 1 or 2 courses. I would agree with Sivers (2005) that those who provide learning opportunities should be:

Initiating programmes based on learners' and citizens' needs rather than funding requirements (Sivers, 2005, p8)

but it seems that this is not generally the case and becoming increasingly difficult to provide.

It is important to decide the purpose of lifelong learning (Edwards 1997, Field 2000). To some, notably government, it may be to create a better equipped workforce, others may view it as a way to enable individuals to reach their full potential, or it can be seen as a way to enable everyone in society to be involved in their social world. With the increase in 'individualism' it is possible to think that this is the most important aim. An investment in human capital may give us a more skilled and qualified workforce which will, in turn, benefit the economy. Or we can view lifelong learning as Taylor (2005) suggests, as:

...a dynamic social process not primarily because people want and need more skills training ... but because they want to learn, socially and collectively, to enrich their lives and the lives of those around them. (Taylor, 2005, p114)

The policies introduced by New Labour concentrate on formal provision and do not appear to value the contribution made by voluntary groups to lifelong learning, or the place of informal learning, and this type of provision is not included in any of the government targets. This may be because some of these groups can be classed as more radical, for instance the Workers Educational Association (WEA), and their objectives may not fit current priorities for government, or it could be because lack of certification or concrete measurable outcomes are too intangible.

The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) which has 215,000 members, is an education charity committed to lifelong learning opportunities for women. It utilises the Open College Network (OCN) courses and aims to equip women for 'public life'. These courses are now under threat as they are not seen as a priority and so funding is reduced. Women in general have had to struggle to gain the opportunities more readily available to men. The nature of much work undertaken by women, in the home, in part-time and short-term work, may exclude them from some sources of learning, and women may also tend to put themselves last when resources are scarce. There has been much emphasis on work-based training provided by employers for their workforce. Schemes have been in place for many years in some large companies to offer a range of education opportunities, not just related to the job they are employed to do, but there is still not sufficient being done in the way of work-based learning for *all* employees¹¹ (DfES, 2004).

There is a question about why some adults may take up lifelong learning opportunities while others do not, despite having the chances to do so and this may be because motivation is crucial for learning as an adult. There is evidence

that increased periods of initial education (up to tertiary level) leads to an increased chance of involvement in later learning episodes, but Gorard (2003) disputes this, saying that:

... despite the calls for lifelong learning, adults may be now less likely to take part in learning as *adults* than they were 20 or even 50 years ago. (Gorard, 2003, p5)

For educators there is a tension between the government view of lifelong learning, to improve the skills and knowledge of the workforce (included in the National Targets for Education and Training) or lifelong learning which is socially purposeful and enriching for both the individual and their society. Funding is available for the first, and increasingly disappearing for the second. Within my sites I will see if there is evidence of lifelong learning being facilitated and what it means for my participants.

4.6 *Powerful Learning and Policy*

There can be little doubt that one of the most significant problems facing society today is that of social exclusion. My conceptual framework is about 'powerful learners and learning' for ALL adults in society. Looking at the majority of formal learning provision it is difficult to see where on the grid socially excluded learners can feature; the concern is that they do not, principally because they are not involved. In 1997 the Labour government established the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to enable them to improve understanding of the issues, promote cooperation between Government Departments and to produce policies which would prevent social exclusion occurring. In 1999 it was estimated that one in four people in the UK is classified as poor¹². The balance of work rich and work poor households is changing with many households now having no one working at all.

The implications of this range further than economic factors as generations grow up in impoverished circumstances and the inevitable loss of social capital. Olaghero, Meo and Cororan (2005) found that families living in deprivation draw on social support from family at the cost of joining in civic life of the community, that is, they do not develop those links which might enable them to develop social capital.

Social exclusion means being detached from communities and organisations which not only give support but which also expect involvement. It is more than poverty alone, although being poor is a significant factor. The minimum wage, while it may give some financial security, cannot alone address issues such as lack of self esteem, power, status and expectations, which may also exist. Some minority groups are more at risk of poverty and other forms of disadvantage (Modood *et al*, 1997) and are also more likely to be unemployed. In addition, pensioners, the unemployed and those living in social housing are all at risk of being socially excluded.

Those who are disadvantaged economically are less likely to be involved actively in civil life because they have not been politically educated (Elliott 2000). There are exceptions to this and women on low wages can be politically active, for example during the miners' strikes (1984-85) 'Women Against Pit Closures', which was based on action for the family and came from working classes, and the closure of Rover in Longbridge (2005), which also generated political and social activism by women. These situations offered opportunities for women to learn political skills in an informal way, which may well, in turn, have lead to more political awareness generally. However, women are still, as Arnot and Miles

(2005) report, over represented in the service industry and, together with teenage mothers and those with low-level skills, are likely to be disadvantaged in terms of pay.

Any social inclusion policies need to address the individual, the family and the community as all are involved. Addressing issues of poverty alone are not sufficient as having employment, education and social skills are necessary too. Particularly pertinent to this study is the fact that education is an important factor in avoiding unemployment. Individuals alone cannot achieve inclusion; they need support from family and the wider community and it seems that education throughout life may help generate the social networks which are crucial for generating social capital.

People from minority ethnic groups may experience both poverty, or at least economic inequality, and discrimination. In 1966 the Local Government Section 11 Grant brought funding to address the needs of bilingual adults and also encourage research into this area. In 1997, when Labour came to power they replaced this funding with the Ethnic Minorities Achievement Grant (EMAG) which focuses on rewarding outcomes. There is a shortage of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) tutors, and adults (except refugees who come under different legislation) are required to live in the UK for three years before being entitled to free classes. The 2001 Census indicated that nearly 8% of the UK population were from an ethnic minority, (ONS, 2003) and that they were predominantly living in larger cities. Most of this 8% were British citizens. More recently there have been refugees and asylum seekers from many countries

(Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, etc). It is suggested that 'by 2011, Bridgetown and Leicester will have non-white majorities' (Tomlinson, 2005, p155)

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000, gave a high profile to equality issues for all races. Future citizens have to pass an English language test and a citizenship test and there is separate schooling for children of asylum seekers. More recently the Home Office have produced a consultation paper (Home Office, 2004) offering a national strategy for integrating refugees, which again puts an emphasis on English language proficiency together with education for citizenship and nationality. Recently the first groups of people to have passed the citizenship test were 'sworn in' to British society. The influx of refugees has not been plain sailing as illustrated by the demonstrations in Dover and the Bradford and Oldham race riots in 2001, and the biggest reason for this seems to be a loss of community cohesion.

Disabled people often experience additional inequalities such as employment opportunities, and access to other facilities, although the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and Special Educational Needs Discrimination Act (SENDA) of 2002 seeks to address these aspects of disadvantage. Gays and lesbians also face discrimination in employment and in legal status. Employment is important for citizenship so groups who are excluded from paid employment outside the home may miss out, but it is not the only factor. There is also a need to encourage critical understandings of the society in which we live. Democratic control of the curriculum learnt in schools and colleges is difficult because assessment is inevitably tied to institutional rules, which are in turn subject to inspection and quality control. But it is important to acknowledge, as Martin (2000) states, that

the curriculum is a social construct, and it is up to adult educators to ensure that education is not reduced to be simply skills based. Society needs to develop positive multicultural attitudes and following subjects such as women's studies, peace and black studies, can lead to socially transforming outcomes by allowing participants to critique their understanding of their own lived experiences. There are both opportunities and constraints for education for citizenship and any lifelong learning policies must be supported by social policies, relating to welfare, for them to be successful. Education needs a 'liberatory curriculum which moves beyond vocationalist imperatives and facilitates a critical awareness of the factors that cause exclusion from citizenship' (Elliott, 2000, p19). Lifelong learning can make a significant contribution to this, provided it acknowledges that it must reach the hard-to-reach. Education also needs to acknowledge that confronting 'difference' can be both challenging and uncomfortable and requires that educators, as Griffiths (2003) suggests, really listen and talk with learners, creating meaningful opportunities for conversation and consultation, respecting others, and meeting and acting together. It is only when injustices in education are tackled that social justice can be achieved.

Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) provides funding for regeneration activities, often on small areas suffering from particular deprivation problems, and can be particularly influential in targeting disadvantaged learners. Other funding initiatives include, for example, a scheme called 'Literacy Links to Health', jointly funded by The Department of Health and the DfES, which is administered by the Basic Skills Agency through the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF). This is an opportunity for provision to be effective, not just to improve basic skills, but also to increase social engagement.

The sites of learning chosen for my case studies are potentially serving those at risk of social exclusion. The main contributory factors to social exclusion according to the Social Exclusion Unit include: 'poverty and low income; unemployment; poor educational attainment; poor mental or physical health; family breakdown and poor parenting; poor housing and homelessness; discrimination; crime; and living in a disadvantaged area.' (SEU 2004, p7) Priorities for the SEU now are to address five areas which are seen as key problems: 'low educational attainment among some groups, economic inactivity and concentrations of worklessness, health inequalities, concentrations of crime and poor quality environments in some areas, and homelessness.' (SEU 2004, p9). The Government claims significant progress in tackling poverty and unemployment through its policies (SEU, 2004), but low educational attainment among some groups still persists and policy does not yet appear to be reaching those who are most disadvantaged. The SEU identifies inter-generational disadvantage as an important issue which can be addressed by improving, for instance, children's education, health and social capital. The significance of tackling social exclusion in childhood is made explicit by Parsons and Bynner (2002) who stress the importance of a range of policies involving education (including post 16) while realising that these have to be set in the social context of the individual to be effective in challenging social exclusion. I anticipate examining my findings against these issues and policies.

Current Labour 'Third Way' discourses suggest that lack of social capital in families leads to educational failure and means that interventions have to be aimed at families, cultures and communities. It suggests that rather than providing welfare there should be a move to regeneration of social capital, with a:

...focus on empowering individuals, families and communities to move out of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion by a combination of individual responsibility, education, social support and welfare to work initiatives. (Gamarnikow and Green, 1999, p6).

Like Gamarnikow and Green, I feel that this policy does not sufficiently acknowledge the affect of social class and that, by having a deficit approach to underachievement, it is repressive and will not generate the social capital it purports to raise.

There is much emphasis currently on workplace learning and Benn (2000) identifies the workplace as the main site of learning citizenship skills which are necessary for individuals to become active citizens. She feels that positive experiences of participation enable learning of the skills necessary for active citizenship, rather than formal learning situations:

Participatory democracy is learned through practice and therefore the adult education experience should itself be an experience of participatory democracy. (Benn, 2000, p255)

It was interesting that she found that students attracted to adult learning classes were already socially active. However, like others concerned with social exclusion, she warns that 'many social factors such as poverty, ill health, gender, race or age may disadvantage parts of the population and prevent their participation.' (Benn, 2000, p254). Thompson (2000b), like Benn, suggests the distribution of wealth, resources, jobs and power are caused by structural inequalities. But these individuals are not just financially poor, they are often marginalised, less well educated and increasingly disenfranchised. Giddens (1994) and others describe a 'risk society' which has now led to the situation where there are increasing inequalities in areas such as employment, housing, income, health and education. This means that while a proportion of society is relatively privileged there is an increasing number who, because of multiple deprivations, feel utter despair and

hopelessness. It is hard to believe that a so called 'developed' country can have sections of society who are so marginalised. Creating learning opportunities for all would seem imperative if, as Aldridge *et al* suggest:

Learning is a way to diminish exclusion, to widen participation and to democratise societies. Democratic civil societies are learning societies – and vice versa. (Aldridge *et al* 2002, p4)

For educators the problem is to make any education or training inputs relevant to these particular groups and that means they must be both local and relevant to their current context. There is little point in offering GCSE English classes, for example, to those who do not know where their next meal is coming from, nor is there much use in holding classes in places which will not have any bearing on their current life, such as an FE college. My case studies are all in areas where there is provision within a community setting and used predominantly by local people. I intend to see if policies introduced by this Labour government since 1997 to address some of the problems which lead to social exclusion, such as unemployment and deprived neighbourhoods, are actually delivering what they intend, to those who need it. My research questions also ask about local support networks and whether these exist, and are sufficient.

Locally, Bridgetown's initiative, City Pride, aimed to attract people into jobs which would thus enable neighbourhoods to flourish and prevent social exclusion. The City Council also prioritised education and encouraged inter-agency working. In 1995 Bridgetown Council produced 'Towards 2000' a strategy document which stated five principles: inclusive (not exclusive) practice; intelligence assumed as multifaceted (not general and inherited); education as a lifelong activity; improvement against previous best and, celebrating success (rather than focusing on failure). They have made use of a variety of funding streams to help address

these areas including single regeneration budgets, New Deal for Communities, and Neighbourhood Renewal strategy. It is obviously high on the Council's agenda, but does it, as Williamson (1998) suggests, allow for sufficient participation and informed involvement of those it is meant to serve:

The regenerative capability of communities is, however, related to their own internal capacity to discover new knowledge and ideas, to create new visions for their own future and on their ability to strike up strategic alliances with others to achieve their ends... Those without power in modern society are those unable to understand how their world is being shaped and who are therefore unable to articulate their grievances, needs and interests. Their communities are constructed by others over whom they have little control or influence. (Williamson 1998, p 112)

I anticipate that my case studies will illustrate whether Williamson is correct or whether policies, both locally and nationally, are effective and achieving what they set out to do. My conceptual framework has allowed me to describe and explain what policies and provision for adult learning can offer individuals and their communities. Within the formal provision socially excluded adults do not appear to be offered opportunities even within the *conformity* quadrant; they are invisible. Informal provision which is generated out of the communities themselves are crucial for these groups, but current policy and funding mechanisms make opportunities for this limited to small scale interventions. Educational policy alone cannot lead to *activism* and *liberation* on the 'powerful learners and learning' typology. Without producing adequate social inclusion policies it is hard to see how individuals can become active agents and achieve social transformation, justice and liberation.

4.7 Summary

While it would be difficult to argue that recent policies have failed to begin to address the problems of poor basic skills, or of widening participation, or reaching

the hard to reach, it does seem that many of the strategies in place are to do with individuals and producing a literate and numerate workforce. It all has a rather 'functional' feel to it which goes against the notion of lifelong learning which is a more enriching concept and involves the ongoing development of both individuals and society. Perhaps we should take heed of Pring's (2005) warning, in his review of recent developments about what is *worth* learning, the danger of being:

... 'trapped' into impoverished language of skills and qualifications without deeper thought of the kind of learning. (Pring 2005, p84)

and being aware that it is the variety and depth of various learning opportunities which will ultimately allow us to reach every adult in society. Having policies and strategies, with targets and monitoring are all very well, but it is crucial to also acknowledge the amount of informal learning which takes place which, by definition, cannot and should not be controlled by government, either nationally or locally. Perhaps the most important issues to remember here are that until we reach the 'hard to reach' and have a truly 'inclusive' policy there will always be adults who remain excluded from playing a full part in society. Thompson (2000a) encapsulates this in the following quote:

It is clear that education – on its own – cannot change societies in which there are economic and class systems which encourage vast discrepancies of wealth and access to resources, including access to information. But education can play a part in assisting people in their various struggles against discrimination, exploitation, inequalities and social injustices, and can make a real difference to peoples lives when heightened awareness gets connected to increased understanding and joint action to bring about change. (Thompson, 2000a, p4)

Adult education can play its part in ensuring equality and social justice and in liberating those, who for whatever reason, are currently excluded.

Martin gives a flavour of the tensions between agency and structure at work in the following quote:

...we are often positioned 'in and against' the state (and, increasingly, the market); the struggle for agency is always conducted within (as well as against) the constraints of structure; and the unintended outcomes of policy may be as significant as its intended ones (Martin, 2000, p27)

which is confirmed when examining policies and strategies within the '*powerful learners and learning*' typology.

While the current government would probably claim that all its education policies are empowering I intend to investigate if this is so. Some may even claim emancipatory outcomes. Often the report behind the eventual policy may have intended to lead to empowerment (Kennedy, 1997, Moser, 1999) but the resultant policies, particularly *Skills for Life* (DfES 2001a), seems to have narrowed and restricted adult learning opportunities. Kennedy's report made many practical suggestions for widening participation but the reality is that adequate provision is often not available. Perhaps one of the most liberating policies is that of the Foyer Federation (2005) which, while limited in scope, does appear to be successful in providing the stepping stones needed to integrate youngsters into society and allows them to become self-sufficient. The space provided by this scheme appears to enable individuals to show agency, which while it is within a structured framework, still leaves them free to grow and become independent. The same cannot be said for most other policies mentioned in this chapter as most would appear to lead, at best, to *conformity* on the 'powerful learners and learning' grid.

Lifelong learning policies purport to empower individuals, but with the restrictions and caveats to funding opportunities the only truly empowering initiatives appear to be LearnDirect and other ICT-related schemes which enable adults to access the huge resources available via modern technologies. LearnDirect however, while it lists all provision in the locality is not all provided free of charge; again the

individual is restricted in choice. New Deal is an example of policy which is counter to empowerment as it provides opportunities for individuals under strict regulation, what many believe should be had by right. Removal of benefits and other penalties for non-compliance can hardly be viewed as enabling and perhaps inevitably lead to conformity or 'opting out'.

This chapter particularly begins to help address two of my research questions

1. What do we know about the contextual settings in which adult learners and learning are located?
2. Why is adult learning an issue and for whom?

Adult learners are all individuals, with different choices, voices and abilities. The learning opportunities afforded them are varied, policy provides a range of formal and semi-formal provision in different settings; but much of the funding available is tied to specific outcomes which are overtly political, and this means provision may not be as comprehensive as it could be. There is little or no public money for specific small-scale projects which may offer learning opportunities to more excluded groups and that which *is* available is often very short-term. From the government perspective there is a tension between providing for the economy and UK competitiveness in the market-place through a well-qualified workforce, and addressing the wider social issues for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. By providing some policies where social and educational or health strategies have been combined they show a willingness to tackle the bigger problems, but it remains to be seen from the learner experiences as to whether these have proved effective.

The following chapter discusses the research methodology used in this study and identifies my epistemological stance. It describes my biographical journey from practitioner to researcher and introduces the learners who participated in the research.

1 Not all initiatives were successful: Individual Learning Accounts, initially suggested in the 1998 Green Paper *The Learning Age* and introduced in September 2000, offered the opportunity for individuals to access recognised training but were beset by problems and were abandoned in October 2001.

2 Computerised multiple choice tests offered initially at Level 1 and Level 2.

3 In 2005 the ABSSU changed its name to the *Skills for Life* Strategy Unit (SLSU)

4 LSC definitions: young people (16 – 18 year olds); adults (19 – 50 years); older learners (50 and over).

5 Up to a maximum of £30 per week depending on income of household.

6 References to Level 2, as a baseline for achievement are used, as by Moser, to mean the literacy or numeracy required to meet the standards of a key skills qualification at Level 2 or, the underpinning literacy/numeracy required to gain GCSE grades A*-C.

7 These figures do not include those in full time education.

8 Partnership founded in 1994 between City Council, Chambers of Commerce, Universities, health sector and others, to try and find ways to regenerate the City, bring in employment, and to discuss matters of common interest.

9 Education Action Zones (EAZs) brought funding and were set up in urban areas to combat disadvantage; they led, in 2004, to the Excellence in Cities programme which focuses on attainment and behaviour.

10 For example: *Make it count* (1983); *Switch on to English* – for ESOL support (1984/5); *Write On* (1986); *Spelling It Out* (1987/88); *Inside English* (1992); *Read and Write Together* (1995), referred to by Shahnaz and Hamilton (2003)

11 nationally around 14% of working age adults received job-related training in the four weeks prior to this survey; statistics for Bridgetown LEA are higher at 15.2%.

12 defined in 1997 as having a household income of less than half the national average income, after housing costs www.literacytrust.org.uk. In 2004 poverty is reached when the household income is less than 60% of the national average www.jrf.org.uk.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCHING POWERFUL ADULT LEARNERS AND LEARNING

5.1 *Overview*

In this chapter I consider the aim and focus of the study, position myself ontologically and epistemologically, give a framework for the research design and then describe the methods used to carry out the research. In attempting to frame this study I have drawn upon the work of the emancipatory theorists, specifically Freire (1972) and Mezirow (1981), and show my own research journey into this paradigm. In an earlier chapter I discussed the key terms of empowerment and emancipation which are central to my theses. Having developed my conceptual framework around 'powerful learners and learning' I use this to decide how I can investigate adult learners and learning in a range of contexts. In any research involving the social world it is important to consider ethical issues and these will be reviewed in a section of their own.

As has been noted in an earlier chapter, adult learning encompasses many activities in a wide variety of places, most of which are outside the boundaries of this study, which concentrates on three very specific contexts. As mentioned previously, appendix 1 gives some additional statistical data on adult learning nationally and locally, which adds to the overall picture of adult learners.

5.2 *The focus of the study*

This study is about adult learners and comes from an interest in individual learners who have for one reason or another fallen outside the conventional idea of compulsory schooling leading to further and/or higher education and then to

employment. In chapter 3 I articulated the need for adult learners to have varied opportunities for learning, both formal and informal, and in a range of contexts, not all of which would normally be associated with 'learning'. The learning which may encourage activism and liberty requires learners to participate and engage, and to develop an ability to think dialectically. Powerful learners may be self-directed or autonomous learners, but it seems there is always a social aspect to successful learning too. Personal transformations as a result of 'powerful learning' cause a shift in learners' dispositions to allow them to become both active and liberated, and therefore able to make real choices within their lives.

In chapter 4 I examined some of the policies and practices, mainly outside the FE sector, which impinge on adult learners. These range from small targeted projects to more conventional learning provision, and maintaining and increasing this range is important as not all learners, or potential learners, are accessing the kind of provision they need or want. Many, but not all, of the learners involved in this study would be classed as disadvantaged, either socially, economically or culturally. One student, I record in my journal, was absent from class and the following week I asked for an explanation. He had been in a prison cell following an incident where a black youth was known to be involved, and he had been arrested while walking in the neighbourhood that evening. Despite being cleared of any connection to the crime he was not given an apology. When asked if anything like this had happened before he shrugged his shoulders and said 'yes'.

Part of such people's disadvantage could be said to lie in issues of a lack of literacy skills. Yet even the solution can be problematic: Levine, in the mid 1980s

was describing the provision of 'functional literacy' as a means of social control. Although it could be argued that progress has been made my assumption is that some of my participants will reveal this still occurs. At one time it was thought that illiteracy could be eradicated by applying the 'standardised educational treatment' (Levine, 1986). Hopefully we have now learnt that this is not the way forward although recent developments and government initiatives (DfEE 1999, 2001, DfES/QCA 2002) are a worrying indication that this is not so.

From a more liberal stance, Ranson (1994) talks about a 'learning society' and offers suggestions for the purposes of education:

Is it an introduction to society's most important forms of knowledge, or a training in the skills required in future occupations, or something to do with encouraging inner, personal capacities to develop? (Ranson 1994, p3)

I am interested in the individuals but also in how they are positioned and informed by their communities. From my perspective it would be impossible to see each person in isolation from his or her surroundings. Rogers (1992) suggests that:

...individuals need a community identity rather than self-assertion to be authentically human. (Rogers 1992, p193)

In this study the communities in which individuals presented offered a variety of purposes from emotional support to direct learning opportunities. For the individuals concerned their sense of identity and agency may differ from my perspective. The following record in my journal illustrates how learners themselves have to beware when they move between different contexts, causing identity shifts¹ such as those described by Hamilton (2000):

(Name) made us laugh about having to speak patois when returning to Jamaica; [the] serious side was how his friends saw it as 'showing off' to speak 'proper' English. (journal p40)²

Considering such factors, together with advice as to the importance of research questions (for example, Light *et al* 1990, Mason 2002), and in an endeavour to put my study within a framework, I decided on my research questions:

1. What do we know about adult learners and learning?
2. What do we know about the contextual settings in which adult learners and learning are located?
3. Why is adult learning an issue and for whom?
4. How might I devise a conceptual framework that will enable the experiential accounts of adult learners to be described and understood?
5. How might the experiences of adult learners and learning shape and inform the development of localised support networks?

Blaikie (2000) suggests the progression from 'what' to 'why' to 'how' questions, saying that all social research will require the former and some will require answers to 'why' questions to help understanding, to explain and possibly evaluate. He proposes that only studies requiring change will need to ask 'how' questions and it is possible that in finding an answer to my final question there may be implications for policy development and implementation in seeking to provide for 'powerful learners and learning'.

5.3 *Knowledge production in adult learning*

Within the social world it is important to identify where our understanding comes from and how we view the world in which we live. This can pose a problem for a researcher working with a paradigm. Bassey (1995) suggests a definition of a research paradigm as:

... a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and of the functions of researchers which, adhered to by a group of researchers, conditions the patterns of their thinking and underpins their research actions. (Bassey 1995, p12)

Within educational research there is the additional need to offer evidence to support change and improvement in practice. Kuhn (1970) uses the word paradigm to refer to a theoretical perspective which encompasses his ontological

and epistemological beliefs about social knowledge. Habermas (1978) offers three approaches to research:

1. Empiricist approaches which use quantitative methods, assume knowledge is objective.
2. Interpretive approaches which are qualitative and seek to *understand* the field of study being investigated and are subjective.
3. Critical approaches that acknowledge that the research 'problem' is complicated by the presence of the researcher and cannot be value-free. It seeks to offer some action to improve people's lives.

My study is located within the interpretive and critical approaches. I am trying to both understand what learning is taking place and why, and acknowledge that my presence in the case is an issue which cannot be ignored. If the data allows it I *may* be able to offer '*fuzzy generalisabilities*', Bassey (1999) which *may*, in turn, improve some person's life.

Within educational research the positivist paradigm tries to find the reality of 'what is out there' using quantitative approaches, but it is less interested in the person within the research. The interpretative paradigm however finds it difficult to *generalise* from statements about humans who all construct their own reality, and tends to use qualitative approaches. It sees the people as the primary data source (Blaikie 2000). I would argue that my research is almost entirely about the individuals within each case study, and therefore firmly within the interpretive paradigm.

Within the interpretative approaches lie hermeneutic and ethnographic epistemologies, but perhaps the most interesting to me is phenomenology. Phenomenology came from an attempt to find common ground between empiricism (Bacon 1605, Locke 1923), which was all about *experiencing* being the only way to know something, and idealism (Kant 1781), which largely ignored the impact of the wider world. It assumes that the subjects of the study are seen within their own context and they describe the world through their own lived experience. Husserl (1973) was the philosopher most closely associated with phenomenology. More recently, Jarvis (1995), described phenomenology as when a person's current supply of knowledge is inadequate to explain the experience and the questioning process is then activated to try and do so. This would seem to be an interesting perspective, especially within the focus of this study.

Building on the concept of phenomenology Heidegger (1962) developed existentialism. He believed knowledge and experience were the same thing and 'being' was all important. He also believed that we make our own meaning for life. While it has some attractions this, like phenomenology, seems to miss some of the power issues which Foucault (1977) identified. He saw power and knowledge as connected. Knowledge is used by people in power and is repressive. Indeed the feminist philosophers (Daly 1992, De Beauvoir 1989, Millet 1970) also acknowledged this tension over empowerment as they developed existentialist ideas for their own means.

This leads us to what can be called the emancipatory or critical theory paradigms. Here are where the writings of Freire (1972), Habermas (1978) and Mezirow

(1981), and contemporary radical educators Martin (2000), Merrill (2004) and Thompson (2000) reside, and where my political affiliations lie. I see knowledge as socially constructed and believe that everyone has attitudes which are meaningful within their social world and that there is no one absolute answer waiting to be found. I see individuals situated within a social context, not in isolation, so their communities are important too. I realise that my own position and beliefs will impact on my research and hope I am prepared to change my ideas if this proves necessary. This, I feel, is a personal example of 'powerful learning' as I am making decisions about my own learning through undertaking this research.

By adopting an heuristic approach to this research I should be able to find common ground between my own and participants' experiences. Freire in his writings advocates the educator becoming the learner, and within my work I believe this is possible.

Research paradigms offer us different approaches and perspectives on an enquiry which will in turn require different ontological and epistemological assumptions. This is not a straightforward choice. It involves many layers of complex beliefs and understandings. Blaikie (2000) offers four strategies, or logics of enquiry, for social research:

1. *Inductive strategies* produce generalisations to explain further observations. It uses the logic of Positivism.
2. *Deductive strategies* deduce hypotheses and test these by matching with data. It uses the logic of Critical Rationalism.
3. *Retroductive strategies* construct a hypothetical model of a mechanism to find the real mechanism by observation and experiment. It uses the logic of transcendental or Scientific Realism.

4. *Abductive strategies* produce a technical account from lay accounts to develop a theory and test it iteratively. It is based on Interpretivism. (p101-102)

Of these four, abductive strategies offer the best opportunity for the learners' voices to be heard. Within this study I intend to use abductive strategies, using my participant's own words to create my own account, interpreting what is going on and why that may be. Robson (1993) offers a different distinction seeing research divided into that which 'demonstrates' and that which 'discovers':

...research which is essentially deductive, quantitative and positivistic follows the logic of demonstration [and that which is] essentially inductive, qualitative and interpretative follows the logic of discovery (p20).

In the contestable and politicised field of adult learning I would certainly want to 'discover' and not just 'demonstrate' and this is an example of where there should be opportunities for 'powerful learning' to take place.

There are two main approaches to data collection which can be broadly split into qualitative and quantitative and which affect the approach taken to address a research question. They are not exclusive and reassuringly Merton and Kendall (1946) cited in Cohen *et al* (2000) state the following:

Social scientists have come to abandon the spurious choice between qualitative and quantitative data; they are concerned rather with that combination of both which makes use of the most valuable features of each. (Cohen *et al* 2000, p45)

Hammersley (1992) agrees with this and suggests that trying to select between methods and data 'obscures the complexity of the problem' (p 54). Many researchers have now come to see the two as being on a continuum, both having a place in social research. Having acknowledged that this is possible I anticipate using predominantly qualitative methods and data.

Quantitative methods can measure and quantify, but may not tell us much about the individual's story. Perhaps one of the most important claims of qualitative

research methods is that it is holistic, seeing the person within their context. It may be difficult to replicate qualitative studies, indeed this is one of its major criticisms, but the involvement of researcher and researchee interactions, and the personal perceptions of the researcher lead to a rich collection of data which is unlikely from more mechanistic quantitative methods. Edwards (2001) sums this up when she says: "Qualitative research tried to be responsive to what the evidence tells the researcher" (p117). Gubriem and Holstein (1997) likened qualitative researching to learning a language, where we seek to follow ways of talking about our worlds. It needs a curiosity and an interest in other humans. I feel this is compatible with my own views and am comfortable with qualitative methods.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identified five overlapping phases of approach to qualitative research methods. These are summarised from Edwards (2001) as:

- traditional (eg ethnographies, criticised for being rather 'positivist'),
 - modernist (where the 'voice' of those being researched began to become important),
 - blurred genres (more boundary crossing from other areas of research)
 - crisis of representation (increased reflexivity by researchers makes them central to the research itself)
 - forward looking (multi-disciplinary ways of 'telling the story')
- (Edwards 2001, pp119-120)

The fourth and fifth phases both lead to critical interpretive research where the researcher is central to the research process. My study acknowledges that I place myself within the research process and understands the position of power which this brings. In an earlier chapter I discuss the relationship between power, place in society, and education, but it is important to acknowledge it also as a factor within the research design phase of this research.

5.4 The research design

This study began with ABE students in a local community evening class. As tutor for this group I started to keep a journal about students' attitudes to learning, their interactions as a group and about my feelings regarding these issues. Writing the journal and thinking about why some things happened as they did led me to read more about adult learners and to really question whether the learning they were doing impacted on them as an individual:

G is fairly bitter about obstacles the DSS (Dept of Social Security) put in the way of him trying to better himself – gets no benefit but still expected to apply for unsuitable jobs; sit at job centre looking through adverts and writing applications, attending interviews, etc. He has enrolled for 3 English classes this year, and worked hard in all of them. His attendance has been 100% - he is clearly motivated to give himself a better chance of a better job. The system seems to be working against him and he's fairly disillusioned. (journal p58)

Concerns for me are encapsulated here when I recorded in my journal:

...trying to de-mystify some of the language is important; some students do seem to feel excluded from this 'educated club'. More worryingly, some feel they have no right to know what others know and have no expectation that they should or could do so. (journal p29)

and

I have to be very explicit about my reasons for asking them (the students) to do something – they seldom challenge why! (journal p30)

It seemed appropriate to use this as the basis for further investigation and to use a case study approach.

5.4.1 A case study approach

Case study is an holistic approach and it appeals to me because it enables participants' stories to be heard. Blaikie (2000) states that case studies constitute a method of data selection, they are not methods of data collection. Stake (1994) tells us that case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of what we will study, ie the case, which is a complex, functioning, specific entity. Both agree that case study can be either a quantitative or qualitative approach and Bassey (1999) and Edwards (2001) concur. Edwards describes case study as 'the most

broadly used form of qualitative research design' (p126). The very fact that knowledge can be gained from investigating a single case, which is a specific, bounded and unique system is critical in case study (Smith 1994, Stake 1995). This does not mean that other cases cannot be studied at the same time, but each one is a case in its own right. Bassey (1999) suggests its greatest strength is that it allows us to concentrate on subtleties and complexities of the case in its own right. Edwards (2001), in line with MacDonald and Walker (1977), suggests case study will '...often provide a detailed snapshot of a system in action' (p126), while Stake (1994) says a case is an 'integrated system' (p236). One difficulty for the researcher may be in defining what is the boundary of the case as it exists within its own social systems. Each of my case studies exists within its own context, and I need to be aware of this throughout the study.

In contrast to experiments or survey approaches, which may offer a collection of data about individuals, case study allows the researcher to view *a unit* which is evolving and changing within its social context. My case studies are centres of adult learning in a variety of social contexts. They do not claim to be representative of all possible sites of learning but they may offer some contrasting experiences and relatability. However representative it may, each case is unique. As Cohen *et al* (2000) state, case study lets us study 'real people in real situations' and recognises that 'context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects' (p81).

