Too Late for the Learning: lessons from older learners

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ABSTRACT This article explores the interests and motivations of older learners, their learning experiences and the barriers faced in accessing education. The research was conducted at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in Ireland as a postgraduate research project. The aim of the research is to promote inclusiveness in education by investigating the educational needs of older learners and how academic providers can meet these needs. The research incorporates action research, qualitative methodologies and evaluative techniques to explore the educational experiences of older learners and identify their educational needs. The research documents the experiences of older learners in an access to higher education course at WIT, members of the University of the Third Age, and students on a computer course designed specifically for older learners.

Introduction

This article explores the interests and motivations of older learners, their learning experiences and the barriers faced in accessing education. The research was conducted at Waterford Institute of Technology in Ireland as a postgraduate research project. The aim of the research is to promote inclusiveness in education by investigating the educational needs of older learners and how academic providers can meet these needs.

The increase in the ageing population and shifting demographics is evident worldwide, and Ireland is no exception. There are currently over one million people in Ireland over the age of 50, accounting for over 25% of the total population (Central Statistics Office, 2003, p. 31). The older population in Ireland is set to increase, with the number of people over the age of eighty projected to double by the year 2031 (Central Statistics Office, 2001, p. 2). These demographic changes have implications for educational providers. The increase in the older population means that there will be fewer adults in the workforce supporting a greater retired population. In the future older adults will be encouraged to return to work or remain in the workforce. Therefore older

adults will become an important target group for educational and training initiatives.

Older adults in Ireland were disadvantaged in their former education due to a lack of access and support from the state. For instance, there was no free secondary education until 1967, so many older adults were previously denied educational opportunities. 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 (Department of Education and Science, 2000, pp. 34-36). The participation of mature students in higher education in Ireland is among the lowest of member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 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, p. 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, p. 192).

Education for older adults is still largely underfunded in Ireland, and most adult educational initiatives are heavily dependent on economic factors. We can see from the literature that older people, particularly older women, often engage in learning for pleasure or self-esteem rather than for economic reasons (Scala, 1996, p. 765). This may lead educational providers and policy-makers to question why they should fund educational initiatives for older adults if they do not yield economic returns through the workforce.

There are a number of moral arguments to support the development of education for older adults. Rawls' theory of justice argues that education, like health, is a public good and educational distribution must be to everyone's advantage and accessible to all (1971, p. 61). Education can improve quality of life for older people, many of whom have been disadvantaged through no fault of their own (Elmore, 1999, p. 9). Education is concerned with combating social exclusion and providing the means to actively participate in the cultural life of the community (Elmore, 1999, p. 13). Elmore (1999, p. 10) acknowledges that as people age, they become increasingly marginalised by society in economic, social, political and cultural terms. Mackay et al (2001, pp. 106-107) illustrate how education facilitates participation in democratic societies. Active citizenship is linked to the ability to access information, and those who are not educated in accessing modern mediums of communication such as the internet can be excluded from society (Mackay et al, 2001, p. 106). Therefore, denying access to education is to deprive individuals of their civil rights and their cultural heritage (Paterson, 2001). Following this principle, older adults should have equal rights and access to education, with positive measures put in place to ensure equality of provision. Therefore, education purely for the sake of enjoyment should be encouraged in later life (Jones, 2000, p. 340).

Older people who wish to remain in the workforce also need access to learning to be able to participate in the labour market. With the older

population of Ireland set to double over the next three decades (Central Statistics Office, 2001, p. 2), fewer workers will need to support a larger population in retirement. Consequently the government will be encouraging older people to remain in the workforce for longer. The low levels of engagement in education and training by older workers and the low levels of support from employers will have economic implications in the future.

Project Methodology

The research used interpretive and qualitative techniques to record the experiences of older learners. The research documents the experiences of the older learner in the University of the Third Age (U3A) at sites in Blackrock, Wexford and Waterford, on an access to higher education course in Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), and on a computer course designed specifically for older learners.

Action and participatory methodologies were used as an overall approach to the study. Dickson & Green (2001, p. 244) found participatory approaches to research ideal with groups who have experienced lifelong disempowerment. Therefore, it was appropriate to use participatory methods with older learners who may not have had the same experiences and access to education as younger people. A participatory element was incorporated into the research process by listening to participant's views and allowing participants at all stages of the research to comment on the appropriateness of the research and its methodologies, the value of the research to them and the validity of the findings.

