

**COMMUNITY UNIVERSITY OF THE VALLEYS RESEARCH
PROJECT**

**Reaching the non-participant:
a pilot study exploring reasons why many adults
do not participate in formal learning
opportunities.**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ◆ The purpose of this study was to explore barriers that limit individuals' participation in lifelong learning activities.
- ◆ A researcher was employed to identify key literature in the field and an annotated bibliography was produced.
- ◆ This is a qualitative pilot study in which two focus groups were held and nine individuals were interviewed. Issues emerging from the literature were discussed in the focus groups and the interviews.
- ◆ Several barriers to participation emerged from the interviews including negative school experiences, family background and influences and economic hardship.
- ◆ However, many positive factors also emerged in terms of people's abilities to overcome barriers through informal learning or meaningful employment. In a small number of cases, barriers had been overcome and individuals were participating in courses at a later stage in their adult lives.
- ◆ The study is concluded with a series of recommendations for further work. For example there could be evaluation studies of recent schemes such as Family Learning strategies that have been established in order to address the problem of negative school experiences.
- ◆ There is also a need for a large-scale study looking at the impact of new Government policies and Assembly policies on participation in Wales.

INTRODUCTION

1. Project Description and Rationale

College is 'a pub without beer. I love it, I totally love it' (Cathy)

Unfortunately many adults in Wales do not share Cathy's positive view of formal learning. The purpose of this pilot study is to explore reasons why many individuals are not participating in formal learning opportunities, which are available for adults. A recent Swansea CCET report highlights the fact that in Wales the percentage of non-participants has increased from 29% in 1997 to 36% in 2001 (Swansea CCET, 2002). There are many barriers, which may limit participation, and these can be categorised as follows:

- (i) *Situational barriers* which include factors such as lack of time lack of transport and family commitments.
- (ii) *Institutional barriers* constitute barriers perpetuated by educational institutions such as a limited curriculum, unfriendly atmosphere and inconvenient timing of classes.
- (iii) *Dispositional barriers* which refer to attitudes towards education such as a lack of confidence, fear of failure and negative perceptions.

(McGivney, 1991).

This project explores the ways in which individuals are constrained by these or any other barriers.

Prior to the conduct of the fieldwork, a research assistant identified literature which focuses on non-participation and she provided an annotated bibliography which helped to inform the themes covered in the two focus groups and the semi-structured interviews.

Methods

When determining appropriate methods for the study, it was noted that the primary aim was to highlight the experiences and perceptions of non-participants. It was anticipated that these findings could form the basis for a larger scale study. Essentially this was to be an exploratory, pilot study. It seemed inappropriate, at this stage, to attempt to gather large-scale statistical data. The approach adopted, therefore, was the collection of qualitative data through two focus groups and semi structured interviews.

Initially, two focus groups were held: one on the University of Wales Swansea campus (involving six participants) and one in the DOVE Workshop, Banwen (involving five participants). The purpose of the focus groups was to identify barriers to participation to be explored in more detail through the semi-structured interviews. It was not possible to constitute these groups in precisely the way outlined in the original submission. For example it proved to be very difficult

to reach the ‘non-participant’. Hence it was decided that the focus groups should include community-based providers and students who also worked in the field of community based education. Both focus groups were successful in that they did help to identify key themes and several potential barriers to formal learning emerged (See Appendix One) such as negative school experiences and negative perceptions of colleges and education centres. There was further exploration of these issues through the interviews.

Following the focus group discussions, an interview schedule (see Appendix Two) and questionnaire (see Appendix Three) were designed. The interview schedule provided a flexible guide: where appropriate there would be further exploration of questions in the schedule. The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide background information about each interviewee.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with nine adults. Initially the intention was to focus exclusively on non-participants from social classes 4 and 5. However, with the limited resources available it was not possible to reach such a precise grouping.