There is some disagreement amongst writers about whether case study comes within the positivist, (see Yin, 2003; Hammersley, 2000), or interpretivist (Stake,

1994; Bassey, 1995; Edwards, 2001) research paradigms. My own view is that case study fits with my interpretivist standpoint because it is overtly subjective. Writers agree that almost any method can be used within case study research. The nature of my cases, and the constraints on access to participants meant that I was not in a position to undertake a longitudinal study. As a result I chose to use observation followed by group and then individual in-depth interviews.

Stake describes three kinds of case study: *intrinsic* when researchers are interested in a particular problem within the case; *instrumental* case study allows investigation of one aspect of practice within the case and, if several cases are required to 'see what is happening' then this is *collective* case study. Edwards (2001) too says case study can be intrinsic, where the purpose is to look inside one or more cases, or a case can be selected as an example of phenomena and used to illustrate 'what is going on'. Her third category is when several cases from similar areas e.g marginalized adults, are compared and this enables the researcher to find themes common to the cases. In this study I use this final approach.

Criticisms of case study are that it cannot be replicated because of the integral role of the researcher, it is time consuming and provides copious amounts of data and it cannot offer generalisations. Stenhouse (1985) does not find the lack of generalisability an issue as case study does offer an 'ordered report of experience' from which judgements can be made. My own judgements may well be different to those of others examining the experiences I report, but as the

researcher involved with the study I am entitled to draw my own conclusions from the data.

5.4.2 Sites of learning

I took three sites of enquiry for my case studies, all were within Bridgetown. It is worth noting here that, within each case (ie Centre) all those learners interviewed were volunteers. I therefore had no control over whom I saw. In all cases I was interested in hearing the authentic voices of adult learners, not expecting to gain one 'reliable' truth from which to generalize. I have used pseudonyms for places and people in order to maintain the anonymity of my participants, and have used names in line with the larger research project in which I was involved. This also means that I have used pseudonyms in the references where documents refer to the case study region.

The first site was based around an ABE group of students who were aware of my research and keen to participate. All members of this particular group were asked to participate and it was up to individuals to offer to be interviewed³. I had been a tutor at this centre for over ten years, working with adults with literacy problems. Within ABE I would describe myself as an insider researcher as we had an established relationship, initially with me as their tutor and then as a researcher. We met in a local community building on Tuesday evenings from 7.00 – 9.30 pm throughout the academic year. Although the student group changed from year to year it became increasingly apparent that learning was about much more than attending a class regularly to work on skills and knowledge.

In 1998 I began to keep a journal of my thoughts following each class. Each year the students were different but the issues seemed familiar and recurring and this led me to want to explore more about what else was going on. All those attending were adults, male and female, who had chosen to attend evening classes to improve their literacy skills. Students could enrol at any time during the year and leave when they chose; there were no formal pre-entry requisites other than they agreed to respect the views and opinions of others in the group. All learners completed individual learning plans and funding was at least partly dependent on their aims being achieved. Access for research purposes to this group was relatively unproblematic in that we met weekly and were able to negotiate interviews at mutually agreeable times and venues. Management staff within the Centre and ABE were supportive of my research and gave their consent and, as has been stated earlier, participants offered to be interviewed and approached me following a general discussion with the whole group. Table 5.1, on the following page, lists all the interviewees and gives a pen portrait of each individual.

Table 5.1: Case Study One – Community-based Adult Basic Education

| Name | Description |
|---|--|
| Wanda white female – one interview | Core curriculum manager, ex numeracy tutor and team leader; very grounded in the needs of the individual students but now in a role where she is responsible for implementing Bridgetown policy and strategy. |
| Debbie white female – one interview | Experienced tutor in ABE, sees the needs of the individual as paramount, uses an empowering and facilitative approach to her teaching. |
| Laurence white male Group and individual interviewee - two interviews | A student, in his early forties, who had attended classes previously while working towards a basic hygiene award for work. Left once he had gained this certificate but returned when he was asked to become an assessor for NVQs within his workplace. Although he was hugely successful in his career Laurence still saw himself as lacking any real credibility because he was insecure about his literacy skills although he did admit to these 'limitations' being about written communications and not verbal ones. Lack of confidence in his own ability was a major factor in him joining the classes. |
| Graham white male Group and individual interviewee - two interviews | Graham, in his forties, is currently unemployed following redundancy from factory work and decided to go 'back to studying' and make something of himself prior to a career change. At the time of this study he had been out of work for a year and was attending 3 classes per week within the centre where I worked, all of which were literacy based. He was highly motivated to 'get an education' and therefore the kind of work he really wanted which was in conservation. During the 18 months in which we worked together I observed him grow and develop in confidence as his literacy skills improved; while also watching a gradual decline in his aspirations as he felt progress towards higher education was too slow. |

The second site was a Family Learning Centre (FLC), where a group of women met to offer each other support and also to get more formal support from professionals working with them⁴. Many of these women had mental health problems, including depression and chronic conditions requiring frequent hospital visits, and the project offered a much needed safety-net for them as well as practical help and advice.

Although there was no formal *education* taking place in this site it was identified as a centre where *learning* was taking place (Edwards *et al* 2003). Women were accessing courses at the community centre itself and involving themselves in community projects such as staffing the GeoBus. It should be noted that these women's experiences were steeped in their community which was undergoing a period of redevelopment and change. Future funding for the project was uncertain. Access for research purposes to this site had been negotiated by one of the senior academics from the larger, funded, research project in which I was involved as a researcher⁵. As stated previously this did mean that agreements had been made which went beyond those negotiated for the other sites, but within the FLC had to be adhered to. Participants were paid to take part in the group interview and when they were interviewed individually. They also had free childcare provided for these times. Although I thought this might change the emphasis of the data themselves in some way, this did not appear to happen, with participants giving generously of both time and information, and indeed hospitality in two cases.

I was involved in the larger project as a researcher and therefore did much of the data collection for this case study. The focus of this larger project was on learning trajectories across communities and so the transcripts yielded rich data for my own purposes too. Some additional interviews were conducted purely for my own study (Deirdre and Gail). The participants from this site were suggested by the managers as women who were representative of their 'typical' client group. They expressly did not approach anyone who they felt might be at risk through involvement, that is, women currently in crisis. The managers themselves approached these women and asked if they would be involved in the research and only after gaining their agreement was I given their names. Table 5.2, on the following page, lists all the interviewees and gives a pen portrait of each individual at the FLC.

Table 5.2: Case Study Two - Family Learning Centre Project

| Name | Description |
|---|---|
| Deirdre white female - two interviews | Project leader for the FLC, worked very closely with the social worker as a 'management team'. Had a history of community work and trained in the 1970s. Now having to work in an increasingly changing and more accountable environment, bending to policy and funding imperatives. A firm believer in an inclusive, supportive environment, seeing herself as a friend to the women as well as a professional. |
| Gail white female - two interviews | Social worker who works closely with Deirdre, sharing many of the 'management' roles. Also sees herself as a friend to the women but one who has professional obligations to them. The nature of her role was such that she undertook a supporting role in dealings with other agencies. |
| Clare white female - one interview | Sure Start worker based locally to the FLC who uses the project based there for her own clients. Sees the FLC as underused and hard for some women to access. Her work revolves around the under fives and their mothers, helping them to establish themselves in the community and alleviate some of the problems often experienced by new mothers. She is used to working with a variety of other agencies. |
| Tracy white female Individual interviewee - one interview | Single parent with two daughters, in her thirties. Has a history of depression and depends on support from close friends and the project within the FLC. Had a disrupted childhood and education due to her family circumstances. |
| Sarah white female Individual interviewee - one interview | Single parent, in her early twenties, with one small child. Her own life has been subsumed by having her son. The project offers her support although she also has good support from her family. |
| Maggie black female Individual interviewee - one interview | Lives with her partner and two children. Taking a course leading to teacher-training and highly motivated to gain the qualifications she needs. Family is central to her life, she invests a lot of energy in them and expects a lot in return. Had a happy childhood brought up by her mother. Valued the support offered by the project when she was 'down' and now likes to give something back by continuing to pop in and support others when she can. |
| Ria, Dee, Alice and Maureen White females Group interviewees - one interview | There were supposed to be six in this group, but one forgot and another had a problem which prevented her attending. Dee is the daughter of Ria. Alice and Ria are both grandparents, Dee and Maureen both have children of their own. They all knew each other well and referred throughout the interview to the staff and other users of the centre. |

At the start of my thinking about appropriate 'other sites' I had considered investigating basic skills provision within prisons. Access, while possible, would have provided a number of constraints which, for a larger ethnographic study would have been worth working around, but discovering that Nacro offered similar basic skills provision locally seemed to offer a better alternative. My third site offered a contrast to the ABE community group as it was a group of unemployed people who were taking a basic literacy and numeracy course as part of their re-employment programme. They were there because the job centre *required* them to attend. These learners were situated at a Nacro centre⁶ which specialises in rehabilitation of offenders and preventative work with those at risk of being involved in the criminal justice system. They have a very specific expertise of working with people who would normally not attend mainstream provision, and who may have behaviour management problems.

Access to this environment was via the centre manager who was sympathetic to my research aims and happy for me to see how Nacro operates. It was probably in this environment that I faced the most suspicion from participants, mainly I think because most of my initial negotiation was with the managers rather than the learners themselves. In addition these learners were used to a culture of being checked up on by various officials and assumed that I was another of these. The 'volunteers' who arrived for the group interviews were worried about what they were coming to do, having been asked by their tutor if anyone wanted to 'talk to a visitor about themselves' which might be construed as somewhat threatening. In each case I spent time explaining what I was doing and why I wanted to talk with them as learners and this appeared to suffice. Knowing appropriate behaviours as

a researcher in this situation was tricky for me; my inclination was to act as I would had this been my ABE group, but I could not do this. The time and space to build a relationship with the group was missing. Despite these constraints it offered a different perspective of working with adults on their basic skills and generated rich data. Table 5.3, below, lists interviewees and gives a pen portrait of each individual.

Table 5.3: Case Study Three – Nacro Centre

| Name | Description |
|---|---|
| Vicky white female – one interview | Additional support co-ordinator at the Nacro centre, also responsible for another centre some miles away. Experienced tutor and manager. |
| Tania white female – one interview | New tutor, in her early twenties, who had begun work as a volunteer and been taken on to work mainly with the younger group of trainees. She had no formal qualifications but had attended regular training within Nacro. |
| Mark white male – one interview | An experienced tutor in his early thirties who had worked across the client group at Nacro for some years. Currently working with the adult group. |
| Celia white female Individual interviewee - one interview | In her early thirties she has nearly completed her 6 months at the Centre, working on basic skills. She lives at home with her parents. Has two brothers and a sister who live locally. Most of her friends have moved away from Highfield/Southtree but she has made good friends at the Centre. Wants to go into shop work. |
| Cath white female Individual interviewee - one interview | In her mid forties, and been to the Centre before to do other courses. Has lived in the area for over twenty years. Left school when she was twelve. Has had very disrupted home life but feels now that she is getting herself on-track to move forward. |
| Peter and Jed White males Group interviewees - one interview | Peter and Jed volunteered to speak with me about the centre and themselves. They were both on a 26-week course to improve their literacy and numeracy skills with a view to finding employment. Neither had enjoyed school particularly with Jed feeling intimidated and barely learning to write his name, Peter played truant and had pretty much left school by the age of twelve. |

5.4.3 Stages in the research programme

My journal had generated data which I felt were worth exploring further. Many of du Vivier's (1992) findings were endorsed by my own experience but I still wanted to know why some learners moved forward and became 'self-directed' (Brookfield, 1986) and others did not. I decided to look outside the typical ABE class to other learning environments for further insight.

Following the preliminary work using themes generated from my journal and a variety of observations, I held group interviews in all three sites. It had been anticipated that these would be groups of between four to eight but this only proved possible in one site. Blaikie (2000) and Berg (1995) state that focus groups can offer another dimension to the individual perspective gained from traditional interviews. Group interactions mean individuals may be forced into questioning their own beliefs, values and opinions if challenged by other views within the group. For participants who may be lacking confidence, nervous of new situations or feeling 'out of their depth', the presence of others may be a reassuring and even empowering factor. My experience of adult learners over the years is that once comfortable in a group situation individuals, even those not generally forthcoming, will eventually join in discussions. By making these interviews seem like a genuine conversation, in which all views are valued, it should be possible to be inclusive.

Alongside the group interviews I arranged to interview 'key' people within each site. My aim was talk to: a manager, a tutor or key worker and at least two learners. The schedule of in-depth interviews is reflected in the table 5.4 (following page). Benefits of working across three sites of learning meant that I was able to

not only interrogate my data from the different perspectives *within* each site, but also *across* sites. Mason (2002) warns that using data from different sources and by using different methods to investigate the same phenomena can be problematic but is also worthwhile.

Table 5.4: Schedule of interviews at the three sites

| Adult Basic Education | | Family Learning Centre | | Nacro | |
|-----------------------|----------|--------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| Curriculum Manager | Wanda | Project leader / Social worker | Deirdre Gail | Additional support co-ordinator | Vicky |
| Tutor | Debbie | Sure Start worker | Clare | Tutors | Mark Tania |
| Participant | Laurence | Participant | Tracy | Participant | Celia |
| Participant | Graham | Participant | Sarah | Participant | Cath |
| | | Participant | Maggie | Participant | Peter |
| | | Participant | Alice | Participant | Jed |
| | | Participant | Ria | | |
| | | Participant | Maureen | | |
| | | Participant | Dee | | |

The term 'participant' is used here to describe those taking part in the learning. In different sites they were described as 'clients', 'users' or 'students'. There are problems with connotations of all of these words and for the purpose of this study I have chosen to use the term participants or learners, wherever possible. However, it is important to note that within Nacro, while they are there to learn they are also attending *because they are required to do so* and this relationship is different to the other centres. In reporting on this site I therefore use the term 'client' as it best describes the relationships involved.

Analysing responses from the group interviews gave me insight into areas to pursue in the in-depth interviews which I decided to have with a minimum of two learners from each site. The larger research project had already agreed a semi-structured interview schedule which had to be used for interviews at the FLC, and so I decided to adapt this and use it as the basis for all my case study interviews. This schedule is given at appendix 3. The interview questions for staff are shown in appendix 6. Throughout the whole research process it was important to keep reviewing the data that were generated and to look for themes or issues which might surface. This is in contrast to Yin's (2003) preferred strategies for analysis which rely on proving or disproving theory, but is confirmed by Miles and Huberman (1994) who suggest that 'playing with the data' is both a valid and useful strategy. It must be acknowledged that social phenomena are hard to compare but that constant comparison of data may enable this. Analysis is governed by fitness for purpose and legitimacy and I was aware of not only looking for data which fitted my 'story' but was prepared to address those which contradicted or conflicted with it.

5.4.4 Research methods

Journal

My journal was a very personal and reflexive recording of working as an adult basic skills tutor in a community setting; it began in October 1998 and ended in December 2001. In it I noted both feelings and emotions as well as practical details of the classes themselves. It was written up weekly, immediately following each teaching session, and offered a contrast to my formal teaching plans and

evaluations. While keeping logs and field notes are common methods for ethnographers, and an essential part of action research, they are less frequently found in studies such as this, but the discipline of writing each week and of asking myself 'why?' some learners became 'powerful learners' and other did not, was a useful introduction to this study.

It became evident over the weeks and months that certain issues kept appearing and this led me to question why this was. Why do so many adult learners have no confidence in their ability? Why do so many have low self-esteem? Are we offering the support they really need? In attempting to answer these questions and others I constantly had to refer back to my own experience as a learner which added another dimension to the problem. It is also important to note that the journal regularly refers to the frustrations of working within an increasingly bureaucratic system, with targets and monitoring becoming the language in use together with the constant pressure to deliver results. This was not why I wanted to work with adult learners whose interests, it seemed, were becoming buried by other imperatives. Achieving measurable goals and passing 'standards' was not what most of my learners wanted. They wanted to feel good about themselves, have confidence in their ability to deal with their social and economic worlds and work in a job where they felt fulfilled.

Participant observation

After analysing data from my journal of working in the ABE centre, some recurring themes emerged. These included issues around learners' confidence and self-

esteem, previous negative experiences of education and of being largely ignored, and a lack of the 'tools' necessary to give them adequate choices in life. I decided that before I could conduct interviews with learners in the other sites it would be important that I experience learners' lives in these other contexts and I therefore visited the FLC on three occasions and I visited the Nacro centre on three separate occasions prior to conducting my interviews with learners. It was obvious that I could never have the same depth of knowledge about the other centres that I have about the ABE class, but observation is a useful way of learning about a place and people. Cohen *et al* (2000) state that participant observation allows researchers to gain an insight into 'real lives' and helps catch the 'dynamic nature of events' (p 306). For research which depends on interpretations by the researcher then observation is crucial and for some (Stake 1995) is preferred to interviewing as a method of data collection. From my perspective I wanted to familiarize myself with the environments and gain the acceptance of participants to my presence, while acknowledging that this did not make me an insider researcher as I was within ABE.

I was offered the opportunity to go with learners from the FLC on a visit to a local art centre, where we all joined in the activities and began to gain an understanding of some kinds of modern art. We met at the Ipcress Studio and the managers from the FLC explained who I was and why I was there. The women had become used to a researcher from the funded project being involved in their activities and accepted me in the same role. Following this outing I attended the Centre AGM and spent time in the drop-in centre observing the activities going on. Those within the Centre, both staff and participants, got used to my presence and

accepted my being there. They already knew that their identities would be anonymised and they could withdraw from their involvement at any time. There is no doubt that observation enabled me to experience some of the social interactions and offered a more rounded view of the Centre than I would have had from merely interviewing. While the majority of my data are verbal or written it was important to me that I was able to see and experience for myself the physical spaces in which the Centre operated. This enabled me to gain a multidimensional feel for what was going on, as referred to by Mason (2002), albeit a fairly limited experience.

With the Nacro Centre I could only observe within the Centre itself and my presence attracted much more curiosity from the learners. As there was more structure within this Centre (ie classrooms with different tutors taking classes) it was harder to mingle so my presence here was more formal and could not be described as *participant* observation. I was however able to see the participants at work in their groups and observe some of the interactions with tutors and other learners. I also saw less formal situations as they entered and left the premises and moved around the building. Permission for my presence was given by the centre manager and the learners themselves had no opportunity to agree or not with this decision.

Notes were made after visits and interactions of key points and issues. The visit to the Ipress Studio was a whole day activity and all participants had sheets to record their feelings and ideas as we moved through the activities and engaged with the art and each other. The observation notes I made are recorded as

appendix 4. Alongside this I was also spending time discussing issues with my co-researchers on the funded research project, and developing ideas for emerging themes and issues, which included the importance of social networks and the building of trusting relationships.

Interviews

Within each case study my main method of data collection was by interviews; first group interviews to identify potential issues, and then by in-depth one-to-one interviews. While other methods may be less time consuming, asking adults with literacy problems to complete a questionnaire was both inappropriate and too impersonal. Indeed the potential for getting rich data from such methods was small and I therefore decided to utilise what time I had undertaking interviews.

Traditionally focus groups are a tool used in market research but have now become more common within social and educational research. They stimulate in-depth discussion and are particularly useful in the early phase of research to define issues. A strength of focus groups is that they use the language of the participants, which is key in any abductive research and important with adults who may be, and feel, disempowered. Focus groups are useful for answering 'what' questions and provide quick access to an overview of issues (Bogdan and Biklen 1992, Stewart and Shamdasani 1998). All the strengths of focus groups can be applied to group interviews, and as the group sizes varied it is probably more accurate to use the latter description. The group interview questions are given in appendix 5. Within each case I asked for volunteers to join a group interview at a

specific time and place. On each occasion these took place in the relevant centre with participants and researcher present.

Mason (2002) states that:

...the interview method is heavily dependent on people's capacities to verbalise, interact, conceptualise and remember. (Mason 2002, p64)

but this should not prevent researchers using a method which offers the opportunity to gain rich data. Just because some adults have problems with writing or spelling should not let us assume that they have inferior verbal skills or expertise. From my journal this is a theme which re-occurs amongst learners where they cover lack of writing skills by highly developed spoken ability. It is also one of the challenges for basic skills tutors to work with adults with such differing abilities across oral and written skills. One of the strengths of interviews as a tool in research is the capacity for the participant's own language to be used, both in the collection and reporting stages.

So why did I use semi-structured interviews? Cohen and Manion (1980) define a structured interview as one in which:

...the content and procedures are organised in advance. This means that the sequence and wording of the questions are determined by means of a schedule and the interviewer is left little room to make modifications. (Cohen and Manion 1980, p243)

Asking students to talk about 'their lack of basic skills' would have proved difficult and could have been more threatening to students - for some it was the first time they had been interviewed by a stranger. There is a danger that using interviews in some situations which could be seen as sensitive, might, as Cohen *et al* (2000) state:

... be seen as an intrusion into private worlds, or the interviewer might be seen as someone who can impose sanctions on the interviewee, or as someone who can exploit the powerless... (Cohen *et al*, 2000, p 121)

The less structure an interview has means that the questions are more open, and open-ended questions allow respondents to illustrate how they perceive the world and let them raise issues which they want to raise, rather than just responding to the interviewer (Silverman, 1993). One thing all my learner respondents had in common was the enthusiasm they showed about talking to me about their life experiences, good and bad, and in sharing their stories with me. While this may not be so surprising with the ABE learners, with whom I had already built up a relationship, it was rewarding to find this replicated in the other sites. Respondents answered my questions but I also let them talk about other things which came up, sometimes very personal or private information. It would seem that Tuckman (1972), who suggests that the use of non-specific questions are less threatening to interviewees, is correct:

Specific questions, like direct ones, may cause a respondent to become cautious or guarded and give less-than-honest answers. Non-specific questions may lead circuitously to the desired information but with less alarm by the respondents. (Tuckman 1972, p276)

Throughout the process I was conscious that there were tensions for me as researcher between using an unstructured interview, or as Mason (2002) prefers to call them 'loosely structured' (p62), and a more structured approach. If the former can be described as a 'conversation with a purpose' then this seemed to fit with my aims. However, the problem of integrating data from the three sites, the decision to use semi-structured interviews at the FLC and my concerns about the interview process itself proving threatening to participants, meant that a more structured approach was necessary. Although I am describing the interviews as semi-structured there was opportunity to allow participants to talk about themselves and their experiences in great detail, while following a common framework of questions, both specific and open, within each interview. Above all I wanted my interviews to produce 'situated knowledge' from participants. The

following diagram (figure 5.1) attempts to show my interpretation of Siraj-Blatchfords' (2001) view on positions of different types of interviews. They maintain that the more structure an interview has the more driven by theory it is likely to be (p151), but I would contest this.

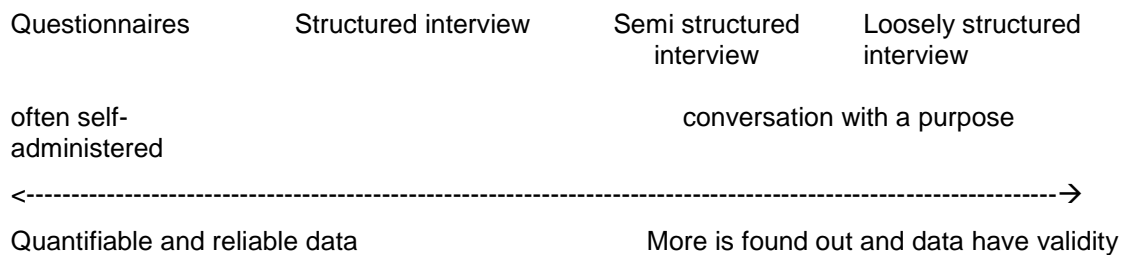


Figure 5.1: Types of interview along the continuum

Mason (2002) strongly denies that any structured interviews can be seen as a qualitative method but I would argue that within the framework of a fairly structured approach I was able to retain the flexibility for responses to be as open and far-reaching as in an unstructured approach. Scheurich (1995) agrees that even by controlling the wording in an interview this still does not allow for the variety in social interaction which occurs during the interview process.

In qualitative research it is important that the data has validity and according to Edwards (2001) validity is about 'being able to offer as sound a representation of the field of study as the research methods allow' and to 'capture important features and analyse them with integrity' (p124). Lather (1986) goes further. She believes in catalytic validity which, as the name suggests, enables the participants in the research to understand their world and help transform it. It is strongly political and fits with Freire's views of conscientization. It features strongly in feminist research and embodies an empowering approach for both researcher

and those 'being researched'. Although these methods fit with my beliefs the notion of catalytic validity may be beyond the scope of this study.

Ultimately it is the aim of a researcher using qualitative methods to see the participant's view of the social world. This is captured by Blaikie (2000) in the following excerpt:

This commitment involves discovering *their* socially constructed reality and penetrating the frames of meaning within which they conduct their activities. To do this, it is necessary to master the everyday language that social actors use in dealing with the phenomenon under investigation, in short, to discover their 'mutual knowledge', the concepts, and the meanings associated with these concepts. (Blaikie 2000, p251)

All interviews were tape-recorded, with the permission of participants, and transcripts produced from the tapes. Although there was some nervousness on the part of some of those learners interviewed about the presence of a recorder, no one refused to allow its use. The transcripts were then read and themes identified which might then be replicated in the other cases. Throughout this process I was aware that although the interview itself is a social interaction, the transcribed result is not. Indeed, it leaves aside all non-verbal communication and reduces the interview to a one-dimensional report of what actually took place. In total I interviewed thirteen learners (individually or in a group) and eight staff who were involved in their learning.

Participants in the FLC received a letter (see appendix 7) in which was outlined the areas and issues which seemed important to me, taken from the interviews. They were asked to let me know if this concurred with their own interpretation. Only one of the three learners responded, and she agreed with the findings. Although participants in the other sites had been offered this feedback verbally, they did not choose to take it up. This in itself seems a very important point, and

an argument that the research process had little or no empowering effect on them as individuals. Whether this was because they assumed the researcher would 'get it right' or because they believed that they could not contest the 'given' representation of their lives is unclear. If it is the latter then I obviously did not stress sufficiently their crucial role in this and give them the tools to be powerful in this way.

5.5 Ethical issues

All research carries some responsibility to consider ethical issues. In research that has people at the centre of it the ethics and morals of the researcher are crucial. Mason (2002) suggests asking questions about the purpose of the research from an ethical, moral and political standpoint and urges us to be honest. It is perhaps obvious, but nevertheless important to state, that getting a higher degree is one outcome which is likely only to benefit me personally. To highlight the situation where individuals are socially disadvantaged and possibly badly served by the society in which they live is perhaps a rather grandiose aim; but is one which I wish to pursue. Work by Bourdieu *et al* (2000) and Smith (1987) from a critical theoretical perspective may be useful here. The following quote from Travers (2001) resonates with my feelings, where in critiquing feminist critical theory he suggests that she (Smith):

...expects to find that the average housewife will only have an incomplete and imperfect understanding of society. (p137)

and this is in part due to male economic dominance in society. In any relationship, and that of researcher and participants is no exception, there may be issues of power involved. While asking people about their lives I have to remember that they may share information which is not specifically relevant to my research but is

part of their 'story' and acknowledge that there may be data that I cannot use as a result. This too is an area where feminist theories may be helpful as they acknowledge the difficulties in using personal information participants may reveal.

All the participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality. For some this was not an issue, perhaps because they did not fully comprehend the implications of being involved in academic research. Each of the participants was a volunteer and I discussed my aims for the study. I was particularly conscious of how these 'volunteers' were brought to the study and this did vary across the sites. Nacro participants were the most suspicious of the purpose of the research and Coady (2001) warns that 'socially powerless groups' (p64) may be seen as potential victims of research and that ultimately 'all humans have the right to determine what is in their own best interests' (p65). Some learners in Nacro actively chose not to participate.

As part of the larger project in which I was involved participants from the family learning centre (FLC) were paid a small sum of money for their time and they also received free childcare during interviews. This was a strategy negotiated between the centre manager and project leader over which I had no influence. British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2004) state that care must be taken when using any kind of incentive to participate in research to ensure that it does not bias responses or choice in participation. Those who did agree to take part in focus groups and individual interviews were approached by Centre staff as being representative of those using the FLC. In all individual interviews participants offered far more of their time than was initially negotiated and I was

as sure as I could be that the payments had not made a significant impact on their responses or willingness to participate.

While I promised anonymity some were keen for their real name to be used and were more than happy to share their stories with me. It was important for me to acknowledge a 'duty of care' in this situation. Mason (2002) stresses the importance of gaining 'informed consent' from interviewees while acknowledging that this can be difficult. She says:

Many interviewees may not be very interested in the detail, and may not be familiar with the disciplinary and academic skills and conventions which are needed to understand issues about what counts as data, what principles of analysis will be used... (Mason 2002, p 81)

Probing into people's lives, their hopes and fears, successes and failures is what gives such rich data, but I had to be conscious that many of my participants had already had very negative experiences and that I must not compound or recreate these. Above all I had to be constantly mindful of the BERA guidelines and the need for validity, reciprocity and truth. For Lather (1986) reciprocity is crucial between researcher and those 'being' researched to 'help participants understand and change their situation' (p263).

The situation at the family learning project was a little different to the other two sites as this was part of a larger research project looking at family learning nationally, see Edwards *et al* (2002). Part of the negotiated elements of entry to the FLC in Bridgetown was that all participants would receive feedback of data collected and have the opportunity to agree or disagree with themes and issues which were identified. In accordance with this I wrote to my three case study participants outlining the main findings from our work together and asking for their comments, negative or positive.

Retaining my integrity as a researcher was important so that the individuals were not left feeling used. Gillespie (1989) offers this about 'insider' versus 'outsider' research:

...ordinary people are rarely considered knowledgeable or capable of knowing about their own reality ... people are research subjects and knowledge about their lives is created and carried away by 'experts'. (p2-9)

and I feel that my own interest in working with adults who traditionally have 'missed out' on education gave me more of an insider perspective.

The purpose of any research is to find out something and the researcher is expected to be both honest and truthful. Maintaining respect for personal dignity of the subjects of the research and considering issues of confidentiality are paramount. In this study I attempted to use a style of 'open democratic research' as described by Scott and Usher (1999), but practical constraints, and perhaps their lack of 'powerful learning' experiences, meant that the interactivity between participants and researcher may have been less than I had hoped.

All those taking part in the research were volunteers. In designing the project it was important to consider the possible impact on the individuals concerned and to think about the relationships involved. This was different for the three sites. In the ABE group students offered to join the focus group and be interviewed; however, previously to this they had all formed part of my journal in which I recorded my own reflections on them as learners and how this impacted on me as their tutor. They had no access to this record, although my thoughts and reflections informed my teaching, and carried on the cycle of action and reflection. The student/tutor relationship was one which had existed for some time (up to two years) and was

therefore well established. It was not one of expert teaching novice but a more equal relationship (see Jarvis, 1985) where we all had strengths and weaknesses and shared our pool of knowledge and skills. It is unlikely that this very particular relationship could be seen as neutral, nor would I want it to be. It did mean that the relationship I had with participants in the other sites was quite different.

In all three sites access was negotiated with the appropriate person in charge and ground rules were agreed. Most of the contact was in person or by phone, no letters were required, although these were offered. The ABE and Nacro sites were approached by me, the Family Learning Centre access was negotiated by one of the project leaders on behalf of the team. Only participants in the FLC were formally written to with feedback from the interviews as, although those from the other sites were asked if they would like to read what was transcribed, they declined. Access to Nacro was negotiated with the Centre Manager and then with the Additional Support Co-ordinator before actually visiting the site and speaking to them in person. The ABE group was much less formally negotiated although I sought permission from the Curriculum Manager and Basic Skills Programme Manager before approaching students directly.

At all times I strove to be honest and open about what I was doing, taking account of cultural, religious and other significant factors as laid down by BERA. There is no doubt that rather different issues were of concern regarding the Nacro site as participants in these programmes could be seen as particularly socially disadvantaged and in many ways already 'stigmatised' by society. Participants

varied from mildly curious about my research to deeply interested in the purpose, but all gave generously of their time.

It was hard sometimes to keep participants to the topic in question as many times they offered extremely sensitive and personal information about themselves and their lives. I had to guard against entering into a counselling role rather than that of interviewer. There is also a strong feeling that I would like to know how they get on; have they made that important 'next step' or have they slipped back into comfortable and safer places? For many I shall never know the answers, but for a short time they shared a significant part of their lives with me which was a privilege.

5.6 *Boundaries of this study*

Although this study uses three different sites of learning it cannot claim to offer a representative sample of all sites where adult learning takes place. Within this particular urban context it offers a range of contextualized situations and while it may be difficult to generalise from results it offers a basis for theoretical understanding of adult learning. Issues of reliability may be of particular interest to quantitative researchers and I cannot claim that my findings will correlate with studies of other adults involved in learning, but it does aim to reflect how their society has shaped and continues to shape them as individuals. I hope I have represented their stories reliably and accurately. Constraints of time and funds also kept the study small. Indeed, researchers are warned against expecting case study research to allow generalisations; its strength is in the particularisation. Though small it does however represent the stories of some adult learners who

are currently striving to improve their situation in life and gives a flavour of some of the policies and practices which have impacted on them and how these have facilitated ‘powerful learners and learning’.

