

ADULT RETURNERS

**Action Research Methodology as an intervention tool to improve the
learning experience of adult returners to formal education**

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education

by

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We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Elliot. "Little Gidding"

ABSTRACT

The present Labour Government is committed to “the era of learning through life”. However, as the Kennedy Report (1997) into Widening Participation in Further Education argues, education is still an exclusion zone for an important minority of the population including women.

If present policy, as set out in *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998a) is to work, further education colleges have an important role to play, becoming the vehicle for moving people “from unemployment through training to employment” (Smith, 1997:4). The present study initially sought to establish the nature of this role by exploring the impact of the current political climate on lifelong learning and the way in which local education authorities have interpreted the policy directives in this area. A detailed Institution Focused Study of one Local Education Authority and one Further Education College revealed a possible mismatch between provision and the needs of the population targeted under the lifelong learning initiative. It concluded that the initiative is likely to present a considerable challenge for institutions which, because of market forces, are increasingly viewing their client population in terms of funding units and academic output (Jarvis, 1998:220).

The study subsequently adapted an action research approach to explore possible ways of meeting the lifelong learning challenge in the case of one group of female adults making a return to further education. A variety of data collection methods, including questionnaires, focus group techniques and reflective journals were employed throughout the two action cycles to record, in detail, the effects of the actions taken on students, lecturers, policy and practice. These provide the basis for an account of the characteristics of provision that could justifiably be described as a lifelong learning opportunity for adult females returning to education.

The study concludes that an action research approach has the capacity for positively affecting lecturers’ experience of teaching and the students’ experience of learning within a further education environment.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning has been variously described as a means of increasing earning power (DfEE, 1998b: 6), as enabling people to break away from the cycle of “if at first you don’t succeed, you don’t succeed” (Uden, 1996:7) and as a pathway (Kennedy, 1997:113). The Kennedy Committee was set up to look at how further education (FE) can widen participation of under-represented groups, especially those for whom initial learning has been unsuccessful. *Learning Works* (Kennedy, 1997) was published just as I was doing my preparatory research and my interest in improving the learning experience for adult returners stemmed from personal experience.

In 1990 my eldest daughter was about to take up her place at Cambridge University. She had followed a relatively traditional route by studying A levels at a North London comprehensive and competing with her peers for her choice of degree. She was bright, articulate and motivated. As a parent I was justifiably proud of her achievement and temporarily bathed in her reflected glory – I still do! However another emotion stirred that I was less quick to share and that was envy for what might have been. When I was a bright, articulate and motivated teenager I turned down my chance at University in favour of salaried employment and felt that the door had shut firmly behind me. Having now had a peek back through that door (especially the rather grand and rarefied doors of Girton College) I surprised myself with the force of my desire to return to education. I had no knowledge of the undercurrents nationally or internationally supporting widening participation in education. I had left school at sixteen years old when jobs were ‘two a penny’ and had felt quite content with my career in the caring profession. However unlike many of the returners that I have interviewed, during the course of my research, I had tasted periods of study in the intervening years when I undertook nurse training (RGN) and various professional development awards. But could I really compete in the lifeworld of my daughter and her peers? How would it feel to attend college with students who were of a different generation? Was it worth it? The rest, as they say, is history. With support and encouragement, and a grant from the local Health Authority my personal voyage of discovery was underway. The pathway opened by a chance encounter has not yet ended for me but the self-confidence that this experience gave me could have the reverse effect for others. In creating a nation which is constantly subjugated to education there may be a danger that persons not on this ‘learning

pathway' would be made to feel inadequate. Rather than lifelong learning we could create a culture of lifelong inadequacy (Matheson, 1996:232).

However, as we enter the new Millennium we are discovering that change is now endemic in the Western world. The career path, trodden by my parents starting in the pre-WW11 years and spanning the whole of their working lives, is dissolving in post-modern society. Traditionally one's occupational status had defined one's social standing; in the case of my father this meant upward social mobility from a family of farmers into the Civil service. This was unusual in Ireland in the 1920's and his siblings did not have the same opportunity to scale the class ladder as their older brother. Uden (1996:17) suggests that there "appears to be a powerful connection between socio-economic status and academic achievement". For my family this meant more than social mobility. It involved physical movement to another country with different social values and a different culture. Following in a parent's footsteps may not be a viable option in today's rapidly changing job market. And having gained employment there is no longer any guarantee, or expectation, of a steady wage packet to ensure occupational status and independence. As Blunkett, the present Secretary of State for Education says in his forward to *The Learning Age* (DfEEb, 1998:3)

"We stand on the brink of a new age. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. Jobs are changing and with them the skills needed for the world of tomorrow."

In 1990 my position on Kennedy's career pathway had been quite stationary for many years whilst I, in common with many women, juggled the demands of bringing up a family with working part-time. McGivney (1999:6) says that employment choices for women are "restricted to whatever short-term or part-time jobs are available in the immediate locality". She goes on to state that this applies even to professional women who have taken a career break, which can frequently lead to downward mobility. McGivney quotes one study that found evidence of employers discriminating against women in recruitment, promotion and training, even in female dominated areas (Meager and Williams, 1994 in McGivney, 1999:8). The learning pathways have been relatively clearly signposted for me and although they have frequently been set at a steep gradient the learning curves have mostly been greater. However my route is not typical of many adult returners and the goal of this research has been to document the implications of recent Policy on further and higher education and how it affects the majority of adult learners. The key objective of this study is also to examine my own practice, as a course manager in a further education (FE) college, to see how I can improve the learning

experience of adult returners to formal study in childcare. I will demonstrate that action research methodology can be used as an effective intervention tool in improving teaching whilst also informing our understanding of the learning needs of adults. By using this unique combination of action and research it provides a mix of both responsiveness and rigour as a part of the teams' everyday practice which encourages ownership and collaboration that can be missing from the normal quality assurance mechanisms used in FE.

My thesis consists of three parts. The first section (chapters two and three) documents the background research into lifelong learning, and in particular adult learning. The major publications on learning through life are contextualised within the global arena, with emphasis being placed on a critical evaluation of the Kennedy Report into widening participation in further education (Kennedy, 1997) and on the government responses to both Kennedy and Dearing (1997). Chapter three investigates the extent to which current government policy has impinged on policy at a local level in a specified Local Education Authority (LEA) and then within a further education college in that LEA. Most of the research contained in chapter two and three was originally carried out for and Institutional Focussed Study (IFS) in 1998. The rationale for integrating the IFS within the body of this thesis is to demonstrate the dynamic arena within which FE now exists. It will show that FE has become central to governmental initiatives for *lifelong learning* that meet the economic and social requirements of the twenty-first century. Finding a way of keeping pace with these changes needs a more responsive service and the IFS explores how one LEA is coping with the challenge.

For the purposes of this thesis some amendments have been made to the original study to bring it up to date in line with on-going policy changes during 1999-2000. It is acknowledged that lifelong learning is a dynamic process and that changes may occur after the formal writing up of my research; therefore what is contained here is a snapshot of lifelong learning in Britain in 1998-1999. Following on from this investigation into recent policy the next section begins to explore a research methodology that would enable me to effectively explore adult learning and to describe quality indicators in terms of their personal achievements and progression. The IFS had appeared to point to a mismatch in the expectations of adults enrolling on courses and with the institutions that set up those courses. This could have contributed to the reported high dropout rate by adult learners (see chapter three). In acknowledging that I was a part of this mismatch, and wishing to improve my professional practice I decided to investigate how I could improve the learning experience of those adults with whom I had contact. By

considering the various research paradigms, in chapter four, I demonstrate how I decided that an action research model would be the most appropriate for my purposes. Chapter four concludes with an outline of my methodology and methods. Chapter five provides detail of the data collection in the first action research cycle and reports on a small-scale study using grounded theory contained within this. It also contains some vignettes chosen for their clarity in describing the impact that action research intervention has had on individuals.

The final section of my research begins to describe the interface between the college, tutor and adult learner and to initiate a second action research cycle based on results of an analysis of the data. A conclusion suggests ways in which a lecturer in further education can formalise their reflective practice by using an action research methodology in order to understand the learning needs of adult returners and to meet the challenges of learning in the twenty-first century.

The research started with the context of female returners in a college of further education. The cohort of NVQ2 childcare students had enrolled on a course of study after at least six years away from any formal study. The purpose of the study was therefore to discuss the capacity of an action research approach to affect both the students' experience of learning and the tutors' experience of teaching over an eighteen-month period. Analysis of the results of second research cycle appears to justify the use of action research as an effective intervention method when working with adults.

1:1 Background

As I commenced my thesis research at the beginning of 1997 England was anticipating two major reports on lifelong learning. Whilst Conservative Government had commissioned these, the Labour Party manifesto (Times 5.7.1996) declared its vision for a learning society under the headline "Education, education, education!" The Kennedy Report, *Learning Works. Widening participation in further education* (1997) was to provide a rationale for a new learning culture that was exciting and innovative. It seemed inevitable that in my role of a further education lecturer I would focus on adult learning. Further Education had been dubbed the "Cinderella" service (Cordingly, seminar report: 12.9.1995) and had been suffering as a result of incorporation. A major publication that focused on post-compulsory education was long over-due and I was interested to see what effects it may have on my own practice.

Many of my students were women who had been away from formal education for many years and fit McGivney's definition of women returners. She describes them as "women who have taken time out of the labour market (often termed a 'career break') usually for maternity reasons and wish to return to paid employment, education or training" (1999: 1). DeBell (1994) goes on to suggest that many women will be 'returners' on a number of occasions. In my experience the women enrolling on childcare courses, particularly NVQ level 2 which is the basic entry level, often came to college when their children had grown up, or alternatively they themselves had been educated abroad and had no qualifications recognised in England. In several cases the women had achieved degree level education abroad but did not speak, or write, English well enough for employment purposes.

As adult returners these women often presented with low self-confidence and had learning needs that did not always 'fit' into the curriculum model of the college. Jarvis (1998:18) suggests that adult education has not traditionally been viewed as a component in the 'front-loaded' paradigm of education but has been "marginal to the institution of education in society". As a result of this many adults' experience of learning has reflected the HMI report (1987:4) which said that adults were frequently in "poor quality accommodation" and that they often had a long day in college without the support of tutorial and private study time. This picture appeared to fit my previous experience too. An abiding memory of myself as an adult returner was of competing for laboratory time with full-time under-graduates. On one notable occasion this led to our group, consisting of around ten women and four men, doing an experiment on diuresis at seven o'clock in the evening after a full day of lectures. To add insult to injury the experiment involved drinking vast quantities of fluid in a short space of time and then measuring output. All floors in the laboratory block had male lavatories, one had female...

The FE College in which I am now based also has great demand on available rooms, particularly during the peak hours, between nine and four. Because the women returners at the start of this study were not regularly on site they had often found 'their room' reallocated which wasted valuable time. In chapter five I record some of the comments made about this situation by the students that reflect how much these adults value consistency. If they are not yet equipped to deal with this kind of change then it is necessary to explore means of enabling them to develop the autonomy to cope in an ever-changing world.

In order to understand why accommodation was such an issue to adult learners it will be useful to contextualise them in terms of the 'learning society' as it appeared at the

beginning of 1999. At this time the funding of courses listed in schedule two of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act was awarded by the government quango the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for each unit completed. Those not listed, including the NVQ childcare courses reported on in this study, were left to the vagaries of the LEAs which inevitably lead to low priority being placed on the more intrinsic value attached to individual learning goal setting. The following quote from an article written the year after the FHE Act illustrates how market forces have become so important

“...grey men in suits, with executive briefcases and brightly coloured ties, skilled in business speak, [who] manage the decisions that deliver fresh batches of new consumers in search of education commodities in lecture halls staffed at chalk face by contract labour whose terms and conditions of employment have been so deregulated as to ensure maximum exploitation at minimum cost” (Thompson, 1993:244)

The FHE Act also intensified the division between learning for life and learning for work, which should, arguably, be inseparable. This is particularly important since significant costs resulted from the division. It appears to have left colleges assessing their worth in terms of numbers of students going on to Higher Education rather than promoting their strengths in preparing persons for employment and raising each individual's self-esteem in achieving a new skill. The Dearing Report (1998) was the result of an inquiry into Higher Education set against a government agenda to give it a key role in lifelong learning. It aimed to “increase and widen participation, particularly from groups who are under-represented” (DfEE 1998a: 3). Funding issues raised by Dearing may have far-reaching effects on the funding of FE courses. By late 1999 the Government had already responded to the Dearing proposals by agreeing to remove the Schedule 2 dichotomy. In a response to the Dearing Report the Director of the National Organisation for Adult Learning (NIACE) was optimistic but added

“...all that is needed to fulfil the vision could not be achieved without greater investment – from individuals, from employers and from the state” (Tuckett, 1998:13).