Qualitative and evaluative techniques were used to explore the educational experiences of older learners. Merriam & Simpson (2000, p. 97) find qualitative methodologies particularly useful for investigations into adult education, as they facilitate the understanding of the experiences of participants in the research and in the improvement of practice. These techniques allowed research participants to reflect on their experiences. Leane et al (2002, p. 44) found this reflective process to be empowering for participants, giving them a sense of confidence and achievement by recognising the value of their experiences. Randall (2002, p. 64) found that allowing people to tell their stories encourages a truly invitational learning environment, thus developing an equal relationship between the learner and teacher, which is a key aspect of participatory and action research methodologies.

Scala (1996, p. 748) points out that research needs to focus on the interests and motivations of older learners, experiences in education and the barriers faced in accessing education in order to effectively integrate older learners in the classroom. Therefore, these issues were examined as key themes of the research. A number of direct quotations from research participants were used to demonstrate each of the key themes in the paper. These key themes are:

- Benefits of learning and educational programmes for older adults
- Barriers to participation in education for older adults

- Former educational experiences and their effect on current learning
- Gender participation in lifelong learning
- Facilitating the older learner.

Benefits of Learning and Educational Programmes for Older Adults

The social benefit of education has been highlighted as a major factor in participation for older people (Scala, 1996, p. 759; Dench & Regan, 2000, p. 4; Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 167; Equality Authority, 2002, p. 59). Research participants indicate the social aspect of learning is a primary reason for participating in education and learning. The philosophy of the U3A has a large social element. Rather than learning in isolation, the U3A model encourages participants to work collectively, incorporating everybody's ideas into a 'democratic learning design' (Whitaker, 2002, p. 7). U3A participants in the research commented on social aspects of the learning environment, such as meeting new people:

> What I like is the idea of meeting people from different walks of life, that have been in a different area to what I have been, and different experiences. And it's lovely chatting with somebody and you learn quite a lot from their way of life and what they thought about different things. And I also think in this group there's a warm ... friendship ... It's great to learn so much about life from other people and their way of coping with things and what they enjoy ... you feel at home. (Blackrock U3A member)

The computer course participants found that learning in a group where they were all in the same situation regarding overcoming the fear of learning and mystery of a new technology was of huge benefit to them.

The older adults on the access course at WIT participated in education and learning largely for social reasons, whereas the younger students participated predominantly to enhance their career prospects:

> 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. (WIT access course participant)

Participating in education for instrumental reasons such as career advancement seems to be less important to older learners. A survey of lifelong learning in the USA also found this to be the case (American Association for Retired Persons, 2000, p. 15). Participating in learning provides many intrinsic rewards for older people (Equality Authority, 2002, p. 59). Most of the older participants on the access course were there for their personal development and making up for lack of opportunities in the past:

> 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. (WIT access course participant)

Successful participation in educational and learning programmes can reinforce a sense of self-efficacy for older adults (Mehrotra, 2003, p. 651). U3A members found that being part of a U3A group could help improve their self-confidence. The computer course participants found that learning helped them to improve their confidence, particularly in using technology:

> Our age are not technology minded. We are technophobic. We don't see the relevance of computers as easily as younger people. As we learn more, I think we will begin to see the relevance of computers to us. (Computer course participant)

U3A participants also noted the intellectual benefits of learning. Scala (1996, p. 759) found that the joy of learning was the most positive aspect of learning for older adults. Important aspects of participating in the U3A were gaining new knowledge and trying new activities. The challenge of learning was also a major reason for participants in the computer course. Learners reported that keeping up with technological advances was important, especially to keep in touch with family and friends via email.

Keeping the mind active was an important factor for older people in the U3A. Swindell (2000, p. 252) outlines a number of studies which document the health-related benefits of intellectual activity in older people, particularly with regard to age-related diseases such as Alzheimer's and dementia.

> Well, I feel that it helps the grey matter keep ticking over. ... We've all known people with Alzheimer's ... I do think it helps a lot that if you keep the brain active you prevent it from going rusty. And it doesn't matter what you're active at. In other words what subject, but whatever you fancy, and that you couldn't get time to do it when you were young ... It's wonderful to dip your toes into a new subject and get ... satisfaction from it. (Blackrock U3A member)

Education for older people is also about empowering people, helping them to know their rights and assert themselves (Equality Authority, 2002, p. 15). Mackay et al (2001, pp. 106-107) emphasise how education facilitates participation in political life through the ability to access information. Participants in the U3A also found that participating in the U3A group provided a platform where older people could voice their opinions.