5.7 Using the data

Analysing qualitative data cannot be seen as easy and, as has been mentioned, this approach tends to generate large amounts of information. Central for me, as for Du Vivier (1992) and Gallacher *et al* (2000), is that the voices of the learners are heard. In Chapter 2 I articulated a typology called ‘powerful learners and learning’ which aims to show, albeit in a very subjective way, how the various participants in the study are positioned regarding empowerment and emancipation. The data which is collected from interviews and observations will enable me to map each learner onto the four quadrants to see if they are ‘powerful learners’.

| | |
|------------|----------|
| ENABLEMENT | ACTIVISM |
| CONFORMITY | LIBERTY |

Figure 5.2: Quadrants from ‘Powerful learners and learning’

Each interview was transcribed and notes made of each visit. This enabled me to review the voices of participants and to identify themes, both within each case and across sites. The transcripts were categorised using ‘interpretive indexing categories’ (Mason 2002), and pulled together in themes. This entailed many readings of the data and creating grids to both identify and examine themes, such as ‘initial schooling’, ‘social capital’, within and across sites. One of the appealing aspects of case study research is that it enables the researcher to look at the

whole case, without the need to deconstruct and reconstruct it. This holistic approach is useful and helps retain the 'person in context' nature of the research. Inevitably the findings which I report will contain an element of reflexivity on my part as I go through the data reviewing and recalling the participants themselves.

5.8 Summary

Ranson (1994) states that 'There is always a socialising process embodied in education' (p6). All educators need to acknowledge this 'socialising process' and within this the enormous potential for misuse of power, particularly when working with individuals who are socially or culturally disadvantaged. I return to this issue in a later chapter when analysing data from the case studies.

This chapter has sought to explore the issues around qualitative research, looking at phenomenology and the interpretive paradigm to help me understand 'what is going on' and whether these adults are 'powerful learners' involved in 'powerful learning'. I have made choices within the research design that mean I accept the subjective nature of this research, and decided to use a case study approach as this offers an appropriate way for me to look at my sites of learning. Through the use of my journal, observation and interviews I investigate how learning impacts on my participants. I also acknowledge the importance of ethics in the research process and the boundaries that the small scale of the study impose on outcomes. Finally, I indicate how the data is to be analysed.

In the following chapter I report findings from the three case study sites, using the voices of learners wherever possible to illustrate their stories. These findings will

then be analysed in Chapter 7 using the ‘powerful learners and learning’ typology and Bourdieu’s theory of practice.

¹ Hamilton (2000) uses the terms ‘institutional’ literacies to describe formal, dominant literacy learning and ‘vernacular’ literacies which are self-generated and informal.

² [name] moved from being a learner to being ‘one of the boys’ and this caused an identity shift.

³ ABE groups are traditionally mixed groups regarding age, gender, race, disability. Within this group there were Asian, Black and white students and a mix of ages, with a slightly higher proportion of males to females. It just so happened that the two volunteers to be part of this study were white males.

⁴ As stated, this was a project to support the local community. The group had decided for themselves that they preferred to be an all female group (not the professionals working there), although there was one man attending with his partner during the research period who was ‘tolerated’ by the rest of the participants. The ethnic and age mix in this group reflected users of the drop-in centre but not necessarily the local community. They were mainly white, aged between 19 – late 50s.

⁵ The first stage of this larger project was a survey of family learning provision across England to identify key features, eg principal source of funding and mode of operation. This initial survey was followed by in-depth interviews with key informants from a cross section of the survey sample. These interviews led to the identification of the final case study sample of six family learning centres, which were selected by source of funding, mode of operation and geographical location to give a range of the forms of family learning support and their communities. The FLC was one of the case study samples. Although initially this site was expected to feature in the final report to the Rowntree Foundation it ultimately did not.

⁶ The group here were multi-ethnic, segregated in classes by age/programme (16 – late 50s). The older group were the main focus for my work within the Centre.

CHAPTER 6: EXPLORING POWERFUL LEARNERS AND POWERFUL LEARNING

This chapter will describe what my data has to say about adult learners and learning. Each centre of learning is introduced and reported in order to understand, first of all, who are the learners and why they are there; secondly, who are those working with them and what are the structures within which they work; and thirdly, perceptions of learning.

Each site is reported as a separate case and then key findings will be identified, first for the individual cases and then across the sites. The first site is that of adult basic education.

6.1 *Adult Basic Education*

The adult education centre where the class is based is in Highfield, a suburb of Bridgetown. The centre has been part of the community for a number of years and the building itself is listed, which effectively means that no major changes can be made to it. Entrance to the reception/office is at the end of the building while access to the teaching rooms is through a main front door. The only toilets are sited through one of the teaching rooms and there are stairways and corridors everywhere you turn, giving a confusing layout to the uninitiated. Within the centre there are classes as diverse as tap dancing, A levels, and cake decorating and it is not unusual for a class to be next door to a 'movement to music' session or Chinese cookery. The regular room used for ABE classes has off it a smaller room which also houses the computers and other resources.

The Centre opens every day Monday – Friday when there are classes scheduled. These are split into three sessions: mornings, afternoons and evenings. Most of the tutors are part-time and many work across Bridgetown in a variety of venues; it can be quite an isolating occupation with enrolment being the best time to meet up with other tutors. Not all adult basic education is provided in centres such as this across Bridgetown¹. There are satellite venues in most areas and Highfield is no exception. Although the students interviewed are based at the centre, the interviews with another tutor (Debbie) and the manager give a flavour of the wider provision.

6.1.1 Sources of information

This section draws on data from a variety of sources, including my journal kept over a period of three years while teaching a basic skills literacy group. It also uses data gathered from a group interview with two students, in-depth interviews with a manager, a group tutor and with two individual students.

6.1.2 The interviewees

Wanda is a middle manager within the adult education service in Bridgetown. She had previously worked as a numeracy tutor for many years and gone on to become programme manager before her current appointment as ABE core skills curriculum manager. This experience gave her a particular understanding of the complexities of adult basic education and meant her management style and overall ethos was grounded in reality, not just policy. The interview took place just after the introduction of *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001a) and following the

implementation of the adult national curriculum and the pilots of the national literacy tests.

Debbie is a very experienced basic skills tutor who works part-time, currently three days per week, with groups in the centre and out in a satellite venue. She takes a very learner-centred approach to her work, with the main aim of improving their quality of life. While in some respects welcoming the new adult basic skills core curriculum Debbie feels she is working with it, rather than to it, and will not compromise the breadth of experience for measurable outcomes.

The group consisted (completely by coincidence) of Laurence and Graham, both of whom also went on to be interviewed in depth later. As in all the interviews participation was on a voluntary basis. It was unfortunate that not more students were able to attend on this occasion. Inevitably the fact that both students knew me well made them more relaxed in this situation and they were also in familiar surroundings. It will be apparent that relationships are important to these students, and that the tutor/student relationship develops over time. I feel that they were able to be more open during these interviews because of that established relationship, both with me and with each other.

Graham, now in his late forties, was made redundant from factory work and had spent the last 18 months attending English classes to improve his chances of moving into higher education, and making a career change. He had lived locally all his life and for the past twelve years has lived in his own house in Highfield.

Graham is single and lives alone and although he has a brother and a sister living locally he rarely sees them. In many ways he is quite isolated and notes that:

...my social life seems to have dropped away, it never was brilliant like, because when I was at work... the last sort of five years at work I really banged in me hours and that sort of... well it didn't destroy me social life cos that was already on the way, like, but it got rid of any that was left. But it achieved what I wanted to achieve which was pay off the mortgage and clear all me bills. (Graham, p2).

Laurence, in his early forties, has lived in Highfield for most of his life but feels it has got rougher because of drugs and violence. He says that he would 'move tomorrow' if he could afford to move somewhere better. He bought his first house at nineteen. He has a wife and two children who are both doing well at secondary school. His parents, and a brother live locally and his sister lives the other side of Bridgetown. Laurence says he sees them 'all the time'. At seventeen he left school and went as a trainee butcher with a local chain. After many moves around the area he is now a well established manager of a branch, still with the same company. Laurence's hobbies include gardening, painting, decorating and DIY in the house, and growing Bonsai trees. He finds tending these 'very therapeutic'.

6.1.3 What the respondents had to say about adult learners and learning

Wanda – a manager

Wanda is one of several curriculum managers across Bridgetown and works collaboratively with them on interpreting and implementing policy. Bridgetown receives national policy regarding adult basic education and then dictates how this is to be implemented. Curriculum managers work together and have targets and development areas which are worked on by cross-city groups. This insures that

each area gets the equivalent treatment and information to others, and helps to ensure consistency across the ABE service. Wanda's particular brief is 'quality' and currently there are three main strands being audited which are: increased participation, increased retention and increased accreditation:

...its having this overview of what's happening nationally; how that feeds down to Bridgetown and how its going out to the field. (Wanda, p1)

Wanda works with many other agencies as part of her role and these include: schools, teachers, librarians, Qualzone (a small EAZ), community liaison groups, residents, police, fire service, local vicar, ward officer, voluntary representatives, health service workers, and so on.

She was heavily involved in setting up a three-year project at Whitelow community flat, in a very deprived area² with many social problems. She had utilized laptops from the Highfield centre over the summer holidays to run some drop-in workshops in Whitelow and had also organised an intensive numeracy summer school. Both these activities proved popular with residents and two participants went on to get jobs on supermarket checkouts, one managed the accounts at the local community Centre and another became Chair of a liaison group. Wanda says this is all because they had gained lots of confidence.

They then tried offering conventional literacy and numeracy classes but these, although well attended initially, had stopped recruiting and so they went back to the residents to ask what *they* wanted. Residents wanted practical courses such as beauty therapy and first aid, and this was arranged with literacy and numeracy built into them. These are the courses run by Debbie. A further spin-off of this was

that other literacy/numeracy needs were identified during these courses and could be addressed when the opportunity arose. Wanda feels this provision worked well because the participants had asked for it themselves and an element of trust had built up between the 'establishment' and the residents:

Then before half term we put on a 20 hour course on just numeracy and we picked up the people from the previous two courses who had shown that they needed that, and had 7 who stayed all the way through. So I think that it worked because it was what the residents had asked for themselves. Because we'd been working in a little way over a long period of time, they trusted us you know. That's the thing, you've got to get them to own that provision. (Wanda, p2)

Despite these obvious success stories there are tensions which new policy and strategies are highlighting. For instance, *Skills for Life* expects providers to target the 'hard to reach' and the following extract illustrates how difficult this can be:

A twenty year old, young mother, two children, and she could not read at all. She really couldn't read or write anything. That's the challenge with the hard to reach people, not only how you get to them, but how you keep them and how you cope with them, how you ensure that the learning takes place really. (Wanda, p2)

Skills for Life has also meant a shift in the kind of provision, with an emphasis on the provision of short courses. Wanda had run short courses successfully previously but, these did not have the curriculum embedded, there was no assessment tool and no accreditation, all things which *Skills for Life* requires. It takes the spontaneity out of providing what students want. She feels that the previous more 'liberal' ABE practice has gone, and is replaced with tight assessments at beginning and end of programmes, the need to 'get people in and out at certain levels the other end' (Wanda, p3), and the need to track students to ensure they go on to other learning, or employment. Practical concerns for her also include the IT systems to support the data collection which are currently not sufficiently sophisticated for the purpose.

Another project Wanda has been active in running is the South Bridgetown Homeless project which is a charity and is a forerunner of the 'Foyer'³ due to be built with ESF funds but delayed because of land issues. From the first six participants in an ICT and Word processing course, two got voluntary jobs, one went on to further training and two did their driving theory tests. These students were able to access Prince's Trust⁴ funding to support them continue on courses. Successfully outcomes are sought by students, tutors and managers, and Wanda cites the following positive outcome:

... a young girl who had very low skills, she went on the programme and was [then] employed, in paid employment, as the cleaner for the depot. And when the BSA came round to have a look at them, the project, she took them into the cleaning cupboard, her cleaning cupboard, and there on the wall was her list of all the things she needed in immaculate handwriting that she had done. It was just lovely ... and she actually got an adult learner's award, went to London to receive it (Wanda, p4)

Sometimes the environment where students learn can be less than ideal as an adult education venue and this project is a case in point with classes being taught in offices and the kitchen in the early days:

Since then we've managed to get a grant to revamp an old garage that was attached to the building and they've now got a training room. We've got 5 computers ... (Wanda, p3)

But even facilities are not enough and a key factor for success is support 'on the ground' from project managers and support workers who are within the community, according to Wanda. She also feels that ABE has still not appreciated the importance of tracking students because of the clash with existing ABE philosophy:

But I do feel we've got a way to go to be really tight on tracking students. Because we're not in some ways used to working in that way. We're so learner centred in their learning that we don't have the government view of it really. (Wanda, p4)

Regarding monitoring and evaluation Wanda knows that she is required to undertake action planning, target setting and reviewing progress to meet the basic

skills 'quality mark' but the Bridgetown database does not record some qualification aims and she struggles to get tutors, managers and students to appreciate the importance and value of completing paperwork fully. In addition, short courses and family literacy and numeracy programmes are not recorded on the database. The national comparisons on accreditation, achievement and retention use published computer records which are incomplete.

All tutors are now teaching to the curriculum and the assessments for this are 'off the shelf' so tutors do not have to design their own, but this also means they cannot be tailored to individual students. She believes that ultimately employers will probably require national literacy test (NLT) Level 1, or Entry level from their unskilled or semi-skilled employees and this demand will encourage students to take the tests⁵, but they will need to see them as useful before doing so.

At this time funding for adult basic education via LSC was relatively new, and in a bit of a 'honeymoon' period. To access funding providers needed to focus on the learning that was taking place and on the quality of the provision:

It's not around teaching, it's very much more around learning, and how you review your learning and have you achieved a learning goal, what were your goals, were they challenging goals, were you inspired? (Wanda, p6)

Not all learning had to end in accreditation, but they must show successful learning and positive outcomes to attract full funding. In many ways this was a time for some lateral thinking and Wanda commented:

The LSC will fund anything and if it's creative and innovative and exciting then they're very interested. (Wanda, p6)

but added that being creative and innovative very often meant incurring additional costs. Any provision which requires 'extras' such as an additional tutor, childcare

provision or transport, are harder to fund and often these extras have to be funded from a different pot of money. Wanda thinks the LSC will need to be open-minded and fund these additional costs⁶. As Wanda pointed out, short courses are demanding on time and resource, but seem to meet a need provided they are what the community wants:

I think the big thing about it being successful is that it's got to be 'owned' by the community where you're doing it. You've got to get them to ask for it if possible, you can't go out and say I'm going to put this course on, just like that. It's finding the ownership of it. (Wanda, p8)

Debbie - a tutor

Debbie currently works with a variety of basic education classes, one of which is sited in a 'community flat' working with mums, now in their thirties, who absconded from school. She describes these women as 'intelligent', 'very bright', 'streetwise' but as having missed out on their formal education. Some had significant 'baggage' from their schooldays:

The problem initially was that they had a huge amount of baggage from their time at school and that the teacher was a subject of anger. We still have some quite childlike behaviour which is quite fascinating. ...they put things like pasta and rubbed it in each others work....Well I was so horrified I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. And they realised and I said 'you know, I'm not trained to teach children, I'm only trained to teach adults', and it stopped. But its that sort of thing, its socialisation, all the hidden agendas that they haven't picked up, they don't really understand what's expected. (Debbie, p2)

They will follow a course, such as first aid, in the morning, with Debbie observing, and then in the afternoons she will look at the English used in the course and work on this with them. They build portfolios for assessment and have already covered topics such as citizenship, healthy eating and basic numeracy. They have done a stage 1 CLAIT course and are keen to progress from this. Most of these women have come to acknowledge their lack of skills because they are unable to help their children. The classes themselves are held in the community flat (which

is actually a maisonette) situated on a street in Whitelow, a very deprived area of Bridgetown. People are in and out all the time which, while it can be disruptive, is also a good indication that it is working for the community. Mainly through their children's school many of these women have become involved in the community and are on liaison groups which are campaigning to rebuild the community centre.

Debbie also teaches a group at Highfield adult education centre, where she describes the learners as being of mixed ability. One of the common factors for many of them is a lack of self-esteem as they have been 'put down all their life':

I've got at least three who ought to be going onto pre GCSE. It's getting them to believe that they can do it. They think that it's something way beyond them. Even when we do work, I've got some pre GCSE work, getting them to look at things like poetry, 'I can't do this', you can see the barriers come up. (Debbie, p2)

So getting them to believe in themselves is often the biggest hurdle. Most want to gain employment. One man has just got a job after many years at home looking after his children and this is the kind of achievement which they need, but he has needed a great deal of practical support throughout the process which classes have been able to provide:

One man hadn't worked for ten years; his setup was such that he was looking after the children. And going for a job after ten years, just filling in the application forms... (Debbie, p3)

To help her learners with job seeking Debbie has arranged for a member of staff from the Job Centre to come up to the group weekly with any new jobs in the area. This has proved an effective measure and is making a new use of existing resources.

For many adults a basic education class is also somewhere to learn social skills. My journal notes the problems caused by adults who join a group but do not

understand the 'rules' of the game. These cannot be taken for granted and even tasks like taking turns to make the teas and coffees in the break are learning experiences. For some making a list, speaking to other group members or listening to others are new skills to be learnt:

[a student says]'I've been into a shop and I've taken something back'. I'm so pleased that they will share it, there's a lot of safety. We're very relaxed. (Debbie, p4)

Debbie describes education as a 'journey' she and her learners are making together, and one of the most important thing she believes is that they know it is all right to make mistakes and we cannot be a hundred percent right the whole time. She strongly believes in giving them informal learning opportunities as well as the formal 'curriculum' and takes them on visits where they all learn together. She describes how they learnt where sayings such as 'being on the breadline' and 'sleep tight' come from. She feels that she tries to give her learners a joy of learning and that it is about their quality of life rather than moving on, and this does present tensions with the structures within which she is working:

Statistically you've got to put a circle in the right place, they've got to be seen, but if somebody will get up and make the tea, that's a huge thing. That's a huge step forward and there's no way of quantifying that. There's nowhere for me to write 'this person went out and bought their own folder, has been and got a dictionary, managed to do some spellings with their child, managed to read to their child, because of course they reach the stage where the children learn the stories and they can correct them. Or they can go into school and see the teacher because teachers are quite human, a teacher isn't some little god, I'm a teacher, but 'oh yes, but you're different, we know you' they say. So this getting over this huge fear of learning and education but there's nowhere I can write that on any evaluations. (Debbie, p4)

Debbie is keen to celebrate all successes, such as the woman who gave a talk at her local WI and the student who spoke to the group about the planets, but these are not the measurable outcomes which attract funding. She also feels that the national literacy test, while it may be good for those who pass it, can be damaging

for those who do not, and tutors need to be aware of this fact when exposing students to potential failure. She works hard with her learners to gain their trust and feels that treating them as equals is an important part of this, and in encouraging them to become independent learners. She says 'it's for living, that's what's important, that's what education is all about.' (Debbie, p6)

The group interviewees and from my journal

Students had come to this centre because it was the closest one to their home and they stayed because classes gave them confidence, encouraged them and was somewhere friendly where they were not 'shown up'. The reasons that brought them to classes were that they knew they had some problems with, for instance, writing and spelling and wanted to do something about it. They felt that they compared themselves with others and identified weaknesses, feeling that they were therefore disadvantaged in society and gave the example of applying for jobs, where poor writing may become an issue. One of them had a physical reaction to situations like this where he felt under pressure, and his eyes would blur as the panic set in. They felt that other people judge them and they did not want to be found wanting:

If you had to put a notice up at work and you weren't sure that it's spelt right, you know damn well they'll take the mickey out of you something rotten. (Grp, p2)

Neither thought learning as an adult was particularly easy. They felt that they needed input to their learning from others and this was not always easy to take, but it can force you to try things you have avoided for years, such as writing. They thought it was important to be told why something was incorrect so that they could understand how to put it right and they also thought that getting the level of the

work offered them right was very important. Looking at activities they liked and disliked within classes they felt that 'real' was best and cited an example of coming across something covered in class in the newspaper:

Yea. I mean, sometimes you're reading the paper and you see something and you think to yourself, oh, that's tautology! ... You have a little smile to yourself because you recognise it. (Grp, p5)

When discussing different roles students feel that the tutor leads by 'telling us the direction we're going in' , that the presence of volunteer tutors enables more one-to-one support which is good and that the group themselves support each other. They do not see any staff outside the classroom as having a particular role which relates to them, other than as someone who might 'check the work' and there is a suggestion that this could be 'interfering'. (p5).

They felt that the centre itself had changed little over the years and still appeared to be well-used by local people. They did feel that the centre was important to Highfield, saying 'everywhere needs an adult education centre and a library'. They felt that it was important that adult provision was separated from young people or children's education because they might feel 'intimidated if kids came too' and could feel 'out of place' (Grp, p7). It is important to them that others want the same from classes:

Yea, like-minded people. Regardless of age, nobody's trying to prove that they're something they're not. You know, looking down their nose at anybody else saying, I'm better than you. (Grp, p7)

It is important to them that nobody judges them for seeking help and the support of other students made it easier to fit in. They felt that a relaxed environment and knowing that they were 'not on your own' were important so that they could speak out without fear of being put down by others:

Yea, the first group I was in I'll always remember, you was talking to everybody going round and everybody had the same difficulties and hardly any of them had ever spoken to anybody about it. They was all saying the same thing... I wasn't on me own.

and

That's it isn't it? If you know you're not the only one who's struggling you've got the confidence to stand up in class and say, "I'm struggling with this", and that's ok. You know that you can say something without everyone sniggering. (Grp, p9)

Both students had experienced this kind of behaviour previously, either at school or at work, and for both it had made a lasting impression:

Teachers were intimidating. Where they think you should know something and you didn't. I can still remember school as a little-un and thinking, here we go again. And you're that frightened you just don't take anything in. You come up to a brick wall and you won't let anyone in. (Grp, p10)

And this can be compounded if you are also subjected to unwanted attention of your peers:

At school there were always the bullies as well. If you were a bit of a dimmy the bullies are going to pick on you. (Grp, p10)

Regarding changes in themselves they mentioned having more confidence and the ability to speak to people in the street who they had met in class. They both write more now as a result of coming to classes, and one has started to keep a regular private diary.

Struggling with your own problems and trying to make things better for oneself is hard enough without also having to battle with the structures which can get in the way. Graham was so dispirited with the lack of job or training opportunities that he was spending most of his time in bed (Journal 4, p5) and I noted my own frustrations with his situation:

He is fairly bitter about obstacles the DSS put in way of him trying to better himself – gets no benefit but still expected to apply for unsuitable jobs; sit at job centre looking through adverts and writing applications; attend interviews etc. He has enrolled for 3 English classes this year, and worked hard in all of them. His attendance has been 100% - he is clearly motivated to give himself a better

chance of a better job. The system seems to be working against him and he is fairly disillusioned. (Journal 3, p17/18)

Role of teacher and of careers adviser/counsellor tend to blend at times. Graham one of most motivated students I've come across, but he's being frustrated by the system, and we risk him chucking it all in. Agreed to go to prize giving/presentation on [date] with him – a positive move. (Journal 4, p4)

Students often lead busy lives and accessing education may be only one of many facets of their life. This is especially so for those who are also working, and for parents' who have to juggle childcare, but it is also the reality of life. This student could not do everything and the ABE class had to be abandoned as I noted in my journal:

Am very sorry to be losing JP - her course starts next week and it's on a Tuesday so she can't come any more. She thanked me and said she'd be back if she could. And commented that it's not often that you 'get what you want from a class' so she was sorry to have to give it up. (Journal 3, p2)

Sometimes the introduction to adult education goes wrong and the following extract from my journal illustrates how vulnerable many students in ABE are:

Had to spend long time coaxing her to talk about how she felt; everyone better than her, too many big words, didn't understand even when it was explained again, can't take stuff in etc etc. We talked about the impression she gives – [smiling face, positive body language] says it's been a problem all her life. Was in remedial schooling but her mum died and never bothered with working after that. Very low self esteem. (Journal 3, p4/5)

But it also shows how a supportive environment can empower an individual so that they can overcome their fears, and that this is further enhanced by acknowledgement of others:

[Name] was very honest about how she'd felt the first couple of weeks – terrified, tearful, worse. But a friend had said 'at least you're going out there and doing something about it' which made her feel better. Now enjoys classes! (Journal 3, p12)

My journal is littered with references to coping with the paperwork and compromises which have to be made to activities which do not necessarily meet the learning outcomes or match the national curriculum. This became an

increasing issue for me as a practitioner as time went on and led ultimately to my decision to stop working within the adult education service.

Laurence – a learner

Laurence first came to the centre when he needed to take a basic hygiene certificate for work. He felt that his English was not good and his spelling atrocious. He also found it very difficult to put words together and had 'no confidence at all in writing'. The pressure of following a course through work meant he needed support with the written work and he chose Highfield centre because it was the nearest to his home. Attending classes each week in a group helped him gain confidence to complete his course which he passed. He then stopped attending the centre as his immediate learning goal had been achieved but, in common with many other ABE students, he then 'hit' another hurdle when his employers wanted him to do an NVQ Assessor course so that he could assess his own staff in the workplace. This brought him back to the centre with a new learning goal which he also achieved, gaining his NVQ much to his own amazement:

I did that course with you and I gained more confidence through doing that, and I got through it. God knows how. But I passed and I got the certificate. So I was chuffed with that. (Laurence, p4)

Now, after another break Laurence is attending the group again, this time because he has been offered a promotion at work and he says he has come to a time in his life where he would like to learn more and would like an English GCSE. He needs to feel comfortable with his teacher as he is constantly worried that he will feel intimidated, and he did indeed leave the class when his tutor left, despite efforts to support him through this change. Laurence says that after the D32/33 he was 'ok on his own for a while and he felt 'comfortable' with the work he was

expected to do. Then he had to take a course with an exam at the end of it and he panicked again. But he enjoyed the learning and was enticed into doing more.

Laurence started working part-time after school when he was 14 at a local butchers but he thinks this disrupted his schooling as he wanted to put as many hours in as possible to earn more money. His leisure activities included riding his bike, going to discos, playing rugby, tennis and squash, but he says that he 'tried most things' and then backed off. Laurence wishes that he had received a better education as he would like to be a bit more knowledgeable and he does not feel a sense of achievement in what he has done because '... the job I'm in at the moment I feel as if I couldn't go anywhere else. (Laurence, p7) This is despite his employers having confidence in his ability and offering him promotion which he is currently wary of accepting because he does not feel he is clever enough to 'carry it off' (Laurence, p7). He feels that the achievements he has made were dependent on the support he had at the time and that he cannot do it on his own. Since taking a break from classes he already feels he is 'losing it'.

Anyone seeing Laurence in his workplace would be hard-pressed to find a lack of confidence as he is a born communicator and has a way of getting people on side so they work as a team. It is telling therefore that while acknowledging the positives he dwells on the negatives:

I can sell myself, I can get people to work for me. No problem at all. I have got 14 members of staff and not one of them knows I'm thick. (Laurence, p8)

While his family have always known he attends ABE classes his work colleagues do not, although they knew he attended night school. He feels it would be all right to say he was doing a GCSE but not basic skills.

His work has however given him an interest in the possibility of working with youth groups at some time as he feels he can relate to young lads:

Because sometimes like I work with young lads and I can see it in myself that they were the same as what I was. I have got a young lad who works for me, [name]. And I keep saying to him "just go to college and learn so and so. Do this, do that." ...20 years down the line you are going to think to yourself I wish I had done."
And I can talk to these kids. (Laurence, p8)

At school Laurence felt unsupported. He failed the 11+ and feels this 'tarnished' him so he went into the bottom set at secondary school. He felt that he should not be in this group because he could write his name and address, but he never said anything and stayed there all through school. An incident in his final year, which may have been a true representation of starting work in many trades for instance, made him want to prove them wrong:

...they told me that I had got to learn how to make a cup of coffee because that's what I would be doing when I started work. And I thought, I ain't gonna do that. And that's where I have fought for my company to get where I got now. So I felt like they pushed me under the carpet then. (Laurence, p10)

Once he left school he did two years training with [company name] which, at the time was all practical work.

At home Laurence supports his children and is able to offer his expertise with maths to support their learning:

I do sit and read with my daughters. I have always done that. And I do a lot of maths with them. I am pretty cute on maths. (Laurence, p12)

He is more involved with his own children than his parents were with his education but he defers to his wife who he says is 'very clever...cleverer than me' (p17), and when he goes to parents' evenings says he feels he can put his own experiences

aside for the sake of fitting in, 'No, I put a show on with the teachers. You do tend to, don't you?' (Laurence, p18).

At work he runs a branch with an annual turnover of over £500,000, does the wages for 14 staff, hires and fires and works out all the rotas. Despite this he doubts his own ability to take on the promotion because it would push him outside his comfort zone. Relating to people in the workplace he has no problems with dealing with any situation that arises, he says he can do 'what is necessary' from talking to other staff across the branches to firing staff who step over the line of tolerance:

No he was too much. Sometimes you get young kids who try and take it that bit too far. I don't stand for that. Or if they are messing with the ladies or anything like that. I don't stand for none of that. You've got to keep them in their place.(Laurence, p14)

Laurence thinks that the tutor of a group is an important factor in settling into a group but the support of other students is also important. Sadly he remembers his schooling as a very negative experience and suggests that some of the teachers like to 'overpower you' (Laurence, p19). Within adult education working together as a group made him feel involved, and while he could always refuse to do something there was also flexibility of work to be done and he cites the use of class time to refine his scripts for the NVQ award. He feels he used ABE as a resource to support him through the D32/33. If he does decide to return to some sort of learning he will probably go to the centre in Highfield and would like to do the GCSE English, although his time is limited. He would also like to do something with computers, using a keyboard, but thinks his English needs to be better first. When asked if he would try a basic IT course he replied that it 'frightens' him. (p21). He does feel that attending the centre has given him

confidence within the classroom which is very different to that he feels in his work environment and his schooldays are obviously still very much with him:

Yes verbally standing up with a white coat and hat on, confidence no problem at all. Take all that off and sit me down in a classroom is a different kettle of fish. Different completely. That's when your hands start to sweat. And if a teacher looks at you in the classroom and you are sitting there, I would sweat. (Laurence, p22)

While at school Laurence truanted up to 2 or 3 times a week when he would not return for the afternoon session. He would follow a group of others and either go home or to the park, and he feels the teachers were not really interested in where he was. His parents never knew because they were at work and it seems the school never told them. He liked art and still draws now. He took exams but he does not know how he did because he never went to collect any results:

I never even went to pick them up. Because I thought I hadn't done any good. Because I was tarnished from the word go...But its funny really, because I never did go and pick them up, no. I never picked them up. I never bothered. Because I felt the whole school wasn't interested. (Laurence, p15)

When asked how his family reacted to this action he commented, 'No they never bothered really, they weren't interested. (Laurence, p15) and, although he does not remember it, assumes they must have gone to parents' evenings. He went on to say that while his brother and sister were quite clever he was 'just the butcher... leave him to it' (p15-16). However, he feels that he has done better than either of them in job terms and done better than people in higher sets at school too, but then comes back to what he perceives as his problems:

Yes, I get frustrated that I would like English. I would like to be able to sit and write a letter... I can't, not really. And put all the full stops in and all the proper commas. That's what I would like to be able to do, just sit there freely and write it. That's what I would like to do. That's my aim, but where I start I don't know. (Laurence, p16)

Laurence is worried about how others perceive him and feels that being in an ABE class helps because everybody is the same and he does not believe that he will find this support elsewhere.

Graham – a learner

Graham is involved in conservation work on a voluntary basis and has worked with a few groups who work on different projects in the area. He describes his interest in this area as something he 'fell into' having heard about voluntary groups and then at a craft fair one day he got talking with a local wildlife group who made bird boxes and thought it sounded interesting. Reflecting on his love of nature Graham says:

I was a rotten little sod when I was young, used to have an air rifle and shot anything that moved. I mean when I think back...I didn't sort of think one day, oh I should stop this and do conservation work, it just sort of um, developed. ... I used to have relatives, a relly with a farm we used to go to sometimes in the summer holidays... you got the woods at the back and ... a third of a square mile of land to run... that sort of got it into me mind like... open spaces, green fields... animals everywhere. (Graham, p 6-7).

He was planning to move to the edge of the countryside but his plans were curtailed when his solicitor robbed him of the £10,000 deposit. He currently still goes 'litter picking' along the local river with a group who range in ages from in their sixties to their eighties, but says he does not want to get into any major projects at the moment because of his studying. Graham is currently doing several courses, both within ABE and mainstream adult education, several of which he is following at Highfield centre. He felt the courses he followed last year gave him the confidence in his ability to undertake GCSE English Literature, which he is now doing.