Six months after I had registered my intention to carry out research on adult returners the global picture on lifelong was making headline news. The UNESCO 5th International Conference in Hamburg in July that year celebrated the first attendance of the United Kingdom for thirteen years and also produced a declaration for the future:

“It is essential that the recognition of the right to education throughout life should be accompanied by measures to create the conditions required to exercise this right.”
(UNESCO, 1997)

UNESCO also stated that they were concerned with adult learning of the broadest kind including “basic education as well as technical and professional education; education for citizenship and for personal fulfilment; formal learning and informal, even incidental learning”. Tough (1979:1) says that the need to learn may be quite fundamental to human beings and that this may be, at least in part, in order to comprehend the world in which they live and to adapt them to it. Certainly much of the literature on childhood education (de Mause, 1974; Durkeim, 1956; Dewey, 1916) stresses its role in the secondary socialisation of the individual and of transmitting culture between generations. If learning is a basic human need, suggests Jarvis (1998:14), then provision of education throughout the whole of the lifespan may “help the learner satisfy” that need especially in a rapidly changing world. This is one of the theoretical premises of andragogy. Knowles is frequently associated with the concept of andragogy, as opposed to pedagogy, and he defined it as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (1980:43). He made certain distinctions between andragogy and pedagogy, including the assertion that adults need to be more self-directive, that they have a lot of experience to bring to their learning and are often more motivated, and also that adults have a more problem centred approach to learning. This approach to adult learning, which Knowles has since modified, is attractive for its humanistic and individualistic ideology. More importantly, Knowles saw andragogy as involving both the teaching and the learning process, with teachers more in the role of facilitator. Practical implications of this ideological standpoint, when applied to further education colleges, where teachers of adults often have no formal teaching qualification may have served to undervalue some areas of further education as well as to leave teachers ill-equipped to meet the needs of adult students. In my research I have observed lessons, which included both adult and post-16 year old students, and comment in chapter six on my impressions of the ways in which lecturers appear to adapt to different groups as well as adults. My diary of these events is not a formal analysis of teaching strategies but simply gives a ‘flavour’ of the learning environment.

Richardson (1990, 1994a, 1994b) has done considerable research into individual differences in student learning which supports Knowles’ claim that mature students are problem-centred and suggests, “they can be seen to have a much better meaning

orientation” (Hayes and Richardson, 1995:219). He describes approaches to learning based on the work of Marton and Säljö (1984) and says that

“...adult students seem to make more use of time management strategies than younger students. In fact, adult students generally exhibit approaches to learning that are more desirable than those of younger students...” (Richardson, 1998:81)

Contrary, therefore, to the stereotype of mature students as being deficient in their basic study skills much recent research actually shows that including them in classes with school-leavers can have positive benefits for the whole group. For example, Boon (1980) says that “mature age students perform better overall than normal age students, have a positive influence on the course, and that their tutorial contribution is considerably better than that of normal age students.” This appears to support Knowles’ general premise that adult learners have vast reservoirs of experience which can be an excellent resource in learning situations. Some other research suggests that some study approaches may be culture specific. Watkins and Regmi (1992: 103) looked at approaches to learning in Nepalese tertiary students and found that they exhibited no conception of learning as memorising and reproducing as found in European studies (E.g. Säljö, 1979; Giorgi, 1986). The NVQ students used for my research come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds therefore in my data collection I have used a written questionnaire to gain basic factual information including ethnicity.

1:2 The ethos of National Vocational Qualifications

This final section of the introduction will provide more specific background on the National Vocational Qualification system (NVQ) before discussing the NVQ 2 childcare program from which the students used in my research were recruited.

The NVQ was part of a range of initiatives heralded by the Government as part of a new framework for training and employment launched through the White Paper *Employment in the 1990’s*. The initiative aimed to bridge the gap between supply and demand for qualified employees by planning and delivering training locally to a carefully prescribed and appropriate level. Baker was the Conservative Secretary of State for Education and Science in 1989 and he recommended that all young people should have the opportunity for education and training leading to NVQs. This fulfilled his desire for a further education service that was “more widely accessible and more responsive to educational needs and the needs of industry” (CRAC, 1989:19). The standards for each NVQ were set by employers, trade unions and professions and have been based on real needs of the

occupation concerned. The key element of the NVQ has been accreditation of qualifications which are placed in a structure of levels of achievement and occupational areas, specifically that

“...anyone who can demonstrate the required competence will have good opportunities for access to it and progress from it to other NVQs” (NCVQ, 1989)

This important statement underlined NCVQ's commitment to equality and lifelong learning which it would further enable by a new system of credit accumulation and transfer. Since their implementation in 1991 NVQs have enjoyed a mixed reception. They have been found to be relevant, easier to compare to other qualifications (and this fact has increased since the setting up of the Qualification and Curriculum Authority – QCA- in 1998), and an easier mechanism for individuals to use to update skill and career requirements. Hall (1994:158) has said that this has led to vocational students being at the heart of FE colleges “shaped by the local and sub-regional labour markets”. In 1991 the Confederation for British Industry (CBI) set as a target the provision of training and education to level three for all those who could benefit from it, amounting to approximately 50% of the workforce by the year 2000. Speaking at a NIACE conference in December 1999 just prior to this target year Clark, Senior Policy Advisor to the CBI warned that job-related training correlated very highly to a persons' previous level of training. He quoted a Labour Force Survey (1999) showing that 24% of people in employment, who were educated to degree level, were likely to get training as opposed to only 16% of those educated to level 2. Clark went on to describe the barriers to learning, the main one being the willingness of industry (and employees) to pay. The same report found that 48% of people fail to reach level 3 by 21 years of age despite that Government's commitment to increasing the number of young people reaching this target (DfEE, 1998). Steedman (1998:22) argued that NVQs had many strengths although they were not included in the Dearing proposals for improving key skills and that they should be extended to make the award dependant on a person passing basic literacy and numeracy tests. A problematic issue with all NVQs is the difficulty in trying to sub-divide an occupation into its competencies and to arrive at a consensus.

The target group of NVQ 2 students used for this research were aiming to achieve vocational competence in childcare with “performance of work activities involving greater individual responsibility than the level 1” (Jarvis: 1998:222). They were already employed in a childcare setting, or wished to gain employment as a result of the qualification and had all received advice and counselling on their career options by a member of the core team before enrolling. The college had only recently introduced

NVQ courses and had not yet run an entire group to completion as I commenced my research. However the team was already expressing concern that the course had been implemented with a 'top-down' approach that could be in conflict with the ethos of student led learning. Halliday (1999:55) reminds us that we need to keep intrinsic values to the fore if FE is prove its worth:

“[it is] futile for Colleges of FE to concentrate their efforts on helping the maximum number of individuals to acquire the maximum number of so-called competencies as if the exchange value of those competencies were all that mattered and as if their exchange value was high”.

My objective, therefore, as I continued along my own learning pathway was to find ways of making the learning experience of these students appropriate and valuable. By considering the wider context of lifelong learning and then making the course responsive to the changing needs of both the student and the market place I also hoped to enhance the teaching of the collaborative team.

CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE SURVEY

Chapter two consists of three inter-related sections that explore the conceptions of adult learning and lifelong learning through textual definitions, by reference to the historical context and, finally, by a critical analysis of recent political publications on lifelong learning. It originally was contained within the Institutional Focus Study since much of the literature illustrates the position of further education in Great Britain as it approached the Millennium.

2:1 The adult learner

It has been argued (Coare and Thompson, 1996:189) that adult learners do not make the same distinctions between learning for interest, and education for qualifications and employment that were created by the 1992 Further and Higher Education (FHE) Act. Much of the literature on adult learning refers to the difficulties that adults have in weaving formal education and training into their lives. Coare and Thompson (op cit.: 154) suggest that one the greatest challenges to people is the present learning culture which can raise such obstacles that access to learning is too difficult for many adults. Through their use of personal dairies the reader is given snapshots of how “life gets in the way of learning” (Coare and Thompson, op cit.: 156).

Some studies (Hall, 1994:86; Roderick, 1983:41) suggest that these obstacles can lead to high dropout rates amongst mature students whilst more recent research (Richardson and King, 1998:73) appears to find a higher motivation and a deeper approach to study among adults than in their young counterparts. This change in the perception of adult learners reflects the national change in approach towards lifelong learning discussed later in this chapter as well as the transformation of FE, since the 1992 FHE Act, into an autonomous business that has to be responsive to market forces. In breaking the bureaucratic control of the local educational authorities (LEAs) the Act encouraged colleges to become entrepreneurs but also handed the major source of income for FE colleges into the safe-keeping of a newly formed government quango, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) which became “surrogate purchasers for students” (Longhurst, 1996:53). In awarding funding units for students who successfully completed courses listed under Schedule 2 (courses approved as vocational, with recognisable qualifications) the FHE Act led to seven years of indirect discrimination

against adult learners since it did not provide funding for part-time courses. It underlined a conceptual distinction between learning categories that was translated in FE colleges by the creation of centres of adult and continuing education (ACE) funded chiefly from the dwindling budget of the LEAs. In November 1999 the government agreed to remove Schedule 2 legislation from the Act leaving the way clear for colleges to respond more closely to local demand by giving them more flexibility in the choice of courses that they could offer.

Adult education is still, for administrative purposes, a distinctive section within further education but the means by which adults are defined appears to be somewhat obscure. This has led to difficulties in making comparisons between the many reports and publications released on lifelong learning over the last decade. Adulthood and the attendant rights and responsibilities that it confers are peculiar to the nation that confers that status. It has changed in Britain during this century, particularly with regard to women. Therefore, whilst it is possible to understand biological adulthood as physical and emotional maturity in its widest sense, there remain other aspects that make it much more complex. In British law a person reaches his or her majority at eighteen. In effect this means that he or she can take a responsible role in deciding who governs the country, can drink alcohol in a public house, can marry without parental consent and, for crimes against society can be sent to an adult jail. Rights and responsibilities confer status and autonomy on the individual and have traditionally been gained after a period of initial schooling during which knowledge about one's culture and traditions are made formal and explicit (Hirschfield, 1988). This front-ended model of education was an important means of socialising children into society as is reflected in a quote from one of her Majesty's Inspectors for Education recalled by Kumar (1978:248f):

"If it were not for her 500 elementary schools London would be overrun by a hoarde of young savages"

Jarvis (1998:16) suggests that the front-ended model of education is no longer relevant for contemporary society since it portrays an image of education only occurring during formative years and ceasing when "social maturity, or adulthood, is achieved". Jarvis creates a dichotomy here between childhood, where education formally transfers the norms of society and adulthood, which is attained by virtue of leaving full-time schooling. Jarvis goes on to say that this model is so entrenched in peoples' attitudes that it is equated with education *per se*

“...and thus the education of adults is still often viewed as an optional extra added on after initial education has actually been completed, so that it remains marginal to the institution of education in society.”

The age at which one achieves adult status has become fuzzy, depending on the context. Most political papers on adult learning or training link their definition of adulthood to the FEFC funding guidelines, which specified until recently that funding for full-time education ceased when a student reached nineteen years. Nineteen had been the age at which initial education ceased if a person followed the traditional model of education. However one finds exceptions to every rule and the White Paper *Education and Training* volume 1 (Hall, 1994:80) reported that ten percent of *adults* attending FE colleges were between sixteen and eighteen years of age whilst the seminal work of the Kennedy Committee *Learning Works* in 1997 cites adults as being over eighteen years of age. Several of the feeder papers for the Kennedy report used different guidelines. For example Reisenberger and Sanders (1997) studied retention rates for adult learners and described these adults as being “older than 21”.

Some authors (Bourner and Hamed, 1987:8 and Roderick, 1983) add yet another dimension when they introduce the concept of mature students. Professor Roderick’s survey was carried out on behalf of the Department of Education and Science (DES) at a time when the falling birth rate had prompted further and higher education institutions to recruit students from less traditional routes. The study defined mature students as “over 21 years on first registering”. If we link this to the FEFC funding regime it could be assumed that these students had had a break from full-time education before returning to formal learning. Bourner and Hamed are more specific in their research into entry qualifications and degree performance on behalf of the CNAA and class mature students as between 23 and 29 years old.

My own research will be an investigation into the perceptions of a particular group of adult returners to formal education, the youngest of whom was 23 years at the time of interview. So far maturity has been documented with regard to those persons returning to education after a break of a few years. Recently there has been an upsurge in the numbers of older returners accessing retraining after a career break or redundancy. Although the National Adult Learning Survey report (La Valle, 1999) does not allow us to see the effects of this since it does not give specific age bands in its analysis, a response to *The Learning Age* from the FEFC in August 1998 suggested that the government were leaving the older (over 49 years in this case) learner out of White Paper entirely. It would appear therefore that the government proposals, as outlined in

their election manifesto, on learning through life owe more to economic considerations than to personal development.

McGivney has written widely about adult learning, and in particular about women returners. In her review of the literature on participation (McGivney, 1993 quoted in Uden) she revealed that returning to education led to better health and well-being “particularly for older people, those with disabilities and those living in rural areas” and high rates of progression to certified courses. Uden, reporting on McGivney’s work to the Kennedy Committee also commented on the raised levels of confidence and self-esteem and said that

“The pursuit of happiness may not be part of our constitution but neither is it in any way a less worthy activity than any of the others which education and training provide”.
(Uden, 1996:29)

Thompson (1989:22) has described adult learners as a “microcosm of the wider educational system” in that they reflect the members of the middle and lower middle classes who have already had some success educationally and that this trend re-enforces the social class differences created in initial schooling. Much of the recent policy documentation has attempted to redress the balance and to promote equality of access to education. The next section explores the development of the concept of lifelong learning until the 1980’s.

2:2 The development of lifelong learning

In pre-industrial Europe, where social change was much slower than it is today, it was only the small minority of the so-called elite from the middle and upper classes who continued to acquire esoteric knowledge, usually theology, during adulthood. Other members of the population learned all the norms and values of their society informally. The Industrial Revolution marked the point at which change became endemic to technological societies and therefore the need to keep up with the new knowledge became important to everyone, in order that they “should not become alienated from the culture that engulfs them” (Jarvis, 1998:3). McGivney (1999:12) suggests that this has become especially important to women returners who “inevitably experience a process of ‘skills obsolescence’ ”. The report goes on to comment on the wide discrepancies between women’s educational attainment at school and their lack of qualifications later in life because of the barriers that they have to retraining or renewing their skills.