> That's where these ageing groups are getting together a lot ... get the government to understand that older people also have a voice ... and they're beginning to do it now, but barely beginning to consult them about things that are going to affect their lives. (Wexford Senior Voice member)

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Barriers to Participation in Education for Older Adults

The barriers to education are defined by Cross (1981, p. 98) as dispositional, institutional and situational. Situational barriers were perceived as the main barrier to education for older adults in the access course. Family and time commitments were reported to be the main barriers. Many older adults had children who were also studying and some were caring for a spouse, leaving little time for study or other college commitments. Financial difficulty was not perceived as a barrier for older students on the access course, whereas it was a major barrier for younger adults. In particular, those younger students who had families with little income found it difficult to participate in education.

Situational barriers are also present for older learners in the U3A. Many cannot attend the U3A due to physical or geographical restrictions. Older people with physical health problems are often neglected in relation to learning, and the focus tends to be on their physical care with little reference to mental activity (Jervis, 2001, p. 127). Age Action Ireland, the national independent organisation on ageing and older people, highlights the need to develop the U3A model in health care and other residential settings (Whitaker, 2002, p. 17). The focus groups also showed that older people in rural areas may not have transport available to attend U3A meetings. The majority of the U3As are located in urban centres, which calls into question whether the U3A model is suited to rural settings. The concept of learning as a classroom-based pursuit needs to be amended so that learning is accessible in a variety of settings, such as people's homes (Whitaker, 2002, p. 9) or doctor's surgeries (James, 2001).

However, dispositional barriers are perceived to be the major deterrent for older learners in the U3A. Although the U3A programmes appear to have minimised or removed many of the barriers which are strong deterrents to educational participation in later life (Courtenay, 1989, cited in Swindell, 2000, p. 252), some intrinsic or psychological barriers, such as lack of confidence, still exist for the older learner.

> I think only in your own mind ... you yourself are the only barrier ...
> You can stop yourself ... if you tell yourself you can't do something,
> well then you can't. (Waterford U3A member)

The idea of sharing facilitation in the U3A aims to develop confidence, as participants realise the value of the knowledge that they share with others (Whitaker, 2002, p. 35). Those involved in U3A for a long time found their self-confidence increased. However, it may take time to overcome negative self-perceptions, and a U3A must use a gradual approach of gaining trust and giving encouragement to participants (Whitaker, 2002, p. 46). Whitaker (2002, p. 35) notes that one of the initial skills learned in the U3A is how to get beyond the critical voice that tells us we 'aren't good enough' or 'that we have nothing to say'. However, this does not solve the problem for the non-participant. It is difficult to clearly define the barriers that exist for older people, as those in the focus groups have already overcome barriers to joining a group such as U3A.

Older adults on the access course also mentioned some dispositional barriers, particularly self-confidence issues, which stemmed from negative memories of former education. Older adults had reservations about entering the classroom again and some found that these negative feelings were a significant barrier to learning. Some tutors in WIT also find that confidence is a major issue in the classroom, and the older students who are more relaxed are more willing to question and will therefore learn more. Tutors note that fear of failure is a major issue with older learners; therefore, the support systems in the college should be recommended to them. Older learners also recommended that more psychological support be available. Although 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.

Computer course participants also had fears and reservations about learning how to use a computer, called 'technophobia' by some participants. This did not seem to act as a barrier to learning for participants. At the beginning of the computer course, learners would often get frustrated by their lack of knowledge or experience with technology, but in time this disappeared and they enjoyed the learning experience.

> Coming from the pen and paper generation the whole concept was so strange it took my brain a few weeks to adjust. At first I felt very frustrated and full of doubts about ever understanding the subject. Then bit-by-bit after bursts of concentration, some small pieces began to fall into place and I began to realise that I was learning more than I thought. (Computer class participant)

Students on the access course also remarked on some institutional barriers. Organisational problems within the institution, such as room and tutor changes, can be confusing and are a distraction when learning. Because of their personal commitments outside the institution, older adults have to structure their classes and study times a few weeks in advance and find it difficult to timetable extra events such as meetings and extra study classes into their schedules. Older adults also feel that tutors need to be more understanding of the needs and constraints on older adults in education.