During his childhood Graham mixed with quite a large group of friends in the local area and together they liked playing and watching football and going to any dances which were on. They would also play cricket in the local park and Graham took up 'bowls' when quite young because 'everybody else was doing it' (Graham, p4). At school he liked photography classes and sports, especially football and athletics. While he would have liked to keep up the photography he felt that it was too expensive as a hobby and as he was 'never in a very good paid job... and there was other things to spend your money on as well (Graham, p5), but he did join a local football team, although this proved to be rough so he did not stay. His interest in art, he thinks, stems back to a rainy Saturday when he and his friends went into town. They wandered around waiting for the pubs to open and he got separated from the others so decided to go into the Art Museum to kill time. He stayed until they threw him out and was particularly impressed with the size of some of the paintings in real life that he had only seen in books previously. This experience led him to continue an interest in art, especially visiting the museums in London, although he never told his friends where he went:

I was the first one with a car, y'know I was the first one to pass my test and get a car... Big old bus, you could get loads of people in... So we used to nip down to London and places like that and... some of me friends were slightly older, they used to want to go into, um, the mucky clubs, y'know the porn film shows, things like ... and I really wasn't that interested in 'em... So I made up a relative I used to visit, but what I used to do was go down and visit all the big museums, on me own, wander round. 'Cos I couldn't have told me mates that I was going to visit a museum, they'd have ... (Graham, p5-6)

Although Graham used to collect paintings he has now stopped because he has no where to put any more. Sometimes he felt he bought paintings for the 'wrong reasons' and when this happened he sold them, but generally he does not like selling his collection, which he describes as all 'contemporary stuff'. He learnt about buying and selling from an amateur artists' group who also told him about

commissioning paintings, and he got involved in their network. Graham admits to the occasional impulse buy:

I mean, when you've got a cheque book in your back pocket and you know you've got enough money to cover whatever you wanna sign ... well...I'll have that (Graham, p8)

and also to buying whatever he likes, regardless of the opinion of others in the field:

I was selling one years ago... I knew somebody that wanted it, I'd beat him to it, y'know, at a sale, and he'd give me his name and address, and said 'if ever you sell it like, let me know', so he'd come down the house and when he saw what I'd got on the wall, he was quite put out, because I'd got ... a hotchpotch of ... y'know, some of them are just three or four pound pictures ... next to ... four paintings on there worth, you know, over two and a half grand (laughs) and he was like, you can't hang this with that (laughs). (Graham, p9)

Talking about aspirations Graham has 'enormous plans' that he says he knows will 'never come to fruition' which is a campaign to 'make the deserts bloom' (p10) and wants to get in touch with the United Nations to try and organise something. He has sent several emails, for example, to the Secretary of the Islamic States Conference and to the US Presidential Office, during the Kyoto talks, but has not received any replies. He suggested that as America does not want to reduce greenhouse gases then they could plant 'eight thousand million trees across the Sahara desert, and keep em watered, there's your problem solved' (Graham, p10). His other major ambition is to go to university and he has been discussing this with others in his English class. Graham gives support and feels he has persuaded one woman to 'go to Fresco College, to do a pre-university course and go on to university' (Graham, p10). He felt particularly strongly that this woman should continue her studies when she lost confidence in herself earlier in the year:

...because I know she can do it she just...she's really down on herself when she makes a mistake... I can't do this... I'm going to give it up like... y'know, I know she can...the way she's turned out it's really good what she does. (Graham, p20)

Graham receives support in what he is doing now from a couple of women in the English class, and says they are all supporting each other, but doubts whether he will keep in touch when the class finishes. Other than this and the classes he attends, he does not receive any support. He has no interest in seeing his brother, and his sister tends to lead her own life, just like his mother used to do. He has no one whom he would call a friend.

Graham feels both a lack of money and his age (forty-nine) are against him as 'nobody's going to employ a fifty-five year old, even with a degree' (Graham, p10). When asked why he thinks a degree is so important Graham's experience is that good jobs with charities, within conservation, have all required a degree. He would 'love to have, to have the ability or power or whatever you'd like to call it, to make decisions' (Graham, p10). Graham is now thinking that even when he has his GCSE English he will have to go back to work but does not expect to get into any of the kind of jobs he would like, despite making numerous applications, because they either want 'twenty years' experience' or a degree. He has recently applied for a post with an NGO (Non Government Office) representing the public on committees and so on for fifteen days a year, but has heard nothing. He feels the lack of feedback from applications is a problem, but when he has rung up to ask they will not tell him. Graham believes this is either because they do not want to upset anyone or because they are worried about being accused of discrimination. The thing he most dreads now is the thought of going back to factory work and says 'I don't want to spend the rest... my last few remaining years in a boring, dead end job.' (Graham, p12). Although in the past Graham has been involved in 'running almost a whole crew of blokes' he is wary of taking on the responsibility

of a charge hand or foreman and he worries about 'having the bottle' (p12) to do something like running his own business. Graham had investigated the possibility of starting up a business in conservation:

...there's lots of little bits of coppices around and farm land... y'know, trees and bits of wood, and they could be used for making broomhandles... it wouldn't be economical for a person to just do it on one little farm, you'd have to do it over quite a large area...and after I'd looked at all the paperwork and the tax and all the rest of it, I thought no, I just wouldn't... if it was like maybe a couple of people... (Graham, p12-13).

He feels that he would rather share this responsibility with others, and suggests that is what would happen in charity work, where committees make all the major decisions.

Graham has bought his own computer and uses this, especially for communicating about his conservation interests, but feels he is a novice user of the internet. He is good at gardening and can put fences up and feels he could even build a house if he needed to, as he has all the necessary skills. He is an electrician by trade and has learnt some of the other skills by doing them, and helping his Dad when younger, but has also attended courses when necessary. '...if I need to learn something, I'm quite willing to go along to a course.' (Graham, p13) This is despite the fact that they have not always been exactly what he wanted, such as the garden design course. He thinks it is important to utilise the resources which are available to you and '...if you want to learn, if you want to prove something, you go along to an expert don't you?' (Graham, p21)

Graham feels he just got on with school, neither liking nor disliking it. He did not truant and was never bullied. He liked maths, geography and sport but 'hated' English. He feels this is probably because he was slightly dyslexic and was

always pushed to the back of the class. He thinks he liked maths because he could do it, and found it straightforward, right or wrong. He says that he drifted through school without paying much attention and left at fifteen. The careers advisors only pushed jobs he was not interested in so he 'sorted himself out' because he wanted to be an electrician. He now regrets his actions at his first job:

cos that would have been a good job if I'd have realised, if I'd had the brains to... so I turned up the first day, in me good clothes, because it was an office job eventually... um... and was given a big shovel and a broom to go and clear this black powder from underneath the gantries, and I mean, I was fiery a little bit when I was younger and I just said, well I'm not doing that and it was a case of you either do that or you go, so 'ta rah' (Graham, p15-16)

He ended up with another company doing what he thought was a full apprenticeship because he went to college and got his City and Guilds certificate, but it turned out to be a traineeship which disappointed him when he discovered this aged twenty-one. As he says, you have got to ask the right questions and at fifteen/sixteen he did not realise the significance. He found the college course quite hard because they would often go too fast for him as some of the apprentices were out on site all week and had the practical experience which he lacked. Occasionally he would come into his own with particular tasks, but this was rarer.

Graham spent the next twenty-three years with the company and although he found the foreman 'tough' the blokes he worked with were mostly good and he used to socialise with them outside work. As they moved on from being apprentices the group shrank as some members left and others got married and so on. By the time the place closed down everyone dispersed, and although he does occasionally see some of them it is rare. Most of those he does still see have got kids and some are grandparents.

Talking about Highfield centre Graham says that it is convenient and offers him what he wants. He has been to this centre and to others and is prepared to go wherever he needs to but if there is a choice he would prefer Highfield and thinks it is important that there is a centre in the local area. Since coming to Highfield centre Graham will communicate with other students whom he has met if he sees them out and about. When he first came to classes he needed to improve his spelling, writing and English generally. He wanted a basic class but was directed to a pre-GCSE class too, which he says was a good move. The Literature class was a particular revelation to him:

...I had read, again covertly, read Dickens and Shakespeare and stuff like that... y'know so when we did a bit on Shakespeare it was, I was quite thrilled to ... sort of ... pick up another book by Shakespeare and ... read more easily. (Graham, p18)

Passing the 'pre' courses with good grades made him decide to carry on to the GCSE but he does not feel that even when he gains his certificate he will have made much difference to his situation:

...if I can't get out of a factory...no. If I'm going to go back into a factory ...I won't say it's been a waste of time, but it won't have improved my situation any at all, no matter what. (Graham, p18)

Graham is also worried about the exam element of the GCSE. His work to date has been portfolio based and he did extremely well. He has been receiving A* for his current coursework but:

...come to the exam when you've got like 2 hours to answer 3 questions, what I'm actually turning out then is absolute rubbish. If I've got the time... to sit and analyse and re-write, I know I can do it, but to do it under the time limit and the pressure... I go to pieces. Well I don't go to pieces but like...I'm not performing anywhere near what I know I can do. (Graham, p19)

Despite his concerns about the exams Graham says that when he has completed it he will go for 'guidance counselling' because he wants a job where qualifications mean something. He worries that he may not be entitled to much help with New

Deal aimed at either the very young or the over 55s, but he will try nevertheless. He feels that he would not be eligible for any financial support if he were to go somewhere like Fresco College saying:

...because I own me own house and I don't get...y'know, no family, so I can't claim any income support, if I was claiming income support or child allowance or anything like that you see, once you're claiming one benefit you can get others... I can't get courses free or cheap because I don't claim any benefit. It's er...catch 22 isn't it? (Graham, p20)

Whatever his current concerns about his future employment plans Graham says he 'just enjoys learning' (Graham, p21), it is not that he has to do it, but it is something that he wants to do.

6.1.4 Overview of findings in ABE

From the management and provision perspective there is often undeniable conflict between what policy dictates in terms of measurable outcomes and targets, against what adults require. This creates tensions, both for the manager and the tutors delivering the curriculum. Sometimes a learner's lack of social skills may act as a barrier when working collaboratively and the learning has to address these needs too. It would appear to be important that adult learners are treated as equals if tutors are to enable their students to become independent learners, and ownership of the provision by learners is crucial if they are to value it.

Both learners and providers mention that learners often display a lack of confidence, self belief and self esteem, and both mention the importance of trust being part of the tutor/learner relationship. While joining an adult basic skills class may take quite a bit of courage on behalf of the student, being with others who are in similar situations, who understand what they are feeling, is also necessary. Support, for individuals and for each other can come from a variety of sources:

from teachers, family, friends, work colleagues and other students, and would appear to be significant in maintaining motivation and confidence. For some students, moving outside their 'comfort zone' can be challenging and being in an environment where it is 'safe' to take risks can be crucial. Providers and learners say that attending classes is often employment driven, but sometimes more than practical outcomes are forthcoming. Overall those involved feel that having adult learning provision in the local area is important for the community.

Learners mentioned their lack of education as cause for being excluded from certain jobs and opportunities and feeling disadvantaged compared to others. There were certain interests/ activities which learners consistently kept hidden from friends or colleagues (Graham with his love of art, Laurence with his lack of confidence with formal writing) and were associated with keeping face. It seems that negative experiences of school, including being placed in low ability sets, being ignored by teachers of whom they were sometimes frightened, feeling that the school was disinterested in them and their potential, all contributed to their lack of achievement. What they wanted was to be involved and feel valued. Both learners were interested in their local community and involved in different ways; Laurence through his job and Graham through his conservation work. Importantly, both Laurence and Graham saw themselves as individuals who were 'still learning'.

In terms of the 'powerful learners and learning' typology it is clear that the adults interviewed within this site began in the '*conformity*' quadrant, primarily because of their prior experiences of learning. Laurence had achieved successful learning

outcomes from his episodes of involvement and had moved into '*enablement*'. Graham, quickly moved into '*enablement*' and made active choices about what courses he would follow and edged into '*activism*'; but his lack of employment success had begun to destroy his belief in the choices he had made about learning being the most important factor.

6.2 Family Learning Centre

The second site is the family learning centre in Ledworth, which is about a mile from the centre of Bridgetown. The family learning centre is a project consisting of a drop-in and access to support and advice on a range of issues including domestic violence, money and housing problems and issues relating to mental health problems. The drop-in is open four days a week (closed Wednesdays) from 12.00 – 3.30 pm, although it is often 4.00pm before the last women leave. Appointments are made for the other services they provide and staff are available Monday - Friday. Staff also arrange 'trips' and other outings for participants. The layout of the centre is such that the space does not encourage new members to stop for a coffee. Most of the regular participants stay in the kitchen, smoking and talking, while the chairs outside remain empty. Gaining access to the kitchen is by invitation, and not generally welcoming to new people. Access to money advice and other services, which is what brings the majority of people into the centre, is through the seating area. This area, seen more as a corridor, also contains an assortment of toys and a few books and puzzles. Outside there is a children's play area.

The nature of the work undertaken by staff and the way they cross roles and act in many capacities means they are busy most of the day, but they do try and spend at least fifteen minutes or so in the kitchen first thing to have a cup of coffee and a bit of social time together. Once the day gets underway one member of staff has to stay in the main office to deal with visitors and phonecalls and answer queries from people as they pass through.

Funding for the centre is uncertain and of great concern to staff. They have to decide whether to stay with the Council, and accept the restrictions this will impose, or form a company limited by guarantee, or to go for Charitable and/or Trust status. None of these options are straightforward and will inevitably bring changes of some kind. They have a particular concern about the liability of members of the management committee if they choose to leave the Council. In the meantime, Sure Start, from whom they receive some funding, has shifted the emphasis of the centre from being about the women to being about her as a parent. This has already caused some tensions and compromises.

The centre itself is situated within a larger community centre in an inner city area of Bridgetown which has recently been subject to major regeneration. The project had previously been located in an old building across the road and the relocation offered more space although not purpose-built. The staff come from a variety of backgrounds including social services, community work, housing and volunteering, and they work in a collaborative way so that roles are blurred, even where the management is concerned. While the learning offered here is not necessarily of the formal kind associated with 'adult education' they aim to

engender mutual support amongst the participants so that they create their own social networks to support them in the wider society.

6.2.1 Sources of information

The findings in this section are based upon a range of data. There were initial observations which included attending the AGM and joining participants on a visit to the Ipress Studio. These were followed by a feedback session to the managers, from observations and interviews from the larger project. In this I acted as observer, working with a co-researcher from the research project.

A month later I participated in a group interview with four regular members of the centre and this was then followed by interviews with Deirdre and Gail, the managers of the centre, and a Sure Start worker, Clare. The final in depth interviews were with three participants, Tracy, Sarah and Maggie.

6.2.2 The interviewees

Prior to undertaking any interviews I was involved in two observations of participants from the family learning centre. The first was a visit to the Ipress Studio with a group from the FLC working with the community artist, Jane. The second was a few weeks later when I attended the AGM.

There were two formal interviews with the managers. Technically Deirdre is the manager, or coordinator, while Gail is the social worker for the centre, but they choose to work collaboratively and so all interviews were conducted jointly. The first of these interviews was feedback from the funded project and so was led by a co-researcher; it is included here to add to the available data. The second

interview with Deirdre and Gail was in line with the schedule used across the sites with staff. The final interview with staff was with a Sure Start worker, Clare, who, while not part of the centre team, works alongside them supporting under 4s (and their mothers) in the neighbourhood.

Following this the managers from the family learning centre asked individuals who used the centre to volunteer to participate in a group interview. Initially six people agreed to be interviewed but on the day only four turned up. They were Ria, Alice, Dee and Maureen, all white women varying in ages from late twenties to late fifties. There was a crèche provided for the children who accompanied them, paid for by the research project. All the women have children, Dee is Ria's daughter, and both Alice and Ria are grandparents.

The participants who agreed to be interviewed were three women whom the staff had identified as representing a range within the centre. Tracy, who is white is in her early 30s has lived in the area for many years and watched it go through the regeneration process. She is a single parent living with her three children aged sixteen, ten and six years. Sarah, who is also white is in her early twenties and a single parent. Her child is four years old and has just started school. She has lived on the estate for fourteen years and now has a maisonette close to her parents. The final participant is Maggie, who is black and in her late twenties. She moved off the estate but has continued to visit the centre, although less regularly than before. Maggie lives with her partner and two children, aged ten and six years.

6.2.3 What the respondents had to say about adult learners and learning

Deirdre and Gail - managers

As managers Deirdre and Gail work with all the major agencies and feel that maintaining these links is dependent on particular staff and the relationships that are built up. The centre is not able to deal with the males in the community, although some men do come in for the Credit Union. There are so many unemployed in the area that the centre would not cope if it chose to try and support them too.

Staff are mainly responsive to individual needs of participants; sometimes these can be difficult situations requiring a lot of support. Regular participants are protective of the staff and see them as friends; they describe it as a 'kind of family'. New participants usually come into the centre to access one of the services provided (eg money advice, housing advice) rather than to use the drop-in. Many are referred by current members which is one way they can contribute to the centre. Another way to contribute is to be on the management committee where some also have a role, for example, as treasurer. Participants have been left in charge of the drop-in on occasions when staff have been on an away day. Although staff try to encourage participants to welcome new members this does not happen consistently. Some (Tracy, Maggie and others) can be relied upon to do so and managers gave the example of Sarah who supported a very young couple who moved next door to her by bringing them to the centre so that Deirdre and Gail could give them support, while also helping to look after their children

herself. However, staff do feel that most of their work is in response to a need rather than them actively promoting the services on offer to a wider audience.

When thinking about how participants have learnt through being at the centre staff commented:

... to go along with the systems in life in a way that they may not have done before, and maybe that just to react violently at something that goes wrong doesn't always work (p12)

They feel for some individuals the affect of not attending the centre could have been 'catastrophic', and it is obvious that the relationships which are built up are very strong. In some ways they feel that they almost act like a family and they do seem to offer that strong support which is missing in many of the participants' lives. Many participants do move on but, like a family, they are there if needed, and equally they do push people to take on responsibilities, for example becoming treasurer and doing courses. One previous participant returned as a volunteer helper and is now employed on the staff.

Having somewhere to go where people will not judge you is equally important and this has benefits too, 'How much you respect other people I think rubs off on people as well, doesn't it?' (p13). Deirdre and Gail state that attending the centre facilitates increased confidence, an ability to select activities for themselves, to make choices and to see things through for the participants. They gave the example of participants wanting a children's clothes sale and staff suggested they organised it themselves, which they did. Gail feels that the women have a lot of skills which they can use and says, 'I think we do hold their hands too much really' (p16), while acknowledging that some still need lots of support. When talking about participants becoming independent they feel that this does occur but is

often very subtle. Initially participants may need a great deal of support in dealing with outside agencies for example, and workers will do most of the liaising and acting on their behalf. Gradually, staff encourage more involvement by the individual until they are able to act on their own. Some still use the centre as a place to make phone calls or use the photocopier, but no longer require staff to do this for them. Others will need more on-going support and require an advocate, especially where there are mental health issues involved. They give as an example a women who attends regular hospital appointments, accompanied by Gail, who acts as a buffer between the health professional who 'puts her down' and the patient. Gail is able to help this women structure what she wants to get out of appointments and has given her a way of dealing with the situation. Sometimes they have to 'smooth the way' with another agency:

...some people do not present well, need to get them 'on side', understand where that person's coming from so they don't treat her with disdain (p16)

In the early days of the project they were sited elsewhere in the community, in a flat, with a brief of 'family support'. They had an open door policy and people would call in for a cup of coffee alongside housing advice. This, they felt, was the essence of the project at the time, but are now not so sure. The drop-in still offers participants, mutual support, friendship and a place to go but many of the participants do not need to access the help provided by the professionals. They do feel, however, that if the drop-in were not there then the centre would become a more 'formal' provider of mother and toddler groups and the whole emphasis would shift. Although the drop-in is very demanding on time it does give staff an opportunity to identify the needs of participants and they are able to manage this in a very supportive way.

During the time of the research and numerous visits to the centre it was apparent that most of the regular participants were white women, although some people from other cultures did visit the Credit Union and housing support, they did not call into the drop-in. Deirdre and Gail feel that while this is so then the needs of white women will dominate within the centre itself. Staff know that their participants do not reflect the local community and try to be as supportive as they can, for example, they are aware of issues where certain shops have refused to accept the tokens provided to asylum seekers instead of money, and have done some work locally to get these accepted. However, staff have some concerns about encouraging women from other cultures into the centre because they may not be well supported by the other participants and feel they need a 'key player' from the Black or Asian community to get into the 'kitchen clique'. Staff are fully aware that investing time welcoming new visitors means they are more likely to return but this is time-consuming. They have tried to use a 'buddy' system to encourage new participants into the centre but feel that the lack of resource to enable staff to do more in the way of actively seeking out women who need support is a major factor. Sometimes the staff do not agree on a particular course of action but decisions will be taken collaboratively and after much discussion and thought. Unlike other more hierarchical environments it is not always the wishes of the manager which are enacted. Other agencies they work with include: domestic violence workers, victim support, Sure Start, Police, Solicitors, National Children's Homes (NCH) housing, City Mission, Churches, Benefits Agency, Psychiatric hospital, schools and community arts.

Often participants will arrive earlier than the opening time of 12.00, and those who come early often are the last to go. No day is the same with women arriving and just wanting to talk or they may be extremely unhappy and need lots of support. Although the managers do not spend all the time in the drop-in they say they find it hard to concentrate on other things when it is open, even if it is quiet. Trips out tend to be in the afternoon when participants will go out with one of the workers and afternoons are also when most of the appointments are made.

Some participants have gone to larger Sure Start meetings and are now more confident about speaking out at these and the centre is regularly contacted by the media for a volunteer to quote on issues, especially which might impact on single parents. Many participants are on the management committee and they can be heavily involved in making decisions, for example whether to buy a washing machine or digital camera for the centre. A few years ago staff decided they needed a lunch hour and proposed that the drop-in should start an hour later, at 1.00pm. Participants vetoed this proposal, through the management committee, and it was dropped. One of the workers organises trips out and is the regular minibus driver. While participants could organise these (despite insurance issues) they do not do so and the managers wonder if this would put pressure on the others to join in while they really want somewhere to come and moan, cry, sit quietly, and so on.

It is possible that participants are learning tolerance as staff feel they 'model' this which seems to encourage participants to act more tolerantly themselves, but also allows for them to 'throw a little fit and not feel that we're going to reject them'. In

some ways participants already show significant tolerance such as that illustrated when a woman was stealing from the centre and the management committee discussed this and, because they did not want to ban her from the centre, agreed that one of the other participants would talk to her and explain this was unacceptable. They were less tolerant of a woman who smelt and would try and 'rile staff' about her presence. Staff report that some participants can be quite 'stormy' but they are able to obey the rules (no fighting, don't judge others, etc) and while this may be due to age and maturity it is likely that the centre has been influential in modifying their behaviour.

Sarah, one of my case study participants, is a relatively new participant who brought along her son to Wrigglers⁷. He was a difficult child but since he has gone to school he seems to have settled. Sarah is now keen to get involved in everything going, and there is plenty for her to access. Staff feel the centre gives participants a space to talk and get help, and they know what is available should anything else crop up in their lives. Taking away the underlying worry seems to be significant. There is one participant who has had an extremely hard life and who gets quite violent and destroys things when she is worried. This can seem very threatening. While in her own flat this takes the form of physical violence but within the centre it is mostly verbal. Once she has 'let go' she will calm down. Other participants have given her lots of support and friendship and staff feel she is now able to handle situations much better than before although they are still concerned about her. They feel that her life would have been different without the centre to go to and Deirdre says:

...it's the same for every individual, if you've got a good friend who doesn't judge you and you know is supportive then that can make a big difference. (Deirdre p12)

Many previous participants have gone into paid work over the years and several current participants take IT courses and art classes, although the latter tends to be more for pleasure than to help find employment. Staff keep statistics, for example, numbers of people accessing the centre and have sheets which they complete for everyone to whom they give advice. These statistics are presented at the AGM and show that during 2000-01 there were 5817 visitors to the drop-in which was open for 192 days, a total of 7016 people visited the centre of whom approximately three fifths were female, but these statistics include children and may therefore be misleading. It should be noted that they do not record the number of visits made by individuals, but purely by footfall through the centre, and this is something they hope to address in the future.

Talking about successful outcomes is complex as, while return to the drop-in would be seen as a success, return to money or housing advice may mean that previous advice had not been effective, or it could mean that through becoming a '*powerful learner*' they are able to seek help over other issues. Similarly with women who seek domestic violence support, they are frequently relocated out of the area, and are therefore 'lost' to the centre.

It is interesting that Deirdre and Gail think that they may be perceived as 'stubborn' by other managers of more formal provision in Bridgetown and they acknowledge that there are tensions for them balancing being both worker and manager, but ultimately the needs of participants is paramount. About eighteen months ago they were involved in a BVSC (Bridgetown Voluntary Service Council) project where they had a range of standards, some of which are very relevant to

them, and drew up guidelines aimed at improving quality. There was also funding available as part of this project from which they bought their computer. Their response to 'who are you accountable to?' was somewhat inevitably influenced by funding issues. They see they have a responsibility to Bridgetown, to Sure Start and to Social Services particularly, but they feel the main people are the participants and each other. They feel that everyone who works and attends the centre wants the same thing.

Deirdre and Gail talked about Maggie (also one of my case study participants) and how she had changed through coming to the centre:

...when she first used to come in here, she would tell you herself, she used to just not be able to speak, and just used to cry, just couldn't speak because she was so upset. She hardly ever comes in now because in most of her life she's together. But every so often she comes back. (Gail p19)

While they acknowledge that they may have played a part in her recovery, Deirdre makes the point that they only help individuals access their own strengths to pull them through by helping them believe in themselves:

I think we got her over a difficult time ... the resources that they've got were the resources they had all along really, but you know people need, sometimes need, just that bit of extra support to keep themselves in the balance as it were and I think we probably helped with that. (Deirdre p19)

As Gail says, 'a person has more than one difficult time in their lives, so people might come back' (p20) but equally, helping one individual may actually conflict with helping others, and this is a permanent tension for staff.

Clare – a Sure Start worker

Sure Start is marketed as an information and advice service with contact with the community. As part of her role Clare has contact with many agencies across Bridgetown and in the local community. She visits the centre about twice a week

with women who are going for advice and will look after the children for them while they talk to an advisor, or will go and act as an advocate for them. She has recommended Wrigglers to her families and says that this appears to draw women and children in to the centre, but that the drop-in seems fairly 'closed' to new people. Clare notes that crèche provision is very expensive and often the various providers of services and activities overlook this when laying on courses and so on. While she would like to use the centre more for her families she comments:

They have got to decide what they are offering. I think what they are offering now is fine for the mums that use it, but it's not formal. There is no formal structure to the sessions that I have noticed. The mums tend to stand in the kitchen where they natter and smoke and the children just potter around outside. I think that is fine for the families they support and I am sure for those families it's probably very important, but if they want to expand on that, I think they perhaps need to liaise with us with what they would like us to say they are offering really, and if they offer that, its going to be more structured (Clare, p10)

The group interviewees

The group interviewees were unanimous in saying that the FLC gave them a place to go (the drop-in) and got them out of the house. They had all suffered from depression at varying times and being able to go and meet with other women who understood how they felt was crucial. Apart from meeting with others in similar situations they also enjoyed the shopping trips (costing a token 50p for transport), and other visits, such as to the Ipcress Studio in Bridgetown, and some had been on one or more of the holidays to the seaside. As well as social space and trips out, the centre also offers practical support and they listed: Credit Union⁸, money advice, housing issues, or use of the phone and photocopier as some of the help they could receive. Most had heard about the centre by word of mouth, one had a neighbour who attended and another knew the crèche worker so went to have a

coffee with her at the centre. They had tried to bring other people along to the centre but had found some people resistant, although they did acknowledge that it can be hard to 'get in', but when in with people it becomes all right. They felt it was important to make new people feel welcome and to be present when they attended, especially for the first time.

Having the centre there for them had given a purpose to the day. One interviewee said that she no longer stuttered or stammered as much when talking and can now relate to others. Another reported that the centre had been able to help her mother too, with a housing problem, and one said that it 'took the pressure off' as formal letters from the council now went to one of the workers and not directly to her. The group thought there was a wide variety of individuals who used the centre and that everyone got on well. Although there can be a lot of children around there is never any conflict about them amongst the women. Alice reported that although her own children had never been to the seaside her grandchildren had done so as they had been able to go with her on the holiday. They felt that the staff all 'pulled together' and are there for the women, even giving home numbers on occasions. They felt staff had no airs and graces. Regarding the work at the Ipccress with the community arts worker one of the group thought it would be good for her kids to go there and intended to take them.

Talking about their roles within the centre it was apparent that several were on the management committee and are involved in decision-making, for example, when deciding if a worker should receive a pay rise. One had been treasurer and, although she had attended a one-day training session, felt she picked most of it

up as she went along. Another group member has now taken on this role and she was commiserating saying 'it has to be done' and you will be glad when the year is over'. They felt that any problems are sorted out between the women themselves. They were not very aware of the wider community outside the FLC although they said that the community centre does invite them to things on occasions. They thought Sure Start was probably the only professional team who would refer people to the drop-in. Regarding what they have learnt the women thought they could now communicate where they would not have done previously, that the staff trust them and that it is nice to have cake on birthdays! An important factor for them was the fact that they know everybody at the drop-in, and this familiarity gave a kind of security.

Observations of the Ipcress Studio visit

This visit was seen as both a social occasion and as a challenge. Jane, the community artist who worked with the group, made participants think, and while there was no direct pressure to do the activities she gave lots of encouragement which was then also demonstrated by other group members. Jane made the point that art is about everyday life and people, it is all about interpretation and it is 'ok to disagree'. She pushed the boundaries of activities the group may have been involved in previously (such as getting participants to talk on video) but also showed that art is not just for 'other people'. She was actively encouraging them to critique the work and also listen to how other people feel and react.

Interview with Sarah

Sarah thinks the area has gone down over the fourteen years she has lived there because of an increase in crime, especially shootings and robberies. Many people have moved out, including her friends, some of whom have moved out of Bridgetown altogether. She thinks that certain aspects of the area have improved such as Sure Start and the Ledworth Library and this is because they have places for children and more space. She has stayed because her parents live nearby and have poor health, both left work on ill health grounds and her father is now pretty much housebound. Her brother, who works locally in a factory, still lives with his parents. Sarah has a four year old son who has just started school and does not have much contact with his father but says she 'gets agro off him and his family'. She currently lives in a maisonette which was done up three or four years ago and now has central heating. She has extended family in Ireland and goes there each year.

Once her friends from school had moved out of the area she felt she had no one to talk to and became very withdrawn. She came to the centre via the Wrigglers group, which she saw advertised on the window, and having rung up about it decided to go along with her son. After the group she went down to the drop-in and although says she did not talk much for the first few weeks she now gets on all right with everyone there:

It is just that they are really easy to get on with here, even the staff as well. If you've got a problem you can just come and talk to them about it, they will help you out. (Sarah p4)

Sarah comes to the centre most days the drop-in is open and joins in whatever activities she can. She mentions 'having a laugh with the staff' and is happy to sit in the kitchen 'having a fag' with the other participants. She does say that sometimes it is boring, but she gets fed up and depressed staying at home. On Wednesdays, when the drop-in is closed, she helps out at the credit union at the school. She goes on the shopping trips and in September she went on the holiday to Dorset with the centre. Sarah has two or three good friends who she also sees outside the centre. She has recently joined the management committee, which meets every few weeks, and would like to have a role on this eventually. She does agree that it can be quite hard for new people to join in with regular participants and mentions how they have just sat on the chairs and not ventured into the kitchen with the regulars:

There are a lot of new ones that have come in and they have just sat out there, they haven't gone near the kitchen. (Sarah p27)

but has no suggestions as to how this could be achieved, despite Deirdre and Gail trying to encourage others to sit outside to chat.

Sarah feels that she has learnt who can be trusted and who not to trust through coming to the centre. She would find it hard to replace the support she gets from other participants and staff if the centre were not there. Her mother has been on some of the trips with her and she personally has benefited from the money advice particularly. Despite the presence of after school clubs in the area she prefers to collect her son from school herself and most evenings too are devoted to him, but occasionally she will go out with some 'mates' to the pubs and clubs in Bridgetown. She is currently waiting to hear from Sure Start about whether she has got a place on a computer course and has also been in contact with a local

FE College about returning to complete her NVQ II in Childcare which she gave up when she became pregnant. She hopes to return to this on a part-time basis, three days a week and hopes also to receive Sure Start funding for this course.

An important factor about the centre to her is:

...the trust of the staff, because anything you tell them you know it is not going to go any further. (Sarah p7)

When at school Sarah excelled at sports and was in all the clubs and teams, where they won a lot of trophies. She also liked IT classes because it was 'better than writing all the time'. She got 6⁹ good GCSE grades (As and Bs) but did not continue to A levels because she did not want to fail. It was her own choice to leave after her exams, the school wanted her to stay on but she did not feel able to do so. All her friends also left and went on to college and Sarah says she has no regrets about her decision. When in the fourth year at school Sarah had truanted because she was bullied:

They'd be on the same bus as me in the morning and they would start calling me names on the bus and that and when we got to the gates at school they would start punching me and pulling my hair and that. The one girl pushed me down the stairs in school. (Sarah p19)

Although her mother went up to the school 'several times; to try and sort things out it did not help and Sarah feels there was a lack of support from the school.

However, she now feels that she would react differently:

Back then I'd never talk to anybody and I think that is why it happened and I just let them do it to me but now, if it happened now, I would just put a stop to it straight away. (Sarah, p20)

After school Sarah would go home and get on with her homework. She did not socialise much, even at weekends, preferring to stay at home. No one told her she had to but she used to tell herself 'I've got to do it, got to' and so she worked

hard. Sarah says that her parents were supportive of her education and attended parents' evenings. She too is showing an interest in her son's education and goes to the school daily and speaks to staff. She has offered to go on trips to help out. Sarah reinforces work they have done with her son at school, such as writing his name and reading, and they watch TV together. Her family will usually baby-sit for her and she also has a friend who has children of her own with whom she swaps baby-sitting.

Quite recently Sarah offered to do some decorating for her parents. She had never tackled anything like this before but decided to 'have a go'. She was pleased with the finished result. She cooks, especially Sunday roasts and makes cakes; takes her son swimming and is planning on getting him lessons soon. Her brother takes him to football each week and they make regular trips to the park. Sarah would like to take up judo or karate but she is restricted, partly because there are no courses locally, partly because of finding a babysitter and also because, particularly during the winter months, she suffers badly from asthma. Her son also has asthma (as does his father) and has frequent attacks which require hospitalisation. Staff at the centre suggested she applied for disability allowance plus she got a parental allowance and other benefits too. She is currently sorting out the possibility of having a nebuliser at home so that he does not have to go to hospital as often.

Sarah says she does not see herself as someone who is still learning. Her ideal job, which her family would encourage, would be as a nursery nurse and yet she is actively seeking out courses and takes advantage of new opportunities as they

arise. She also said that she would like to think she may be Chair of the management committee one day in the future, which seems to run counter to her view of someone who has stopped learning. I suspect this is more that she views learning as formal schooling and further or higher education rather than the more informal learning she is currently involved in. There is little doubt that her lack of confidence at 16 affected her life choices at that time and that the experience of being pregnant and having her son and then joining the centre and meeting women with whom she could identify, has been very empowering.