According to a report by the Director of Further Education (CRAC, 1989:23) the notion of lifelong learning was still revolutionary in 1929 when the Western economies were particularly precarious. The Wall Street crash had just sent shock waves around the globe. Jobs were in short supply, throughout the industrialised world, even for the fortunate minority of the populations who had attended school beyond twelve years of age. The economies did not begin to recover until the Second World War and education had to take a back seat in Britain until the coalition government paved the way for the creation of the welfare state when the Labour Party took control in 1945.

The 1944 Education Act (The Butler Act) placed a statutory duty on Local Education Authorities to provide adult education. This Act resulted in a promotion by Government of key vocational skills and the notion of lifelong learning as “possibly the key to the future” (Gordan, 1991:223). Between 1944 and the late 1970’s there was an expressed interest in education for all but little commitment from central government who had placed “adult education low on the pecking order” (Thompson, 1989:21). Therefore, despite commitment to education for all, the economic situation led to a serious gap between statute and practice. The situation was not limited to Britain since the global economy had been affected world-wide by the oil crisis and in 1972 the United Nations report issued a reminder about the importance of adult learning:

“...[adult education is] a process whereby persons who no longer attend school on a regular or full-time basis, undertake sequential and organised activities with the conscious intention of bringing about changes in information, knowledge, understanding or skills, appreciations and attitudes: or for the purpose of identifying or solving personal problems” (UNESCO Learning to Be: 1972)

More recently UNESCO published a report on education for the twenty-first century (Delors, 1996:97) where they outlined ‘four pillars’ on which they considered learning through life was based. These were:

- Learning to know – “means learning to learn, so as to benefit from the opportunities education provides throughout life”.
- Learning to do – which included “competence to deal with many situations” learning both formally and informally
- Learning to live together – a concept that underlined the importance of equality of opportunity

- Learning to be – underlining the need to develop autonomy and personal responsibility.

Throughout the report it stresses the universal importance of education pursued through life as “the heartbeat of society” (op cit: 22) whilst endorsing decentralisation as a means of “increasing educational establishments’ responsibilities and their scope for invention”. *Learning: The Treasure Within* was a timely reminder of one of the major challenges of the twenty-first century.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1992:141) stressed the need for an “international goal of achieving lifelong learning” and later recommended that policy makers should find ways of encouraging educational attainment to “encourage economic development and job creation” (OECD, 1995:197). Both reports are primarily concerned with adult education, that is, the gaining of recordable qualifications and give little reference to informal learning as identified in the UNESCO report.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Thatcherite policy began to reduce the power of the state in many areas previously co-ordinated by central government. For example the National Health Service was reorganised and hospitals were required to consider patients as consumers and to balance the books. Doctors were given control of their own budgets and, as providers, began to barter for treatments and hospital beds in competition with colleagues. This Thatcherite principle of dismantling the ‘Nanny State’ and giving power and autonomy to the consumer and to the provider continued into the next decade. Alongside the Health Service, education was to be radicalised, again giving autonomy and power to the consumer and by directing control of resources and management to the provider. Thatcherite government wanted to not only remove the Nanny State of central government but also of local government. A closer analysis of the Education Reform Act (1988), which was introduced to deal with the Government’s perceived defects in the educational system (Kirby and Crump, 1999), shows however that the Government was directly intervening in education, bypassing the LEAs. The result was to remove a middle tier of governance as well as strengthening the power of the state to intervene in all aspects of education by implementing large-scale top-down regulations. This has continued in the early years of New Labour, in direct contrast to other policies and to the government’s relationship with society.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 was Conservatism seeking to “introduce the work ethic into the curriculum” (Gordan, 1991: 99). Keith Joseph (Education Minister at the

time) said that he was committed to education reform “based on competition and market forces”. This reform resulted in no fewer than thirteen education reports or Acts during the twelve years of Margaret Thatcher’s rule. With general expenditure cuts adult education became an “easy target” (Thompson, 1989:222) despite the Education Reform Act making it the duty of every LEA to “secure provision for their area of adequate facilities for FE”. This was to include full and part-time education and training as well as organised leisure time occupations.

As the 1980s drew to a close it became evident that education in Britain and worldwide was in need of change in order that it could meet the needs of the twenty-first century. Keys (1997: personal communication) suggests that it was only in late 1980s that the government showed any interest in international studies into education, and that this was when they began to believe that economic success was linked with the effectiveness of educational and training systems. Demographic trends showed an increase in the population amongst social classes 1 and 2 but a corresponding decrease in social classes 3-5 who have been highlighted as at higher risk of exclusion from lifelong learning (CRAC, 1989:32). More recent studies have suggested that nearly 40% of the population in the 16-64-age range¹ had no qualifications or had non-vocational qualifications below ‘O’ level grades A-C. Green and Steedman (1995:21) estimated that this amounted to around 6 million people in Britain a figure that Maguire (1993) suggested for the number of adult learners at any one time in the country. By this time both the global economy, and enormous technological changes, had begun to alter the career paths for many people leading to a need for retraining and new knowledge if one wished to remain in the workforce. In this arena in the later years of Thatcher’s government a major investigation into further and higher education was commissioned. The two resultant papers will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

2:3 Widening participation in further and higher education.

The Kennedy Report into widening participation in further education.

On the 27th October 1995 the Widening Participation Committee adult working group held its inaugural meeting. The brief of the committee was to investigate and report on factors influencing entry, success and progression of adults in education and training; to identify gaps in available data and areas for further research; and to identify priorities for action. (FEFC archive material).

¹ This report by Green and Steedman to the Kennedy Committee again uses a different age range to discuss raising “adult retention rates”

Key issues identified included

- Measurement
- Advice and guidance
- Financial support
- Analysis of retention and achievement
- The role of employers
- Transition from non-schedule 2 to schedule 2
- The learning environment

These issues had been set against a context that had been described in the full Widening Participation Committee meeting two weeks earlier. This context recommended that learning “should be seen as productive and as a source for production” (FEFC, 10.10.95. File1). The committee also placed their brief firmly in the global market place by stressing the need for Britain to be flexible and competitive and drawing attention to the effects of massive technological advances. All these issues “reflected those which are at the heart of the government’s education agenda” (Kennedy, 1997:iv).

The document resulting from eighteen months of consultation was published in May 1997. *Learning Works* provided a clear rationale for widening participation in further education. It also set out practical ways that this might be achieved. *How to widen participation. A guide to good practice* continued this important role by giving examples of good practice with advice on implementing the lessons already learned in nationwide colleges. The government Green Paper and the more recent FEFC response demonstrated a “wholehearted commitment both to vision and action” (FEFC, August 1998). *Learning Works* had several feeder papers that provided details on major issues including funding, disadvantaged groups and ways of increasing learner autonomy. Several referred to the discrepancy over funding mentioned earlier in this chapter. Newham Women’s training and Education Centre, for example, reported “the complexity of the funding mix meant that courses could be funding rather than need led” (FEFC Archive 26.1.96: 5.2). Green and Steedman (1995: 44) stated, “Finance is obviously the major obstacle to participation”. This problem of funding is still being reported in recent surveys into access (Clayton, 1999:18; McGivney, 1999:13) although childcare now appears to be an even bigger obstacle. Since this thesis is concerned with

improving the learning experience of people wishing to undertake childcare qualifications, participants will be asked about their views on these topics.

Bailey (FEFC Archive, File 5) was chair of the quality and performance task group with the specific remit of examining the interface between adult education and further education. I was fortunate in being able to talk to her in the early stages of my research. This quality group produced definitions of both 'participation' and of 'widening' for the Kennedy Report which illustrate their firm commitment to consider all aspects of learning and their support for the notion of cross-over from so-called leisure pursuits to formal study:

“Participation - takes into account all the elements of an individual student’s learning experience starting from access to and success in their current learning program and continuing beyond their current goal to other opportunities for learning.”

“Widening - means ensuring that the learners who participate in FE at national, regional, local and institutional levels become more representative of all the people in the areas concerned.” (FEFC, 1996:File 5)

In his White Paper *Learning to Succeed* (1999) Blunkett takes up the challenges posed by the Kennedy committee and acknowledges the view that

“...current arrangements provided an insufficient focus on quality, failed to give men and women the support they need and were too provider driven”.

Blunkett set up plans to reduce the money motor that had been driving further education recruitment since the introduction of the FHE Act, by replacing the very council that provided the research for *Learning Works* with “a single national Learning and Skills Council”. Professor John Field, speaking at a recent NIACE conference (8.12.99) expressed his concern that “lifelong learning is everyone’s business and nobody’s business”. He went on to discuss social exclusion, particularly the issue of literacy and to say, “in some key areas government is either unwilling or unable to act and intervene”. Field, who was Britain’s first professor of lifelong learning, spoke out soon after the Green Paper response to *Learning Works* was published. He expressed his concern

“...the centrality of lifelong learning among the majority of the population mean. that those who are left out may become even more alienated than before”. (Field, 1998:33)

Kennedy also highlighted the “sense of failure and exclusion felt by many” who had completed their formal education without achieving at least the equivalent of National

Vocational Qualification level 2 (NVQ2) which is a vocational award comparable to GCSE. Green (1995: FEFC archives) recommended in his feeder paper to the Widening Participation Committee that the government should set NVQ2 as a policy goal and this point has been taken up by the Dearing Report (1997) mentioned later in this chapter. Kennedy also asked many questions about barriers to widening participation in further education including how potential learners could actually manage to gain access to advice and guidance “outside of the magic circle of education” (Kennedy, 1997:92). McGivney (1999:13) found the same barriers, which include insufficient information and guidance, accessibility, financial constraints and domestic constraints. However much of her source material pre-dates Kennedy making it difficult to measure current changes as a result of recent policies. A similar criticism could also be made of Clayton’s work on access to vocational guidance for people at risk of social exclusion (Clayton, 1999). This study will include questioning to gauge whether this particular group of students found similar barriers in 1999. Kennedy made some far-reaching suggestions to government to remove barriers to learning. Funding of FE could, Kennedy said, benefit from National Lottery money to set up a “Learning Regeneration Fund” (Kennedy, 1997:44) but these suggestions initially appeared to cause the government to rethink their response since much lottery money had already been earmarked for the provision of out of school learning and childcare. The White Paper was expected in autumn 1997 and was eventually released several months later as a Green Paper together with a pledge to give £83 million to “underpin the vision” of lifelong learning. However *Further Education for the New Millennium* committed the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge to supporting local partnerships in lifelong learning initiatives and to matching contributions, to courses to help people gain access to learning, made by trusts, charities and businesses (DfEE, 1998:13). In a letter Rebello (1998:personal communication) stressed the government’s commitment to lifelong learning and quoted the Prime Minister as saying that education “is our best economic policy”. Members of other political parties did not consider this to be enough. Robinson (1998:7) claimed that the present funding system was “an ill-contrived ideologically based internal market system of competition”. By the time *Learning to Succeed* was published in 1999 Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, was pledging £19 billion of “extra resources over the next three years” for widening participation in further education.

In his response to the Kennedy Report, David Blunkett acknowledged the important role of FE in widening participation in education and commended and endorsed the powerful message in *Learning Works*. The government stressed the need to extend learning

opportunities to an extra 500,000 people by 2002. However in section 4:1 (DfEE, 1998:12) maximising participation and attainment is only a priority for the 16-18 year olds. Later in the same document Blunkett mentioned the drive to “help as many people as possible to become qualified to level 2” and a review of the Job-Seekers’ Allowance rules to assist those over 25 year olds who have been unemployed for more than two years. Whilst the Green Paper received good reviews in the educational press (for example TES, 27.2.1998:6; Lecturer April 1998:12) there was concern expressed over the funding that the government had pledged and also over the scrapping of Kennedy’s proposal for a Charter for Learning which would have “spelt out the rights duties and entitlements of ...seven million adults with no formal qualifications” (TES, 1998:33.)

The Kennedy Report was not the only document to chart the damaging effects on the individual and on the economy of excluding people from learning. Lord Dearing released his report soon after Kennedy and this is discussed below. Alongside these two major reports the government task force on lifelong learning, chaired by Fryer, also urged the Government to change attitude and to build a “learning culture”. As Field however commented the notion of Government suggesting that what is learned is more important than how and where “sits uncomfortably with conventional notions of what good government is about.”(Field, 1998:33). Kennedy advised politicians to heed the advice within all three reports by saying

“...learning needs to be the engine of economic and social success” (Kennedy, 1997:10).

The Dearing Report: Higher Education in the Learning Society

This report was set in the context of widening access to education for all saying that, “anyone who has capability for HE should have the opportunity to benefit from it” (DfEE, 1998a: 5). The report drew attention to the effects of the cuts in spending per student and recommended that these should not continue. Whilst the government responded positively to Dearing and agreed to inject funds into HE this did not prevent them from abolishing maintenance awards and insisting upon means tested fees. Therefore although the Green Paper set out its commitment to widening participation, the introduction of £1000 fee to each university student resulted in a reported 30% fall in adult entrants to Universities according to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (MacLeod, 1998:13). Kennedy responded to this by launching a bursary scheme, worth £1000 per student, aimed at encouraging FE students to continue their studies into higher education.