First, in relation to ‘non-participants’, the difficulty of identifying or defining such groups soon became apparent. An individual may have participated briefly in the past or may participate in the future. Is s/he a participant or non-participant? One of the interviewees in this study, Cathy, had been a non-participant for most of her life but was now attending classes. Mary is a participant but had experienced significant barriers to participation. (See Appendix Four for brief details of all interviewees) In both cases, inclusion in the study provided valuable insights into the difficulties experienced by many potential adult learners. Instance, Morris and Rees (1995) refer to the dangers of working within a polarised participant/ non-participant dichotomy. They suggest that a ‘participant’ – ‘non-participant’ continuum may be more useful when exploring participation and barriers. I have adopted this notion and placed interviewees on a continuum as follows:

<i>Total non-participant post school</i>	<i>Occasional training course/short courses</i>	<i>Returned to study in later adult</i>	<i>Has participated but hampered by barriers</i>	<i>Studied throughout adult life</i>
Liz/Leila	Nathan/Gary Claire/Richard	Cathy	Mary	Andrew

In addition, reaching the ‘non-participant’ proved to be very difficult within the limited resources of this project. Frequently ‘non-participants’ are the very people who do not wish to be interviewed by people associated with a University. With greater resources it might be possible to reach such groups through organisations such as New Deal and Sure Start and individuals could be approached in their local communities. Moreover, as researchers, we should consider including in our funding applications, a budget to enable us to pay interviewees.

Second, with the limited resources available it was not possible to identify specifically members of Social Classes 4 and 5. Contemporary debates on the applicability of traditional social class analysis are well documented (Giddens, 1997; Walby, 1986). For example the traditional assumption that all family or household members occupy a common class position determined by a male head of household is now challenged. Moreover, individuals may find that their lives are influenced by more than one class position. If we take Cathy, her class origins are clearly Social Class 5 with both parents in unskilled occupations. Her own last job was as a local authority care assistant. Her working class roots have clearly had a major impact on her educational opportunities. Yet, her husband works in a highly paid occupation and her current lifestyle is also influenced by her husband's middle class position. How do we locate Cathy? In selecting interviewees, therefore, I found it was not feasible to limit myself to a narrow social class grouping. This is not to deny the importance of social class, and any larger scale project could focus more broadly on poverty factors such as dependency on benefits.

All interviews were transcribed (See Appendix Five for an example of a transcribed interview) and analysed. The first stage of analysis involved the coding of data or the 'generating of concepts' (Coffey, A and Atkinson, P 1996: p26) Many categories were identified and it was noted that interviewees experienced situational, institutional and dispositional barriers. Space does not allow for discussion of all the themes, so only the most significant will be discussed in the next section.

In writing up the fieldwork, I have changed all names and minor details in order to protect anonymity.

FINDINGS

Three of the most significant themes which emerged from the fieldwork will be discussed in this section: negative school experiences and the feeling that continuing education is like school; family/peer pressures linked to gender and financial factors; and the importance of informal learning. The focus group and interview data confirmed much of the work that has already been undertaken in this field and suggests that despite the wide range of local and national initiatives, there are many remaining barriers to formal learning.

Negative School Experiences

The impact of negative school experiences has been widely documented (Ashley R and Thomas W, 2002; Fryer R, 1997; Trotman, C and Morris, S, 1994; and Trotman, C and Pudner, H, 1998; Rees *et al*, 2000). Despite attempts to offer provision which is informal and non-threatening and as far removed from school experiences as possible, individuals are still influenced by their school experiences.

In this project 8 out of 9 of the interviewees recalled negative experiences of school. However, the degree to which these experiences influenced later participation varied.

Liz, for example, wasn't interested in school and only went to see her friends:

“...it was a laugh to go to school to see your mates, rather than the work.” (Liz).

Liz is now establishing her own singing business:

“...I've got my own business...it's nothing to do with what I learned in school, just the talent I've got.” (Liz)

For Liz, negative school experiences have discouraged further participation. However, such experiences did not deter all the interviewees from any involvement in formal learning. Mary passed her Eleven Plus but had to attend a Grammar School stream in her local Secondary Modern School.

“...I was put in a sort of elitist group which caused a lot of problems and of course we didn't have the facilities, basically the teachers, to give us a proper Grammar School education, so it was all a bit of a mess.” (Mary)

Moreover, Mary's position in the Grammar School stream led to problems with her peers:

“Jealousy, bullying, I was bullied, beaten up. Well we were treated specially by the teachers and so the other pupils hated us, so that was quite difficult.” (Mary)

Mary, however, has not been discouraged from further study and is currently taking short, accredited courses. This may be related to the fact that whilst she had negative school experiences, Mary was in the 'elite' class and therefore unlike many so-called low school achievers, did not leave school totally lacking in confidence.