Interview with Tracy

Tracy has lived in the area for sixteen years and feels it has gone 'downhill' in the last six years, describing the estate as 'horrendous':

When we all lived in the old flats before the houses were built, everyone was on the same level because you all had the same amount of money and now we've got these houses, some people think they are better than others and this estate is horrendous. The children, not my children, the children on this estate are out to 10.30 pm, 11.00 pm at night kicking balls around, smashing bottles, drawing on walls, being abusive with their mouths and I have to live with a certain neighbour that I do not get on with again, like last year, and she verbally abuses my daughter and her children do as well and I have to live with that. (Tracy p1)

She feels strongly that children should show respect for people and tries hard to ensure her own children understand this but some parents, she says, cannot be approached about their children's behaviour. Although Tracy speaks strongly about not being intimidated in the following extract:

They're not taking nothing off me I don't care who they are, no way. I walk up the road and I just walk straight past them, if they don't like it, tough, but I'm having no one take nothing off me. (Tracy, p13)

she obviously *does* feel concern as she tries not to go out in the dark. Tracy has no family living in the area, her step-dad and sisters all live in Bilton and she only sees them if she goes to visit. Closer to home she has her good friend Janet, they

look after each other, and two other close friends who she can talk to about things. 'I get a lot of support because I give a lot of support' (Tracy, p2). Trust is very important to her and she mentions this frequently during the interview and she sees it very much as a two way process; trust has to be earned.

Tracy fills her time with activities. She attends an internet class, and art class and is learning the saxophone (all at the community centre); she helps Janet out as she is nearly blind now through glaucoma and does her shopping for her, in return Janet will baby sit for her. She also attends an aerobics class, but has to take her younger children with her as there is no crèche. Her children, all girls, are aged sixteen, ten and six years old and take up a lot of her time. She says she is too busy to work once she has looked after her own house and helped out her friends. She enjoys mixing with a variety of people of different ages and cultures. Early in the year Tracy lost her mother whom she used to visit three or four times a week. This had led to her becoming very depressed and some days says she cannot go out, so Janet comes and keeps her company.

She would like to learn judo and karate for self-defence and take her girls along too, but it is not run at the community centre and she will not travel in winter evenings:

...it is the young ones, the youths, the ones who like to hang around at night with the hoods on, they make you not want to go out to the shops and things and if you've got jewellery on you feel like you've got to hide it and stuff like that. (Tracy, p4)

Tracy has been attending the centre since the project began. Her sister took her along when she was first depressed, which followed the birth of her first daughter

when she was eighteen, and had recently moved to Ledworth. It took her four months before she would speak at the centre. She says that it is friendly and helpful if you need advice, but the drop-in is not as friendly as it should be because of the atmosphere which, when pushed, she defined as:

Ignorance and the looks and things like that... Not like oh all right, how are you and all that stuff. They just look at you. I don't know it is really hard. You know when you can feel the vibes and that's what I pick up and I don't like it and if I was a new person walking in I wouldn't go in there unless one of the staff were in there. (Tracy p6)

A few years ago Tracy and another participant tried to do something about getting more women into the centre:

...we went out of our way, me and her did, to go all around Ledworth with a questionnaire, knocking doors and going in and asking people, did they know about the centre? Did they know what facilities were available to them? and why if they did know about it why didn't they come in? Most of them were single parents probably suffering with depression so it's hard for them to just come out on their own, because I know what that is like. (Tracy, p5)

She also feels that the situation for those who do not have English as a first language is even harder and tries to be very welcoming to anyone who she feels is lacking support. Tracy has communicated her concerns to staff about certain participants and appreciates that banning them is not a solution, but stays away from the drop-in herself now unless there is something specific going on. Tracy shows a willingness to participate in joint activities and thinks they should be doing more fundraising, following courses together and putting on plays for the children, but says that there is a lack of interest from other participants. She sees them as just sitting in the kitchen, being depressed, while her own solution is to keep herself occupied.

Tracy's childhood was seriously affected when her parents split up and she and her twelve year old sister were left to run the household:

...mum left home when I was ten so there was me and my sister and my dad and from the age of ten we had to be like cooking, cleaning, shopping and that was it and we didn't have time. Dad never showed, no offence to him because he wasn't very well, he never like said to us you must do this and you must do that, he never came to parents evening so no I didn't have a really good childhood actually, that's why I'm trying to make it better now myself. (Tracy, p7)

She now feels she wants to make up for her lack of a happy childhood and describes herself as not liking having to grow up, she likes being like a child and doing 'drawing and stuff and playing with toys and things like that' (p8). It has also affected how she is with her own children:

...having a sixteen year old daughter, she needs different support than the other two younger ones, so I took her out for a drink and we had a chat and that. She wants to leave home and move into a student flat and I don't want her to because she is too young, so I've explained all that to her so she is not moving out now. It is ever so hard. (Tracy, p10)

Tracy is adamant that she will 'always support' her children and has obviously been influenced by her own experiences as a child. She is also prepared to make tough decisions and stand by them:

She's not leaving home, she's too young. Sixteen is too young. When she's eighteen she can do what she likes, I've told her. No way, not sixteen. I'm having none of it. (Tracy, p12)

However, she does feel that she has let her children down by not challenging effectively certain neighbours who cause them problems. Her life experiences have also given her a reason to distrust most men:

A man shouldn't make you not want to do what you want to do and if they do stop you from doing what you want to do you should get rid of them. It has got nothing to do with them what you want to do and they should bloody well support you and if they don't they're no use. (Tracy, p12)

and she remarks that her mum had a 'terrible time' with her dad. For the first year after her mother left they had no contact but then she and her sister started seeing her but had to keep this secret from their father. He would not miss an opportunity to tell them what he would do to their mother if he caught up with her, so there was a lot of pressure put on her during this time. It was only when her

father died that she discovered he had a mental illness and is now sorry for the way she 'played him up' being a wild child and selfish:

Being depressed is like, well it's a mental illness and it can stop you doing lots of things that you don't realise. (Tracy, p11)

Tracy is developing her internet skills but finds it hard. She says she needs to learn so that she can help her children. Her art classes give her a lot of pleasure and she gets a lot of support from other members of the group:

It's not the learning, it's the release of all the stresses of life. That's the whole meaning of having the class because a lot of the women that come to that class have family problems like I did, depression and stuff and once you get there it's a nice group of women and we all support each other and we don't think about nothing depressing, we just have a nice time and do art and it's like getting something for yourself instead for everyone else and that's nice, you get a lot of pride out of your work and that's nice, I like that. (Tracy, p10)

She describes herself as 'a bit wild, but I'm very mature' (p 13) and says this has enabled her to give her children a good grounding:

...it's nice because if I had stayed the way I was when I was younger I wouldn't have been able to give the kids the knowledge of what I know now and how to behave and how to mix with people and things like that. I wouldn't have been able to do that. (Tracy, p13)

When younger Tracy says that she was too shy to enjoy communicating, but now she feels confident and sure of herself. She will go up to the Community Centre and ask what is going on, she knows people and they know her:

...now I'll do anything for anybody and talk to anybody. It don't matter if they are not dressed very nicely, in other words if they're a tramp, I still talk to them, it doesn't matter to me what you're like as long as you're a nice person, I'll have time for you. (Tracy, p10)

She gets her encouragement, she says, from herself, it is internal, but she does enjoy the reinforcement of positive feedback from others:

If you were hanging around and you didn't have no one to tell, I can't see what enjoyment you get out of it because you are not getting any feed back on things you do, so it's nice to be able to go out there and say I do this, that and the other and get something back (Tracy, p11)

Tracy is intolerant of those who she perceives do not help themselves. She is also critical of her sisters for the way they have abandoned her to find her own way and for their own lack of motivation:

I'm the only one who has got any get up and go in my family out of my two sisters and myself. They don't do nothing. All the things I've done and lost I don't know say six years, them two are older than me and they haven't done any of it what I've done, nothing and I'm the youngest as well. So it's like they haven't showed me what to do, I've done it on my own back so I can't understand them, I think they are really boring myself. (Tracy, p12)

Tracy also believes she is still learning and says, 'Yeah, no one ever stops learning. You learn something every day,' and 'when younger you think you know everything, but you don't. (p15). She still has ambitions including trying horse riding, go-karting and learning to drive, but finding a driving instructor in whom she has confidence is something she worries about. She has recently overcome a lifelong fear of the dentist, and her step-father supported her through this process. Tracy also feels she has taught her children manners and respect, to be nice to be and polite and helpful. She has always helped them with homework but cannot help them with maths, which she finds difficult herself. Regarding the wider community, Tracy would like to help children living in care; she is worried about abuse and feels that the professionals ignore too much that goes on. She has thought about becoming a social worker but feels that she would want to do it 'her own way' and not just follow procedures.

Her school life was difficult as she always had second-hand clothes and only the Asian girls would play with her as the white girls were too snobby. No one had told either her or her sister the 'right way to be', she feels she had a 'rough and wild' upbringing and this disadvantaged her. At secondary school she hung

around with the boys because she was 'wild and she was sad' (p17) and felt the girls did not support her. She hated games and never got picked when choosing teams. She loved art and English and 'wagged' other lessons. The English and art teachers were supportive because they knew about her home life and did not put pressure on her. This was in contrast to the French teacher who showed her up in front of the class regarding her homework. She did not see herself as a good learner at school because she was always thinking about her mum and household stuff. Tracy had to tell staff about any problems at home, and feels they may not have believed her because it was not authenticated by an adult. There was therefore no support from her family throughout her schooling which is in direct contrast to the way she supports her own children, going into school as a voluntary helper.

Within the centre Tracy says that the activities are listed on a monthly sheet and they have regular meetings to discuss what they might do, but there is a lethargy about the place. She feels that some of the other participants just go for the 'freebies' and do not contribute. The staff, in contrast, are all lovely. The visits to the Ipcress Studio are really special to Tracy. She comments on the friendliness of Jane, the community artist, who greets them with a 'big love' and makes them feel really special.

She is on the management committee and at the next meeting intends to say again that, in her opinion, they need to attract new people in to the centre. There are many isolated women around who would benefit, and she is prepared to go and knock on doors to get them in. From her calculations there are about sixty

people who regularly access the advice at the centre and are potential users of the drop-in. They could come and sit and have a cup of coffee but do not currently use it. She is passionate about the need for women to support other women, but she feels you also need to be able to trust them and she can only trust certain other participants. When her children were little she used to take them up to the centre regularly and she feels that this helped them socialise and prepare for nursery and school. It is very important to her that the centre is there but she is frustrated by the lack of women using it. She is determined to stay involved and reach these other women. Her future aspirations include more use of the internet and in creating leaflets and booklets for people. She is also still interested in social work, saying that she likes doing things for others and gets a lot of satisfaction from doing so.

Interview with Maggie

Maggie moved to Ledworth when she was six because her mother was going through a divorce and needed to move. They got a maisonette and moved in. Her mother knew people in the area from the past, and this influenced her choice. Her uncle also came to live with them which meant Maggie and her younger brother shared a room. Her uncle was, and still is, a steadying influence in her life and she remembers him helping out at their after school club when she was a child.

Maggie's childhood was full of activity, most of which revolved around Ledworth and the community. She attended the after-school club, the church, she did tap and ballet and karate at the community centre, which has been refurbished since

she attended it as a child. She has fond memories of these times, reminiscing about jumble sales at the local church and such:

Yes, where you find three brown cardigans, who buys brown cardigans? and then we ended up wearing tights and stuff light that, brown tights with my little purple shoes..... oh gosh! (Maggie, p3)

During her childhood Maggie was not allowed to go to town and her mother did not really let them go out alone that much. However, she did take them out herself to places like the central library, the cinema and the art and science museums. When they were older she encouraged them to continue to visit these places independently, which Maggie did. She says that her mother offered experiences which 'opened your mind to what you liked and what you didn't like ' (Maggie, p5).

At school Maggie enjoyed English and particularly liked Shakespeare and Dickens. She also liked sport and was keen on running, track events and badminton. She got GCSEs but not Maths and English at C or above that she needed to become a teacher, and she has since retaken these. Her home life at the time was disrupted by the presence of her cousins who moved in with them. Having a household of seven was not conducive to studying and she feels that without the understanding of one of the teachers she might not have got through school. Although Maggie appreciates why her mother invested in broadening the experiences of her childhood she does feel that this has given her some problems sticking at any one thing in her life.

Maggie was nine when she first went to Jamaica where she met her grandmother and her great grandmother, who was in her early seventies at the time. Her grandmother went out to look after her great grandmother years later and more recently her mother went to look after her grandmother, taking Maggie's youngest

brother with her. Maggie hopes she does not have to go to look after her mother, although she would maybe like to go and teach in Jamaica sometime in the future, despite the problems this might cause:

I might end up going to Jamaica to teach. I think the reason for me pursuing an academic career is so that I can join my mum. If I think about it deep, deep, deep and I know there are lots of complications like the kids might not want to go and [her partner] probably won't want me to go and little things like that, but it's something that I want to do or it's something that I want to do in the future. (Maggie, p18)

Most of her extended family moved to Mapleton or to London and her brother now lives in Derby. Maggie is determined that her own children have a good start in life. Her son, is arty and quite like her, she says he is his own person and 'if he asks for something it's usually because he really wants it, not because someone else has it' (Maggie, p25). Her daughter she describes as 'lovable', but more demanding and susceptible to peer pressure. She taught them both to write their names before they went to school and she reads daily to them. They have regular fun outings on Mondays after school to a Wackey Warehouse, McDonalds or the cinema, for instance. She is trying to teach them about spontaneity but is also very open with them about what funds are available and about making decisions:

We parked and we went to see Harry Potter and that was a kind of a whim thing. We sat down and watched it and thoroughly enjoyed it. I always state how much money we've got to spend. I just think that is important, that we are not going to overstep this limit because I had £20.00. I said that we've got to pay in and we've got to pay parking, that's two main things and food will have to come second and we actually paid in, roughly kind of like said okay about £3 for parking and we got a lot of food because there were refills because we went on a Monday. (Maggie, p22)

Maggie also encourages her children to speak out, which sometimes causes conflict with other family members. She says that she and her partner have very different parenting styles but she prefers to be very direct and expects the same in return. She will tell her children to 'fix your face or have a cry' (Maggie, p7), while

he will stand by and say nothing. Maggie has strong views about what being a good parent is about, but acknowledges that it is not necessarily something that everyone finds easy:

That's probably the one thing that we argue about, the fact that he doesn't spend quality time with them, but it's hard to do something that you haven't been taught how to do. He's a complete comedian, but he's not very good at expressing himself. He really isn't. (Maggie, p7)

Maggie has been involved in the centre for about six years although she does not go there as much now, especially since she has moved. She feels that she does not need the support as much as in the early days, but also her life is now so busy that she cannot find the time. However, she does want to put something back and tries to do as much as possible to contribute, commenting that you 'appreciate places once you contribute to them' (p27). She is on the management committee and tries to get to meetings whenever she can and also still goes on the trips on occasions, and has learnt to find her way around places by paying close attention when they are out. When she does get there everyone is glad to see her, and there is no pressure. She says that she gauges her own progress by seeing others at the centre and appreciates how hard it is to approach others when you are depressed, and that getting it right is not always easy:

...it's just that when people first come they [other participants] think you need time, and sometimes if you approach somebody and they are not ready to be approached you kind of scare them away. (Maggie, p27)

She feels that the best support to new participants is that existing people open themselves up and show their vulnerabilities then they can see that they are not alone. 'I think if you really want to help yourself you have to humble yourself' (Maggie, p26). But she suggests that some regular participants may have

forgotten what it was like when they were very low. Maggie feels the centre has given her confidence and is keen to support others going through difficult times:

I think just being here, I think there are actually people here who are not confident, because you look at everybody else and you think oh they are really confident but when you come here you realise that's not reality, a lot of people are unhappy. A lot of people are not content. A lot of people do feel trapped. A lot of people do feel depressed. But if you get help from somewhere you kind of always remember that help. You never ever forget. What you're going through, that pain lessens, but you never forget the help you had. Even if you wanted to forget, you couldn't and it kind of drives you to do the same thing...It's like a domino affect. (Maggie, p24)

Maggie's partner still has some issues with the centre as it reminds him of the bad times, her depression and his resulting problem with alcohol, but he appreciates how important it is to her and accepts that it is still part of her life, albeit a reducing one. Maggie describes it as a 'safety-net'.

Maggie still enjoys visiting the library and her passion is collecting books she buys in second-hand bookshops. Her son is also a keen reader and reads to his sister and does her homework reading with her. Maggie still reads to them both at bedtime, just as her own mother read to her and her brother. She chooses stories that she thinks will 'open their eyes'. Maggie believes in talking through issues with her children and uses books to support some of these discussions and uses the experiences in books to support their own lives, such as when the hamster died.

Maggie is currently following a course in Early Childhood Studies which is a three-year part-time course at university. She says that her mother is her 'driving force' because she always believes in her, although Maggie herself had hoped that she would have had her degree by now and well on the way to qualifying as a primary

teacher. She appreciates that her mother invested a lot in her and wants to do the same for her own children. Maggie feels that the key to learning is being interested and, while she likes a challenge, not too much pressure. Last year, when she had some difficulties on her course, a teacher who she was placed with urged her not to give up, saying that she 'has what it takes' and this was influential in her continuing.

When she was about eighteen Maggie taught her younger brother to read and she regularly supports two of her friends' children with their homework, particularly in Maths and Science, feeling that she is able to help them 'understand the questions'. Maggie is happy to get support from her son who is helping her get to grips with some newer technologies such as the internet and TV interactive. She feels she has also learnt from her partner through supporting him with his studies and uses this learning in her own work. Maggie says she has always been learning something since she has been with her partner and this work ethic has influenced him too:

...he's just realising the value of it and what kind of rewards it brings and whatever, just now. He actually said I can see why you study now. It's not the same as working (Maggie, p16)

Maggie has different circles of people she socialises with. Her friends see her as 'brainy' but she says this is just because she can think and make connections quite quickly. She likes to do practical things while they tend to prefer being 'girly', but she has done some joint projects with her one friend such as when they decorated her lounge. Maggie thinks that you lead by example and feels that she encourages her children but does not push them. It is significant that she feels her

own mother's lack of experience of further education meant that she did not understand the pressures involved in formal education:

...she was slightly pushy with it, whereas I'm kind of 'yes do your homework' but I'm a lot more laid back than my mum because I'm going through it and I know what the stress is. (Maggie, p12)

and she does not want to do this to her own children. Nevertheless, education is very important to her and she says:

If you are educated, nobody can ever take that away from you. You can forget things but the ground work is already there, it's already imbedded somewhere. (Maggie, p12)

Maggie gets support from her aunt who is a teacher who lives locally in an all-female household of five daughters and two granddaughters. Maggie's one friend, she says, also gives her support by believing in her but she sometimes doubts herself when she compares herself to the other younger students. Maggie is a qualified silver service waitress and currently works five hours a week. She originally qualified as a chef but did not like working in kitchens. When she left school at sixteen she did not know what else to do. Even though she has only been in her current job for a few months she has already been team leader on several occasions so she thinks they must be pleased with her. Maggie wrote a children's book for her son called 'I want to be an Adult' but although people at the centre thought she should try and publish it she has not yet had the confidence to do so.

One day a week is fiercely protected as a day for herself. She calls it her pampering day and she does 'steam and sauna' and has counselling. After five attempts she passed her driving test which has given her independence which

she values. She regrets that her mother has not seen her daughter for five years since they last went to Jamaica, but is generally very happy with her life.

The teacher at her school who supported her during her adolescent years made a significant impact on her and she feels she has modelled her own teaching style on his way of turning negatives into positives. There is also a tutor on her course who she admires for being very accommodating, but assertive, not soft. Another tutor is very confident and animated which she finds highly effective. Maggie says that she is at her children's school '24/7' and knows all the staff. This school is also her placement school and so she has worked with other teachers there and is included in 'all their meals' and visits to the pub. One of her favourite things is helping with 'maths week' when they have family quizzes and things. She values this camaraderie and likes feeling involved. But she does sometimes feel isolated by going to university and then the centre gives her an overlap between her lives, and gives a boost to her confidence.

6.2.4 Overview of findings in FLC

A clear analytical outcome from these interviews is the importance of support, especially from staff and from the other women at the centre. This support is usually based on some sort of life crisis such as domestic violence, financial problems, housing issues, which frequently manifests itself in depression. The workers believe that they are helping the women to access their own internal resources which they may not realize that they have. Workers also feel that they are mainly reactive to situations and lack of resources prevents them being more proactive in the community. Trust between staff and the women is fundamental to the family learning centre and it is important to the women that others around

them can identify with their problems and issues and that the centre is a safe environment for them.

Some of the women think that the centre offers unique support which could not be replaced; it helps them build up networks and contacts so that they can access other services and facilities. Sarah, who as a child at school, had become a 'victim', had flourished in the supportive atmosphere of the centre and was keen to establish herself in the workforce and give her son a good start to life. Her parents had supported her throughout and still play a large part in her life giving her a firm basis from which to build. In contrast Tracy had a disrupted childhood and, from an early age, had acted pretty much independently of her family, seeing them in largely negative terms. Her past experiences have also given her a poor opinion of most men, and she organizes her life so that she can function without much contact with them, other than her boyfriend who is allowed into her life, but strictly on her terms. Maggie had close family support while growing up and has invested in her own family in the same way, although including an element of fun which she thinks was missing from her own experiences. She is very honest with her own children, encouraging them to make decisions, which is different to Tracy who is protecting her children's right to enjoy their childhood, as she had not been able to do.

Tracy dislikes the materialistic and one-up-manship trends in her local community and wants to influence more participation and community involvement. She takes pride in her own work and both needs and enjoys feedback from those important to her. Letting herself trust others is difficult for Tracy, but she has relationships

where she will allow trust to build and these are very important within her life, offering her the support that she missed in her childhood. Tracy is keen to work collaboratively to improve the lives of the wider community and resents the way individuals get in the way of this aim. She shows the disposition for collective agency.

Sarah probably had the most successful education of the three participants, but her lack of self-confidence stopped her continuing in formal education and limited her aspirations. Despite support from school and parents she would not put herself in a situation where she might fail.

Maggie feels she has moved on from needing the support of the family learning centre, but she wants to put something back in return for the support shown to her when she was depressed. Maggie's life is very busy but she finds time to call in and says that she can identify with the women there because she remembers what it was like. Her mother was, and still is, the main motivator in her life, but Maggie mediates how she is with her own children because she is aware of the pressures which learning can put on an individual. She is prepared to support others and to receive support in return. She feels that the FLC is where her various lives overlap. Maggie, like Tracy, feels she is still learning.

The tensions between the formal style of provision required by Sure Start and the informal history of the family learning centre are obvious in the interview with Clare, with her wanting 'more structure' to what the centre can offer mothers with small children. The project's aim of offering support via social networks would

appear to be effective for those women who persevere and become an accepted part of the drop-in.

Some of the adults in this site of learning are beginning to be 'powerful learners'; all three of those interviewed individually show some indication that they are making choices for themselves and decisions about their lives. Maggie retook her GCSEs in English and Maths because she needed them to become a teacher which is her ultimate ambition. Sarah is investigating ways of continuing her career as a nursery nurse by looking for courses she can attend, and Tracy is involving herself in courses at the community centre as a stepping stone to more formal learning. For these women the key factors for them being able to do these things *for themselves* has been the support of the staff and other women at the FLC and building up trusting relationships with others. By acting collectively individuals have been allowed through 'powerful learning' to move towards *activism*, although only Tracy and Maggie had attained this during the study.

6.3 Nacro centre

The final site is that of the Nacro centre, situated in Southtree, a suburb of Bridgetown, where a group of unemployed people were taking a basic literacy and numeracy course as part of their re-employment programme. The centre specialises in the rehabilitation of offenders and preventative work with those at risk of being involved in the criminal justice system. They have a very specific expertise of working with people who would normally not attend mainstream provision, and who may have behaviour management problems. The centre also caters for young men aged sixteen to nineteen offering vocational courses in bricklaying, known by the shorthand 'bricks' within the centre itself. Across

Bridgetown there are other centres which offer similar courses in 'graphics' and 'horticulture'.

The centre is another old building (18th century according to the clients) and therefore not ideally suited to its purpose. It has at some time in its past been used as a mortuary, a point some of the clients were keen to point out. Some of the rooms upstairs can only be reached through others, which means teaching can be interrupted by many diversions throughout the day. Because of the vocational courses there is also a mini building yard at the side and open doors into this, which makes the building particularly cold in winter. Students sat around in coats in several of the classes I observed. Staffing at the centre is tight and people have to be prepared to work in various key roles; on one visit to the centre the manager was in reception covering for absence and the additional support coordinator regularly staffs the office downstairs in the early mornings. Mark, one of the trainers also doubles as the centre's IT expert and sorts out problems for office staff as well as clients.

Nacro is open from 9.00 – 4.00 Monday to Thursday and 9.00 – 1.00 on a Friday. Friday afternoons is when staff fit in other essential tasks for which there is little time elsewhere in the week due to their heavy teaching commitment. The majority of their clients have to do thirty hours a week tuition to fulfil the requirements of their contract with the Job Centre, and absences can result in a reduction in benefit for the individual. There is therefore an element of mandatory attendance here which is missing from either of the other two centres.

People are referred to Nacro (and other specialist centres) by Employment Services, often when personal advisors (PAs) feel a client might have a basic skills problem. They have an initial basic skills assessment which takes about 1.5 hours, following which a report is sent back to the personal advisor with a recommendation for further action. The PA then acts on that recommendation and will send the client for a number of weeks of tuition on one of various schemes¹⁰, at any centre that offers the appropriate course, of which Nacro is one. While it does not always follow, many clients who have been to Nacro for their initial assessment will return there for their tuition. Clients who want to go into a vocational area which is not covered by Nacro will be referred on to other providers in the area, via the Employment Services.

6.3.1 Sources of information

Within Nacro, following introductory telephone calls, I had an initial meeting with the centre manager to discuss my research aims and to observe the routines within the centre itself. This was then followed by further visits to the centre when I held a group discussion, and in-depth interviews with a manager, two tutors and two clients.

6.3.2 The interviewees

Peter and Jed, who were both white, were my group interviewees. On the day this interview took place they were the only two to volunteer from the group, despite the hope that there would be about four people present. Peter and Jed were both on a twenty-six week course to improve their literacy and numeracy skills with a view to finding employment. Neither had enjoyed school particularly. Jed had felt

intimidated and barely learnt to write his name and Peter played truant and had pretty much left school by the age of twelve.

Vicky's title is 'Additional support unit co-ordinator' and within this role is also responsible for another centre some miles away. She is an experienced tutor and manager. Vicky spends most of her time at the Southtree centre but can be called across Bridgetown at a moment's notice if there is a problem elsewhere. Her role as co-ordinator means she manages the additional support provision across the whole of Bridgetown, which is different to the management of basic skills, which is managed locally by each centre.

Tania is a new tutor, in her early twenties, who had begun work within Nacro as a volunteer and been taken on to work mainly with the younger group of trainees. She had no formal qualifications in teaching prior to starting at the centre but had since attended regular in-service training within Nacro and achieved some NVQ accreditation.

Mark is a more experienced tutor in his early thirties who had worked across the client groups at Nacro for a while. He is currently working with the adult group, and is well known by clients throughout the centre.

My first individual participant was Celia, a white woman in her early thirties. She has nearly completed her six months at the Centre, working on basic skills. She lives at home with her parents and has two brothers and a sister who live locally. Celia was born and brought up within a few miles of the centre and has lived in Highfield for many years. She feels the area has changed for the better because

there are more shops, but acknowledges that the demolition of old buildings to build new houses has destroyed some 'brilliant buildings'. Most of her friends have now moved away from Highfield/Southtree and, although some are only living about ten miles away, she no longer sees them regularly. She has made good friends at the Centre and feels that they all get on well. Celia had been unemployed for about three and a half years before coming to Nacro and when she finishes her course she wants to go into shop work, but as she puts it 'it's back to the Job Centre and start all over again' (Celia, p3).

My second individual participant was Cath, again a white woman and in her mid forties who lives locally with her grown up daughter. She is one of nine children and describes herself as the 'black sheep of the family'. Although she still does not get on with her parents Cath does see a lot of her siblings and socialises with them (and her thirty-eight nieces and nephews) most weekends. She had been to the Centre before to do other courses and has lived in the area for over twenty years. She left school when she was twelve and had a very disrupted home life, but feels now that she is getting herself on-track to move forward.

6.3.3 What the respondents had to say about adult learners and learning

Interview with Vicky

Vicky deals with any problems that arise at the centre, for example, with the younger clients there are sometimes behavioural problems, she will try and get them to talk and if necessary will discipline them. All the trainees have problems so she tries to keep an open door policy so that they can talk when they need to. She will try and help them resolve problems rather than giving them advice:

You try to get them to think about the problem and how they can solve it.
Because problem solving is part of the additional support that they need. (Vicky, p2)

All prospective trainees have to be interviewed by someone at the centre. Vicky is often in contact with personal advisors from the job centre or careers advisors about the younger client group and they will sometimes visit the centre to see how a client is getting on. Vicky is also an internal verifier for NVQs and a representative for basic skills in the region. She deals with the LSC and employment services, housing services, benefit offices and the probation service, who refer a lot of young people to the centre. Vicky feels there are many people who do not receive the extra support they need with basic skills because it is not identified and this may partly be because adults are used to covering up, particularly with those in authority:

Now its very easy to spot somebody who can't read and write very well at all. So you can say I will refer them for a basic skills assessment because they can't fill in the forms. But its not so easy to spot people who are just below level one because they can cover up quite well. They can fill in simple forms, they can communicate well. So I think a lot of them aren't being sent for assessment because they are not being recognised as having a basic skills need. (Vicky, p3)

When people are unhappy to come down to the centre for their basic skills assessments Vicky will go up to the Job Centre and do them there. Every two months Vicky has to do support and supervisions with the trainers but they can come and see her at any time to let off steam or talk, because it is a very stressful job.

Most of the adults have got basic skills needs. Some of the younger group have not, but they do have behavioural problems. They may lack confidence or motivation, and there may be problems at home, sometimes very severe. Some of the adults have gone years with an unacceptable level of basic skills and staff need to gain their trust and get them to talk. They see that others have also got

problems and this can be a great support and is enlightening for those who have previously been belittled. The relationships with staff are crucial and they all need to be approachable. While certain trainers have responsibility for groups they all tend to move around and teach across the groupings which is a strength because clients then get to know all the staff. Vicky says that they have pretty good retention rates with most of their clients achieving their goals.

Restricted time with clients (maximum of 26 weeks) means there is a limit to what they can learn in the time and for some it is only key words. Those who are well below Entry level face more of a challenge:

But if you have got somebody come through that can't read and write at all you are not going to do a great deal in 26 weeks... All we may get them to do is read key words and perhaps be able to write their name and address. Because the school system has failed to do it in 10, how ever many years they have got in school, so we are not going to do it in 26 weeks. Especially with an adult because it's harder for them to actually learn. So all we can do is just the basics with them really, but it's quite amazing that when they start to read, when they start recognising words the motivation is wonderful because they have never been able to do it. And once they can start its amazing how much they can do because they want to. Once they realise that they are capable of doing something. Even if it's only a few words that they recognise, it's fantastic. (Vicky, p7)

This progress, which can be hugely empowering, may or may not be sustained when they finish their programme and some will go back and forth between the centre and the job centre:

After that then when they leave us unfortunately we don't know. Sometimes they come back and see us, sometimes they don't. But I always say to them when they are going, look enrol at night school. Go to night school once a week and continue. Some of them do I think, but some of them just don't, they just go. And we have some of them come back again and again and again. (Vicky, p7)

If clients have not achieved their learning outcomes then they can, after a further six months of unemployment, be referred back again, until they do achieve them.

Vicky thinks that for the adults listening to other people's opinions and working as a group does impact on them, and on the way that they relate to society as a whole. Group discussions can lead to unexpected outcomes:

Its amazing the things they like to talk about. We were talking [about] the elections just before and some of them were saying 'I am not going to bother to vote'. And then another one was saying 'well you should vote'. And a couple of them who at the beginning weren't going to bother to vote at the end had decided 'oh yes it was important that they went out and voted because it could effect their lives'. So I think yes in just little ways. I am not saying that we make them into perfect citizens but in little ways.(Vicky, p13)

and feels that the increase in confidence is one of the most important factors, as this example illustrates:

I have got one little girl in there who never went anywhere without her mum. Her mother went absolutely everywhere with her. When she came here for her interview her mum came with her. Every time she went to sign on, mum went with her. And the PA phoned me up the other day and she said how is she doing? And I said you wouldn't know her. And the PA said to me I was really worried because she never went anywhere without her mum, I didn't know how she would get on. And I said you would not know her. She has fitted into the groove, she is joining in discussion, she is talking to the group. The change in her confidence wise.. Her basic skills haven't improved much but confidence wise, she is absolutely brilliant. (Vicky, p8)

Twice a week the adults do job searches and this is a compulsory element built into their timetable. There is a dedicated team who come to the centre to help them write CVs, fill in application forms, practise interview techniques, use the telephone and so on. It is part of the contract that if a client is offered a job during their twenty-six weeks and they refuse it, then they lose their benefit. Vicky says that it is not unusual for clients to go into a job and, especially if their basic skills are very low, then lose it. Any remaining weeks on their programme can be completed but, once they have completed the twenty-six weeks then they cannot return for six months. This makes it difficult for some to sustain their learning.