The Dearing Report also examined the present 'triple-track' system, which leaned heavily on the traditional A-level route into HE. Spours expressed concern that Britain was still on an elitist education track and said

"We need to get away from the present polarised view of the curriculum- A-level students stuck behind desks absorbing knowledge, non-academic students busy scampering around." (Spours, 1997:2)

Dearing recognised this in his recommendations and commented that: "Nothing works in its own right if it stands against the 'gold standard' of the A level". In the government response, and the resultant Green Paper *The Learning Age*, stress was laid on the need for collaboration and co-operation between higher and further education and with industry, as well as modernising and updating the further and higher education systems. *The Learning Age* set out a challenge to "bridge the learning divide" and to

"...build a qualifications system which is easily understood, values both academic and vocational learning, meets employers' and individuals' needs, and promotes the highest standards." (DfEE, 1998b:11).

Blunkett again commented on the target of increasing the number of people qualified to NVQ level 3 saying that twenty-one million adults in Britain had not reached this level. In his summary (1998b: 5) he states that, "fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning are essential for our future success".

These reports were released after I had commenced my research into adult returners. They concentrated on the need to change the culture of learning in order to meet the needs of the new Millennium. It seemed as though FE was about to lose its 'Cinderella' status (Cordingly, 1995 seminar paper 12.9.1995) having been "tested to the point of destruction" (Spours, 1997:2). Dearing's proposals went a long way to encouraging widening participation in education but the problem of attaining the basic skills required to achieve competence at level two was only referred to in the report in general terms for 16-19 year olds. These universal skills of literacy, numeracy and communication have been highlighted recently as being paramount in enhancing the learning of adults undergoing NVQ training. As Steedman (1998:22) commented recently: "Broadening their content [NVQs] to include literacy and numeracy would undoubtedly have the effect of motivating many adults to acquire those skills". This problem was to be clearly demonstrated when I began to interview the NVQ level 2 students as part of my research

and the issue of addressing basic literacy and numeracy was frequently raised during the study.

Chapter three examines how these major policy initiatives have impacted through one Local Education Authority and to the further education college within which my research is set.

CHAPTER THREE- THE INSTITUTIONAL FOCUS

Chapter two provided the policy context from which the research question was devised. This chapter describes a political context in one local educational authority (LEA) and one Further Education College since if learning is to be relevant to the student's everyday environment it is important to consider and to describe potential barriers and inducements to education. The institutional focus, together with the literature survey that precedes it, enables a refining of the research question, which in turn shapes the research methodology that follows.

The specific institution used for this study was situated in a London Borough and is also the FE College used for the main body of the research.

3:1 Lifelong Learning in the borough

The borough is situated in northwest London around ten miles from central London with an estimated population of 210,000 in 1998. Over 51,000 people work here. Schooling is organised in three stages: first schools (from 5-8 years), Middle schools (from 8-12 years) and High (from 12-16 years). The Borough also offers post-16 education in two Tertiary colleges and one Roman Catholic Sixth Form College. Being surrounded by Local Educational Authorities that offer sixth forms within the state school sector there is a relatively free flow of pupils wishing to move inter-borough, according to personal taste. In a recent Education Committee report (LBH: 29.6.98) concern was expressed about the "significantly increasing outflow of able students from the Borough". The borough also has a number of independent schools and colleges.

The council retains responsibility for funding non-vocational adult education programmes run by the Tertiary colleges. An audit carried out between October and December 1998, by the Childcare Strategy Group, showed that women are a major part of the local employment market. It also said that there is "a need to target the needs of working or training parents whilst retaining the focus on the needs of children"(Borough Childcare Strategy audit 1999/2000). Section 5.11 of this audit demonstrates that the Borough is prepared to fund proposals by providing assistance with fees, materials, and travel for "up to 20 new students in the year 1999/2000".

Since May 1998 a Labour majority has controlled its Council. Education is not managed in isolation but is integrated into the wider fields of less formal pursuits. This is

significant when considered within the Kennedy recommendations since it appears to be placing equal importance on formal and informal learning. The Education, Arts and Leisure Committee has representatives from all the main political parties, but the Liberal Democrats position is currently less secure since the party lost around two-thirds of its seats in the local by-elections.

Since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act colleges in the Borough have been incorporated and receive funding for Schedule Two (mainly vocational courses) from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Adult and continuing education (ACE) continues to be managed and partially funded by the Council, which in turn receives grants from central government for this purpose. In recent years these monies have been gradually reduced in real terms and this is reflected in the decrease of subsidy for non-Schedule Two courses. Demand for courses has continued to rise despite an actual reduction in the net budget since 1997/1998, as reported in the Borough information circular in June 1998 (LBH, 1998a). Twenty-one percent of the adult education budget had been withdrawn in the financial year 1997-1998 and a further reduction of £15,000 was predicted in the year 1999-2000 – a decrease in funding of 9.4%. This means that adults wishing to join a non-vocational course not listed in Schedule Two of the FHE Act are being asked to pay more unless they are entitled to concessionary fees. A full-time vocational course, that is one exceeding 16 hours of study each week, is free to persons of any age.

The following summary of the local authority's strategic aims for widening participation in education is based on information obtained by attending meetings of the Education, Arts and Leisure Committee and from the minutes from these meetings. It will be seen that the Borough appears to have a very clear commitment to lifelong learning and is working on various cross-party initiatives. Their Lifelong Learning Policy emphasises equality and accessibility. It has been produced following discussion with local universities, colleges, schools, TEC, and libraries as well as the University of the Third Age, the Workers' Educational Association, the Arts council and the local community. The resulting strategy was agreed in May 1997, a month before publication of *Learning Works*. The many partnerships, forged over the year following their strategy report, closely map the Green Paper recommendations and are beginning to attract external funding. The financial implications to the council are however reported to be significant. The borough's full strategy document on lifelong learning was published only two months after the Government's Green Paper *The Learning Age* and during the period, between both reports, the borough had already increased the numbers of adult learners

by over twenty percent. Thirty-eight percent of these now come from Black and ethnic minority groups.

In common with other councils around the country the local authority has been required to consider a number of key questions in relation to Lifelong Learning. It reports that lack of resources could be a potential obstacle to achieving a Learning Age since expectations aroused in the local population may not be met unless resources are increased considerably. The Council is concerned that the “pump priming” funding approach will produce initiatives that cannot be maintained. It is considering development of the careers service to widen its target group to include those aged over nineteen. This is in-line with the Government’s New Deal initiative. The borough’s Director of Education (LBH, 1999: section 3.14) stated that whilst student numbers in further education had grown by a quarter in the previous four years, unit funding had fallen by twelve percent. This imbalance could lead to strategies that enlisted persons in order to increase unit funding rather than for academic reasons. In his response to the government policy on funding the Director stressed that there was now a need for local partnerships to create a “coherent approach to learning”. He went on to recommend that FE colleges should develop a more pro-active approach in the local community by using citizen juries, focus groups, student parliaments, and so on, to implement the Principle of Best Value (LBH, 1998 section 3 21). All of these recommendations are firmly in line with recommendations made in the Kennedy Report (1997) but they also go further in considering some of the Dearing proposals. The borough’s response to the Green Paper also recognises the need to target adults with the inclusion of key skills training for them.

“The sector is charged with developing more stringent monitoring of adult education non-vocational courses that traditionally have not been vetted in the same way as schedule two courses. It is felt that this should be incorporated into a policy to ‘improve the quality and standard of FE’.” (Education Committee: June 1998).

The inaugural meeting of the Education, Arts and Leisure Committee following the local elections, was held on June 30th 1998. Attendance at the meeting was good, and included many spectators. Twenty-three items appeared on the agenda and therefore the listing of a discussion on the response to the Green Paper on lifelong learning as the third item appeared to underline the importance accorded to it. The strategic plan for the local education services for the next four years outlined the council’s aims and was deemed “much more focused” by one councillor. It was then pointed out that the borough already had in place many of the initiatives set out in the Green Paper and that they had a “wealth of experience”. Concern was expressed that there were obstacles to widening

participation in the area and that these included lack of plans for disadvantaged and disaffected persons, and lack of resources. It was stressed that there would be financial implications in improving participation in further education but the general feeling was that the authority was well placed to work as a partner with local businesses in these strategies.

Part one of the committee agenda also included a review of non-vocational adult education provision in the area, which had been in crisis. A plan to introduce a lifelong learning log for recording students' progress on accredited work was announced then information was provided about student profiles. An increase over the previous year in part-time enrolment of 22.5% gained a headline in the following week's local paper "Evening classes win the battle to woo students" (Observer, 9.7.98:96). This percentage included ethnic minority groups, who were especially targeted by Kennedy as being at risk of exclusion. The Chairman of the education committee was reported as saying "Colleges and local authority have looked at adult education more carefully – something they should have done before – and decided to take action."

In the eighteen months since the initial meeting following the Green Paper the LEA has begun to implement many of its recommendations and the Early Years Partnership has members from every representative of childcare providers in the Borough. It is also in close liaison with neighbouring Boroughs. The centre manager for Early Childhood at my college has spoken to the group (of which she is a member) about our strategies for increasing adult course provision at the college. In addition to this the LEA, working at strategic level, has conducted an inter-college mapping project, of current participation by gender, age and ethnicity to assist in comparative analysis of LBH supported students, including adult learners. Some of the results of this project are reported later in the chapter.

3:2 Lifelong Learning- the views of local councillors and officials.

This section investigates the relationship between the LEA's lifelong learning strategy and the individual perceptions of local councillors and officials.

Contact was initially made by letter to the education spokesperson for each representative political party in the borough and the Director of Education as well as the Youth and Community Service Manager. Each letter was followed up one week later, by telephone, requesting an interview. Out of a total of eight letters only one person agreed to be interviewed. Three persons responded by letter with information and one to

apologise for being away on holiday. I was warned by the committee administrator that councillors would be “very difficult to interview” and experience proved this to be true.

One Councillor agreed to be interviewed. At the beginning of this, and subsequent interviews, I stated my desire to report my findings accurately and sought permission to use a tape recorder. I transcribed each tape as soon as possible afterwards and sent a typed copy to the informant for comment.

Having agreed to meet in the Civic Centre, my first informant gave me considerable written source material. She pointed out how difficult it was for the council to set a legal budget and still meet all the demands made on that money. From a personal perspective she stated, “Learning should be a lifelong thing. We are learning all the time”. She felt that there was no dividing line between training and education and that non-vocational learning could be the starter, particularly for women, who had long been disadvantaged. Discussing the Council’s policy of collaborating and encouraging partnerships, she felt that it was “always a problem getting people together”. In summary, the Councillor said that the concept of lifelong learning was already with us but it needed much nurturing. There would be no point in training if it were not a two-way process –“good for the establishment but at the same time enriching the individual”.

Throughout the interview there was a feeling of firm commitment not only towards the Party, but also the need to subsume personal ideals to the constraints of local politics. Many sentences began with “Council will,” or “We are” referring to cross-party policy documents.

Responses from the other individuals, including the Committee Chairperson, also followed this pattern. They stated that lifelong learning needed to promote adults as independent learners and that opportunities needed to be “grounded in needs analysis” with emphasis placed upon accessing the opinions of the local population. There was general concern over the increasing out-flow of potential 16-19 year old students from the borough, which could have a knock-on effect in terms of progression. One Councillor spoke of the importance of instilling a “learning ethic” in the Early Years Curriculum so that it would become more of a cultural norm to continue learning through life.

Obtaining personal comments on policy from politicians has proved to be a daunting task. I had anticipated that it would be a straightforward matter to access local councillors but made at least two errors in my calculations. Firstly, I commenced my

attempt to contact Councillors at the point in my schedule that was most convenient to me, ignoring the fact that many of them were about to go on summer recess. Secondly I assumed that a letter, followed by a 'phone call would be sufficient to set up a meeting with individuals. It has become clear that an interviewer needs stamina and persistence. The data collected so far does however serve to demonstrate the local commitment to widening access to education for all, whether it is within the remit of the 1992 HE Act or not. The general consensus appeared to be that an important factor in widening participation was finding ways to stimulate individuals to empower themselves as autonomous learners. Then there have to be sufficient entry points for them to access learning, either in Colleges or elsewhere. As the Liberal Democrat Councillor pointed out, however, the dichotomy between 'academic' and 'other' learning in terms of central funding puts pressure on the already stretched local budget. Without a legal requirement to provide a wide range of non schedule two courses demand will continue to dictate which courses run or not, even if this is not a good indicator of their value.

3:3 The Learning Age in an FE College

At the time of preparing the Institutional Focused Study the College studied was one of three tertiary colleges in this Borough catering for full-time 16-19 year old students from maintained local High schools, other residents, and neighbouring authorities. 85.3% of borough pupils aged over 16 years went on to further education in 1998, one of the highest staying on rates in the country.

As required by the Governors and FEFC the College produces three-yearly strategic plans, which include comments on demographic trends and marketing priorities. In the plan for 1994-1997 it was noted that there had been an unexpected ten percent increase in the enrolment of part-time vocational students and a "very large" increase in non-vocational students, particularly white female students. In section 1.1.4 the plan comments on the steep rise in unemployment in 1993 and "therefore it is anticipated that the College will provide more courses for the unemployed and for women returners." This suggests that the main driver for new courses at the College is the provision of training. However this could be a reflection of the fact that there have been substantial reductions in funding by the London Borough (LBH) for non-vocational education. Halliday (1999:55) considers that this perceived training role lowers the status of FE in general since it contributes to the "so-called academic – vocational divide".