Trotman and Morris (1994) found in their research that the impact of bad school experiences on participation in adult education was more prevalent in males than in females. In this study, it was also the case that the men interviewed appeared to be more influenced by their school experiences. For example, Nathan was in one of the lower streams in a comprehensive school:

“...it was ugh. Well it was so regimental...because we were seen as lower classes at school...we were just put on to the field to play football...it was horrible. I hated every moment of it.” (Nathan)

He goes on to say:

“...we were the class to be picked on all the time and if they wanted to embarrass someone, they embarrassed our class.” (Nathan)

Nathan had been sent on short training courses by his employer and hated them because they reminded him of school:

“...I’ve got so many training courses in work and I just hate it from the time it starts...all I’m thinking of is I want to get out of here..” (Nathan)

“...we were sitting in the classroom...there was only ten of us sitting there and every time the gentleman who was doing it got up, all I could see was his cloak and gown and he was with a big stick” (Nathan)

Similarly, Gary describes his school experience:

“My schooling was very basic...I never really liked school. The only subject I enjoyed was history...but I didn’t like any of the other lessons.” (Gary)

Gary believes that his main reason for not studying formally is his school experience:

“...a lot of my reasons for not taking up opportunities was my own negative experiences and the fact that everything seemed to be about passing something else before you could do what you want in the end.” (Gary)

There is clearly a need to address this issue and explore ways of combating negative school experiences. Strategies such as summer schools for school students which are offered by a small number of universities; and Family Learning which is currently being promoted in schools and communities will need to be evaluated in the light of their success or failure in challenging negative school memories.

Family/peer pressures/economic pressure

Negative school experience, however, is one of many factors which contribute to the non-participation of adults in formal learning opportunities. For example the impact of socio-economic factors, and in particular family background on individual learning trajectories, in school and adult life, is widely recognised (Field, J. & Schuller, T., 2000; Gorard, S. *et al*, 1999). These features interact with others such as culture to either encourage or discourage participation.

In this pilot study, whilst family factors influenced many of the interviewees, there was also some evidence of a rejection of the values associated with education, despite family support.

Liz, for example, received considerable family support and may have been more influenced by her negative school experiences:

“...they knew that I wasn’t buckling down...there wasn’t a lot they could say to me. It was just, you know what teenagers are like...they tried to encourage me and would say things like ‘you’ll have a shock when you leave school if you haven’t got nothing behind you.” (Liz)

Nathan was also pushed by his family and, like Liz appears to have been influenced more by negative school experiences:

“My parents were...it was leave school at half past three, be home by 4.00pm and 4.00 until 6.00 was in books...My grandfather and grandmother were doctors and it was all medical...my father and grandfather were pushing me into that but I just didn’t want to do it.” (Nathan)

Both Liz and Nathan were involved with peer groups who were also alienated from the school ethos:

“Yes, the people that I was with, when you’re at school you tend to go around with the people in your class and we were all, like we didn’t want to be there.” (Nathan)

“...I did work quite hard at the beginning but then I got in with the wrong crowd...we just wasn’t interested...had a laugh and that was about it.” (Liz)

Thus, for both Nathan and Liz, negative school experiences and peer group appeared to have a stronger influence on their educational trajectories, both at school and during their adult lives, than family influence.

Gary’s family were less supportive:

“No...the advice of my parents (was) that the best thing to do was ‘get a trade boy’.” (Gary)

His mother was a lone parent and a school cleaner, so it was likely that her ambivalent feelings towards Gary’s education may have been influenced by a lack of financial resources:

“...my mum brought me up...I think she thought it was important and was keen for me to get on but she didn't really push me, her parents hadn't pushed her. It wasn't that sort of culture, I think she wanted me to get on...”

As with Nathan and Liz, the barriers experienced by Gary have influenced his educational experience both at school and during his adult life. It is possible to see how the work of Field & Schuller, and Gorard, S. *et al* can explain Gary's educational trajectory in terms of family and socio-economic background. He also refers to a 'culture' which does not encourage lifelong learning or the establishment of a 'learner identity' (Gorard, 2000).

Nathan and Liz's experiences are, perhaps, more unexpected and require further exploration. It is interesting to note that Gary, Nathan and Liz have all expressed very positive feelings about their current employment positions, despite negative school experiences and a consequent lack of commitment to lifelong learning. The cases of positive career opportunities, despite a lack of formal education merits further research.