They keep records of achievement, copies of certificates and so on, but Vicky also monitors progress by talking with the tutors. Funding bodies will audit and inspect them and also note how many clients have moved into work. Each client has an individual learning plan (ILP) and monthly reviews of progress where they talk about how they are doing with their teacher. Vicky thinks that this individual feedback is crucial:

...they want you to praise them. They want people to say. They are proud of themselves. "God I can do this, I can read those words now." And they want you to say to them well done, you've done it now, lets move on. They want to feel that people are seeing and recognising that they are doing it. So feedback is really, really important. (Vicky, p11)

On completion of their programme the majority will have achieved their certification, which is either Wordpower¹¹ or Numberpower, or the national literacy test at one level or another. For Level One they actually sit a test and Vicky has some concerns:

I think it's frightening for them as well because you mention tests, and its done under test conditions. No matter how much you say to them this is just an assessment of your skills, you have learnt to do this now, you just need to prove it. And then you take them into the room and you say you have got so long to do this. You can't have mobile phones, you can't do this, you can't talk to each other, you must not leave the room...But I'm thinking to myself you have got these people up to a certain level and you know that they are capable of doing this test but as soon as you put them in that room. Fear. And they just forget everything. (Vicky, p11)

Interestingly there is no writing in the test, which is multiple choice. Vicky prefers the assessments for Entry level:

I quite like the assignments, the little assignments for the entry level. I think those do reflect and it's not...although it's done under supervision and like test conditions, it's not so rigid, because you can say to them when you have had enough just put up your hand, I will take the paper off you, I will lock it away, we can resume tomorrow or another day. So they haven't got to do the whole lot in one day or one time. So I quite like that route...The assignments you can pull off, you just pull off the internet and so they can be done at any time when you feel they are ready. So if you think that somebody is ready they can do it and if they don't pass it you haven't got to say you have failed. You can pull another one off, a different one, and they can do the different one. So I quite like that I think its giving more people a chance to actually achieve something. (Vicky, p12)

The centre manager, and not Vicky, is responsible for all the funding proposals and deals with budgets. Contracts with employment services are renewed annually and so funding is uncertain from year to year which inevitably impacts on staffing levels.

Interview with Tania

Tania works with the younger clients who are doing 'Life Skills':

Most of them have a bad background somewhere. They've been expelled from school, or they've been in trouble with the law, very naive, very scared. (Tania, p4)

but she seldom knows any details about their situation and feels that 'it's their prerogative' not to share this information with her unless they choose to do so. She can have a group varying in size from ten up to as many as twenty-four. This makes life as a teacher difficult with them being at different levels and at different stages of their course¹². Some can hardly read or write and others are able to complete the work in a fraction of the allocated time. They are working towards City and Guilds Wordpower and Numberpower accreditation, at Entry level or Level 1. Until recently she was working alone with this group but has now got a volunteer to help her. The group are currently all male (probably because of the vocational area they cover here) although there was one girl who went through the Life Skills class quite recently. Occasionally they will go out on trips such as recent ones to go-karting and the cinema, which they seem to enjoy, but these are not a routine part of their course. Although the clients are expected to start sessions at 9.30 they regularly do not turn up on time and can drift in up to as much as an hour and a half later. This makes planning and working as a group all

the harder, which means there is a lot of one to one tuition and a reliance on worksheets:

So I can't really do lesson plans, or do group work, because I don't know who's coming in, when they're coming in and when we do start something they come in half way through and we have to abandon it, so it is mainly 1:1... Individually I help them. I give them worksheets, explain the worksheets to them, sort of give them little lessons around that worksheet while they're doing them... We've got loads of books that we photocopy things out of, or if I can't I'll show them the piece of work and say to them 'please do not write on this', which half the time they do! And get them to do things like that. Depending on what we're doing; I've also devised quite a lot of worksheets myself so I just re photocopy them all. (Tania, p1)

In mainstream adult education students would be encouraged to bring items of interest from home to use as resources, and this can also be a useful 'hook' into group work. Within this setting though it is not such a useful strategy, as Tania describes:

The clientele that we have I try and discourage them from bringing things in from home because in the past things have gone missing, from the table basically. If it's a film that they're all interested in and someone has the film, then obviously they bring it in, but I have it off them, I keep it, I do the video and then I give it to them afterwards. Sometimes I have said 'you can bring it in, but if you don't want to give it to me, it's up to you, if you lose it I can't do anything about it; I've given you the chance'. So that's what they do. Most of them aren't interested in reading books, so it's pointless me borrowing a book and letting them read, they're not interested. They're either interested in biker magazines or car magazines and again they've all got different tastes, so I can't really do a lesson on one subject; it's very, very difficult. (Tania, p2)

Often they do not arrive and get straight down to work on their portfolios so Tania will invest a considerable time talking with them and managing discussions:

So they come in here and they're um, I'm getting involved talking to them, somedays, well most mornings I actually [sit] down on the desk with them and we'll just talk about anything. I think talking sometimes helps. If I just come in and say 'right you're doing work', they're not going to, but if I actually sit on the table with them and input something into a discussion, they seem to enjoy it a lot more. So, in writing skills they're not learning... they are learning, but not to a fast pace, they learn slowly, we have discussions, its more about getting them to understand life... You know, what's wrong, right, how do we go about this and that... Like this morning we've just been nattering about this that and the other. If they're not interested in working, writing, I can't force them to work, to write, so I'll have discussions; go and have a chat with them. And then for some reason they'll suddenly pick up a pen and start writing. So it works. In a roundabout way! (Tania, p4-5)

Discussion is not necessarily a 'safe' activity in that it can sometimes generate more conflict than Tania deems acceptable in the classroom:

...there is quite a bit of conflict. Which I say is healthy to an extent. Sometimes it can get a bit too much and I'll go 'right, break now!' and they'll walk away and we'll start some of the other work. (Tania, p5)

but she feels that they learn from this experience and begin to know what is acceptable and what is not.

Tania has received training in the new core skills curriculum but says that she is still finding it difficult to get familiarised with it and begin to incorporate it into her lessons. She has also completed other vocational courses relating to basic skills.

Keeping the younger client group motivated is difficult and Tania has to use various strategies to do so, including allowing them 'fag breaks' and sometimes working through lunchtime and finishing early. She finds that once they have decided to 'switch off' there is little she can do and this also means she needs to spend a lot of time just talking with them and being one of them rather than their trainer. She also feels that it is important that they see her as someone near their own age because they can talk to her about things and know that she will understand. There is a volunteer at the centre who is rather older and to whom they do not relate, nor want to. Some of the clients are prepared to show respect to Tania and she thinks their upbringing is a crucial factor in this:

Some of them do take notice of what I say, others don't. Again, it depends on the individual, of how they've been brought up. If they've been told to think for themselves and sod everyone else then obviously they're going to do that. Others actually have respect for other people and will listen to their views and think about it and go away and then come back and say 'yea, you were right'. It just depends. (Tania, p6)

She talks a lot about them learning communication skills and about behaviour generally. For some the goal of getting on to the bricklaying course is sufficient to encourage them to work for their accreditation which is their door into the vocational training:

There's quite a few that when they come here they're not interested, they don't want to be here, they just want the money at the end of the day and that's it. I mean, for instance, [name] he's in 'Bricks' at the moment. He was a pain basically, he just didn't understand why he was doing this work, thought it was beneath him, but eventually he got it done and got the qualification – Entry Level Wordpower. And now he's in 'Bricks' and he's completely changed. Whether it's through me or whether it's because 'Bricks' don't take any rubbish, I don't know. But he's certainly a changed man, he's more nicer and respectful. When he first came here he'd just sit here and fall asleep. Now, first thing in the morning he's here. (Tania, p6)

Being 'tolerated' and listened to and being treated as an adult seems to give clients the beginning skills they need to cope in their everyday life:

Mainly I think it's to do with communication; how they're speaking to others. When they first come in here, I mean they don't really... sometimes every other word is a swear word. By the time they leave here they seem to have grown up a bit more, they seem to have realised how they need to speak to people, how to respect others. (Tania, p7)

These skills enable them to adapt to different situations and to find a reason for behaving in a different way:

...if they go down to bricklaying then they do a two-week taster. Now, it's completely different down there. I'm more lenient because I feel I treat them 'gently gently' but in bricklaying they won't take anything off them. You start swearing and someone will say something; whereas I'd say it in a nice way they'll just be firm and nasty to them. So they realise that they've got to wake up and sort something out. So they come back after the tasters and start knuckling down and doing the work. They realise that their attitude needs to be changed. Some of them have actually admitted it to me, you know, their attitude does stink and it needs to be changed. And then we work on towards that, if they go off in a strop, start throwing things around, we'll go through and say, 'remember what we said last time?' and then they'll seem to calm down again and realise, before they wouldn't have realised, they'd have just gone off on one. (Tania, p7)

Once clients have finished on their course they do not tend to stay in contact with the centre, unless they continue onto 'bricks'. The expected learning outcome for

them all is to move onto something else and Tania describes their time at Nacro as a stop-gap where they have to prove themselves:

This is a stop gap for them really. If they have been in trouble then they have to come here to change their attitude and behaviour, see how their timekeeping is, before being transferred over to a vocational area. They have to do a full days' work which is quite a shock for them so this is like an easy breaking into it, before they move to a vocational area. (Tania, p8)

The Life Skills group do not meet on a Monday so Tania spends this time coordinating the 14-16 year olds who spend a day a week at the centre on an alternative curriculum, or she may have to cover for the absence of another trainer. On Fridays, when the 14-16 year olds are in they spend half a day with her on lessons and then half a day in bricklaying doing practical activities, about which she says:

They do like it here, they do, especially the bricklaying, they love it. They can't wait to get down there, even when it's school holidays they want to come in! (Tania, p7)

Offering these clients respect is probably the most important thing from Tania's point of view, and this can be achieved she feels through working on their social skills:

I find they learn a hell of a lot more than the English or maths. It is important I think, socialising. Social skills are very important, especially this type of clientele, because of what's happened to them. They need to be respected, and treated fairly, and I hope that's what I do. (Tania, p9)

Some thrive on this environment and do move on to other opportunities, but for others it does not work out and they leave. For those who do not achieve the accreditation they may still have got certificates in First Aid, Health & Safety and Manual handling, which all clients are expected to take. Some will move on to get jobs, either via the vocational training or directly.

Interview with Mark

Mark works with the adult group who are at the centre on full time educational training (FTET) and also runs the innovative basic skills course. His clients are doing a mix of accreditation (Wordpower and Numberpower) and core skills curriculum followed by the national tests. Although there is a bank of resources being built up around the new curriculum Mark still prepares most of his own for his learners' diverse needs. He talks about the particular strengths of Nacro offering a service for certain members of the community:

because we do have a very select clientele, to say the least... we may well get someone walking in off the street they know what Nacro's all about and they might have violence against a person. Now, most standard training organisations will not take a person like that on board. We specialise in that, so that's when ... because we can hopefully keep this person from re offending, which obviously is better for ourselves and as well as society as a whole. (Mark, p2)

Building up a client's confidence and self esteem is very important to Mark and he gives the following example of the multiple problems that some of them face:

...he'd just finished, I'd got him through his Wordpower and he'd passed with flying colours. This person, you know, he'd had a really bad life, he'd not had much attention from his mother or father you know, was very despondent when it came to family life and what life is all about, and manic depressive. One minute he was fine and then he wasn't. And I sat him down and gave him one of my pep talks just before he left and he started crying because he'd never actually come across anybody being so positive with him before. And to hear it coming from somebody else's lips he was kind of overwhelmed. He left here feeling more positive than when he first arrived. And that I think is one of the main goals, I enjoy building up their basic skills because you get a lot of them come through and they've got severe learning difficulties and that brings their confidence down, their self esteem (Mark, p3)

He believes in being quite tough with them and if their work is wrong then they do it again, which he says is the only way for them to learn. Like Vicky, he also believes in the value of reading and encourages his learners to read as much as they can, and although some are more reluctant than others, he says that most of them eventually do so, and appreciate the benefits it brings in extending their vocabulary. Mark also values the review process and although these may be time

consuming feels they are an essential part of the learning process and very important to the learner. Mark describes his approach to teaching basic skills as 'very laid-back' but he likes to work as a group where people support each other through the learning experience:

I'd like it to be fun, I don't want it to be you come in, you sit down you do literacy, you do numeracy, end of story. Let's sit down and have a conversation. Let's see where this conversation leads us, let's see what advice we can get from each other. Let's see what resources other people have got, the full dynamics of the group; that's what I want. (Mark, p4)

He goes on to say that many of the group will 'build up a good rapport' and forge friendships which continue even after they move on from the centre.

While most of his adult class are reasonably happy to be at the centre Mark says he is beginning to find some who are less keen, and when this happens he has to work hard to get them to understand the benefits of working on their basic skills first before moving on to a vocational qualification. He feels that the new core curriculum accepts the wide variations in dialect and accents and the importance of this in the way people communicate. 'Yes, don't disregard it, it's a valid, it's valuable, your accent, it's part of you' (Mark, p6). But he also thinks it is important for learners to know what is appropriate language in different contexts and gives the following example of a client who had taken this advice on board:

[name] was coming to me saying, 'thanks for showing me different kinds of letters and what not', because he's extremely into his football and he wrote to a ... um football training company and they replied to him and he's got to go for trials today... and he actually wrote that letter to them, off his own back, which he did at home. (Mark, p6)

Examples like this, of client's learning, are the reinforcement Mark himself needs. 'So it does work. That's what keeps me going as a teacher' (Mark, p6). The system within which the centre functions mean that learners sometimes get jobs right at the beginning of their time there and Mark feels that this is sad as they still

have basic skills needs which have not been addressed and that opportunity may have been lost. Some will get the training they need within the workplace and Mark says it is important that they are offered the opportunity, 'these people that do need basic skills, let them achieve it' (Mark, p7). While Mark does not describe himself as a counsellor there is a certain element of the work which involves being able to listen to clients' problems and this includes dealing with those with mental health problems. He has done some basic introductory courses and is soon to undertake a full time counselling course so that he can become the 'official' centre counsellor. He believes that individuals usually have the answer to their own problems if they can only find it:

I try and draw it out of them because everybody seems to have the answer. It is within them. It's just that they need prompting from time to time. Is this going to be the right solution for you? (Mark, p8)

Mark demonstrates compassion and a level of understanding of his group which enables him to assist them in their learning experience by both pooling resources and searching inside themselves for strengths they may not have known they had.

The group interviewees

Both Peter and Jed live reasonably close to the centre, Peter in Southtree itself and Jed, who lives with his older brother, about four miles away. Peter came to the centre because he wanted to learn about English and Maths. He feels that he missed out on school from when he was about twelve years old:

I kept bunking off from school. I never went back to school. I went back a few times but I kept messing about and at that time I didn't realise how it affected your life. But, as I say, it's never too late to learn is it? (GrpN, p1)

He had his initial assessment with Vicky and the job centre sent him to the centre for this programme. Jed was also sent to improve his literacy and numeracy but,

due to family problems, says he is finding it hard at the present time. It seems that he is supporting a relative who has recently lost both her husband and son and although he does what he can by being on the end of the phone for her, he worries that he cannot do more, mostly because she lives on the other side of Bridgetown.

Both Peter and Jed have been at the centre for about eight out of their twenty-six weeks and at the end they expect to sign on again, although they would like to get work. Jed would like to change from factory work because he is now diabetic and does not feel he would cope, and would like to utilise one of his hobbies:

I'd rather go into gardening. I did 6 months at another training centre, Rathbone training centre where I did my training for 6 months on gardening. I passed me Health and Safety and manual handling course, which I'm proud to have the certificates for. (GrpN, p2)

Peter was a metal finisher but suffers from asthma and has been told he will have to change his job. While currently open-minded about what this might lead to he has identified a gap in his skills which he would like to fill:

Anything really, but I've got to improve me maths because I've had a few jobs where you need to use computers and things and need to be quite good with ... what's the word now, .. numerate, yea. So I thought I need to know about that. (GrpN, p2)

Interestingly, although he says he wants to move away from factory work he still applies for these jobs when he sees them because it is familiar territory, 'I can do it. It's like second nature' (GrpN, p3). Whilst attending the centre clients are encouraged to take courses in certain areas such as manual handling and first aid. Peter had already been able to put his one certificate to use:

It's good actually cos I came out the one day, on the Friday, I'd finished on the course for the St John's Ambulance, and we got this old bloke who'd fell over on the road like and I run up to him, I didn't know how long he'd been there, and I knew how to hold the bandage on him. (GrpN, p2)

Coming to the centre for Jed means he is not in the house all the time which is good but he has some strong memories of school which was not the happiest time for him:

I feel as coming here is a challenge because you want to improve yourself while you're at the centre and by improving yourself you've got to think to yourself is it worth a coming, which it is because it helps me with my reading and writing. My reading is not too bad but I could brush up on that. When I was at school uh, I did attend school on a regular basis but I was frightened of the teachers and I was glad to leave... There was one chap, the were about 4 of us were leaving at the Easter, and he was crying his heart out and I says to him you should be happy to leave school but he said at least you can do your name and address but I can't, all I do is to put MrX for me name which I felt really sorry for that lad. But they didn't teach me nothing when I was at school. I think in this day and age when there's education is a lot further advanced than when I was at school and there's still people leaving school today what can't read and write and they're doing nothing about it. At least they've got these sorts of places where you can learn to read and write. But half of them today, they don't want it.

While he accepts that attending the centre might help him achieve certain goals he feels it will not necessarily help him get a job.

Staff at the centre tell clients what opportunities are available to them, which they appreciate. The people they meet at the centre are nice and will 'go for coffee and that'. They feel that their tutor is very understanding, and so are all the others, some of whom are volunteers. Jed has found particular support from one tutor as he has family problems at present which he feels is affecting his work:

I think like um, [name of tutor] is the sort of person what you could sit down with and if you had any problems, I don't think she would know all the answers but I think she'd try to help you and probably make your mind more easy. (GrpN, p7)

Peter seems a bit confused about how he lost his last job, but used the Job Centre as a way of getting onto a course which might help him:

I got laid off, no I didn't, I got sacked from the job I was in. I'm not sure why I got sacked, but I went to the Job Centre and I was signing on and I realised that I had to do some kind of English and Maths. I asked if they'd put me on a course. (GrpN, p5)

He later says that people had been suggesting to him for a while that this might help:

Well people said to me like you can get trained up a bit to get into a better job. It sort of sinks in a bit... Like people have said to me, you should go back and learn a few things which should help you. (GrpN, p11)

But when asked if he would recommend doing courses to other people he felt this was none of his business and Jed thought it was up to the individual but would say 'have a try'.

They describe choices they have at lunchtime over where to go, over the 'caff' where a cup of tea/coffee is 50p, or stay in the centre where it is 10p. Jed has continued to get up early, around 6 am, even after he was made redundant, although sometimes he questions whether it is worth attending all the time, but feels he should push himself to do so. He has an older brother who he accompanies every fortnight to get his money, but other than this, and just at present while he has these family issues, he would expect to attend most of the time:

I'm pleased I come here. When I first started I was a bit nervous, I think any new place you go to, where you don't know the people you're a bit nervous. I think it takes about 2-3 weeks for you to get in and fit in. (GrpN, p7)

Recently he joined a local library, a task set him by his tutor, and is planning on getting more books out at the weekend. Jed mentioned that it was not the first time he had attended this centre, although his first experience (many years ago) when he came to do painting and decorating had not been a happy one. He discovered that the centre was now run by different people and when he came down here found that it had improved.

Peter thinks that coming to the centre is a bit like going to school or work, similar to any place in his experience. He is looking forward to the future when he hopes

to be in a regular job with a pension but his experiences to date have not been particularly positive:

Yea. I'm trying to apply for jobs I've never applied for before. I tried to get a job as a care assistant, I didn't get that because of lacking in confidence like. I went to the interview and it seemed all right, but I didn't have any of the qualifications and I was sacked from my last job and that kind of went against me. (GrpN, p9)

Having just any job, however, is not enough for him and he acknowledges to himself that he is capable of more, but also views it in a matter of fact way:

I don't know, no, not really. I've sort of gone against myself. I've took jobs and I've worked but I've known I've been able to do something else. I feel a bit sad that I couldn't have learnt more. But life's like that. (GrpN, p9)

He feels it is still early days before he can gauge whether attending this centre has made much difference to him and his circumstances. Jed feels he has grown a little in confidence through attending the centre, which is something he has lacked throughout his life, but compares himself with his brother who has less literacy skills than he does himself:

Yes, I think it's given me a little bit more confidence in meself, I've lacked in my life, confidence. I'm just starting to get that confidence back again which I'm pleased with... When I was at school they day teach me anything. Me brother's in the same diccamment as when I went to school, he can't read and write. I mean he can just do his name. I'm a little bit better than me brother now, cos I can pick up words and letters and I help my brother as much as I can. (GrpN, p9)

Neither Jed nor Peter appeared to know much about what else goes on in the centre apart from the parts that impact on them directly but Peter mentioned that at his interview for the care work people there knew about it and said 'a lot of good work happens in that centre', which made him think that there are people in the know within the community.

Talking about flexibility in their learning they felt that the teachers had to stick to what was on the timetable but they would offer extra work if students wanted it. Peter acknowledges that it is different teaching adults, but obviously does not see

the relationship as one of equals given the following quote, which obviously reflects his own recollections of school:

I think sometimes you can become slack and I think the teachers sometimes, I call them teachers, I think that they sort of pull you up on something if you're doing it wrong. It's hard to do because we're adults, if we were kids they could give a clip around the earhole. (GrpN, p11)

Interview with Celia

As a child Celia spent a lot of time with her older brothers climbing trees and jumping streams and loved being out of doors. She still enjoys socialising with members of her family and does so regularly. Celia's secondary schooling does not bring back happy memories and she describes how easy it was for the bullies, picking on her because she was 'too quiet' and therefore would not cause any trouble:

...if anybody was stood behind me that didn't really like me, they would give me that push down the stairs and I was like 'I don't want to go to school no more. I am not going in today.' I would always throw the sickies and that. (Celia, p5)

and how she felt unsupported by the school

...half the time they turned a blind eye. It was ... 'can we really be bothered to chase this up or not.' (Celia, p6)

Celia tells how she could not keep up with the work either in the mainstream classes and so was put in one of the special classes, where she fared better. The bullying stopped being such a problem once she belonged to a group which gave her a certain amount of protection:

because you were with all the others and they were like, 'hang on, she's with a gang now, so we're going to leave her alone.' (Celia, p14)

Celia does not remember any teacher being of particular influence on her although she says that they were all 'really good' and tried helping a lot. She did

not belong to any school clubs or join in team games as she got older, mainly because she was quite small but also because she could not be bothered. On leaving school Celia went into a training course in sheet metal work which she chose because she had always liked practical classes like woodwork and cookery and did not want to go into catering or shop work like all the others. She did a two year course at a training centre and went on placement at a factory making spare parts for the car industry. Once she finished the course she remained at the factory and worked there for twelve years at which time she says they got rid of her, because her work was not up to standard. There is some confusion over what actually occurred but she thinks she was made redundant because of 'the amount of money that was in my bank when I went to cash my last money' (Celia, p7). Despite this Celia says that she knows there was no problem with the standard of her work and feels she was probably an easy person to make redundant because she was unlikely to make a fuss.

Since this time Celia has been unemployed and spent most of her time in the house watching TV, listening to music, but very little else. It was a difficult time for her and she says 'All I wanted to do was stop in the house and I was happy' (Celia, p12). Her family were pleased that the course at Nacro got her to go out again. Celia cannot think of any instances where she has helped others to do something, either within her family or outside it. All her family have worked except her mother who has looked after the house and the dog. She describes her oldest brother as a 'genius' who knows everything, while her other brother experienced more problems like she did.

Celia has never felt that her lack of English or Maths skills held her back but acknowledges that the Job Centre suggested she needed more skills to help improve her job opportunities. The skills she learnt at work came from observing the supervisors and then trying tasks for herself. She says they would also come over and help her out if she needed it and over the years she also helped others who were new to the various machines. Celia does not perceive herself as someone who is still learning, despite the fact that she is in full time education training. She says her only ambition is to get into retail work as soon as she can, inspired by some voluntary work at a local charity shop. Celia enjoys doing tasks within the house and can decorate and put shelves up, having taught herself these skills. She will cook but her mother has been doing it all while she is attending the centre. Celia also has a problem with her one arm which was damaged in a fall when she was seven years old. Although this was not a problem when she was working it has recently flared up again and currently she can hardly use it at all.

At the centre Celia had expected to be given work and told to get on with it. The reality was better and tasks are explained and there is a sense of working together, but at your own pace. She has completed three folders of work and is waiting for them to be assessed. They generally spend the morning on English and the afternoons on Maths, although she does say that some of the group would rather do English all day but she likes the variety. They have breaks every couple of hours or so and the time goes really quickly. They work as a group and have discussion and help each other out if they get stuck. Celia enjoys the scenarios they discuss and thinks this is:

because you're using your brain a bit more and you're not just copying off a board, its you that's thinking... is this right?...Because you've actually got to work it out for yourself. (Celia, p19).

She thinks of herself as a lot more confident now than when she started at Nacro, and thinks everybody else sees this too. Attending the centre for the first time was difficult for her but she was determined not to be put off:

...walking through them doors for the first time in your life. My God, they all look like nutters. Especially when you meet the brickies, because they are virtually the first people you walk into the minute you hit the building and its like And you think 'what have I come into?' ...they didn't frighten me. I thought you lot are not frightening me. I'm coming whether you like it or not. (Celia, p21)

From others on the course Celia has heard about opportunities which might be open to her, like going to college or night school, and she might follow one of these up once she has finished at Nacro.

Interview with Cath

Cath comes from a large family, and now spends most of her time with them and babysitting for numerous nieces and nephews. This does not leave much time for socialising with friends but she does see Celia, who she met through attending Nacro, several times a week. But for many years before this Cath had not been able to go out, spending most of her time sitting in the house not mixing with anybody other than her daughter.

Her days at secondary school were limited, but in the time that she was there she has few positive memories:

I was put into a back class, a special needs class for reading and writing, because I never done that much schooling, and everyone else was more advanced than what I was. So we were always pushed to the side. I used to be in the swimming gala for the school, that was about it. But reading, writing, English or maths or anything like that. Its not that I didn't like it, its because I didn't understand it. But when you used to have 40 or 50 in the class you could never put your hand up and say I don't know this. She would say 'outside, or stand in the hallway.'

Because I was far back from the rest of them. And then after that they started putting about 5 of us together with a special needs teacher to help us along...It was better because I could understand. When we tried to explain to the teacher when we were in a big group, she used to say 'oh go away, go and sit down.' In other words get out the way. So we used to just sit down and play up. (Cath, p13-14)

Cath admits that she was disruptive but feels that this all stemmed from the frustrations of not being able to do the work she was given to do, and involving her parents only made things worse:

When I came home with a ruler mark across my legs and on my hand Mum went up and beat the teacher up. And then after that I got picked on. I got picked on worse....I can't remember any happy memories at home either. (Cath, p14)

At the age of twelve her family moved to Spain and Cath did not attend school at all during her three years there. They returned because her mother had heart problems which resulted in her needing surgery. Her father also suffered a heart attack so her home life at that time was very difficult and aged twenty she left home. Soon afterwards she got pregnant and married but she describes this as a bad marriage with a lot of problems. Cath says that she never got on with her mother. She and her sister, as the two eldest in the family, were expected to do a lot and look after the younger children:

Because we were the oldest we was always left to look after the young ones. Mum used to out and leave us in and the kids used to fall over and bang their knees we used to get a telling off. Or if the washing up wasn't done or cook the food. We were just like skivvies really to look after the others. ..All the ironing had to be done by the time she come in. We had a rota every time she went out...I can remember from about seven taking black bags to the launderette to dry for our mum. (Cath, p4)

This disruption to her childhood also affected her schooling as she missed a lot of time staying at home to look after the younger ones while her parent were out:

I wasn't allowed out because mum was never there or dad, so we were always like mum to the kids. (Cath, p7)

Fifteen years ago, when her daughter was five years old, Cath had a nervous breakdown which resulted in her not being able to read or write at all. At the time

Cath says her daughter was the only one who looked after her and 'If it wasn't for her I don't think I would have pulled through' (Cath, p5). But some things Cath did for herself and she describes how one day she made the decision to stop taking her medication:

She [her daughter] knew that I needed the tablets. Even though I never got angry with her, she could tell that I needed them, because I used to shake. As soon as I used to start shaking I knew I needed a tablet. And one day I came back from the doctors and I said to myself I'm not taking no more. I flushed them all down the loo and I never took another tablet. (Cath, p8)

The cause of her breakdown was years of domestic violence:

Because I got beat up you see, with the bangs to me head and everything else. Because my husband was violent, he used to drink and beat us up and beat my daughter up. I locked myself away for years in the bedroom. I was on anti-depressants and all that. I locked myself away for about ten year's and I have only just come out into the open. (Cath, p5)

Following this she describes how her mind was 'just a blank' and it is only since attending the centre that she has finally regained the confidence to begun to go out again:

Its been a different life. I've actually seen the other side of life where I can leave the home... and I am out, and its me, and nobody else. (Cath, p5)

She is very close to her daughter whom she describes as a friend and as instrumental in her beginning to recover from her breakdown. They learnt to read together, with her daughter bringing words home from school and Cath learning them too. Eventually she explained to the teachers that she had some problems with reading and they would send an extra tin of words from which they could make sentences. This continued all through her daughter's secondary education, with Cath learning alongside her, but never quite feeling that she was a competent reader.

Cath is very keen on decorating, having discovered a natural talent for it when she moved into her first flat. Since then her services have been much in demand by

family and she has plans to work in this area if possible. She attended the Nacro centre before when she followed a course in painting and decorating, gaining certificates. She tried to teach her daughter how to hang paper, but this was not a success because [name] 'gets annoyed too quick' (Cath, p12). Cath sees herself as someone who is still learning and thinks this is something which will continue. She maintains that she is fairly self-sufficient and as capable of finding herself a job as the Job Centre. Recently she was offered a well paid job working away during the week but had to turn this down because she has pets at home that cannot be left. She is hopeful that the same agency may find her work in Bridgetown however, as having a job is a main priority for her now. Years ago she worked in a Bingo Hall, a place she became familiar with because of the amount of time she spent there waiting for her mother, but other than this has not been in paid employment.

Cath has always enjoyed activities which involved keeping fit and taught herself to swim and then nearly all her brothers and sisters and her daughter. As a child she learnt to cook but not from copying anyone, and was determined to give her own daughter a better example:

No I just picked it up really. She used to just say 'that's for tea', and leave it on the side and we just used to do it from peeling potatoes and hope it was cooked properly. We used to have to taste it all the way through. ...We wasn't quite sure how much salt but as the weeks went by we soon picked up. But my daughter at the age of four was peeling potatoes at the sink. I was at the side of her, cutting cauliflower up and all that. (Cath, p7)

Cath acknowledges that her daughter's childhood experiences have affected her, but she has tried to compensate by being there and giving her a good experience

and a good schooling, and was determined to give her a better childhood than she herself had:

...she knows the rough part of life as well. She's already been there. She's very toffee nosed and completely different. She sticks out from the rest of the family, if you know what I mean. I tried to give her more than what our mum gave me.
(Cath, p9)

Although Cath feels she has let her daughter down in some ways, her daughter maintains that the most important thing is that unlike her father, Cath has been there for her throughout her life.

Cath has enjoyed attending the centre and is also on the committee, which involves:

Going to the other side, in [town], and we talk about the things what need doing. Like here we told them we needed painting all up and tidying the place up, which they have been doing. Putting new windows in and that. We have to go around the class asking them to put down what they want and what they need and then we go up there and speak to them. (Cath, p15)

She expects to stay in contact with the staff and clients by meeting up with them on a Friday for a regular visit to the pub.

6.3.4 Overview of findings in Nacro

Employment was the expected outcome of the education involved at this site and had to take precedence if learners were offered work during the course. Tutors acknowledged that learners required lots of support and invested time in this aspect of their work, but it was all aimed at increasing their chances of obtaining work or getting better jobs, or being able to retain a job for more than a few weeks. The learning here was not particularly 'powerful' and seemed predominantly geared towards keeping learners and learning in the '*conformity*' quadrant. Peter demonstrated his awareness that he needed to learn more to

improve his chances of getting a better job, but then reverted to applying for factory work because he understood it and felt comfortable in that environment.

All the learners had negative experiences of schooling with most having experienced bullying which led them to truant. Cath, Peter, Jed and Celia were all in a special needs group or class at school and both Cath and Peter left school aged twelve. Their experience was mainly punitive and some felt let down by the system. Most felt they had limited opportunities through their life to date but had made the most of chances they did get, for example, Cath learning to read with her daughter and explaining to the teacher what she was doing. Many of the learners at the centre have both basic skills and behavioural problems and it is apparent that life skills need addressing before tackling English and maths. Staff treat all their learners as adults, which is difficult for some in the younger group to accept, and believe that helping them solve their own problems is one way to encourage this. An abusive relationship caused crisis for Cath but coming through this gave her the determination to return to learning and she sees herself as still learning. Learners do support each other and also build strong relationships with their tutors; in addition to this some are actively involved in helping others, particularly family members.

Most talked about building up their confidence to increase their self esteem and while some did display human capital, their social networks meant they had little in the way of social capital. Their whole learning experience within Nacro was based around the structure of 'employment'. However, what each learner showed was amazing resilience and a desire to improve things for themselves. In addition

tutors show a capacity for encouraging learners to access inner strengths and abilities, and are offering a very regimented and controlled curriculum in a way which still allows learners some choices. In this they are creating opportunities for 'powerful learners and learning'.

6.4 Overview across the sites

From the management perspective it seemed that lack of, or uncertainty about resources, and some tensions between policy and the needs of the learners were areas of concern. These issues were hidden from the learners themselves in the more formal ABE and Nacro centres, but were discussed with learners in the FLC where there was a more social emphasis to the relationship.

As one might expect, learners' previous life experiences varied. Some had happy childhoods while others had very disrupted experiences and, where they now have children of their own, this had impacted on their parenting style and ethos. Many, especially the women, had experienced domestic violence or other crises, which led to depression, and for some this had lasted for many years. Learners from both ABE and Nacro mentioned that lack of education, or lack of achievement at school, left them feeling disadvantaged and excluded from certain employment opportunities and, although this was not an overt concern for the women at the FLC it could be seen in Maggie and Tracy's efforts to learn how to use the intranet. None of the participants interviewed had continued at school beyond the age of sixteen, and two had left aged twelve.