Former Educational Experiences and Their Effect on Current Learning

Adults come to a learning programme with a range of expectations about the learning process and attitudes towards education, which usually are based on former educational experience (Rogers, 1996, p. 67). There were mixed feelings about former education in the access group: some said that they had enjoyed their former schooldays, but some had unpleasant memories. Lack of confidence was the major barrier to participation in education. This may stem from lack of educational experience or negative memories associated with former education.

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Some participants shared their account of their past experiences in former education and the psychological barriers they had had to overcome before successfully returning to education.

> 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. (WIT access course participant)

Older adults in the U3A also had mixed feelings about their former schooldays. Some reported that this left them with a very low self-esteem. However, some participants had very pleasant reminiscences of schooldays. Some told stories of the joy of their schooldays and their love of learning that had since developed.

> I was lucky enough to go to a third-level education ... I think that life is more important than the formal education ... I went to a small country school ... I was bright, maybe that was an advantage. But we had no physical punishment then and you had an open fire and that ... We had a great education really we did ... in a small country school ... we were very lucky. (Wexford Senior Voice member)

If the attitudes of older people to their former educational experiences are not taken into account, it can cause difficulties in the learning environment (Rogers, 1996, p. 69). These experiences, whether positive or negative, need to be taken into account to maximise and enhance learning for older people (Rogers, 1996, p. 69).

Gender Participation in Lifelong Learning

There were only two men involved in the U3A focus groups. The U3As in Wexford and Waterford were developed from Age Action Ireland's 'Desirable Futures' project, a project encouraging older women to become involved in their community and decision-making. Therefore, all of the U3A participants in these sites were female. Participants felt that it was difficult to get men to join groups such as the U3A. Some of the women in the groups felt that women were joining these groups to make up for lack of educational opportunities in the past. Williamson (2000, p. 55) found that men and women approach life in the third age differently: men in the U3A prefer to 'sit and think', whereas women prefer to be more active and 'free' to do things denied to them in the second age. The gender imbalance is similar in the UK, where women outnumber men by about two to one in the U3A (Midwinter, cited in McGivney, 1999, p. 10). Midwinter suggests that this may be due to the nature of U3A learning, which tends to be informal and social in character, which seems to appeal more to women. Non-vocational programmes for older learners are targeted at both genders, but women are more likely to take advantage of

them (McGivney, 1999, p. 126). This was also the case in the computer course: there were only two men on the course, and twelve women.

Scala (1996, p. 765) found that older women are more likely to return to education for personal reasons, whereas older men are more likely to pursue job-related qualifications. Some of the older men on the access course in WIT were pursuing higher education qualifications to enhance their careers, while the majority of older women on the access course said that they would be pleased to gain employment after their studies but did not pursue education for that reason.

There may be many reasons why older men do not access educational and learning opportunities to the same extent as women. An Irish study of gender and learning found that older men tend to have negative perspectives on learning, due to their former experiences in education, with physical punishment a common experience for many of them (King et al, 2002, pp. 68-69). Peer support may be a factor in returning to education. King et al (2002, p. 81) found that most men are supported by their immediate families in returning to education but have less peer-support than women. They also noted that older men tend to favour all-male groups and sometimes have more difficulty in admitting they don't know something, especially when women are present (King et al, 2002, pp. 81-92). However, some WIT tutors felt that older men were more vocal in the classroom and more forthcoming with their opinions than older women.

As substantially more women than men were involved in the research, it was difficult to get a male perspective on learning in later years. It is a challenge to encourage men who are no longer economically active to participate in learning programmes, despite the fact that it could help them to manage the period of transition into retirement and find alternatives to full-time work (McGivney, 1999, p. 124). Further research is needed to establish a male perspective on these issues and to look at how education and learning can be developed to be appealing and beneficial to older men.

Facilitating the Older Learner

Facilitators need to be aware of a number of issues in educational and learning programmes for older learners. Some of the U3A members felt that their memories were not as effective as when they were younger; therefore, they preferred learning at a slower pace to absorb information. They also liked time to reflect on new information. Truluck & Courtenay (1999, p. 234) found that adults become less active and more reflective and observant in learning as they age. However, this may depend on the subject area. The need for practical experience was apparent in the computer course. Participants on the computer course found that they had difficulties in remembering what they had learned, and mentioned that they needed constant repetition of material to memorise it. WIT tutors found that it took longer for older adults to remember information, and their classes needed to be slower to allow for understanding of material.