Both Cathy and Mary were potential Grammar School candidates but were held back by financial factors:

“...I knew that there was no money. I mean it was a hand-to-mouth existence in our family; we were five children.” (Cathy)

In relation to the cost of the Grammar School uniform Cathy says:

You just don't want to put that worry on your family.” (Cathy)

Similarly Mary was not encouraged by her parents to go to Grammar School, largely for financial reasons:

“...my parents weren't that keen on me going ahead with it anyway because we didn't have any money at home. My mother couldn't afford to buy me a proper uniform...couldn't afford to buy me the books... they just didn't have the money to do it, so that was the main problem for me.” (Mary)

Gary refers to the fact that education wasn't part of his culture. Both Cathy and Mary experienced the same cultural barriers. Cathy, for example, did not know anybody who went on to further education immediately after leaving school. Education was for other people:

“Further education was for somebody like a doctor's daughter or son. I mean professional people were sending their children onto further Education.” (Cathy)

However, this cultural factor is clearly linked to economic hardship:

“I think a lot of it was people didn’t think it was for the likes of them, but one of the bigger barriers would have been money because, I think, if there had been money available my father would have liked me to have gone.” (Cathy)

Mary had also been discouraged from continuing with her education by both bullying experienced from her peers, but also by negative views from her family:

“...I wanted to fit in and also my family, my mother’s family in particular (not my father’s family) always had this idea that to be clever was showing off and you shouldn’t show off, and if you were clever you were odd and strange and they used to make fun of me...” (Mary)

Mary’s case, in particular bears out the point made by Trotman and Morris (1994) that participating in education is not seen as part of the culture of working class communities. This is seen as being a result of the barriers experienced by working class people, primarily economic hardship.

Nevertheless, whilst both Cathy and Mary both experienced further barriers to participation during their adult lives, such as commitments to childcare, they were able to overcome barriers in later life and both now have very positive ‘learner identities’. It would be worth researching further the factors which enable individuals such as Cathy and Mary to overcome such serious barriers to learning.

Informal learning

In addition to the many barriers to formal learning experienced by individuals, it was also noted that there was a significant experience of informal learning amongst interviewees. There is an increasing recognition of the value of informal learning (ELWa, 2002; McGivney, 1999, 2001). One implication of this recognition is that it becomes increasingly difficult to define the ‘non-participant’. This is especially true when considering the hidden nature of much informal learning.

Informal learning covers a wide range of learning situations, many of which are identified by McGivney who defines informal learning as: (i) learning occurring outside of a formal centre and emerging from individual or collective interests; (ii) activities which are not course based and might include, for example discussions, talks or reading circles. They are offered in response to the stated wishes of individuals associated with a range of organisation including health, education and employment; and (iii) organised learning such as short courses which are offered in response to community needs and offered in informal ways.

However, much of the informal learning that was identified in several of my interviews is even more informal than the above and may be seen as incidental learning arising from a range of activities. As Eraut puts it, non-formal learning occurs when ‘there is no intention to learn’ (Eraut, 2000 p 12). Frequently the learner will be unaware of the fact that s/he is actually learning.

In Gary's case, informal learning has had a major impact on his life and enabled him to move from an unskilled, poorly paid job as a hospital porter to a well-paid and rewarding job as a full-time trade union official. He built up the expertise which enabled him to change job through his trade union activity. To some extent this involved attending trade union courses:

“...I still had this aversion, this lack of confidence to go in studying except for TUC courses. They just make you think and discuss. You don't have to write anything.” (Gary).

However, much of Gary's learning was the incidental learning I refer to earlier. His employers refused to release him to study for a Diploma. In retrospect he felt that maybe he learned as much through his trade union experience:

“...if I had gone, there's two ways of looking at this, I would have come back, presumably nine months later with a Diploma...but as an alternative to that, I was gaining lots of experience. I got more involved and pushed myself further as a lay trade union rep.” (Gary).

In recalling the way in which his voluntary trade union activity helped him to make the career change:

“...by the time I applied for the job even though my lack of self confidence was still lurking inside...not only had I been involved with local managers, I had been negotiating with senior managers at Health Authority level...even being the lead part of a delegation that went up to the Welsh Office in London to speak to a government Minister...I can remember thinking to myself that there were these other people there who had been to Universities, and there were doctors and Solicitors... and there was me, a hospital porter sitting with this Government minister...I was given a spot, you know, to speak on behalf of the members...”