Learners from all three sites reported feeling a lack of confidence, of self esteem, self belief and in some cases, a fear of failure. Those in ABE and Nacro had a

range of what could be termed 'educational' needs but also exhibited, in some cases, a lack of social skills and behavioural problems. Socialisation was also an issue in the FLC because depression had led these women to shy away from social situations and to isolate themselves.

ABE and the FLC sites both offered examples of learners having an involvement in their local community, building social networks and showing collaborative agency. In general the centres were seen as 'safe' environments where learners could take risks, and crucially where they were treated as adults and equals. Teachers adapted their style of teaching to enable individual learning styles to be accommodated wherever possible, sometimes subverting the formal systems to do so. The importance of receiving support, both from staff and other learners, and of giving support to others was a factor in each site. For some this was extended outside the centre when they had strong family support, but this was not so for everyone. Alongside support was the issue of trust, mentioned by many of the learners and staff. It seems that building relationships on trust is essential for adults in a learning environment.

There is evidence across the three case study sites of '*powerful learners and learning*', but it is limited. Much of the provision for adult learning could facilitate 'powerful learning' *if* the learners are receptive to this. This is particularly evident in the specific community-based work which is tailored to local community need and negotiated with the learners themselves. There is no doubt that the learning opportunities provided by the tutors and those working with adults in this study are both *enabling* and have the potential to lead to *activism*, even in Nacro where they

are working within an inflexible system. This suggests that adult educators work with learners to help them achieve their maximum potential *despite* the constraints of the structures in which they function.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has looked at each site in turn and discussed the findings of my research. It has described the sources of information and the interviewees. It raises issues about confidence and self esteem, the need for support and trusting relationships, and the importance of family, the negative effect of schooling and the lack of suitable employment. It describes areas of similarity, and of distinction, and has concluded with an overview across the three sites. Significantly this chapter has heard the voices of both learners and staff.

These findings will now be discussed, in terms of the literature and my conceptual framework, in the following chapter. Chapter 7 therefore returns to my 'powerful learning' typology, discusses issues of empowerment and emancipation, the contexts for learning and the place of Bourdieu's 'theory of practice.

1 It is acknowledged that basic skills provision occurs in many other venues in the community, such as colleges of FE and workplaces. For this study I am concentrating on standard, formal adult basic skills community provision which comes under the remit of Bridgetown Council.

2 "There's 80% free school meals at the local school and there's about, something like, 60-70% turnover in a year of children in the school, and its got a lot of single parents, quite a lot of women from abusive relationships, a lot of people in prison, its got a huge number of social problems." (Wendy, p2)

3 See Chapter 4 about 'Foyer' Federation

4 Founded in 1976 by HRH The Prince of Wales, the Prince's Trust helps young people realise their potential and transform their lives by giving them practical help, including financial assistance.

5 Nearly 4 years later staff working on New Deal in the local job centre reported that employers locally are mostly still unaware of the existence of national literacy and numeracy tests, and that many do still not understand New Deal itself, and what it might mean to their business. There is one local provider who routinely puts unemployed adults without formal English/Maths qualifications through the national tests and they receive a certificate from the provider ie not for the tests themselves, which employers accept.

6 Currently in the Northfield area there is dyslexic support and in-depth assessment, and language and literacy support for NVQ childcare courses, which have made a big difference to retention rates. There is work-based learning (council refuse collectors) and a citizenship course which ran in partnership with Fresco College and involved a youth worker and a basic skills tutor.

7 'Wrigglers' is the name of the mother and toddler group run at the family learning centre.

8 Credit unions tackle financial exclusion by providing low cost financial services to groups of individuals often excluded from accessing credit.

9 Sarah's GCSE results were: English Language A; English Literature A; German A; Maths B; Child Studies B; Home Economics B

10 Basic employment training, New Deal or FTEC (full time education and training) option get 26 weeks'; young people on Life Skills get 13 weeks but this can be extended if it is not felt to be sufficient; innovative basic skills (IBS), for those over 25yrs whose basic skills are below level 1, have a course of 8 weeks.

11 City and Guilds Wordpower and Numberpower were the 'old' accreditations available in a variety of Levels. These were superseded, following the introduction of the core skills national curriculum, by the national literacy tests which, at the time of this study, were being phased in.

12 New 13-week courses start weekly so the population of the group is constantly changing with a 'roll on, roll off' situation.

CHAPTER 7: ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

7.1 *Introduction*

In Chapter 2 I articulated the significance of social capital, empowerment and social identity and how this led me to Bourdieu's theory of social practice and to the 'powerful learning' typology. In this Chapter I intend to show how the reality of learners' experiences map to the typology and their journey towards empowerment or emancipation. To do this I will use Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' to analyse what my data shows, and summarise what it helps me to understand about my learners and how they are positioned in the world.

7.2 *Powerful Learners and Learning*

The typology first introduced in Chapter 2 is revisited here, with a view to helping to explain where learners in each case study are positioned. This is, as acknowledged earlier, a subjective concept. The typology is shown as a grid (see figure 7.1 following page) with empowerment to the left-hand side and emancipation to the right-hand side; agency – both individual and collective, is at the top, and structure – social, cultural and economic, at the bottom of the grid. Four quadrants within the grid are '*enablement*' and '*conformity*' to the left, and '*activism*' and '*liberty*' to the right; the former indicating empowerment, the latter indicating emancipation.

7.2.1 **ABE learners**

Laurence has a successful career and a wealth of social capital. He has social connections with a wide variety of people and the influence of his wife is evident in the cultural capital of their children. Laurence, like many other adult learners, dips in and out of learning. He likes the idea of learning for its own sake, but what

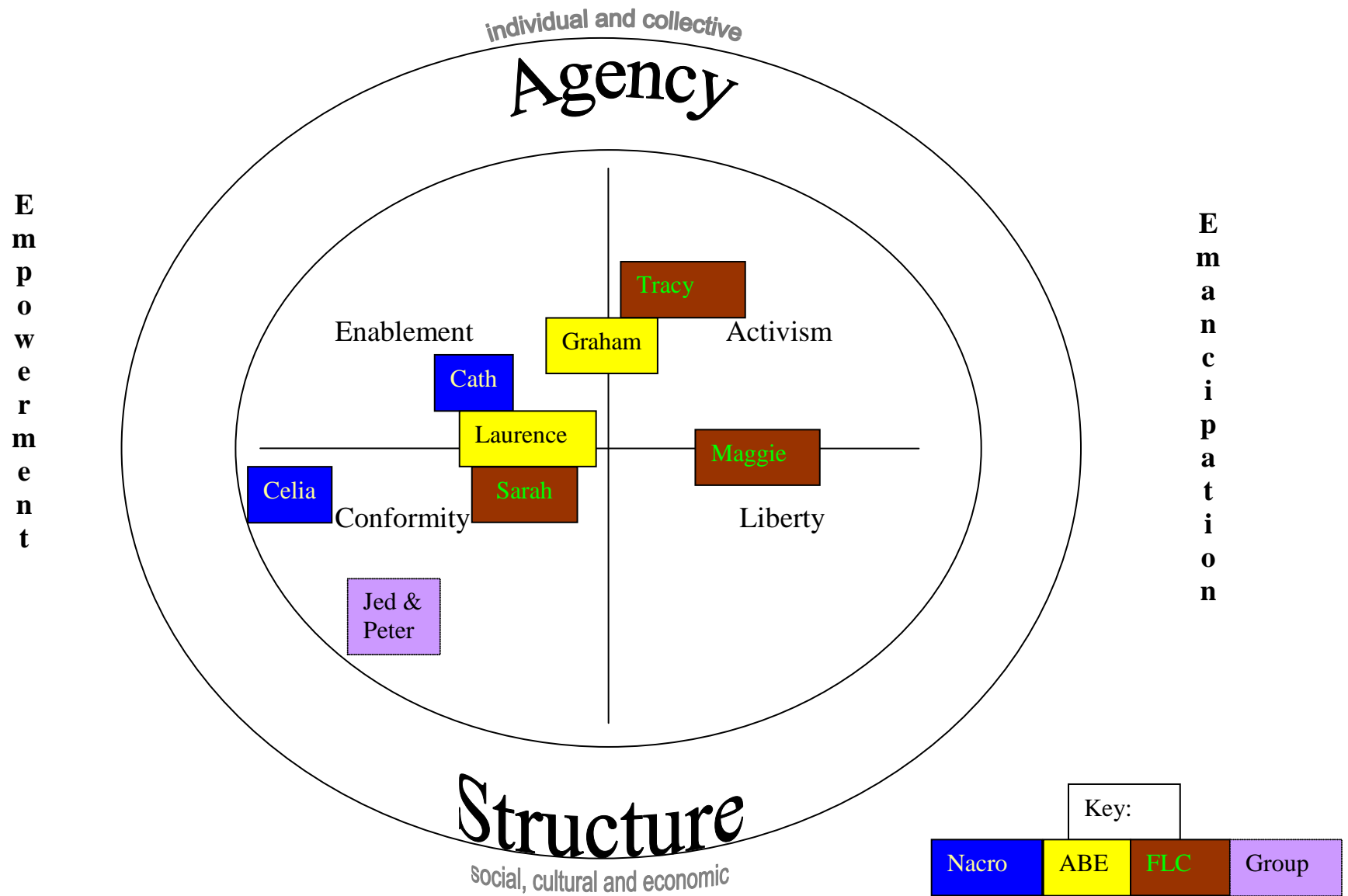


Figure 7.1 Powerful learning within the sites

prompts him to learn is driven by occupational imperatives. Once that immediate need is addressed he no longer sees the point in carrying on learning in a formal environment, but he does continue to carry out some activities which were begun during a learning episode, for example, by keeping a personal daily diary. He feels caught in a situation where he remains in a job which offers little in the way of personal development or 'using my brain' as he describes it, but, for economic reasons feels he cannot afford to move to something else. He has been offered promotion several times by his employers who see his potential to work wider across the company, but he feels this is too big a risk to take and might expose his 'weaknesses' in the area of writing and spelling. Crossan et al (2003), when discussing learning careers of learners, suggest that these:

...are contradictory and volatile. They do not travel in one direction alone, but can go into reverse, not once but many times. An explicit rejection of education may form a deeply rooted and recurring component of some individuals' sense of themselves and their place in the world. Yet these non-participant identities may coexist with episodic participation and with values which favour educational achievement in children. (Crossan et al, 2003, p65)

This would appear to describe Laurence's situation quite accurately. On the grid he remains on the left-hand side, showing agency to seek the learning he needs to cope with his current job, but seeing this as a 'quick fix' rather than long term development. The outcomes of his learning episodes therefore lead to him being enabled to undertake particular tasks demanded of him by others, but do not appear to move him into a position where he is either prepared or really interested in taking further risks, and he is shown as straddling '*enablement*' and '*conformity*'. However, he does not dismiss the possibility of returning to learning in the future and has the capacity to access the appropriate resources to do so.

Graham's interest and involvement in conservation and the environment generally, might indicate that he has high levels of social capital, but, while he may work with groups on particular projects most of his activity is as an individual, so there is little or no collective agency shown. In contrast to Laurence he currently does not work and has made a conscious decision to devote his time to learning so that he improves his chances of obtaining a better job. This decision has brought him into conflict with agencies such as the job centre, over the expectation that he should still be looking for employment. It is only by refusing benefits that he has not been diverted from his purpose. He has challenged some of the structures which might have prevented him taking action seeking an intensive period of learning, and been determined to see through his plan to 'better himself' through education. It might therefore be expected that he is developing cultural capital, albeit slower than he would like. While he is also shown on the left-hand side of the grid, he is moving more towards emancipation (on the right-hand side) but the frustration at his rate of progress has lead him to reconsider his options and may ultimately mean that he returns to work in a factory.

7.2.2 FLC learners

Ria *et al* in the group interview spoke passionately about the support they received, both from each other and from staff at the FLC. In times of difficulty the centre provided a safe haven, a place where they were neither judged nor excluded, with a guarantee of finding support from another human being. For many it seemed to be a replacement for family support, or as another dimension to this. I have not shown the FLC group interview participants on the grid, as it is

difficult to separate them sufficiently to do so, however, the overall impression is that they would predominantly appear on the left-hand side within the '*conformity*' area, contained by the structures within which they live. What is clear is that the work of the FLC supports the New Labour policy of raising levels of social capital, and it may also enhance the social capital of their families.

Sarah, despite successful academic outcomes from her initial schooling, is still worried about failure and this has inhibited her life choices to date. She has always had strong family support, but the habitus within which she currently functions does not consider furthering her academic studies as particularly useful or necessary. I would agree with Merrill (2004) that this is primarily due to her working class background, probably re-enforced by her gender. Sarah shows very little agency outside the family group, although since her child started full-time schooling she has involved herself more at the centre, and is beginning to be more active and even talks about 'one-day' chairing the management committee. Sarah appears in the bottom left quadrant of the grid, firmly in the empowerment side and showing '*conformity*' rather than '*enablement*'. While this is true for now there does appear to be capacity for her to become a more active agent in her own life, and she may well do this in time.

Tracy has a longstanding relationship with the area and the local community and cares deeply for other women in her immediate locality. She invests in developing the social and cultural capital of her children, striving to give them life chances which she did not experience given her disrupted childhood. Tracy has career aspirations which are going to be hard to achieve (becoming a social worker) as her lack of social identity and cultural capital would appear to make this very

difficult. Once Tracy feels she can trust an individual then they are allowed to get close to her, but this does not happen easily and people have to prove themselves to her first. Tracy's attitude to others in a similar position to herself, and her capacity to take action on their behalf would indicate that she is in the upper half of the grid, both *enabled* and showing *activism* through individual and collective agency. She rejects being stifled by structures which inhibit what can happen and is prepared to fight for what she thinks *should* be done. While Tracy is well and has the support she needs on a personal level then this appears to be how she acts, but it does feel somewhat fragile, as though she could easily be diverted from her purpose.

Maggie is someone who has a strong disposition to learn and who also encourages her own family in their learning endeavours. She has friends and colleagues from a variety of areas of her life and manages to combine studying, work and home life in what appears to be an effective way. She knows what she wants from life and is following a path which will enable her to achieve this, although it has not always gone according to plan and she sometimes feels frustrated by what she perceives as slow progress. Maggie states that having received support from the FLC at a low point in her own life, she now wants to pay something back and she does this by remaining on the management committee and visiting when she can. I have placed Maggie into the right-hand side of the grid, straddling *activism* and *liberty*, as she shows agency, both individual and collective, and a capacity to make her own decisions and choices, finding her way through the opportunities afforded and situations encountered.

7.2.3 Nacro learners

None of the adult learners interviewed at Nacro appeared to have resources to support them in terms of social capital or cultural capital and their habitus was more about survival than learning. Jed and Peter (from the group interview) display little in the way of self esteem or confidence, although there is evidence that the learning they are undertaking is beginning to help them grow in confidence as they consider what their options are. Neither could be described as fully included in society as they live on benefits and are in and out of work. Both have to reconsider their occupational status and direction because of health problems and are finding they lack the necessary skills to make much headway with this. Jed shows some capacity to support others who he sees as worse off than himself and is close to his family. Peter was confused as to why he lost his last job but seemed to accept this as inevitable in some way or another. Both were entirely reactive to the structures in which they found themselves, doing what was expected of them without particularly questioning why. They are shown in the bottom left quadrant within '*conformity*' as they did not appear to make decisions for themselves about many aspects of their lives, and are content to be 'done to'. It may be that with the educational input that they desire they could be encouraged to move into a more active role, but this is doubtful in the twenty-six weeks available.

Celia has a family who have always supported her and continue to do so. She had a happy home life but was less happy at school because she was bullied for being 'too quiet'. She drifted into factory work and was a loyal employee. Redundancy caused a bout of depression where she could not leave the house. Her family

helped her through this and also viewed her attending the centre as a very positive step. She now wants to move into retail work and is optimistic that this will be achievable. Celia is enjoying her coursework and being part of a group; she too feels that she is 'using her brain' for the first time. It seems that the support of her family may have protected Celia over the years and she is now just beginning to find her own way in life. She is shown in the '*conformity*' quadrant, but edging up towards '*enablement*' as she grows in confidence and belief in her ability.

Cath, in contrast, had a very unhappy childhood, working with her sibling to provide a home for the younger children and her parents. She later found herself in an abusive relationship in which she felt helpless, but the strength of her feelings for her daughter and the support they gave each other pulled them through. Despite many low times in her life Cath remains optimistic about the future. She invests in her daughter's development, and is proud to see her as 'different' to the rest of the family. Now that she is well again Cath knows what she wants to do with her life and is making sure that she gives herself the best chance to achieve this. Despite the difficulties of her earlier life Cath shows agency and a disposition to make choices about her life now. She is shown in the upper left quadrant in '*enablement*' but would appear to have the capacity to move into a more active position as her confidence grows.

I found no evidence in any of the three sites to add weight to the argument by Blackwell and Bynner (2002) that a poor early education can lead to early parenthood, although Sarah, Tracy (from the FLC) and Cath (from Nacro) all had children at a reasonably young age. It is probably true to say that once becoming

a parent the educational aspirations of the mother was put on hold, to concentrate on the immediate task of parenting.

7.2.4 Social factors

The importance of social networks was mentioned in Chapter 2, together with the difficulties for some members of society to establish these. Maggie and Laurence probably have the most developed social networks, with Maggie having a variety of networks in which she functions. Graham, Cath, Sarah and Thesesa have more limited networks although Graham does have his art and conservation networks if he chooses to use them. There is strong anecdotal evidence from Nacro that 'belonging' to the community of bricklayers is an example of effective learning in a community of practice, as discussed by Wenger (2000), as is Maggie's learning within the school environment.

Other than Tracy, Maggie and Cath few of the learners displayed a social identity (Jenkins, 1996, 1998) which Putnam (1995, 2000) found to be necessary for the production of social capital. Social capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1999, 2000, Cattell 2004, Hall 1999, Preston 2003 and Putnam 1995, 2000) begins in the family and builds up over time, moving into other areas of social activity. It is centred around issues of reciprocity, mutuality, trust and common good. Maggie, is probably the only learner who shows all these capabilities, with Tracy and Cath, in line with Hall (1999), Putnam (1995) and Ranson (2000), mentioning trust as important to them. The remaining learners appear to function almost exclusively within the family unit. The exception to this is Graham who, other than from his environmental work, which is now spasmodic, appears currently to have little social capital. It

may be that lack of employment, poverty and exclusion, as Cattell (2004) suggests, means high levels of social capital are not available to these learners and there is evidence, particularly from the Nacro site, that Field (2003) is correct when he suggests that to develop social capital an individual needs to be able to navigate uncertainty in their life. Hall (1999), Preston (2003) and Schuller (2003) suggest that social capital can lead to educational success, and it does appear that the evidence from Maggie, who shows altruism in her ability to involve herself in civic participation (at university, school, and the FLC) and to show reciprocity in her actions, would support this.

7.3 *Empowerment and emancipation*

Graham, Maggie and Tracy display 'power with' which Norton (2002) describes as based on respect and a capacity for collective agency with their communities. They could also be described as Giddens' (1984, 1998) 'purposive agents' showing both 'discursive consciousness knowledge' and 'practical consciousness knowledge'; Cath shows some capacity and Laurence and Sarah only a little. Giving and receiving support to show relational agency described by Edwards and MacKenzie (2005) did seem a factor in each of the sites, but was a particularly strong feature of the FLC with all three learners, and those who took part in the group interview, mentioning this. In the Nacro centre Jed and Cath showed relational agency, but in ABE only Laurence showed this, and this was in his working life, not within the centre.

While Graham, Tracy, Maggie and to some extent Cath all show the ability for critical reflection which Brookfield (1987, 1995) and Mezirow (1991) feel is

important so that individuals do not see themselves as helpless within the world, other learners did not show this capacity. Jed, Peter and Celia, as well as some of the FLC group interviewees, could be seen as socially excluded because of their lack of economic, social and political involvement in life (Cattell, 2004). It is hard to see how the socially excluded could participate in effective adult learning given the social factors which impinge on their lives, and this appeared to be true for those suffering with mental and other health problems and other material disadvantages which seemed to prevent them from participation.

Graham in particular seems to fit Foucault's (1993) description of learning reaffirming a position of little power, and this could also apply to the Nacro learners who are restricted to a relatively limited curriculum within non-negotiable timescales. Self-belief and confidence needed to show 'power from within' (Norton, 2002) was only really in evidence from Maggie in all aspects of her life. Laurence does display this, but only in his work life and Graham, while he used to show this capacity, is now doing so less and less as time goes on. In contrast, both Tracy and Cath are beginning to develop in this area. For individuals to have a voice, to experience equality and social justice (Foley 1998, Freire 1972, Griffiths 2003, Martin 2000, Merrill 2004, Thompson 2000), is obviously crucial, but only Maggie, Tracy, Cath and, within part of his life, Laurence, feel that this is true for them. Other learners do not. Williamson (1998) describes lack of power by communities over decisions made for them by others and although Graham has a vision about global issues and makes efforts to add to the debate, and Tracy wants to be more involved in her local community but is unsure how to do so effectively, neither could be said to be influential or to have any control.

In conclusion, returning to Foucault (1993), who said that while empowerment of others might be possible, emancipation cannot be conferred on a person because 'liberty is a practice', it seems that the evidence from these case studies would indicate that this is true. On the typology grid only Maggie is moving towards '*liberty*', and this appears to be because she is on a journey which she is determined to complete and has support in her endeavours. Worryingly, it seems that findings from recent NRDC research (Parsons and Bynner, 2005) who found that there are particular problems for adults, especially men, with very low basic skills, leading isolated lives and being prone to depression, is mirrored in this study. These socioeconomic problems must not go unchallenged, or we are at risk of depriving members of our society from the education to which they are entitled and deserve.

The conceptual framework around powerful learners and learning has proved useful in describing the *experiences* of these adult learners. I now return to the thinking tools of Bourdieu to help explain *why* the learners are positioned as they are.

7.4 A theory of practice

In Chapter 2 I discussed the importance of agency and structure. Bourdieu (1999, 2000) sees agency and structure as linked; objectified history manifests as field in structures and mechanisms while subjective history is embedded in the individual and through the habitus disposes agents to act. The linking of habitus and field, and the generation of different kinds of capital, gives the possibility of different practices; this is Bourdieu's theory of practice.

Both Bourdieu (1999, 2000) and Haugaard (2002) suggest that finding success in a learning environment can begin to change the disposition of an individual. Laurence and Graham within ABE, Tracy, Sarah and Maggie within FLC and Cath within Nacro have all achieved learning successes of some kind, and have shown 'identity shifts' (Edwards and MacKenzie 2005). This may be because they have been able to be reflexive (Bateson 1972, Bourdieu 1999, 2000) and going through what Shilling (2004) describes as a process of 'disruptive selves'. Significantly Maggie perceives herself as 'a teacher', Tracy and Cath can see themselves succeeding as their confidence grows, but Graham, having shown a disposition to learn and experienced a change in habitus, now seems less convinced that this is for him. Some of the learners, Graham, Laurence, Tracy and Maggie in particular, show a 'disposition to engage with opportunities for action' (Gorard et al 2001) but only Tracy and Maggie seem able to transfer this deliberative or agentic action (Dreier 2000, Edwards et al 2002) to other contexts.

According to Bourdieu (1990a) members of a class share a similar habitus because they share similar conditions of existence. Certainly evidence from these case studies would support this as all the learners had working class roots, some came from single-parent families, some were financially disadvantaged and lived in relatively poor housing. Laurence, Tracy, Peter, Jed, Celia and Cath all found initial schooling difficult and were classed as having 'special needs' or as being 'difficult'. In addition, Laurence, Graham, Tracy and Cath expressly mentioned a lack of family support while they were growing up. Together these add evidence to Bourdieu's description of habitus as embedded history which, for these learners was not positive. Interestingly both Sarah and Maggie felt they had good support

from their family and an acceptable experience of initial schooling, but while Maggie has a strong disposition to learn Sarah is reluctant, despite significant successes in the past. It would seem that the only explanation for this is her relative lack of cultural capital which is in contrast to Maggie's experience of huge investment of cultural capital by her mother.

A field, adult education for example, is a structured system of social positions and certain resources are needed to be able to compete in the field; these include social capital, cultural capital, economic capital and symbolic capital. Within the field of adult education, Graham feels he is struggling for acceptance, Laurence is staking economic capital as an investment in his daughter's lives and values education, but not really for himself. Maggie, despite some setbacks, is succeeding in higher education and Cath is determined to keep learning now that she has begun. This 'struggle' described by Bourdieu (1999, 2000), is evident in all their stories. The dispositions which they, as agents', exhibit, in turn generate meaningful practices, such as helping out in school, and leads to changes in their perception of the world. Bourdieu (1990a) believes that the earlier an individual is embedded in a field then the less likely they are to be able to *consciously* understand the rules 'of the game' but appear to have an instinct for how to behave. This embedded understanding is not knowledge, and therefore cannot simply be learnt, it has to become part of one. It seems to me that Graham typifies this sense of out-sidedness, he knows what he wants to do and realises that education might be the key to obtain it, but he has not yet been able to adapt to an appropriate habitus and does not have a 'feel for the game', so crucial for success in a field according to Bourdieu (1990b). According to Bourdieu agents need to look beyond objective facts and appreciate 'the game' in which these

facts are staked. He suggests that not appreciating both these factors will result in misrecognition. I maintain that this is what has happened in Graham's life as, although he understands that he needs to obtain qualifications to enable him to work in his chosen field he does *not* understand 'the game' of education in which he is involved. While he admits that he needs a degree to enter work as an environmental officer, he also resents that his pre-GCSE is insufficient. His expectations are therefore unrealistic. The habitus which Graham exhibits is complex as he has always personally believed in the benefits of learning and has gone to some lengths to pursue interests which did not fit with those of his circle of friends. Adopting a habitus which gives him what he seeks is proving problematic.

The practices available for individuals to follow are, according to Bourdieu (1998), constrained by both the habitus and field, which may not be in agreement with each other. Practice for Bourdieu always involves action on behalf of the individual. Warde (2004) helpfully suggests that the tension which can exist between field and the practice taking place within it, is because while field is characterised by being competitive and strategic, practice is more co-operative. Gaining credentials by accessing and utilising resources within a field may offer prestige, in the form of symbolic capital, but not everyone will be well-suited to the field in which they are practising. Learners in ABE and Nacro seem, in most cases, to struggle with balancing their employment and financial needs with learning as an adult.

In chapter 2 I introduced the term codification, used by Bourdieu (1990b). This 'coding' gives authority to the activity being coded, that is, it becomes almost a

shorthand for those within a field and implies that it has the acceptance and authority of all those within the field, even when it does not. The new National Tests in basic literacy skills could be described as codification. The government and policy-makers who have implemented them give the impression, to employers and learners alike, of achieving a certain formal level of 'progression' which far outweighs the value of the tests themselves. The real value of the capital staked by learners is in the ongoing learning, not in the outcome of one multi-choice test, but the government/ funders/ policy-makers are interested primarily in the number of 'positive outcomes' of learners jumping through this hoop to add to their statistical base of 'successes' and not the learning which has taken place. The significance of the tests are therefore 'misrecognised' by those in the adult education field. This misrecognition is mirrored in the FLC where there could be an expectation that 'learning' for these women will somehow make the family 'better' in some way and in Nacro where twenty-six weeks' education input is perceived as rehabilitation. In all cases the teachers and workers themselves learn to 'play the game' if they are to work within the official adult education sector.

Graham and Maggie particularly display a generative habitus as they move from one area of their life to another, Maggie having many different fields in which she operates, but increasingly feeling comfortable within the field of adult education as she moves towards her goal of becoming a teacher. Graham and Maggie are also gaining cultural capital within the field of adult education, albeit at a slower rate for Graham than Maggie. This would appear to be because Maggie already had the capacity to function in this field because of the cultural capital invested in her by her mother throughout her childhood while Graham is having to generate this

capital for himself and, not surprisingly, is finding it hard, and at times demoralising, to persevere. Laurence is investing economic capital in the upbringing and education of his daughters which, according to Jenkins (1992), is likely to be converted to increased cultural capital in the future.

In *Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu 1990a) Bourdieu describes that objectivism makes the principles of the theorist universal, while subjectivism makes the experiences of the subject universal. Agents make choices between available practices, and they base these choices on the conditions of possibility. Some actions they will consider as being unthinkable:

The most improbable practices are therefore excluded as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable. (Bourdieu, 1990a, p54)

Many of the learners, in particular Sarah and Tracy, exhibit just these tendencies, by appearing to discount certain possibilities.

Merrill (2004) and Mezirow (1991, 2000) amongst others, suggest that education should be transformative. Within the case studies probably the most vivid evidence of this comes from Cath, who learnt to read as an adult with her daughter and has taken advantage of her twenty-six weeks at Nacro to consolidate and affirm her progress. Becoming an adult learner has enabled her to make some significant life choices and to feel good about herself and her place in the world.

There is evidence from Maggie's story that her disposition to learn and succeed in higher education has caused her some conflict in other parts of her life, as found by Merrill:

Learning also distanced some people in HE from friends and relatives as their cultural capital increased. (Merrill 2004, p87)

It seems to me that Graham has always struggled with this issue, as indicated by his extreme actions to hide his interest in art from his peers.

As has been discussed earlier, habitus is a structuring structure that is structured by objective possibilities. Agents make choices and decisions based on what they view as possible, such as achieving a particular career aspiration. The habitus, being both transferable and creative in new situations is therefore capable of change, and Maggie illustrates this in practice. She is not only beginning to think like a teacher, she can also speak and behave like one and is accepted by the teaching community at her placement school as one of them. It could be argued that her ability to do this stems from the cultural capital she has which has enabled her to practise successfully within the field of adult education.

Bourdieu (1998) acknowledges that the fields of power and gender relations overarch all other fields. Learners in this study are generally not powerful. The New Labour vision of a modern citizen is via education and skills (for example: New Deal and the aim of having 50% of school leavers entering HE) and can be viewed as imposing rather than enabling. There is a tension for adult educators who need to see the individual in the social context in which they are embedded, not in isolation as an individual agent.

7.5 The contexts within which learners learn

The institutional structures which impinge on this study are varied. Nacro is a relatively inflexible and highly controlled centre of learning; ABE is also controlled

in the sense that it is funded and monitored by government. The FLC, because it is functioning outside the formal field of adult learning, is less controlled in some ways, but dependent on multi-agencies for funding, and has a diverse remit in terms of delivery. All are trying to give the best service they can to their learners. Within Nacro and ABE most of the learning opportunities appear to be formal, or, in the case of some outreach work in ABE, semi-formal. All have paperwork to complete for monitoring and evaluation purposes and to ensure funding. *Skills for Life* (DfES 2001a), the *Adult Literacy Core Curriculum* (DfES, 2001b) and responses to Moser's '*A Fresh Start*' (DfEE 1999) were all in evidence in these two centres. Staff were well-aware of policies which impinged on them and the options available to learners in terms of entitlement to education. It also seems that the language of '*Opportunity and Excellence*' (DfES 2003) permeates the adult education field where it is up to the individual to succeed in their endeavours. In addition, learners and staff at Nacro were very conscious of the tight restrictions imposed by New Deal and other 'back to work' initiatives which dictated almost every minute of their work. The FLC, in contrast, appeared little affected by any education policies and was more concerned with economic, social and welfare policies, as one might expect. The learners here were encouraged to grow as individuals in a mutually supportive environment and, as they became more independent, to access learning opportunities in the local community and beyond. This informality appears to be its strength.

It is interesting to note that while one might expect the adult education field to always be organised around educational practices, Warde (2004) critiquing Bourdieu's (1990a) notion of field, suggests that this is not always true:

...the concept of field is incapable of appreciating non-strategic action, purposeful behaviour in non-competitive circumstances, internal goods arising from participation in practice, and discrepancies between competence and social position (Warde, 2004, p16)

The family learning centre is a field which is concerned with social networks and not education per se, although that is a subsidiary agenda, and therefore not all the women are equally prepared to position themselves within the adult education field. Equally, according to Warde (2004), some learners bring generative dispositions to a field, but what they are then required to do, how they are required to act in their position in the field, may not be something that they are well suited to do, and they may then reject it.

From my perspective the adult education field has become more uniform and conforming. Funding regimes are more restricted under the LSC and bidding processes ever more complex. The kinds of activity provided under the 'adult education' umbrella has reduced to tightly controlled and regulated programmes, with targets for enrolment, progression and measurable outcomes. Many fringe activities had to drop from the mainstream provision because they did not fit. This, in line with Thomson (2005) I would argue, is an example of educational policy as codification.

Writers who refute the 'deficit model' of adult education (including Barton 1994) would also find difficulty with the recent move in the language of policy which, instead of talking of social class, now describes social exclusion/inclusion and disadvantage. This appears to lay blame on individuals, and indeed some communities, for a lack of aspiration or ability. It is easy to see how some New Labour policies expect action on the part of these 'disadvantaged' members of

society to get themselves into a position where they too can contribute to the UK economy.

One of the significant areas of development recently has been in the use of partnerships, especially, but by no means exclusively, in regeneration projects. The premise underpinning partnership is that it assists in societal cohesion and inclusion and combats aspects of social exclusion and creates social capital within the community. While there is evidence of some successful partnerships, such as YALP and the ABE community projects in Whitelow, it may also be that, as Seddon et al (2005) suggest:

Their initiatives are usually too patchy and often too short-lived to address entrenched inequality. Indeed, they can exacerbate systematic disadvantage by focusing resources on specific included or recognised groups while further remaindering others who are excluded or unacknowledged. (Seddon et al, 2005, p568)

Certainly, a problem for ABE was the short-term and uncertain nature of funding available to establish and sustain partnership working. For learners at the FLC the recent regeneration of their area had significantly not involved any of them, although staff were involved.

