

Access to higher education in the third age: the value of diversity

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Introduction

There is a wide gap in the educational attainment levels of younger and older people in Ireland (Irish Equality Authority, 2002:61), which may be due to past deficiencies in the Irish second level system. Only one-third of adults between the ages of 55 and 64 have completed second level education compared to two-thirds of adults between the ages of 25 and 34 (Irish Department of Education and Science, 2000:34-36). The participation of mature students in higher education in Ireland is amongst the lowest in the OECD (Irish Department of Education and Science, 2000:18). Only 5% of students in higher education in Ireland are mature students compared to 33% in the UK and 29% in Northern Ireland (Lynch, 1999:189). As well as the low proportions of mature students, the majority are relatively young with only 5% of mature students aged fifty or over (Lynch, 1999:192).

It is now widely accepted that older adults have special educational needs (Elmore, 1999: 12), which must be respected and reflected in education (Irish Department of Education and Science, 2000:13). Older adults have been instrumental through their economic contribution to the education system which has proved beneficial to the economic advancement of the country, and to the personal benefit of younger generations in Ireland and therefore, should now have the opportunity to participate in education for themselves (Irish Equality Authority, 2002:58). As discrimination on the grounds of age is prohibited under the Equal Status Act Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000, p.10), people over the age of fifty should have the same right to education as younger people.

However there are well-documented barriers that affect older adults in returning to learning. Psychological factors such as feeling out of place among younger students or fear of competition with younger students may be a barrier to learning (Scala, 1996:761). Scala (1996:761) also found that older adults returning to education may have some academic difficulties. These barriers need to be addressed if we are to provide equal opportunities in education.

With an increase in the amount of older learners returning to education, the age diverse classroom will become commonplace. Therefore, to plan effectively for older learners, it is important to learn what their interests, motivations and experiences are in the classroom (Scala, 1996:748).

Aim of the research

The purpose of the research was to investigate the impact of an age-diverse learner population in an access to higher education course run by Waterford Institute of Technology in the southeast of Ireland. The access course is a one-year foundation course for mature students. It improves the prospects for adults wishing to enter third level courses, who do not possess the Irish Leaving Certificate or its equivalent and would be unlikely to gain entry to the college by the standard application mode. The aims of the research were to explore the factors that promote and inhibit successful learning experiences for older and younger adults, to examine

the perceptions of younger and older adults towards each other and to examine any differences between them in the learning process.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative methodology, focusing on the voice of the learner. Focus groups were used to explore the educational experiences of older and younger adults. Gaskell (2000:353) found that focus groups could be a learning experience as participants explore concepts and issues that are of key importance to them. Leane, Duggan and Chambers (2002:44) also found the interview process to be empowering, giving participants a sense of confidence and achievement by recognising the valuable aspects of their lives.

For the purpose of research, older learners are defined as learners over fifty years of age (Irish Equality Authority, 2002:2). All of the access students were asked to take part in the discussions. However due to time constraints and other commitments it was not possible for everyone to participate. Ten older learners and eleven younger learners took part in the discussions. My contact details were given to those who could not take part so they could give their views on the issues if they wished at a convenient time for them.

I devised a topic guide, consisting of general key questions and more detailed 'probe' questions. The general questions were used as often as possible to allow participants come up with the solutions by themselves. At the beginning, participants were also asked if there were other key issues they felt should be added to the key topics. Therefore, both the researcher and the participants decided the key issues. The focus groups were recorded on tape and transcribed for analysis. The issues that were discussed can be classified into the following categories:

1. Benefits and positive experiences in education
2. Former experiences in education
3. Negative experiences in education
4. Barriers to participation in education
5. Age differences in education and learning
6. The learning process

Results

Benefits of participation- 'Education is no heavy load to carry'

Older students gave a range of positive experiences from participating in education. These included "Personal development", "the social aspect" and gaining self-confidence:

...We all kind of want to do well and we are all really determined, and there's some in the class that would know more than others and they are very helpful ... I can't see anything negative about coming here...

I have begun to shed that feeling of inadequacy around education, feeling shame that you...don't have any formal education. That's beginning to dissipate, which is a positive thing.