Gary's experience of incidental and informal learning supports McGivney's assertion that people who may be from low income groups and defined as 'non-participants' are frequently involved in informal learning through their every day social, working and leisure activities. (McGivney, 2001) She suggests that this learning may include involvement in social movements or voluntary groups. Gary was very involved in social movements: the union, CND, the Labour Party and the Socialist Health Association. The incidental learning which Gary experienced through all these involvements enabled him to transform his life in a similar way to the way in which some people are able to transform their lives through formal education. Can Gary still be identified as a 'non-participant'?

Mary, like Gary, is an active member of the Labour Party and has learned new skills through her activism:

“Yes, I’ve been a member of the Labour Party for years and I campaigned for the whole year before the Labour Party got in last time. Telephone canvassing and leaflet drops.” (Mary)

Mary found that the skills learned as a Labour Party member helped her in her employment:

“I got into the mobile phone side of things and I was so used to ringing Pembrokeshire and getting people to vote Labour, but because of those skills I’d learned being a member of the Labour Party, then I became good at telephone canvassing.” (Mary)

The frequent reference to non-formal learning is perhaps the most optimistic element of the interviews. There is the hope that some (or many) of the 36% of people in Swansea who have been identified as non-participants could be involved in ‘hidden’ forms of learning. However, whilst the recent ELWa report acknowledges the value of these alternative forms of learning there is the danger that in a society which is becoming increasingly influenced by the culture of lifelong learning, a dichotomy between informal and formal learning might serve to perpetuate the very inequalities we are seeking to eradicate:

“...a reliance on non-formal learning will not simply generate and perpetuate inequality; it may (if unintentionally) legitimate those inequalities that arise from an unequal access to (recognised) knowledge” (Field, J and Spence, L, 2000, p 40).

Another problem is that less formal learning is not always recognised officially or documented in official reports (Gorard, 2000; McGivney, 2001). ELWa (2000) has identified difficulties in terms of funding, partly because informal learning not easily measurable in terms of conventional indicators. However, despite the problems less formal modes of learning, including incidental, unintended learning can be empowering for many people who can take control of their own learning, independent of institutional constraints.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly a pilot study of this scale cannot generate groundbreaking or definitive conclusions. What can be gleaned, however, are important issues and suggestions for further research.

In many respects, the qualitative data that emerged from the interviews and focus groups simply served to confirm previous and research. Examples were provided of McGivney’s three categories of barriers:

- (i) *situational* (the barriers of economic hardship and family responsibilities experienced by Mary and Cathy);
- (ii) *dispositional* (negative perceptions of education as expressed by Nathan, Gary and Liz)

- (iii) *institutional* (the view that training opportunities mirror the school experience as expressed by Nathan).

Nevertheless, there were also interesting findings in relation to individuals' abilities to overcome barriers in terms of informal learning (Gary and Mary); returning to learning despite serious barriers (Cathy and Mary); and finding rewarding employment (Liz, Gary and Nathan).

Emerging from this research are recommendations for further exploration of key themes. In particular, it is important to place any research into barriers which limit the participation of particular under-represented groups in the context of the stated commitment of both the British government and the Welsh Assembly to widening participation.

Recommendations

- The issue of negative school experience has been widely documented and there have attempts to address this problem in several ways, for example, the provision of Summer Schools by Universities such as Aberystwyth; and the development of Family Learning strategies in schools and communities. These strategies are comparatively new and whilst there has been a degree of evaluation, there will be a need for statistical and qualitative longitudinal studies, which can evaluate the success of these schemes.
- The greater involvement of the schools' sector in combating negative experiences.
- Research on the impact of Government policies on widening participation and student hardship on participation by individuals living in areas of economic deprivation.
- A larger scale research project focussing on barriers to participation within the framework of a continuum of participation/ non-participation. This project was hampered by a lack of resources, for example, the employment of a full-time researcher would enable us to reach those who are alienated from education by contacting organisations such as New Deal and Employment exchanges. They could also attempt to reach such groups by street interviews in communities of deprivation. This strategy was adopted successfully by Trotman and Morris (1994).
- More research into the importance of informal and incidental learning such as that produced by ELWa (2002).
- Further research into the ways in which people manage to overcome serious barriers, either through involvement in formal learning or any other means.
- Finally, given the need to reach individuals who are or who have experienced economic deprivation, future research bids should include a budget to enable research teams to pay individuals who agree to be interviewed or involved in focus groups etc.

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FINANCIAL REPORT

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Total	£2000-00