Targeting for provision suggested an average eight percent growth in enrolment of part-time vocational students. The preliminary audit for 1998/1999 shows that the Colleges'

strategy of widening the entry points for adults, through more flexibility in course delivery and by effective marketing, has enabled them to actually increase adult enrolments by fifteen percent. In *How to widen Participation (1997)* Kennedy suggested that provision of “financial and practical support” was one of the characteristics of good practice. The College in question had closed down its playgroup following adverse market research evidence in 1996 but is now reviewing the need for adequate childcare provision for students, in the light of funding made available in response to Kennedy’s proposals.

In March 1998 a Millennium Strategy draft was released. This document was prepared during the launch of the Kennedy and Dearing Reports, and produced following the Green Paper on Lifelong Learning. It was three times as long as its predecessor and devoted a larger proportion of its space to the needs of adults. In common with the other two Tertiary colleges it identified the need to “ensure a dynamic Adult Education curriculum” and the importance of carrying out effective analysis of the needs of adult learners “ across the vocational and the non-vocational areas”. The plan goes on to stress the value of collaborative planning with other providers. There is already evidence of collaborative networks with a local High School but there was little mention in the documentation with regard to adult learning.

The College has undergone several management restructurings since incorporation to create a more coherent and responsive market orientation that reflects its desire to “retain its niche position as a small caring college”(Strategic Overview 1998- 2001:19). The main focus for change has been the Advanced Studies Centre, which was created in 1996 in response to market research, which showed a poor image of the less structured full-time programme. It was felt that parents wanted to have a fully timetabled day similar to that on offer in the out-Borough sixth form system. This therefore reflected a Borough-wide concern over the increasing outflow of students at 16+. The collaborative network with a local High school was designed to offer pupils in Year 10 taster courses at the College and as a means for lecturers from both establishments to share teaching on A-level courses. This initiative closely maps the Government’s recommendations on sharing skills and resources but does not go as far as to suggest any physical merger with either High schools or the other Tertiary colleges. Merger had been explored in the Millennium strategy draft as a means of remedying serious financial problems incurred as a result of the FEFC Financial Memorandum. However it was decided that, “co-operation and collaboration would appear to be more attractive alternatives to merger for the fulfilment of the college’s mission”. At the end of 1997 therefore the College

operated a strategic plan to increase the number of non-vocational part-time courses outside of Schedule 2 and to focus on a higher volume of part-time vocational provision. The development of the BTEC National Certificate in childhood studies and of NVQ level 2 and 3 in childcare courses were one result of this strategy. By 1998, in the second draft of their strategy plans for 1999-2001 (College, 1998) it had been noted that market penetration by adult education providers in the Borough was lower than had been anticipated. The "Towards a Millennium Strategy" recommended that there was an urgent need to ensure a dynamic adult education curriculum that was rapidly responsive to the needs of the students. The document concluded with a commitment to "develop a dynamic, flexible part-time programme with wider opportunities for access to Lifelong Learning"(op cit.: 21). My research proposal, which had been submitted at the end of 1997, was thus in the spirit of the College's commitment to "carry out an effective needs analysis of the needs of adult learners across vocational and non-vocational areas of the adult education curriculum" (op.cit: 10).

The college in common with many others is highly dependent on FEFC funding. In its Millennium Strategy document the College listed the need to review Adult Continuing Education Centre and in the autumn of 1999, after further consultation decided to reorganise this part of the college provision. A new post of Director of Adult College was created and filled in December 1999. This post demonstrates intent to improve adult education in a way that generally appears consistent with recent Government initiatives. There is frequent reference to the need to 'explore opportunities' and to create a dynamic adult education curriculum but the reality suggests that without financial incentives, or accurate appraisal of local need, priorities will continue to lie with the 16-19 year old students. This appears to conflict with the recommendation of the FEFC (News Release 10.8.1998) for Government to articulate links between lifelong learning for adults and its strategies for young people. The Principal, in a personal communication expressed a frustration at the current situation in which Colleges are expected to deliver more for the same amount of money. Regarding the anticipated White Paper on lifelong learning being released as a Green Paper he said, "word on the street was that it was all to do with money". In the light of recent Policy initiatives and in particular the removal of Schedule 2, the new Director of Adult College will have a wide remit as well as an increased budget as the college moves into 2000. Factors such as separate facilities for students attending the newly named Advanced Studies Centre have been used as a major marketing strategy to attract the post 16-year-old student but no similar facility exists, at present, for adult learners. In the focus groups adults said that they would feel uncomfortable in the available study areas and the refectory due to the large numbers of

younger students. Some money is being negotiated to provide carpeting, new lighting and other comforts for adults on professional courses organised by the Colleges Business Training unit. Until very recently both the Borough's, and the College's documentation gives the impression, that adult students are part-time despite an increase in adult full-timers, particularly in business studies and information technology courses.

There is evidence of initiatives being developed in some areas. In the last year the ACE centre has developed some innovative programmes in the local community, and has set up short courses in out-reach centres, such as schools. This appears to be an example of the College's intention to follow through Kennedy's proposals but there are some problems to note. For example, the courses have focused primarily on issues such as parenting rather than the basic literacy skills suggested by Kennedy. One notable collaborative achievement that demonstrates the importance of careful market research and marketing, in attracting non-traditional students, has been the BBC funded 'Computers don't Bite' sessions. These have been highly successful with all age groups and have resulted in increased enrolment for longer courses. Information technology (IT) has been promoted as a vital core skill for persons hoping to achieve level three but the FEFC (1998: 21.84) believes that "many older people or those not in work do not have [this] familiarity". Many of the adult returners joining the NVQ courses say that they are wary of new computer technology.

It also remains a fact that on-going training will mainly take place in a formal setting, which assumes that adults have the confidence to come on site. The FEFE (1998: 11.16) suggest that this is an issue in need of review and say "for some people, the need to enter a college to access learning can be a significant barrier".

3:4 "Let's learn about wine!"

This section presents the responses to interviews with a variety of staff members, and other associated persons, at one college of further education over the summer months of 1998.

In order that staff members were fully briefed about the purpose of the interview letters were sent to each person (Appendix A) outlining its format, and giving four base line questions for consideration. These were the same questions as those used with Borough staff in the previous section. Each person responded positively and agreed to a taped interview. In the interests of validity a written transcript of the interview was sent to the relevant interviewee, with a note of thanks, for comment and correction. In one case this

was not possible, as the tape failed to record so I wrote out a faithful account as soon as possible after the interview. This was seen and agreed by the interviewee. In total eight persons were interviewed for approximately thirty minutes each. Staff were chosen for interview because of their relevant experience of teaching adults or because they held posts of responsibility within the College, related to adult learning. What follows is a report of the major themes to emerge from the transcript data. Interviews all followed a situated theme by asking questions such as “what do you mean by...?” and “how you feel about...?” By taking none of the data for granted distinct themes were sought by constant re-reading of each manuscript. Some of the commonly held views that emerged were the following:

- Adult learners are not an homogenous group
- Adults come with more social and emotional ‘baggage’ than their younger counterparts
- Adults often have more limited aims than the traditional students when coming on courses
- Adults need to negotiate their own learning styles
- Effective marketing is vital in attracting disadvantaged students

Adults are not a homogenous group: Adult learners at this College come from a wide cross-section of society. Those, for example, who attend courses organised by the Business Training Unit (BDU) tend to be professionals who are updating their skills or undergoing training on new technologies. The Adult and Continuing Education sector attracts local people who may be seeking a leisure course or are undertaking basic skills training. Other adults may attend College to gain academic qualifications or commence vocational training. The common denominator tends to be their increased need for flexibility in terms of attendance, whether professional or unqualified. One difficulty in measuring or predicting success for adults is that the College may measure that success as completion of a course when an individual adult may measure it in more altruistic terms. The issue of learning outcomes is considered when formulating the second action research cycle in chapter seven.

Staff involved in teaching expressed regret that they only saw adults who were enrolled on full-time programmes and talked about leisure classes (pottery and so on) as “subject specialisms” often run by part-time lecturers who had little involvement in the day-to-

day life of the college. However several informants mentioned the need to promote inclusion more fully to include adult returners. Senior staff made a bigger distinction between adults who were enrolled on vocational training and those who were on ACE courses. It was considered that most persons following a leisure course did not move on to join a Schedule 2 course but no quantitative evidence was available to support this statement.

Adults come with emotional and social baggage: The reference to 'social baggage' was made by a senior member of staff who described this in terms of the added responsibilities that many adults had when attending courses. Women returners in particular had to balance the demands of family with the College timetable. Nearly all of those interviewed expressed the opinion that adults had particular learning and personal needs that often required a great deal of tutor support. Two respondents suggested that adults actually had "special needs" particularly in terms of no longer having "skills for learning", and also with confidence levels, that were not always recognised by staff. It was suggested that staff themselves required more specialist training in dealing with the learning needs of adults. One respondent suggested that this could account for the considerably higher dropout rate for students on the ACE programme –eighteen percent as compared to the college average of about twelve percent.

Adults have more limited aims when coming on course: There was a general feeling gained from discussion with staff at all levels that the concept of learning through life was a valid and acceptable one. Each informant talked about learning in terms of gaining new skills, whether these were recordable or not, and most often contextualised these within the economic market place. When mention was made of leisure pursuits the picture began to fragment slightly as staff in more senior positions described persons isolated within their own learning experience. One informant said, "people on leisure course have limited aims for the most part. They want to learn about wine and so on." This respondent went on to say, "The impression, in most, case, is that middle classes exploit their understanding of the nature of course, rather than exploring learning- it produces leisure clubs rather than adult education." Another respondent talked about limited aims from a very different perspective when mentioning the case of women in the Asian community. This interviewee expressed the opinion that Asian women see "learning as a legitimate means of escape. They may start with an ESOL course, then branch out." This notion was also given in another interview where the informant said that teachers must think from the students' point of view

"What does the student give himself permission to do?"

Perceptions, by staff, of the limited aims of adult students may not necessarily match the perceptions of the students themselves and this will be explored in chapter five.

Adults need to negotiate their own learning styles: A common theme here was the need to design a curriculum, which enabled more learner autonomy. This is a major component of inclusive learning initiatives. When asked whether inclusion was a workable reality one interviewee said that it was probably easier with adults than with the traditional student. Several stressed the need for sensitive assessment prior to selection for a particular course, followed by sympathetic and appropriate tutor support. “All vocational courses need a tutorial built in but they don’t always get this – or they may just see a tutor during a half hour break. The issue is - are they willing to pay for this?” This factor is of particular importance for adult returners enrolled on A level programmes with a view to going on to HE. “With 2 A levels they will not be getting a tutorial at all despite the fact they may be doing them for University entrance... people are not anticipating the needs of the students.”

Marketing is vital: Having completed and analysed the interviews I was aware of a strong feeling of support for the concept of learning through life. Several people reflected the Borough strategic aim of researching into the needs of the local population more directly. “We need to take the market to the people” was one comment and the ACE manager has taken up this initiative during 1999. The recurrent reference to there “being no such thing as a job for life” was made in terms, not only of retraining, but also in terms of needing to occupy one’s time. This was felt, as mentioned above, to be easier for the middle classes who had already had a good experience of learning.

These five common views held by staff responsible for planning and designing the adult learning curriculum appear to be of particular significance if the college is to be truly committed to widening participation. The College Millennium Strategy says that it has the structure in place to facilitate the requirements of the Green Paper and the Borough’s strategy on lifelong learning. It has developed this alongside national and international initiatives aimed at providing a responsive workforce. The newly developed courses, such as the NVQ level 2 childcare are evidence of responding to local needs.

In order that this study meets its aim to improve the experience and quality of learning for adult returners a research method is needed, which is both collaborative and democratic since, only then will the needs of the adult students be translated into appropriate action.

CHAPTER FOUR – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the rationale for action research methodology as an appropriate means of doing research that has a need for responsiveness from the participants. It also includes an overview of grounded theory which has been used as a broad frame of reference in chapter five for examining interview data to map the qualitatively different ways in which the NVQ students “ experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them” (Marton, 1986).

Having carried out a focused study of the institution where my research was to be based I discovered that, in searching for answers, one often finds more questions. For example how do adults gain meaningful advice about learning outside the ‘magic circle of education’ (Cordingly, seminar paper 12.9.95)? And how might it be possible to record or evaluate individual learning? I had found a mismatch in the perceived understanding of what adult returners wanted to learn and the actual courses the college offered. Over the last two years, as an adult returner myself I had begun to move towards a realisation that, having learned the rules of the ‘learning’ game, I now wanted to change them in order that returners to formal education could benefit from their learning experience.

I now had a problem that concerned me, which involved me as a person and teacher. I began to consider the methodological issues that would enable me to focus on a means of seeking a solution. This led me away from my intended methodology, which had been a purely phenomenographic approach, towards one that would encompass a phenomenographic framework whilst building in the flexibility to initiate change in response to analysis of data.

“the nature of many adult classrooms places numerous limitations on the usefulness of conventional research” (Jacobsen, 1998:125)

It was tempting to use a purely interpretative methodology – to ‘problematise’ student’s notions of understanding and knowledge. As Carr and Kemmis (1986:88) suggest all descriptions of actions must contain this interpretative element. However the outcome of this methodology would be to objectify the problem as a ‘phenomenon’ and thus make it somehow independent of the practitioner. Having already acknowledged that the problem is mine I needed to consider a methodology, which allowed me to be a part of it.