Older learners are participating in education for a variety of reasons. These were mainly for personal reasons:

I didn't even come in here...to get a job. I came in here just for myself. I wanted to learn...I loved business, so I wanted to get information on that. That's what I'm here for...

Some older men also participate in education to enhance their career prospects:

...in the marketplace...there's very little you can do unless you have qualifications of some description, and some of the things I would like to do...I wouldn't get if I didn't have qualifications...

The main reason reported by younger students was to enhance their career opportunities:

Opens up opportunities as well for...your options with regards work, stuff like that.

If you are working in a factory for a long time, you're limited to what you can achieve...

Former education- 'Am I in the right place'

Older adults had mixed feeling about former education. Some older adults enjoyed their former schooldays. However, some had unpleasant memories of school, establishing a barrier to learning in later years:

...One of the big drawbacks for me...it's that sort of feeling of inadequacy you carry around with you if you left school at a very early age. And no matter what you do in life whether it's to do with work or relationships or...whatever you do, you carry that feeling of inadequacy because you haven't been there with the others. You kind of feel inferior or something.

Younger students also had some negative memories of their schooldays but found that any negative feelings disappeared soon after returning to education:

The first few times that you walk into the class, you feel a bit, is this the right place for me, but that didn't last that long.

Negative experiences- 'The workload just really hit me like a ...wall'

Older adults found that 'stress' and lack of time for studying are negative aspects of education. Younger adults also found that it was frustrating when learning new concepts. Both younger and older adults found that structural problems such as room and tutor changes also cause confusion and are a distraction when trying to learn:

...We had one class where we didn't have a tutor for a while, and then we had a change of tutor in another class, which is disruptive. People are trying to catch up...or find out what was done...We had a couple of classes where we actually have to change three times during the one [class]...which is again disruptive. You lose your train of thought...

Older adults also feel that tutors need to be more understanding towards the needs and constraints on older adults in education:

...As adults we have a lifetime behind us, we have all lived lives and sometimes we are treated like children...We are here because we want to be...We don't need to come in and be treated as if...you didn't get this done and you didn't get that done. There are reasons why we don't get them done.

If assignments are due... we know that... the majority of the time there are good reasons why you actually haven't...Different things will interfere with our actual progress than will interfere the other student's life.

Barriers to education- 'I carry a lot of baggage'

Barriers to education for older adults include external commitments, lack of time and a lack of confidence stemming from former schooldays. Family commitments also leave older adults with little time to study:

I have a son doing the Leaving Cert at the moment and I lost two weeks...when the pre-leavings were on, and he was so upset...I could actually organise his study materials and I could not organise my own...which made me so stressed out...It just dawned on me this morning cause I'm...at least a week if not two weeks behind.

The main barrier to education for younger adults was finance:

...And if it's financially not viable...you just can't go to college, that's the bottom line...I knew a few last year that wanted to go to college. It wasn't financially viable. They didn't go this year. They probably won't be going next year.

For me the summer now will be make or break. I really have to make up my mind if financially I can afford to go on next September. So that would be what my challenge now would be...I do want to... I've a woman and a kid in the house and...it's just...130 euros a week...it's gone the minute you get it...

Age differences- 'We've been there and recycled the t-shirt'

Both younger and older adults found that having an age diverse classroom was a positive experience. Older learners found that the younger group respected their opinions and the age mix in the classroom provided a multitude of ideas:

They've never actually looked down on us or been intolerant of us, it's never been an issue at all.

They respect that we have knowledge that we gained in our lifetimes.

I think at the end of the day...it's necessary to have that mix, because certainly listening to the students, the younger crowd now, they've a different perspective altogether to what I would have on certain things...and listening to them, it is an eye opener at times, they may think we're...fuddy duddys...We've our opinions too and they listen to that too...

Some older adults found that attending college had changed their opinions of younger people:

What impressed me about them...the young students...before I came here, I would have had probably, ideas about younger people, that they were a bit unruly... and I have to say...they're so organised, they get everything done...they're courteous...

The younger students also had very positive perceptions of older learners in the classroom:

They're always a good voice as well...They have good things to say, something that you've overlooked.