Computer course participants also said they needed more opportunities to practice the skills they had learned, in order to effectively use them in their lives. This was difficult, as most did not own a computer and had no opportunity to practice outside the class.

Some older adults found skills such as note-taking were difficult to master at first. Tutors also noted that older learners find it difficult to multi-task, for example, taking notes while listening to the tutor. The access course has a study skills module throughout the academic year. However, both younger and older adults recommended that study skills sessions be provided at the beginning of the year to give them the necessary academic skills before beginning their studies. Mehrotra (2003, p. 651) found that older adults required more positive feedback than younger adults to achieve the same gains in self-efficacy and sense of achievement. Older learners on the access course mentioned that they liked to receive feedback on their assignments.

Many critical writers in adult learning suggest that experience forms the basis of all learning (Rogers, 1996, p. 107). The older learners on the access course said that they felt the life experiences of the older learner should be respected and reflected in the classroom. WIT tutors also felt that older learners needed better understanding from their tutors regarding their capabilities. Tutors noted that older adults have their own views and opinions on particular subjects. This was seen as an advantage in subjects such as history and politics. However, tutors felt that in subjects such as art it may be difficult to get older adults to challenge their ways of thinking and broaden their outlook. Older adults in the U3A also wanted their life experiences to be recognised and appreciated in their learning. The U3A model fosters a system where learners are also teachers and each U3A member represents their own skills, expertise and life experiences (Whitaker, 2002, p. 38).

WIT tutors found that older learners had more difficulties with IT-related subjects and were often afraid of technology. WIT students did not mention these difficulties, but noted the importance of computer technology in their studies. The U3A members also felt that it was important to keep up with technological advances, and that learning how to use a computer was essential for their age group. However, most felt that classes were too advanced and technical and needed to be delivered at a slower pace and in a language that is clear for older people. Computer course participants also felt that computer classes needed to be delivered at a slow, easy pace for learners in a non-threatening environment. Some participants on the computer course felt than one-to-one instruction would be more beneficial to older people when learning an unfamiliar technology.

Older adults on the access course gave a wide range of preferred subjects and methods of learning, showing the diversity of the adult classroom. This has implications for academic providers, in designing a curriculum that is diverse in teaching methods and appropriate for adults of all ages. U3A groups also engage participants from a wide variety of backgrounds, with several different experiences of former education. The life experiences of all the older learners in

the research were equally diverse. This is further proof that older learners are a heterogeneous group of people and their diverse learning needs must be taken into account.

Coming to grips with computers may be difficult for older people who are new to the technology, and the need for individual attention became apparent as the course developed:

> It takes time as a beginner to grasp learning especially if a person is
> older as it is easier for a younger person who has a more alert brain.
> (Computer class participant)

Participants noted that they were more comfortable with individual instruction. This was difficult to do in a classroom, however, particularly with a large number of students. A few participants suggested that teaching computing to beginners might be best done on an individual basis rather than in a classroom. One individual said that learning on her own computer at home would be more relevant to her:

> Personally speaking I would be happier in a one-to-one class
> situation while graduating towards a certain degree of proficiency.
> This in no way reflects on the ability, efficiency and patience of
> Karen our tutor who has been most helpful during this course.
> Neither does it reflect on the other cheerful people attending.
> (Computer class participant)

Older learners may also have sensory difficulties that need to be accounted for in the learning environment. On the computer course, one participant had difficulty viewing the screen. One U3A participant mentioned that she didn't like lectures or going to hear people speaking as she had difficulties hearing. However, the research found that older people may not necessarily reveal these difficulties, so that it is the responsibility of the facilitator to detect them. Only when participants became familiar with the environment did they divulge this information to the facilitator. Thus many older adults may avoid learning situations for such reasons.

Conclusion

In the past the rights of the older adult in education were virtually ignored. More recently, the benefits of education for older adults have been formally recognised in strategy documents such as the Irish White Paper on adult education (Department of Education and Science, 2000), and *Implementing Equality for Older People* (Equality Authority, 2002). However, educational providers lack clear objectives in their policies for developing lifelong learning for older people. Policies need to establish clear targets for educational provision for older adults and ensure that educational providers achieve these targets. Strategies for lifelong learning also need to advocate the importance of attracting older adults back to education.