Carr and Kemmis describe three different research traditions: positivist, interpretist and critical. They favoured the latter and developed a model of critical emancipatory action research at Deakin University in Australia. The Deakin model aims to “improve rationality, justice and satisfactoriness of the participant’s practice, their understanding of that practice and the context in which it takes place” (Kemmis, 1985:156). It uses the theory/practice relationship to enlighten actors “to enable possible change” thus ensuring that educational theory is integral to the self-understanding of educational practitioners. Action research focuses clearly on the problem and is seen as a means of empowering the participants. When working with adults as colleagues and as learners Kemmis’ philosophical standpoint is very attractive because it emphasises democracy and autonomy. A problem with the approach however, according to Dick (1992:3), is the evangelical stance that remains critical and unaccepting of other approaches. However the reflective spirals of plan/action/observation of action/reflection that are developed with a trade-off between retrospective understanding and future action are very similar to the earlier work of Lewin outlined in 4:1. The following quote from Carr and Kemmis sets the scene for theirs and other action research methodologies:

“Critical educational research aims to identify and expose the contradictions between educational and institutional values... action researchers aim to transform the present to produce a different future” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 183)

4:1 What is action research?

Action research, according to Hart and Bond (Blaxter et al, 1996:64) can be distinguished by the following criteria:

- It is educative
- It deals with individuals as members of social groups
- It is problem-focused, context specific and future orientated
- It involves change intervention
- It aims at improvement and involvement
- It involves a cyclical process with research, action and evaluation interlinked
- It is founded on a research relationship with those involved, who are participants in the change process

The key point here is the linking of the words action and research where action is used to inform understanding and research is used to provide rigour to the action. Almost all writers (Dick, 1992:4) regard action research as a cycle or spiral with “at least intention or planning before action, responsiveness or critique after”. This iterative approach, using a double dialectic, is what provides the responsiveness and rigour.

The crucial defining characteristic of action research, according to Zuber Skerritt (1996) and Atkinson (1998) amongst others is strategic action. This is action based on intention achieved through rational, iterative analysis. It should be used on multiple cycle problems since if one was to arrest the action research after just one cycle (Carr and Kemmis, 1986:85) then it could be likened more closely to a purely evaluative process. Strategic action is premeditated and purposeful not mere habit or intuition. As is stated in the Curriculum Action Research Network (CARN) mission statement action research continually constructs and reconstructs practice. If we relate this to adult learning part of the strategic action would be to encourage active and collaborative participation in the research process as a form of “collective self-reflective inquiry” (Webb, cited in Zuber-Skerritt, 1996:137) which stresses the importance of dialogue. A crucial part of this thesis is therefore an engagement in dialogue with the students to actively seek their opinions on the structure of the curriculum and their experiences of learning. Friere (1972) suggests that the most fundamental constituent of dialogue is comprehensibility and trust. This places a value on the learner as a human being and sites him or her firmly in the socio-cultural domain. It also emphasises the role of the teacher in listening to the learner, breaking down barriers and “starting where the learners are” (Jarvis, 1998:151). An attraction of action research and of critical reflection, for me, is this individualistic and democratic approach that seems to be particularly relevant for adult learners.

It could be argued that teachers are engaged in this kind of reflective practice on a day-to-day basis and that problem solving is part and parcel of the work of interacting with peers and students. Good practice could be seen as an experiential learning situation that has change built in. Near the beginning of this research project I was invited to present a paper on the subject of good practice in Early Years Care and Education at a Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) workshop in London. FEDA had produced a draft framework for good practice, which contained thirteen sections covering many aspects of teaching and learning. This series of exemplars provided an excellent stimulus “to help trigger thoughts about...good practice” (FEDA, 1999) and generated many ideas to assist teachers in their daily work. What it did not do was to site praxis in a theoretical context (see note 3, page 45) and this is what distinguishes action research

from mere problem solving. The distinction, for me, is that when a gap is discovered, between theory and practice, action research can be used to create a theoretical framework for planning change. An action research project can also enable practitioners to generate a 'living educational theory'² that can provide understanding by describing and explaining the problem. This approach has been described as "an action grounded philosophy of practitioner-centred research" (Hughes, 1994, unpublished PhD thesis) Unlike the concept of good practice it is not simply a recipe for doing things right. It is an ongoing search for conflict or difference that is capable of responding to and challenging the status quo in order that good practice is negotiated rather than simply assumed. By being rigorous and by thinking about praxis³ rather than merely practice it can then give rise to increasing knowledge from, and about, educational practice. However one difficulty with action research could be that, because of its need to be responsive to the situation under investigation, the researcher has to be very careful to demonstrate clearly that the data are accurate and that the interpretation of the data is sound. It becomes even more important to seek out disconfirming evidence and to challenge all emerging interpretations.

4:2 The development of the action research movement

Whitehead (1993:115) claims that action research was first developed in Vienna in 1913 by Moreno who used it as part of a community initiative when working with prostitutes. Hodgkinson (1957, in Whitehead) reported however that action research was developed in the United States of America in the 1920's, particularly in progressive education with researchers such as John Dewey who is said to have been a major influence on Lewin in the 1940's. Modern action research is attributed to the work of Kurt Lewin (Evans, 1998, Zuber Skerritt, 1996) as part of the dynamics movements' need to solve social problems. Although Lewin discussed democratic participation and argued that this "leads gradually to independence, equality and co-operation" (1946:202) he is reported to have had ulterior motives since he was using the approach to get the workers to be more productive. Lewin (Adelman, 1993:15) thought that involving workers in the decision making process would encourage them to work harder and this could be seen as coercive rather than empowering. His behavioural perspective is referred to as scientific action research by McKernan (1991:21) A student of Lewin, Stephen Corey, writing in 1949

² Whitehead (1993:88) uses the term 'living educational theory' to emphasise a philosophical view, in action research, about the nature of knowledge and suggested that the research practitioner is the living 'I' who is conducting the inquiry- a point which is enlarged by McNiff (1993)

³ The term *praxis* is used here to denote reflection-in-action. Carr and Kemmis describe this, 1986:33) as being "informed action which, by reflection on its character and consequences, reflexively changes the 'knowledge base' which informs it". It is thus a dialectical way of thinking.

discussed action research for the first time as a means of improving school practice and stressed the co-operative nature of the activity in making improvements to practice.

By the 1950's there was an increasing emphasis on positivist research approaches and action research suffered a decline in popularity in America. The development of new models of action research shifted to Great Britain (Stenhouse, 1975:249) and Australia. Lawrence Stenhouse contributed to the teacher researcher movement in Great Britain arguing that the practitioner is the best person to discover what actually occurs in the workplace. Stenhouse was interested in curriculum development and research that aimed "to meet the problems of extending a genuine secondary education to people who were not of the elite" (Stenhouse, 1980:248). He considered that much of the progressivism inherent in the Plowden and Newsom Reports led to increased paternalism that disadvantaged many potential learners. Argyris (1982), Schön (1983), and Nyiri (1988) have criticised Stenhouses' approach for being too subjective and therefore invalid. Argyris and Schön (1974) were concerned about the difference between what they termed espoused theory and with the theory in action of which practitioners may not be aware. This appears to create a paradox where non-practising researchers could be valued for their ability to be objective and accurate but in doing so may lose the subjective detail of the practising teacher. In contrast the practising teacher may find it difficult to articulate their practical knowledge and therefore may not be in a position to contribute to theory.

Schön's work (1983) on the reflective practitioner begins to deal with this paradox by placing the emphasis on the process of learning rather than the product. Schön's epistemology of reflection in action seeks to recognise that theory and practice are interdependent yet complementary in the change process. This is a dialectical way of thinking in that it constantly seeks for variation. He used this model as a theoretical framework to validate the teachers' practice and recommended that they "react to the inconsistencies in a situation by rethinking one's tacit knowledge" (Ferry, 1998,102). Schön's approach to action research demonstrates a rigour that urges the practitioner to examine his or her familiar ideologies then to become critical and actively search out discrepancies "constructing and testing new categories of understanding action and ways of framing problems" (Schön, 1983:39).

By the 1970's Elliot was revising Schön's practical –deliberative model and advocating a self-monitoring model. He acknowledged subjectivity as a strength in increasing the dialogue and accessibility of the research to other practitioners and participants – "there must be a free information flow between them" (Elliot, 1978:356). Elliot considered

teaching to be an inescapably “theoretical activity” that can be validated by procedures such as triangulation. Recently Elliot has moved away from a case study approach towards more microethnographic studies. . However McKernan is still in favour of the use of case study in action research as “an ideal method of reporting an ethnographic piece of action research” (1991:65) whilst warning against becoming too idiosyncratic. He goes on to describe case study, in action research, as a formal collection of evidence that is presented as an interpretive position of “a unique case” and using a clearly bounded population. More recently, Bassey describes the use of case study in action research as a kind of “story-telling” (Bassey, 1999:41) that allows the world to share the new knowledge and understanding gained in the workplace from systematic and critical enquiry. Both Elliot and McKernan are members of the CARE consortium and both use language in their work, which appears to have strong links to ethnography, for example recommending the use of field notes and participant observation.

At the present time there are many models of action research and this is its’ strength since the core of any piece of action research is that it involves the day-to-day practice of the teacher. In accepting that these learning situations are socially and culturally mediated and that people’s actions are not entirely predictable the action researcher must take care to go beyond the techniques and methods of his or her craft of teaching to a deeper consideration of the processes involved in action research. Bassey (1987:7) says that these are:

- Its plural structure – that is, having multiple viewpoints
- Its risk structure – the research must be subjected to critique
- The dialectical critique
- The reflexive critique
- Theory, practice transformation

These processes, according to Bassey, place emphasis on rigorous procedures to demonstrate the reliability of action research.

Carr and Kemmis (1986:184) argue that action research possesses a double dialectic of theory/ practice and individual/society that appears to have its origins in the work of Habermas (1987:21) who asked ‘how is reliable knowledge possible?’ Habermas suggested that knowledge is developed by a process of construction and reconstruction of theory and practice. In his view knowledge is defined by “both the objects of

experience and by a priori categories and concepts that the knowing subject brings to every act of thought and perception” (Pusey, 1987:22). Habermas said that language is the “reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist” (Pusey, op.cit: 64) thus emphasising the importance of dialogue and questioning whilst recognising the power relations institutionalised in language. Habermas distinguished between speech and discourse. He described speech as communicative action, where what was said was sincere, true and right and discourse as a co-operative search for truth, which is designed to test truth claims. In the case of this research communication needed negotiation on more than one plane. It required that effective communication be maintained between researcher and management, researcher and other members of staff, and researcher, staff and learners. At all levels there were issues to contend with. For example any reportage had to be written carefully for its intended audience in order that it was acceptable and understandable. When talking to, and interviewing, a participant it was also necessary to consider whether their command of English was sufficient to engage in effective discourse without the use of mediation.

4:3 Advantages and disadvantages of action research

Action research is tailor made for use by a practitioner in his or her everyday work situation. It is flexible and responsive which means that team members (and others) can recognise its practical value and learn from it and it can be made occupationally relevant. These factors are attractive and could perhaps give an illusion of security and ease over other research paradigms. However it cannot be considered to be a ‘soft’ option since it requires a process by which change is initiated by the researcher. Most important to me was the added pressure that initiating change could bring. Challenging the status quo can be threatening. It must be done ethically and for appropriate reasons rather than simply because the methodology appears to demand it. It also requires a long-term commitment to a project since its validity rests on a series of iterative cycles, of planning acting and reflecting, that take time to complete.

Another problem that I have already found with action research also lies in its uniqueness since it subsumes a variety of research approaches. Being unique can mean that it is harder to report and it “ignores some requirements which have become part of the ideology of some conventional research” (Dick, 1992:6). Its virtue is in its responsiveness and subjectivity although this ability to use reflexive accounts, using diaries for example, must not be confused with other factual record keeping such as

transcripts of conversations and meetings and so on. There is no conventional format for writing up action research effectively and this is especially true for the literature review. In the case of adult learners within the context of lifelong learning this has proved to be particularly problematic, as much legislation has only been published after the start of this research and much of the new policy recommendations has had an impact on the overall learning experience of this cohort of students. Action points need to therefore integrate external change within their remit for improving the learning experience for adult returners in the local context.

The use of an action research approach needs to be justified. At the very start of this project I was interested in a more ethnographic approach and also considered the potential for a phenomenological study. Two important considerations have been taken into account as my methodology has evolved. Firstly I wish to be an integral part of the research process but I also wish to provide data for comparison on different perceptions of adult returners experience of learning. I acknowledge from the outset that my research is unique to the institution within which it is set and to the persons under investigation. By being a part of the process I may skew data collection findings and must 'build in' a means of reducing the impact of this by opening them for critical review by my peers. Secondly my research question presupposes that the improvement of the learning experience of adult returners will involve some degree of change. If I am to improve their experience I need a methodology that can respond to data as it is collated and evaluated as part of an on-going process but still has at the heart formal and strategic planning. Action Research has been explored in depth and will be adopted as a means, on this occasion, of achieving these goals.

As I began to consider the needs of the research and to shape my main research question it became apparent that these methods would not be able to seek out answers adequately since they would not enable me to become a co-participant. The following section on data collection will illuminate the rationale more clearly and see how I decided to approach the question

“How can we improve the learning experience for adult returners who enrol on childcare courses?”