There's a lot more respect there. You might not get that respect with a group of younger people.

There's a better rapport, I think. It makes the class better.

The learning process- 'What's an assignment'

Older adults reported that they learn best from more practical methods than theory:

Practical experience has a lot more to give us than theory, we will key into practical experience.

Quite a few older adults said that they preferred subjects like maths and accounting as there is a practical element of working out the answer. However, others preferred theoretical subjects such as psychology, showing that older adults are not a homogenous group. Older learners also feel that there is little recognition of prior learning and experience:

The mature students...the knowledge they have should be tapped into more...it also encourages those adults out of themselves and helps them to get back to education, to go on further...

Older learners who are new to academic institutions may not understand the use of terminology, which academic providers may take for granted:

You get these assignments...I'd never heard the word assignment, I didn't know...what's an assignment?

Older learners also prefer continuous assessment to exams. They feel that exams are not an appropriate method of examination:

It's like a memory test, which you're told it wasn't going to be. And you were told this is not going to be like school, but...it is. I have 15 weeks of history to remember...

...What we have been getting really for the last five weeks is scare tactics...if you don't do this your exams.... You will fall down in your exams.... That's stuff that kids have been getting, we're not kids.

Younger learners need to relate new knowledge to their life situations. They also tend to question knowledge before they can accept it:

When you can transfer knowledge into everyday life...its different when it's on paper but when you know you've experienced yourself or you can relate what you've been taught into real life, into the workplace...

...When we are in a classroom doing something, we tend to question it. We don't just passively accept it...There's people in there that are twice my age and they've more experience that I'd ever have...Some tutors accept it, some of them find it a bit confrontational.

...We all have...life experience and that has to be taken into your learning process. Some people are better at reading, some people are better at talking, some people are better at listening...if you're in a group dynamic, which we normally are, you'll always find out that there are people who have skills and abilities to help you just as you'll be able to help...many of my fellow students have helped me, maybe without realising but I've learned a lot from just watching them, listening to them, and how they discuss what they do and how they do it.

Review and analysis of findings

Older adults participate in education mainly for personal reasons. Some older men also participate to enhance their careers. Older women said that while they would be pleased to gain employment after their studies, did not pursue education for that reason. Scala (1996: 765) also noted these gender differences in older learners. Younger students also participate in education to enhance their career prospects. Both older and younger adults spoke very positively about the age mix in the classroom and found that the variety of age groups gave the class a wide diversity of opinions and perspectives.

The difficulties reported by the participants can be classified into dispositional, situational and institutional barriers (As defined by Cross, in Merriam and Caffarella, 1991:88-89). Situational barriers were perceived as the main barrier to education for older and younger adults. Family and time commitments are the main barriers for older adults in education. Many older adults have children who are also studying and some are caring for a spouse leaving little time for college commitments. Finance is the main barrier for younger adults. In particular, those who have families to support find it difficult on little income.

Older and younger adults also described dispositional barriers such as negative memories of former schooling. Both older and younger adults had reservations about entering the classroom again. Some older learners found that these negative feelings are a significant barrier to learning. Older learners recommended that more psychological support be available. While there is counselling available for students many older adults said that they had reservations about visiting the counsellor and said that it would be useful to discuss these psychological issues as a group.

Institutional barriers such as room changes and tutor changes also cause difficulties. Some older adults also found that skills such as note taking were difficult to master at first. There is a study skills module on the course. However, both younger and older adults recommend that study skills sessions be provided at the beginning of the year to give them the necessary academic skills prior to beginning their studies. Older and younger adults also gave a wide range of preferred subjects and methods of learning showing the diversity of the adult classroom. These also have implications for academic providers in designing a curriculum that is diverse in teaching methods and appropriate for adults of all ages.

Conclusion- 'We're going to be eternal students'

We can see from the research that the needs and motivations of older and younger adults in the classroom are diverse. Although their needs and motivations may vary, the access course was perceived as beneficial and a positive experience for both groups. There were a number of situational, dispositional and institutional barriers, which need to be addressed if older and younger adults are to successfully participate in education. However, both younger and older adults feel that the age diverse classroom is a positive experience that should be encouraged and nurtured.

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