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In higher education, it is evident that the needs and motivations of older and younger adults in higher education are diverse. A number of situational, dispositional and institutional barriers need to be addressed if older adults are to successfully participate in education. Educational providers need to be sensitive to institutional issues such as timetabling, room changes and tutor changes that affect older learners. Dispositional barriers can be addressed by educational providers, through the development of support systems for older learners. Supports such as counselling and classes in study skills can enable older learners to overcome difficulties in self-confidence or negative attitudes stemming from former education. Situational difficulties are usually outside the control of the educational institution. However, through creative planning, educational institutions can address these issues. Educators can creatively adapt the conventional provision of education to suit the needs of older learners. For example, educational activity does not have to take place in a conventional classroom, nor does it have to use conventional teaching strategies:

> Imagination and experimentation on the part of adult educators are
> necessary, but of course not sufficient. Without resources there can
> be little change, but whilst the struggle for resources must continue,
> it is important to think of new ways in which the old values of
> liberal adult education can be preserved, and benefit more people.
> (Jamieson et al, 1998, p. 226)

The U3A in Ireland provides a platform for older people to share their life experiences and their variety of skills and talents with each other. It is a comfortable, safe environment that encourages learning at an appropriate pace, using methods suited to the needs of the individuals involved. The U3A is a broad term that describes a diverse range of learning programmes and participants. The three U3As involved in the research were different in the types of subjects and activities they offered and the people who participated, but they all encompass the self-help, independent learning ideals of the Irish U3A model (Whitaker, 2002, p. 15). This is a useful model, which can be adopted to suit a wide variety of groups of older people and the types of learning activities they wish to pursue. However, issues such as increasing male involvement and promoting the U3A model to isolated or rural areas need to be addressed if the U3A is to become a successful model for all older people.

Much is known about the characteristics of adult learners and their preferences for learning styles. This knowledge, however, must be extended to the needs of older adults. This research conveys suggestions from older learners themselves about their preferred styles of learning, and how facilitators can meet their needs in the classroom. Older learners' interests vary greatly regarding learning content and subject areas. Although this research focused primarily on the facilitation of IT-based learning, other subject areas need to adapt their curricula to meet the needs of older learners. Specific programmes for older learners should reflect their needs in the curriculum design. These strategies also

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need to be adopted for mainstream classrooms, to ensure that institutions are truly non-discriminatory in their approach to learning.

We can see from the research the benefits of education and lifelong learning for older people. Mehrotra (2003, p. 653) remarks that older adults with more educational experience and more recent experience are more confident learners, whereas those with lower levels of formal education are far less likely to participate and need more guidance when they do participate. Therefore, we should promote educational opportunities that encourage older adults who do not currently partake in them. This research only included those who have already overcome the barriers to participation in education or learning and are part of an educational or learning programme. Mehrotra (2003, p. 653) notes that the challenge is in reaching those who are presently underserved but who would most likely benefit from educational programmes. We need to hear the voice of the non-participant in the research and look at ways in which we can target them. A greater input from older men is required, as very few men's voices are reflected in the research. More male involvement will help to give a true account of the gender issues in education for older people.

The literature on older adult learning tends to focus on the chronological definition of ageing. Elliott (2000, p. 209) suggests that this limited theory of ageing can cause us to generalise and make assumptions about older people. The research showed that older people are involved in learning for a variety of reasons and their motivations for engaging in learning are diverse. For instance, some are learning for pleasure or as a hobby or interest in retirement, some are learning to enhance or change their careers, and some want to fulfil lifelong ambitions and seize the opportunities that they were denied earlier in life. In this research the chronological definition of the 'older learner' has been used solely as a means of identifying research participants. However, the research also observes the diversity in the types of learning activities they engage in and their motivation for engaging in those programmes. Jamieson et al (1998, p. 226) recommend that research into the significance and meanings of educational activities at different stages of life is a more appropriate means of approaching education for older adults. For the purpose of further study in this area, it would be more appropriate to define older learners in terms of their needs at a particular stage of life rather than chronological age.

There is no statistical evidence of the number of older adults involved in groups such as U3A groups, active retirement associations or other lifelong learning groups in Ireland. Future research needs to record and identify the diverse range of learning opportunities for older adults in Ireland and their participation in informal learning activities.

Current research has rarely addressed the issues of older learners in education in terms of differences in social class. Societal issues of power and knowledge need to be considered in relation to older learners. While these issues have been explored in adult education (Cervero & Wilson, 2001), specific problems of societal structures and access to education for older adults have yet

to be explored. Future research on older adult learning should take these issues into account.

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