4:4 Data Collection Methods

For this research to be truly considered to be action research the project has, according to Stenhouse (1980:249) to be contextualised within the classroom by practising teachers who collaborate fully with each other in a common language. To do this I invited all potential staff participants to a meeting during which I explained what I then understood as action research and how I aimed to improve teaching and learning for the adult students. It was stressed at the outset that I did not intend to set myself up as an 'expert' and saw the research as collaborative. The College team is well established with, I believe, a mutual trust and respect for members. It consists of a full-time course manager who has experience as a nursery manager and of NVQ assessing and verifying. Apart from myself, other core team members are mainly employed on either a fractional or casual basis to provide input on underpinning knowledge and assessing in the workplace. The college is currently running a TDLB course D32/33 for suitable persons in the workplace to carry out assessments and also has a Steering Committee made up of local childcare providers. Staff from other disciplines within the college do provide some underpinning knowledge, for example a Law specialist gives lectures on employment law and the Children Act. I made it clear at the outset however that an important function of the process would be to challenge our 'taken for granted' assumptions and that this might possibly be a threatening situation. I took time to speak to staff before I approached the Principal for his, and Governors' permission to proceed as I felt that it would be important to be sure of a supportive environment within which to work. Permission came surprisingly easily. The only condition to being allowed to carry out the research in the College was that I provided regular feedback to the management team and that I provided an input to a FEDA project on curriculum development being undertaken.

Data collection for the first action research cycle consists of a range of methods, which include the use of discussion groups initially then interviews with individuals. I also kept a research journal throughout the first phase. McKernan (1991:87) suggests that diaries can be rich in personal sentiments and "provide clues to fundamental issues". My diary has been an aide memoir as well as allowing me to 'dump' information to return to at a later stage. I found the skills needed for writing a journal regularly quite difficult to master at first but it was not long before I found myself automatically adding a note to my diary whenever an idea occurred to me. Questionnaires were justified as a means of obtaining background information on the cohort of students in terms of age, academic achievement and so on. The data produced from them did not influence the action

research but it gave me the opportunity to seek permission from respondents for in depth interviews.

Before a new term started I considered that my first task was to get a 'feel' for consumers' expectations. The word 'consumer' is not used lightly. It reflects the local colleges' *Enhanced Collaboration Research and Evaluation Study*, which discusses the Borough structure as a supply model, meeting clients' requirements. Doing this cost-effectively and to a tight time scale required careful consideration. I decided to use discussion groups as a relatively quick way of gaining opinion before the students actually started. In the short time available I was able to lead three of these groups. Details of the way these were run and an analysis of the emerging data is discussed later.

One result of the discussion groups was an understanding of the potential types of student involved. All but one of the childcare students were female. Since commencing the NVQ childcare course potential male students have shown some interest but they are very definitely in the minority. Adults are not a homogenous group but the two illustrations provided here give an insight into the problems many of these learners have to overcome in order to participate in the course. Both names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

i) Lisa had been working on a voluntary basis at the playgroup previously attended by her daughter. She had begun helping out almost by osmosis and slowly found that she enjoyed participating. The playgroup suggested that Lisa registered on a vocational course and offered to pay her tuition fees if she completed her training with them without pay. As Lisa's daughter was by now at full-time school she thought that it would be a good idea to gain a qualification.

Lisa had left school without any qualifications and freely admitted that she had 'mucked about' as she put it. She reflected that her first job after leaving school at sixteen had made her realise that she had potential to do better but then she married young and had her first child. Soon after having her second child the marriage failed and she had to learn to cope as a single parent and she began working as a school welfare assistant. Coming on the NVQ course was therefore the first time that she had returned to education for twenty-five years.

ii) Tavinder had come to this country from Pakistan ten years ago soon after she had completed an arranged marriage. Prior to her wedding Tavinder studied at University to primary degree level in child development and home economics. Tavinder had

apparently wanted to study science but had not been allowed to. She then began a Masters degree but this was taught in Urdu rather than her own dialect or English and Tavinder only attempted one exam before acceding to family pressure to marry.

Tavinder's new husband attended College in England whilst Tavinder worked in a factory to support him and their children. When the couple separated Tavinder's family agreed to sponsor her in retraining. She applied for a computer course but found herself discussing childcare with our team and realised that this was what she would really like to do. Prior to acceptance however Tavinder showed great perseverance by gaining her first level EFL course and going on to take GCSE English. Tavinder said that her main motivation was in comments made by her ex-husband about her not being educated, as she held no British qualifications. She wanted the status as well as the qualification despite already being educated to a higher level in her own country.

Both these students had very different prior experience of learning and whilst both had decided to enrol on a vocational programme in order to gain a qualification the facilitation of that goal would be very different. In chapter six the results of the first action cycle explore how intervention affected the learning experience of these two women as well as the other members of their course.

All of the core tutors are female, mainly middle-aged and middle class and my observations at local and regional support meetings, and at conferences, is that this is typical of tutors of childcare since many come from either a nursing or a primary teaching background both of which have traditionally attracted women. One cannot ignore the implications of gender, particularly where researchers interact directly with their respondents. Eichler (1991:6) warns that gender insensitivity consists of ignoring sex as a socially important variable. This could lead to the possibility of missing other problems because the "information necessary to do so is missing". One means of guarding against this is by repeated interviewing (Oakley, in Roberts, 1997:40) and using only one interviewer for all interviews.

Vaughan et al (1996:26) recommend the use of focus groups when doing action research to develop a general understanding of the target groups' perception of, in this case, returning to formal learning. He suggests that this method allows for multiple views of reality and that the group can develop a synergy that is comfortable and spontaneous. Ferry (1998: 104) also recommends focus groups in action research to "involve others interactively in defining and generating solutions" to work related problems. Focus groups have been defined by Beck as:

⁴“ *an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics relevant to the situation at hand*” (1986:73)

Yin ⁵(1988:21) advocates the use of focus groups for case study research because they shift emphasis from the interviewer to the respondent. This giving of autonomy to the group members is one of the main features of action research described in Elliot’s mission statement for his action research network, CARN. He goes on to say that “Good action research does not generate private knowledge for a core elite of staff. It renders what they have achieved public...(Elliot, 1995: 10). The use of focus groups to open the discussion to public scrutiny is in accord with action research methodology. All of my focus group interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and given to as many of the participants to read as possible. One outcome of the focus groups was the positive way that participants viewed them. Several commented on how nice it was to ‘be listened to’ and that they felt valued by being consulted. This simple effect is obviously of great importance when dealing with adults. Vaughn (op cit: 71) confirmed this saying that involved students “often feel a higher level of commitment and motivation” towards both each other and to their course.

4:5 Analysing interview data

When I reviewed the focus group taped transmissions I realised that in-depth interviews with new students and over the course of their study would provide some interesting data to seek out the different ways that these adults experience learning. I therefore undertook to interview eight students at the start of their study and then towards the end of the year-long course. Each interview took approximately forty minutes and was tape-recorded then transcribed by me. The written copy was given to the student for comment and possible amendment since, having sought informed consent from all respondents prior to interview I would be ethically bound to either amend, or remove, any statements that they wished altered. I was fortunate in that none of these students requested any changes. The discussion of results in Chapter five will demonstrate how the interviews had an effect on group dynamics and affected the action research process.

At the planning stage of this part of my research I took care to delimit the phenomenon that I wished to study. Following a careful review of the literature on adult learning (see

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Action research is sometimes referred to as case study (Robson, 1993:438) although this is a restricted use of the term.

chapter two and also below) I interviewed eight women, as described in chapter five, at the outset of their training and then again, nine months later as they neared completion. By interviewing the same people twice, not only was I able to complete 16 interviews in total, but I was also able to make a comparison of the ways in which the group experienced learning at two different experiential points in their learning career. The interviews sought to discover the qualitatively different ways that adult returners experience learning in a formal setting. Marton describes this as “a collective anatomy of awareness” (Marton and Booth, 1997), which is a way of experiencing something in relation to how people’s awareness is structured. In terms of action research I could then review whether the teaching approach used by the tutors was having any effect on the student’s perceptions of learning and what other influences impacted upon their learning experience.

Semi-structured interviews are modelled on conversations in that they are social events with interactional rules. Ball (1983:93) suggests that interviews cause “the rules of conversational discourse [to be] flagrantly disregarded in the name of social science”. It is therefore important that both interviewer and interviewee are aware of these rules in order that an asymmetrical relationship does not arise between the two parties. Oakley (in Roberts 1997:40) suggests, in fact, that this pretence of neutrality on the part of the interviewer can be counterproductive and that participation demands alignment. One example of how difficult interviewing women can be if, one is to adhere to the strict axioms of the interview method, was the way that these women frequently sought to bring me into the discourse. In these incidences they asked me questions which often related to childcare or to my viewpoint as a woman. This research does not aim to undervalue the importance of this unique situation. Rather it demonstrates that “bias is the human tradition” (Ellen, 1984:129).

The methods used for these interviews sought to provide rigour and to guard against undue bias. Accordingly all participants were given some advance warning of the topics to be covered, firstly by the content of the questionnaire, and secondly by my visit to the class when I gave a short explanation of the purpose of my research. All interviews were conducted in the college environment in order that it was familiar and relevant to participants. I arranged seating so that we were face-to-face on similar chairs and without a physical barrier, such as a table, between us. At the start of each interview I introduced the topic gradually using a few prompts but the questions arose mainly out of the discourse rather than being imposed upon it. I took especial care to guard against

gender stereotyping and of creating sexual dichotomism with, for example, language usage.

According to Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996:189) grounded theory analysis builds up a “cyclical or spiral perception of the research process, with concept development, data collection and data analysis taking place in close conjunction and feeding into each other”. It contains a notion of discovery as it seeks to uncover concepts and to consider how participants respond to changing conditions. Corbin and Strauss (1990: 6) stress that the process should guide the researcher and ground the developing theory in reality by constant comparison against different incidents as well as not restricting analysis to the conditions that bear immediately on the phenomenon of central interest. Although I was not using grounded theory as my main research method the interactional approach to studying human experience by focusing on ‘lived’ experience (Hutchinson, in Thompson 1989:23) is in close accord with the philosophy of action research.

In the nine months that I spent collecting the interview data I was developing a professional relationship with the interviewees and they, presumably, were getting to know me better. One cannot remain completely detached and it has to be acknowledged that in attempting to gain an understanding of other peoples’ experience one is at the same time influencing that experience. However once it has been openly acknowledged that I am a part of the research and actively interacting with it then it is possible to ‘build in’ a means of lessening the effects of potential skew. In this case I used the tenet of grounded theory that one should be constantly analysing data and reflecting it against other transcripts and data sources to seek for disconfirmation. Secondly I used the collaborative group to assist in open coding of the transcripts so that we could “break through subjectivity and bias” (Corbin and Strauss, 1990:13).

Once interviews were transcribed they were collated in a large file which I spent time regularly simply reading through to allow general impressions to emerge. I then laid out all the transcripts and initially simply made headings on single sheets of paper of the *in vivo* actions that I thought described developing concepts. Particular examples of these were added under each heading. At this stage I then invited the research team to consider the groupings and to debate their authenticity. I found that using the group members as sounding boards helped to focus more clearly and also to illuminate mismatches or inappropriate codes. The result of this content analysis was a large number of potential themes and some general consensus about the major issues emerging from the data. In the initial interviews this had little effect on the on going questioning but subsequently it

helped to tighten the focus. We met again formally to discuss themes when I had completed the second round of interviews.

4:6 Initiating the First Action Research Cycle

Effective action research depends on regular and systematic reflection on action and creating a cycle or spiral that allows change to be built in. Dick suggests that these cycles should be relatively short and that at their simplest they could be represented as follows:

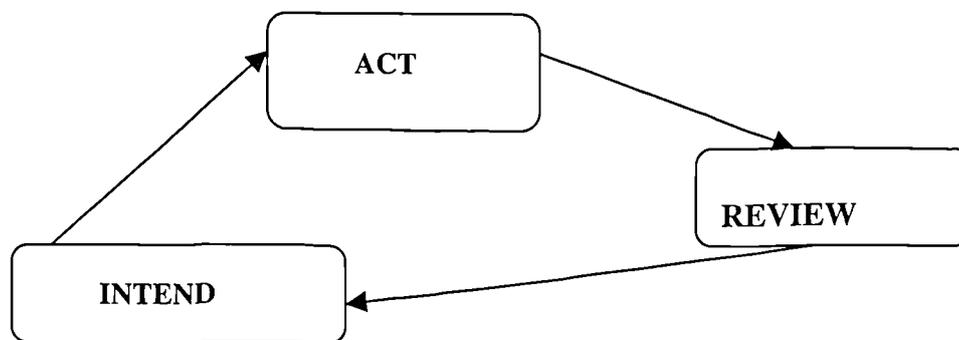


Figure 1: a simple action research cycle

From Dick, B. 1992-1993 *copyright v2.06:930507*

<http://www.imc.org.uk/imc/coursewa/doctorar/bobolc.htm#refer>

It will be seen during the discussion on results that this cycle is very simplistic. My research cycles became a synthesis of Kemmis and Carr's controlled intervention model developed at Deakin University Australia, which has been criticised for being too prescriptive, and a more conceptual model as outlined by Argyris (1982:159). Argyris integrates intervention with a theory of social systems based on communication flows and relationships that seems highly relevant when studying adults.