The staff with whom these adult learners work have a common 'student-centred' approach. This is true both for the FLC, where the women and their needs are central to the work of the staff, and for the opposite situation at Nacro where learners are required to attend or face financial penalty. All the staff mentioned 'building confidence' or 'self esteem' of learners as an integral part of the service they provide, and many mentioned the importance of treating individuals as adults. Managers balance, sometimes with difficulty, the tensions of reconciling what policy dictates should happen with what they see as good practice for the

learners; mediating wherever they can to offer the best provision possible. They seem to want more than policy sometimes suggests because, as Merrill states:

Education is not just about vocational learning and jobs, as the government often implies: it is also a social encounter and experience. Adult education is about transformation, individually and in communities. (Merrill, 2004, p 75)

7.6 Summary

This study has revealed that:

- a) there is a social aspect to learning and support from others is important to learners
- b) building trusting relationships is important; this may stem from the impact of previous negative experiences of education
- c) managers and teachers are working within controlling structures but are attempting to give learners a positive experience of learning as an adult and offering real choices
- d) the individual habitus does seem to affect how individuals are positioned in a field, and to influence whether they can 'play the game'
- e) having certain kinds of capital, especially cultural capital, appears to influence learners' choices and decisions in life
- f) opportunities for learning need to be varied to suit individuals and their communities
- g) to be truly emancipatory learning must offer transformation.

Some implications of these findings are:

- 1) that any adult education provision needs to take account of the social nature of learning and capitalise on opportunities for group learning and learning in less formal contexts
- 2) that funding must be available and accessible without complex and time-consuming bidding processes and narrowing down of the curriculum for adults is counter-productive
- 3) that family, or other social structures, are crucial in engendering various capitals which are needed when competing in a field like adult education.

The three sites of adult learning selected for this study are very different. They range from provision of formal 'basic education' to an environment where participants are supported, and give support, through everyday life to become active agents in their own lives. It is therefore unlikely that practises in one site would necessarily transfer to another, but it does illustrate the importance of having a variety of options for adults to access as they struggle with being in and of society.

Fielding (1996) suggests that a 'vocabulary of emancipation' is used to 'entice and dupe' individuals into believing that this will be the result of education. It seems from the evidence in these case studies that, amongst the learners at least, there is little talk of emancipation, nor of empowerment. The staff working with them may well have such aspirations for their learners, but this does not appear to transfer to the learners themselves who are more concerned with gaining employment and a reasonable standard of living.

The final chapter will summarise this research project from its inception through to its conclusions. It will discuss what the data revealed and what the implications of this might be, both for these learners and workers, and for the future.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

8.1 *Introduction*

In this thesis I set out to explore the experience of adult learners and learning. The questions I wanted to investigate came from my own experience as a tutor in adult basic education, from my own experiences of learning as an adult and from reviewing the literature on this specific aspect of adult education. Although the numbers of case studies were small (three sites) I gained rich data to enable me to articulate 'what is going on' for these learners.

This study adds to the growing body of knowledge about adult learners and learning. It reinforces findings from larger surveys from the NRDC, (see for example, Atkin *et al* 2005; Jupp and Roberts 2005) and from other life-history research (see for example, Downing 2005; du Vivier 1992; Gallacher *et al* 2002, Merrill 1999), about the fragile nature of some adults and the critical importance of the social aspects of learning.

8.2 *The research*

From my experience as a basic skills tutor in ABE I had questioned why some learners appeared to 'move on' while others did not. I kept a research journal, alongside my teaching, in which I recorded my thoughts and feelings about learners and my role in their learning. After identifying my research questions (see following section) I designed my study. Using a case study approach I interviewed learners and key staff in three different sites of learning; ABE, FLC and Nacro, which offered a variety of learning opportunities in the local area. Each site offered a different kind of learning to its participants.

In previous chapters I have reviewed adult education and learning and the major policies which impact on the field. Through investigating social capital and issues of empowerment and emancipation I developed a typology called '*powerful learners and learning*'. This led me to use Bourdieu's thinking tools of habitus and cultural capital to explain how the adults in my case studies are positioned in the world.

Despite my intentions that the research participants could be transformed by the process of being involved in the research, as advocated by Lather (1986), I do not feel that this was as significant an outcome as I had anticipated. There is little doubt that participants appreciated both the opportunity to talk about their lives and experiences and being given the space in which to do so. This went some way to enable them to reflect on choices they had or had not made through their lives, but it did not appear of itself to make them more 'powerful learners'. There would need to be more dialogue and activism on the part of the participants for this to occur, and the design of this study did not allow for sufficient interactions.

8.3 *What the data revealed*

I now take each research questions in turn and give a *brief* comment about my findings in relation to each one for the learners in this study:

1. What do we know about adult learners and learning?
 - We know that each adult is an individual but that they cannot be separated from the communities in which they live and work. Adults have different preferred learning styles and different motivations to learn.
2. What do we know about the contextual settings in which adult learners and learning are located?

- The formal provision is tightly regulated and controlled with funding available only for projects which fit precise criteria which are often functionally, or employment, led. Informal learning can be just as valuable and for some is crucial to begin to allow them to make real choices about their lives. Provision needs to be responsive to the needs of the individual and their community and to be sited close to where they live.
3. Why is adult learning an issue and for whom?
 - Adult learning is an issue for everyone in society. There are the economic reasons for having a workforce able to adapt and take on increasing technologies and work in progressive ways. There are the societal reasons, for those adults currently excluded from learning (1 in 4 people say education is not for people like them – Aldridge and Tuckett, 2003) and issues of social justice for all members of society.
 4. How might a conceptual framework be devised that will enable the experiential accounts of adult learners to be described and understood?
 - By exploring issues around social capital, social identities, cultural capital and examining dispositions to learn, I decided that 'powerful learners and learning' depended on individuals being able to make informed choices about their lives. I state that the more powerful a learner becomes the closer they come to true emancipation through liberty.
 5. How might the experiences of adult learners and learning shape and inform the development of localised support networks?
 - The social aspect of learning cannot be overstated. Support from others is crucial for effective learning to take place, as is varied provision to suit individual needs. Adults prefer to learn in their own communities surrounded by people with whom they are comfortable. Relationships with teachers are a vital component for successful learning experiences.

It appears that what matters is not only that opportunities for adult learning exist, but that they offer opportunity for all adults, not just a proportion. Principles of social justice (Griffiths, 2003) and radical education (Martin 2000, Merrill 2004, Thompson 2000) would seem to be important, but in many ways appear to be ignored by recent policy which emphasises the economic rather than the social implications of learning. Learners do access learning for a variety of reasons, and there was evidence to support du Vivier's (1992) findings that while these personal reasons can be complex they are compounded by issues of social and

economic deprivation. There was also evidence of significant impact on learners of negative experiences of schooling. Many of the learners in my study did appear to be emotionally dependent on their teachers, which was warned about by Moore (1983), but this may be because they were at a stage in their life where support was more necessary than learning.

Most learners appear to be empowered to a degree, but the question remains, empowered to do what? Policies aim to create a more qualified and educated workforce and the evidence from my case studies would indicate that adults are being offered, or in some instances coerced, into learning situations, but it certainly does not seem that many individuals are being 'transformed' and liberated by what is on offer to them. It is the few, maybe those whose habitus can accommodate the necessary changes, who appear to succeed and really learn for themselves, and for their wider society.

All my learners are originally working class. Many had disrupted childhoods and/or schooling but one, Maggie, stands out as having a relatively privileged upbringing. She comes from a family where her mother invested in generating cultural capital for her children and where there were other members of the family who had occupational success – for example, her aunt who was a teacher. Even these relative advantages did not entirely protect her from the difficulties she has had to overcome, but they gave her a head start. Other learners, such as Cath and Graham, who it could be argued are further behind in this educational journey than Maggie, look likely to meet more barriers. For learners like Peter and Celia it seems that the following, as Merrill suggests, is true:

The voices of working-class adult learners disclose that for many learning is a struggle, a risk, and often not an easy option. It is a battle against external constraints such as institutional barriers or finance as well as personal and family ones. (Merrill, 2004, p92)

The conceptual framework which led to the '*powerful learners and learning*' typology allowed me to describe learners' experiences using a 'shorthand' for all the factors which impinge on adult learners. It added a visual representation which is useful. The limitations of the time spent with some of the learners means that it is only a representation of what I found out from the one interview in most cases. I also acknowledge that the subjective nature of this construct makes it a highly personal account of these learners' experiences.

Bourdieu's theory of practice enabled me to explain why these adult learners experience learning as they do. It helps understanding of the way in which both agency and structure impact on learners and how learners' dispositions, through the habitus, manifest. It takes into account individuals' histories and their current situations and therefore how they are positioned in the world. It does not however, suggest how this situation might change, other than by revealing 'the problem' and therefore allowing adults to see where they might begin to make choices.

This study did not address other types of adult learning provision and exploration of experiences within outreach and drop-in centres would add further to the evidence of effective adult learning.

8.4 *What are the implications of these findings?*

It is clear that any adult education needs to be tailored to what the learners want and need. Formal mainstream provision is inappropriate for some and informal opportunities need to be developed and maintained. These need to be localized and relevant to the learners and this may require some 'thinking outside the box' on behalf of providers to reach the most marginalized. Funding has to accommodate this variety of learning opportunities and short term investment is not good enough. Learners also need to be able to trust others to build social capital and enable them to build social networks within which they feel comfortable. They then need the support of others, including teachers, peers and advisors, throughout their lives.

The small number of sites of learning and the low number of learners involved, make this work a 'singularity' (Bassey, 1995), but there appears to be evidence that without adequate support, both in the learning situation and within life generally, adults will struggle to succeed as learners. Evidence from the small study of local learning completed recently by Downing (2005) also found that adequate support for learners was crucial, as was provision tailored to their specific needs and situation. Research from the NRDC (Atkin, Rose, and Shier, 2005) into rural provision of basic skills also found that the relationship between tutor and learner was a 'key factor for success' (p9) and that it was particularly important to fit the provision to the lives of the learners, not to the needs of the provider. They too found that learners preferred local provision and that accessibility was an issue. It would appear that evidence is mounting that tailoring the provision to the learners, even if this increases the cost, is more effective in the long term. Ivanic and Tseng (2005) remind us that 'social interaction is the

key mechanism through which learning takes place (p5), and this appears to be born out by the learners in this study.

For me personally this work has been a journey. As an adult learner, like some of the participants in the case studies, it has at times felt too difficult to continue. I know that the experience has changed me as an individual and made me more reflexive and open to change. Within my own learning experiences in higher education (HE) I have come to realize the importance of supportive networks and feel, in many ways, transformed by the experience, as found by Merrill (2005) in her study of women in HE.

Adult learning is a large and growing field and this work contributes to one small area of it, but nevertheless, does offer some insights into what learners need and want. It does not suggest how the situation for these learners might be changed in the short term, but by helping us understand more about how they are situated in the world it should offer possibilities to both policy and practice.

8.5 *Suggestions for further work*

Since beginning this study adult education and basic skills in particular has undergone major and significant changes. While at my starting point eight years ago there was little in the way of research evidence regarding basic skills this has now changed. This is primarily because of the work of the NRDC, prompted by '*Skills for Life*', and the associated higher status afforded to this aspect of adult education. The recent study by Downing (2005) into tailored provision for

individuals adds weight to my findings and suggests that more work could be undertaken in this area.

8.6 *And finally*

This concludes a personal journey as an adult learner. The research has reinforced my beliefs that successful learning for adults is only possible if the system allows for the needs of the individual learner, understanding the importance and influence of the habitus and their ability to generate and utilize cultural capital.

I am pleased about the increasing body of work which is now being undertaken and the parallel raising of the status of adult learning within the field of education.

For adult learners to be successful then there has to be local provision, tailored to individual or community need and expectation. The relationship between the learners and their teachers is key, as are other support networks which recognise the highly individualized nature of moving from educational disadvantage to learning as an adult.

Figures

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Appendix 1: Statistics

It is estimated that there are 4.2 million learners in Further Education (FE) in England of whom 83% were classed as adult learners (19 and over). Of this 83%, 71% were hoping to achieve entry level, level 1 or level 2 qualifications; over 50% of the younger learners were aiming for level 3 qualifications. Only 2% of learners were working towards level 4, 5 or HE qualifications.

The most popular courses for males are

- Construction
- Engineering, Technology & Manufacturing

The most popular courses for females are

- Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy

(DfES 2005).

According to the DfES and others, participation in learning decreases with age, from over 85% of 18-24 year olds to under 45% of 65-69 year olds. These data show 60% of adults (defined here as 16-69 years) involved in taught learning and over 75% participating in some kind of learning (DfES 2004a). This contrasts quite starkly with the data below which shows a much lower figure of participation, which can only partly be explained by the age difference of the sample (ie 17+).

Table 1: adult participation in learning

| Year | 2002 % | 2003 % | 2004 % |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Currently learning | 23 | 19 | 19 |
| Currently learning or within last 3 years | 42 | 39 | 38 |
| Currently learning or within last 3 years (West Midlands) | 40 | 36 | 39 |
| Currently learning or within last 3 years (under 25 yrs) | 75 | 71 | 71 |
| Currently learning or within last 3 years (socio-economic class ABs) | 60 | 53 | 54 |
| Currently learning or within last 3 years (socio-economic class DEs) | 25 | 25 | 23 |
| Not undertaken any learning since leaving f/time education (socio-economic class ABs) | 17 | 16 | 15 |
| Not undertaken any learning since leaving f/time education (socio-economic class DEs) | 58 | 53 | 57 |
| Not undertaken any learning since leaving f/time education | 36 | 35 | 36 |
| Unemployed who are current or recent learners | 46 | 40 | 46 |
| Data source: NIACE (2004) Adult Participation in Learning Survey Surveys 5000 adults aged 17+. Uses a very wide definition of learning which matches my own and <u>crucially</u> captures data on whether individuals perceive themselves as learners. | | | |

The NIACE (2004) survey also reports that:

- If an adult is already learning or has recently participated in learning then they are more likely to take up or continue further learning in the future

- Gender balance regarding participation is fairly equal, but more women than men report no participation since leaving full time education.

Data from the DfES (2004b) suggests that more males are participating in learning of any type than females, but similar numbers (around 60%) were involved in taught learning. Work-related training/education rates are around 14%, with younger workers receiving more than older workers.

Table 2: Statistics for Bridgetown from Census 2001

| | % | Ranking | Comment |
|---|----------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| Employed | 51.6 | 361/376 | |
| Unemployed | 2.1 | | |
| No qualifications | 37.1 | 39/376 | |
| Highest qualification of degree or over | 16.6 | 229/376 | |
| Owner occupied housing | 60.4 | 339/376 | |
| Overcrowded | 9.6 | 41/376 | |
| Looking after home/family | 8.0 | 9/376 | |
| Lone parent with dependent children | 9.6 | 1/34 | Compared to rest of West Midlands |
| Separated or divorced | 10.2 | 15/34 | Compared to rest of West Midlands |
| General health not good | 10.9 | 73/376 | |
| Limiting long term illness | 19.7 | 122/376 | |
| White | 70.4 | 34/34 | Compared to rest of West Midlands |
| Born outside EU | 13.4 | 1/34 | Compared to rest of West Midlands |
| Data source: National Statistics - Census 2001 http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001 | | | |

Table 3: Summary from National Adult Learning Survey (NALS 2002)

| | % |
|---|----------|
| Learning currently or within last 3 yrs* | 76 |
| Respondents with no qualifications | 29 |
| Respondents with basic skills difficulties | 52 |
| Unemployed | 68 |
| Caring for family | 52 |
| Living in deprived areas | 67 |
| Used ICT at some point | 70 |
| Aware of LearnDirect | 62 |
| Use of LearnDirect | 6 |
| Aware of UK on-line Centres | 27 |
| Used UK on-line Centres | 2 |
| Data source: National Adult Learning Survey (2002) | |

* outside continuous full time education

- lack of childcare and transport was cited as a reason for non participation by some adults.

November 2002 statistics of adult education enrolments (DfES 2004b) show:

Table 4: DfES (2004b) adult education enrolments by government office region

| | All enrolments | Male | female |
|---------------|-----------------------|-------------|---------------|
| England | 1,041,700 | 276,700 | 765,000 |
| West Midlands | 90,400 | 25,500 | 64,900 |

Table 5: Birmingham adult education statistics 2002-03

| | 02/03 FE | 02/03 ACL |
|--|----------|-----------|
| Participation rates | 23,029 | 21,918 |
| Retention rates | 77.82% | 76.53% |
| Achievement rates | 86.4% | n/a |
| Data source: BAES Annual report 2002-2003 | | |

FE = further education – all basic skills and accredited courses;

ACL = adult community learning – all non-vocational learning

Table 6: Literacy levels for 16 – 65 year olds in England

| Level | % |
|--|----|
| Entry level 1 or below | 3 |
| Entry level 2 | 2 |
| Entry level 3 | 11 |
| Level 1 | 40 |
| Level 2 or above | 44 |
| Data source: DfES (2003) Skills for Life national needs and impact survey | |

Adult basic education appears to be on schedule to meet government targets for achieving basic skills qualifications (1.5 million by 2007 and 2.25 million by 2010) with 750,000 adults already learning and gaining qualifications by 2004. Since 2001 2.4 million adults have taken up courses in literacy, language or numeracy (DfES 2004b). It is estimated that 57% of men in their 20s have low levels of literacy (RaPAL, 2004) vol 53 Spring p7.

LEAs and FE colleges are the main providers of mainstream formal adult education. Workers' Educational Association (WEA) are the largest voluntary adult education provider in the UK. They provide 10,000 courses per year across 9 regions.

Provision takes place in many venues including churches, mosques, workplaces, schools, community centres, prisons, libraries, art centres and clubs. This variety can be viewed as a strength.

Funding:

- LSC spends £9 billion per annum on FE and work-related training in England
- CBI reports that industry spends £23.4 billion per annum on staff training
- Level 2 qualifications are a higher funding priority than other basic skills courses
- Some courses which are appealing to traditional non-participants (eg taster courses) are in danger of disappearing because of lack of funds
- £6.5 million made available for training teachers in the adult core curriculum (literacy and numeracy) recommended by Sir Claus Moser in *A Fresh Start* (DfEE 1999) and introduced in Skills for Life (DfEE 2001).

Appendix 2:

Chronology of major policies and publications in adult education in Britain

| Date | Published by | Policy / Publication | Comment |
|---------|--------------|---|---|
| 1944 | DES | The Education Act | Introduced compulsory secondary education and state funding for Church schools |
| 1972-73 | DES | Raising of the School Leaving Age (RoSLA). Margaret Thatcher was Education Secretary | School leaving age raised to 16 years |
| 1973 | DES | Adult Education: A Plan for Development (Russell Report) | Outreach and community education |
| 1975 | DES | Report of the Committee of inquiry into Reading and the use of English | The Bullock Report: a language for life and a need to include adults' needs in any policies |
| 1975 | BBC | 'On the Move' campaign | Government led initiative to tackle illiteracy by using a media campaign |
| 1979 | ACACE | Report by the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education to the Secretary of State for Education and Science | To review progress on tackling poor basic skills following 3 years of literacy campaign (1975-1978) |
| 1988 | DES | The Education Reform Act | |
| 1992 | | Further and Higher Education Act | FEFC established |
| 1996 | SCAA | Review of qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds (Dearing Report) | Wider access to higher level qualifications. Led to introduction of Curriculum 2000 |
| 1997 | DfEE | Excellence in Schools (White paper) | Led to establishment of education action zones |

| | | | |
|-------------------|----------|--|--|
| 1997 | FEFC | Learning Works: Widening participation in further education (Kennedy Report) | Helena Kennedy's wide-ranging report on widening opportunities for adult learners |
| 1998 | DfEE | TECs: Meeting the Challenge of the Millennium: Consultation paper | (82 nationally) set up. Provide basic skills for unemployed |
| 1998 | DfEE | The Learning Age: a renaissance for a New Britain (Green Paper) | Led eventually to individual learning accounts and LearnDirect helpline |
| 1998 | DfEE/QCA | Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools: final report of the advisor group on citizenship London: QCA | Crick Report: education for citizenship introduced in schools |
| 1998 | DfEE | Further Education for the New Millennium | |
| 1999 | DfEE/DTI | Learning to Succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning and skills (White paper) | Adult participation in learning crucial to raise standards. Led to Connexions and an emphasis on careers |
| 1999 (Feb) | DfEE | Improving literacy and numeracy: a fresh start (Moser Report) | Report chaired by Sir Claus Moser to the Sec of State. Made 21 recommendations for action, most if not all of which, were taken up. Suggested a National Strategy and National Targets Most radical changes to basic skills provision ever made. |
| 2000 | DfEE | Learning and Skills Act | New funding for post-16 education and training. University for Industry (Ufi) formed |
| 2001a (Spring) | DfES | Skills for Life | Established the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit which then became Skills for Life Strategy Unit (SfLSU). National standards to literacy, numeracy and ESOL. National tests introduced. |

| | | | |
|-------|------|--|---|
| 2000 | BBC | 'Gremlin' media campaign | Controversial campaign launched as part of the Skills for Life agenda. |
| 2001b | DfES | Adult Literacy Core Curriculum | For the first time gave a core curriculum (Entry levels 1-3, Level 1 and Level 2). Only provision based on this core curriculum is funded by public money. |
| 2001 | | Learning and Skills Council established | National body with 47 regional councils. Took responsibility for adult education from LEAs, replaced TECs and established ConneXions for 13-19 year olds |
| 2002 | DfES | Extended Schools: Providing Opportunities and Services for All | Allowed schools to widen the facilities and services to family and community and to charge for this. Creation of 'extended' schools |
| 2002 | DfES | Success for All: Reforming further education and training | Colleges of FE (CFE) - funding tied to development plans and improved targets. Focuses on learner choices and successes. CoVEs, StARs |
| 2002 | | National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) established | To research specifically into literacy and numeracy |
| 2002 | DfES | 14-19: Extending opportunities, raising standards (Green paper) | Social exclusion and vocational qualifications |
| 2003 | DfES | Towards a unified e-learning strategy | |
| 2003 | DfES | 21 st Century Skills: Realising our potential (White paper) | Local partnerships. Established Skills Alliance. Personal and community development; opportunities for pensioners; ICT skills; economic prosperity in a competitive world |
| 2003b | DfES | Opportunity and excellence (White paper) | Based on 2002 Green Paper 14-19 |

| | | | |
|---------------|--------------------------------|---|--|
| 2003 | DfES Research Report 490 | The Skills for Life survey – A national needs and impacts survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills | |
| 2004 | | Educational Maintenance Awards (EMA) | 16-19 yr olds receive a grant to stay in f/time education |
| 2004 (Oct) | | Working Group on 14-19 Reform, the Tomlinson Report | Valued work-related and work-based learning |
| 2005 (Feb) | DfES | 14-19 Education and Skills (White paper) | Response to Tomlinson Report. |
| Due 2006 | | National Employer Training Programme | Announced by the Chancellor Autumn 2004. To formalise work-based education/training responsibilities |

Department for Education and Science (DES)

Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)

Department for Education and Skills (DfES), following General Election in 2001

Appendix 3

Individual interview schedule

Preamble: We are doing some research on how people learn. We'd like to ask you some questions about how you think you have learnt, what has helped you to learn and perhaps how you have helped others to learn or to become people who are keen on learning. We know that learning happens everywhere, so we are interested in all kinds of experiences and not just those that happen in schools. We've arranged the interview in sections and will ask you some questions to prompt your thinking. We will not attach your name to anything you say so the interview will be entirely confidential. You can have a copy of the interview transcript if you would like one.

Starts tape: Can I just confirm your name and ask how old you are?

Today is (date) and we are in (venue.)

Section One: (Perspectives on the neighbourhood and introduction to family and family centre).

1. Can you tell me a bit about this area? How long have you lived here? What do you like about the area? Is there anything you don't like? Has the area changed much in the time you have lived here? In what ways?

2. Do your family live in the neighbourhood? *(Explore different family members).* What kind of contact do you have with your family?

3. What about other friends? What things do you like to do? Are there opportunities to do these locally? Are there things you would like to do but can't?

4. How long have you been going to the (Centre)? What do you like about the Centre? What kind of things do you like to do when you are there?

We will come back to talk in more detail about the Centre. Next section is about the kind of learning that goes on with family and friends.

Section Two: (Informal Learning with family and friends)

5. Did you have hobbies or things you liked doing as a child/teenager? What kind of things did you do? Where did you do them? Who did you do them with? What kind of skills and strengths did you develop?

(prompts might include activity related skills or social and communication skills).

6. What about now? Do you enjoy doing similar things? Where? Who with? What skills are you developing?

7. Can you think of something you do where you feel that you are learning (it could be cooking with your family, or decorating, a chat at the health centre...) Can you talk me through what you would be doing, what you think you are getting out of it?

8. What helps you to do these things? *(Explore personal and contextual affordances and constraints. Prompts could include practical help such as lifts, babysitting or more subtle forms of support, such as encouragement)*

9. What things would you like to if you had the chance?

10. Is there anything that stops you doing things you would like to do?

Informal Learning: community activity

11. Are there other places where you feel that you are learning? (Prompts: clubs, religious group, union etc.) How long have you been involved? What kind of activities are you involved in? Who with? What kind of skills are you developing? How are you changing as a person?

Informal Learning: work

12. Have you any paid work experience? What kind? What kind of things have you learnt from work? Who helped you to learn at work?

Section Three: (the learner in the family)

Here we are talking about how people become learners and how their families can help them.

13. You have described some of the things you enjoy doing or are involved in. Do you see yourself as someone who is still learning?

14. You have mentioned some things you would like to do. Do you have any other ambitions? Can you think of anyone who might help with these?

15. What about your family? How do they support you? Who gives you support? Are there any ways in which your family might support you more?

16. Have you helped any of your family or friends with their learning? Who? What kind of help have you given them? Were there ways you would have liked to help but couldn't? Could you describe these?

17. Do your family and friends use services to help them as learners?
(*Explore libraries, after-school clubs, nurseries, community groups etc.*)

Section Four: the learner in formal settings

I would like to go backwards now and talk about your experience of formal education, that is school.

18. Can we go back to your time at school. What kind of things did you enjoy?
(*Prompts: sports, arts, subjects, social life, truanting..*)

19. Do you think that your teachers recognised what you were good at? Which teachers? What skills or strengths did they help you to develop? How did they do this?

20. Did your school(s) support you as a learner in other ways? How?

21. Did you see yourself as a good learner when you were at school?
(This question might already have been answered). How did you get that impression?

22. Did your family support you as a learner at school? Who in your family gave you support? How involved with the school were they? What kind of things did they do? *Or* what made it difficult for them to get involved?

23. Do you think it is easier to be involved with schools now? Why? Are you involved? Do you plan to be? What kind of things do you do? If not, what makes it difficult for you to be involved?

Section Five: Learning in the Centre (questions in this section need to be tailored to specific local facilities)

I would like to come back to some of the things we talked about at the beginning. You have described some of the things you do at (Centre). Here we are thinking about learning opportunities available to you through (Centre).

24. Talk me through a typical morning/afternoon at the Centre.
(Prompts: What do you do when you arrive? Who else is there? What activities do you get involved in?)

25. Tell me about the other people in the Centre. Who does what?
(Explore role of paid staff, volunteers, other Centre users).

26. Do you feel that you are involved in making decisions about what goes on? Give an example. If not, would you want to be more involved? In what ways?

27. Imagine you were talking to someone new from the area and they wanted to know about the Centre. How would you describe it to them?

28. Do you think you have learnt anything from going to the Centre? What kind of things? Who with?

29. Do you think your family has benefited from the Centre? What kind of benefits has there been for them?

30. Has the Centre made you aware of other opportunities? If so, which ones?

31. Imagine yourself in two years time. Do you see yourself still involved in the Centre? What would you like to do at the Centre? Do you see yourself doing other things? What do you see yourself doing?

(Prompts: more involved in running the centre? Other learning activities?)

Ends.

Appendix 4: Observation notes

Visit to Ipcress Studio, Bridgetown with Ledworth Project – Friday 31 August 2001

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Present: Jane & Gina, from gallery; Deirdre, Gail, Diane, Kate, Dee, Cassie, Tracy, Ria</p> <p>Had arrived early and stood chatting to Jane. She was waiting to welcome the group. They arrived (late) in two groups. Jane was rushing around welcoming everyone. I was involved from beginning, group seemed accepting of newcomer.</p> <p>Went to teaching room for coffee and intro chat from Jane and Gina; they outlined the day and gave some info about the exhibition we were to see – Bridgetown. There was some strong language among the group members at this point. Some who'd been last time said they were glad not to see Raiki again (they had thought it was porn).</p> <p>Ria arrived later – her arrival caused quite a change in the group. She was very ready to talk and offer input to discussion. Previously, aside from staff, Cassie and Dee had dominated with some input from Kate and Tracy. Diane was noticeably quieter and body language quite reserved/contained.</p> <p>Once all happy with what we were doing began to move into the exhibition. Diane at this point said she wasn't happy with seeing the Gillian Wearing piece so she went to Beat Streuli room on her own. The rest of the group opted to stay together.</p> <p>Found GW room quite disturbing. We were all asked to record words, marks etc for each piece. Jane circulated constantly. Had to move us on as we'd been there too long (40 mins!).</p> <p>Beat S – youth photos and video of New St ramp. Diane been here long time and enjoyed it. Had go a leaflet and spoken to the visitor helper, Mark.</p> <p>The next room, two-sided projection of the [name] was depressing and full of negative images. (Huyghe)</p> <p>Then a long haul upstairs to the final piece; music was heard first – very melancholic and sombre and increased the tension of what we'd find. Some nervous giggles and chatter as got nearer the top. Then, rather disappointing. Staged fighting and music to go with it (with digestive biscuit all over the floor – Gina was there!) Alys/Ortega.</p> <p>Back to room for lunch.</p> <p>Shared our words in turn from each piece. More discussion of why is it art? Art is about everyday life and people. OK to be critical and not agree. All about interpretation. Discussed Damien Hirst's pickled sheep etc – meaning different after discussion with the artist.</p> <p>Made our own art from the exhibition.</p> <p>No concerns at the end – everyone had enjoyed and wanted more visits.</p> | <p>There was talk between staff and Jane about [name]'s involvement with the GeoBus; he'd been very enthusiastic. Jane constantly encouraging and getting involvement.</p> <p>Jane spotted those not engaged in the pieces. Got them to talk about their thoughts to her and she helped with recording this.</p> <p>Individuals began to move away from the group more. (loo and cigarette breaks too.)</p> <p>Had built up huge expectation for this one.</p> <p>Photographs taken of group working. Dee refused to be in these.</p> <p>Video on. Took it in turns to sit and hold up comments done earlier.</p> <p>Then students read comments from each other's sheets, trying to put lots of expression into it. Jane said they were making poetry.</p> |
|--|---|

Appendix 5

Group interview questions

- Why do you come here, to this Centre?
- So why did you turn up at this centre and not another?
- Why do you think other people come to this centre? Why do people come here?
- What do you do when you're here?
- What helps you most, what kind of activities help you most do you think?
- If you had to say what you like most about the group, what would you say?
- Who does what here?
- Since you've been coming here has this place changed at all?
- What about outside the centre, has that changed much?
- What about outside the centre, Northfield, has that changed much?
- Is it important that the centre is here, in Northfield?
- How recently did you know about the centre? Did you know about it when you arrived here or did you know about it all the time you've lived here?
- If you were going to recommend a group like this to someone, how would you encourage them to turn up?
- What might have made it easier for you to come into the first group that you joined?

Appendix 6: Schedule for interviews with managers and tutors

Set scene by saying I'm looking at learning in a variety of different settings; in its widest sense, not just in terms of 'formal education'

| | |
|---|--|
| Could you describe a typical day here at ? | <p>What are they doing and why?</p> <p>Who they interact with (eg other agencies)</p> <p>why?</p> <p>when?</p> <p>how?</p> <p>Can they give me EXAMPLES?</p> |
| How do you think users of [the service, project] learn through their contact with you / your tutors? | <p>What are they learning?</p> <p>When attending meetings?</p> <p>organising/taking part in trips?</p> <p>socialising with other(s) (women) / mixed groups?</p> <p>Do they apply this learning in other contexts?</p> <p>Can they give me examples?</p> |
| What effect do you feel support given here has on the ways users contribute in their local community? | <p>Does 'learning' carry into the community?</p> <p>Does this support enable users to carry on with their lives? eg DV, applying for work etc</p> <p>Can they give examples?</p> |
| You (the service you provide) is clearly very successful with this. How do you monitor and evaluate the impact of working with these clients? | <p>What sort of changes might you expect to see in your users? ie learning outcomes</p> <p>How do users know when they've been successful?</p> <p>Are there tensions - as manager, as worker, as both?</p> <p>What are the funding issues?</p> <p>Are there quality assurance issues?</p> <p>Who is accountable, and to whom?</p> <p>Is this driven by policy rather than by the user and those working with them?</p> <p>Do you feel your work has an impact on the development of citizenship? if so in what ways?</p> |
| Any other comments? | |

Appendix 7: Example of letter to participants

July 2002

Dear Maggie

Thank you for meeting Lin for an interview a few months back. We've looked at what you were saying alongside some other interviews and have tried to pull out some main points. We want to check that what we have pulled out from your interview are important points for you. We agreed with Deirdre that we would check with everyone that they were happy with the way we were reading the material we collected. So could you let us know if you are not happy with what we have seen as important? Thanks.

There seemed to be a number of things that really mattered for you when you spoke with Lin and we've listed them below:

- Your family is central to your life
- Support of your friends is important to you and has an influence on your confidence
- You have different friends in different areas of your life
- Finding ways to achieve your goals has always been important to you
- Learning has been an active part of your life since childhood
- You are keen to support others in their learning.

We won't mention your name when we write up the research. What you have come up with is very similar to what other people have said. So we will write things like 'For most people their children were what mattered most'.

If you think we've got it wrong about you could you let us know? We've included a stamped addressed envelope for you to get back to us.

Best wishes from us both,

[name of project leader] and Lin MacKenzie

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