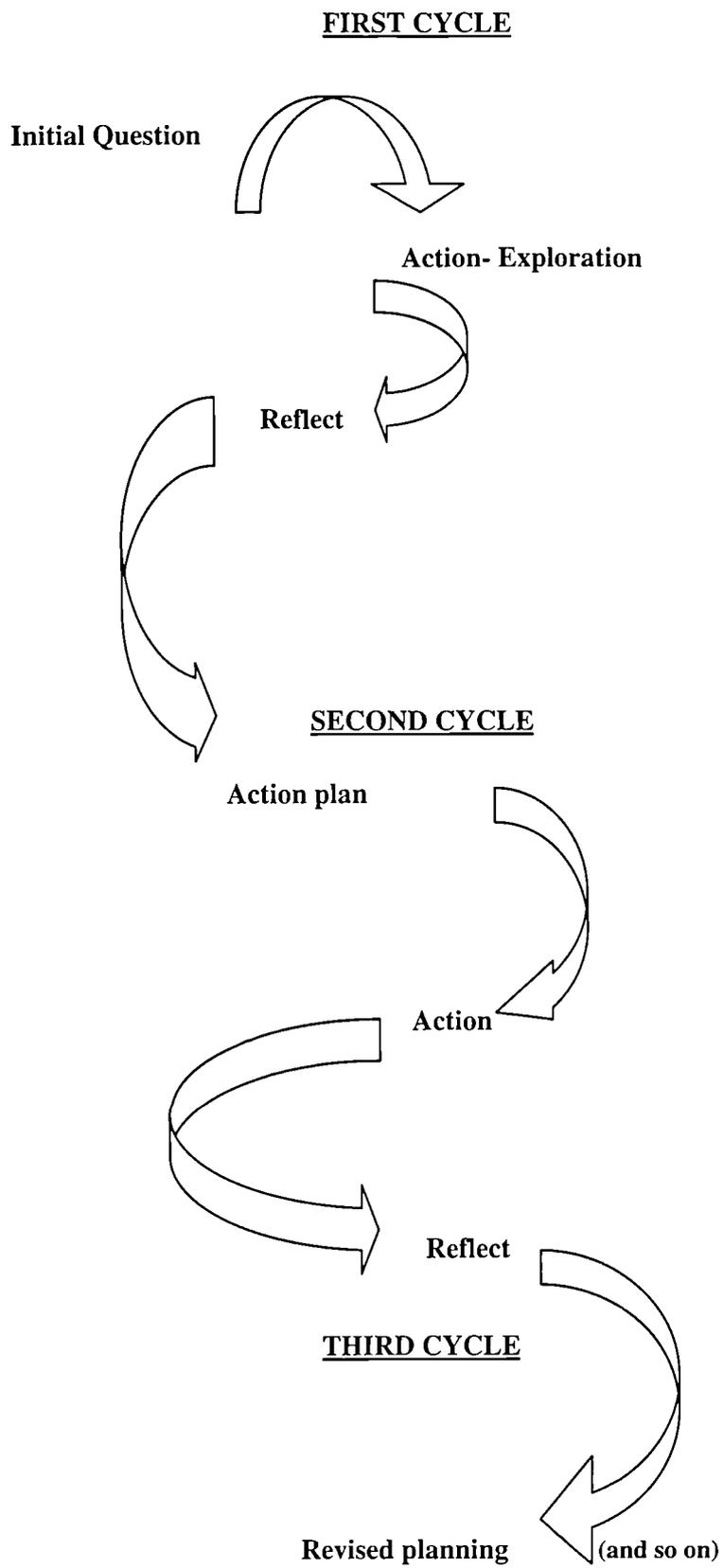
My own research cycle (fig. 2, page 57) therefore emphasises the need to involve all participants democratically in the change process. This diagram does not purport to describe a radically new model of action research. It aims to demonstrate the flexibility of this approach in adapting to individual problems.

The first cycle involves identifying the problem and stating it clearly with a needs assessment. Any hypotheses for testing can be developed into a plan of action or “blue print” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986:29) that can be implemented before rigorous evaluation. Having identified the problem using focus groups and discussion with team members involved in delivering the course action can be planned and executed. The data are described and evaluated in chapter five. Carr and Kemmis stress the importance of multiple data sources which they call a double dialectic – “the heart of action research” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986:183) in maintaining rigour. In this situation I used a personal diary, open interviews and staff interviews to assist in the building up of a contextual picture. Some issues were pressing and required speedy intervention; for example interpersonal relationships were found to be very strained in one group which had been made up of some students who had already completed an NVQ level 2 course amalgamating with ‘new’ NVQ3 students. Using action research as my research paradigm facilitated a smooth and beneficial plan of action to rectify the problem. Evaluation of the group dynamics one month later, as recorded in my journal, showed a vastly improved situation.

Other problems would not be so straight -forward to resolve. Nor would they fit easily into the time span. One particularly difficult issue to resolve has been responding to the students desire to be allocated with an assessor in the first term of their study. The implications here impinge on staff availability, time constraints and a negotiation process that cuts across departments. This will be fully discussed in chapter six.

My action cycles have been brief in order that I could adequately review and provide dynamic interpretation of data. As suggested by Elliot (1992:82) a cycle length of around one term has been found to be manageable and also fits with the rolling program used for the NVQ courses. It is recommended that you constantly seek “disconfirming evidence and argument” (Dick, 1992:7). Reviewing and recasting the problem in the light of previous evaluation has now resulted in a further full cycle and one partial cycle. A new hypothesis and action plan were developed and then reviewed in collaboration with staff and students. The following chapter begins to analyse emergent data from the focus groups and initial staff discussions and contextualises them by relating them to the rationale for introducing NVQ courses at the College.

Figure 2 - ACTION RESEARCH MODELLING



CHAPTER FIVE- THE FIRST ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE

This chapter will describe in detail the methods used for the first action research cycle. It demonstrates how one subset of data collection led on to another and provides some analysis of the early material. The chapter concludes with a diagrammatic representation of how the data collection for the first cycle is integrated into the action research model outlined on page 58.

As described in chapter four, focus groups can provide illustrative data in the early stages of action research. Carrying out focus group sessions as recorded in section 5:1 enabled me to gain a view of the learning experience of adult returners. In the following section, 5:2, I show how questionnaires provided me with some basic factual information and also introduced this research to my target audience of NVQ students. McNiff (1996:104) warns against questionnaires unless there are very good reasons for doing them, for example finding out basic information, evaluating the effect of an intervention or to introduce a particular topic to a chosen audience. Zuber-Skerritt (1992:28) has also used this technique to uncover students' suggestions and criticisms of a new learning skills programme. She suggests that questionnaires have the advantage of allowing data to be collected from a statistically significant number of students but the disadvantage of the "researcher influencing the subjects' responses by means of questions or non-verbal suggestions" (op.cit: 56). In this instance my line manager, who was not a part of the collaborative group, had requested their use to facilitate factual information gathering and since action research requires democratic co-operation within the team it was decided to employ them purely for this reason. Section 5:2 also comments on the limitations of questionnaire surveys.

Section 5:3 reports on interviews held with students over a period of about nine months. These interviews allowed me to gain a large amount of qualitative data on the ways that adult returners experience the phenomenon of learning. The next section records how an action research journal enabled me to maintain a time frame when collecting and collating data from multiple sources, as well as being a convenient means of logging anecdotal evidence. The penultimate section changes the focal point to discussions with staff in order that a comparison of perceptions between all participants in the action planning can be made. Section 5:5 goes on to document the reflecting stage of the first cycle, including some feedback from a colleague who also kept her own research journal, to act as a counter-balance to my personal perceptions. The chapter concludes

with an overview of the reasons stated by students for returning to formal education and the possible barriers, including both intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

5:1 – Data collection from the focus groups

A focus group is “ a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants” (Kreuger, 1988:18). A major part of the teacher’s role in FE is facilitating discussion between students in a classroom situation. This method is usually a strategy for re-enforcing learning by a critical analysis of the topic under study. A skilled lecturer will ensure that all participants get the opportunity to contribute and will act as mediator as well as summarising and often chairing the proceedings. In focus groups the role of the facilitator is quite different and I had learned some of the pit-falls during an earlier piece of work as part of the EdD research-training module. Vaughn (1996:14) recommends the use of focus groups within action research suggesting that they are “compatible with the key assumptions of the qualitative paradigm” and therefore, before initiating the main study, I decided to carry out a pilot on an established class attending a short evening course at the college.

I targeted the Introduction to Pre-School Practice (PPA) course because it had a similar cohort of students to those whom I intended to interview in the main study. The group was made up of woman returners who intended to seek (or who intended to improve upon) employment in childcare. This course is held for two and one half hours per week over 24 weeks and provides a reintroduction to study that may enable the participant to proceed on to the NVQ or another similar course. Kreuger suggests that it is good to have a homogenous group in respect of background, sex, socio-cultural characteristics and so on as less time needs to be spent on group maintenance. In this instance the group had had a chance to become more cohesive over the six weeks that they had been meeting and I had made no attempt at sampling since, by their attendance, the women were self-selecting. This probably made management of the pilot group much less problematic but it still gave me a chance to test out questions and structure. Having discussed the situation with my collaborative group I then visited the PPA class informally to explain my objectives and to outline the procedure, as I understood it. I stressed my commitment to confidentiality and told them that I wished to use a tape-recorder to assist my recall. No one refused to take part.

Personal learning from this pilot focus group was of the importance of controlling the topic as some group members tended to monopolise the dialogue and to demand a personal forum that was not totally relevant. I was able to practice the sequencing of the

session and how to develop probes without leading. Transcribing the data was difficult, as I had not written down sufficient visual cues and some people 'talked over' each other. I had used a small Dictaphone on this occasion and had positioned it beside me to be more discreet. This machine had been a reliable resource when taping personal or small group interviews. In a large classroom I discovered that it picked up too much background noise and frequently missed 'asides' made whilst a more dominant group member was speaking. Because I was engaged in the process I was not able to note any nuances or to comment on individual speakers. Lastly I had to unlearn my habit of reflecting ideas and personalising comments as this could be seen as skewing the data. Despite the problems outlined here this session had an interesting outcome. The women gave very positive feedback that was to be consistently reported during the formal focus group interviews. I recorded in my diary how impressed they were at someone taking an interest in their point of view

"The meeting actually ended with me offering to have three of the women to attend a BTEC 'human growth' lesson next week. Also interesting was the fact that some of the women told me how nice it was to have someone taking an interest in their point of view 'it doesn't normally happen' and how pleased they were to be asked. The session did over-run because of their questions. I had allowed 30 minutes but was there for an hour. A 'feel good' session!"

Armed with this self-confidence I felt more able to negotiate the three formal sessions. My first focus group targeted adults who were exploring the possibility of returning to study and had been invited to a 'taster' session before enrolling. The day in college had been organised by the tutor responsible for setting up the NVQ childcare program in response to market research. Vaughn et al (1996:12) differentiate between focus groups and small group interviewing by saying that the focus group interview is not an attempt at consensus building. It is used to identify themes and negotiate categories until the moderator can predict responses and themes begin to converge. Vaughn recommends group size should be 6-12 persons and the interview should last around one and a half hours.

My first focus group consisted of twelve female students ranging in age from mid-twenties to late thirties. The women had spent the morning with each other and were reconvening following a shared lunch. I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the session. The initial questions were intended to relax the women and to encourage group interaction. By talking about children and childcare it was very soon evident that

these women held strong opinions on the experience of child rearing and had not applied to do a qualification simply to gain employment.

“ Moderator: So everyone here is doing this because they want a job?”

Respondent: My reasons to come here were to better myself. I keep my family. Now I say I'm not just a mum. I can do something else.”

Being impartial in this environment is difficult given my background of Health Visiting. It was interesting to observe the very different behaviours of group members in particular one woman who monopolised a lot of the conversation and was quite dominant. Other group members exhibited behaviour that mirrored Quiriconi and Dorgans' (1985:61) descriptions of conventionalists (self-achievers) but they also used verbal and body language that supported colleagues' comments. For example they frequently nodded positively as someone entered the discussion.

The initial focus group interview lasted approximately one hour. I took care to draw the discussion to a close whilst reflecting on the discussion content. I arranged to type up the interview and provide access to the transcript for comment and feedback. I undertook to transcribe the data in longhand before asking a colleague to listen to the tape and read my interpretation. I returned to the group two weeks later to allow them the chance to read and alter the document. Not all respondents were present at this session since two had elected not to join the course.

Two further focus groups were conducted over the next month. One consisted of a group who had already started on their course and had been attending college for two months. The other group consisted mainly of new returners who had registered on the NVQ3 level course due to previous experience but it also had a few members who had recently passed the NVQ2 qualification and were returning to do the higher-level course. My diary records the conflict inherent in this latter group.

“Second Focus Group – 6th November...The dynamics of this group was very different from the previous one. One woman was anxious to dominate the proceedings from the outset and much of my intervention consisted of asking if other group members agreed with her (she did say 'we' frequently) or had other viewpoints. Her main expressed issue was over being integrated with about four women who had completed the NVQ2 course rather than being in a discreet group.”

Later in my diary record I reported on the reflection that the group had actually been quite supportive of this 'cuckoo'. When I returned with the transcript group members

had obviously given the situation considerable thought. The woman who had been particularly outspoken greeted me then read and agreed with the written record. She commented on her feelings at that time and how much the clarifying of her concerns had enabled her to confront them. On the 11th of December I recorded my personal reflections on the effect of the focus group

“11th December- In College this morning one of the team leaders approached me and told me that the woman who had been so out-spoken and aggressive had recently had a tutorial with her. During the tutorial she had said how much she had appreciated the opportunity to bring her feelings into the open. By doing so she had realised that she had come on the course with a very negative and closed attitude. She felt that she was now able to work better with the group and was enjoying the course more as a result. Is this what action research is about? It has certainly made me think about how we could incorporate a more reflexive kind of discussion/seminar into the programme and perhaps encourage more ownership of the course by adults.”

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

Several themes emerged during the three focus group interview sessions and I have summarised these under the following sub-headings

1. **LEARNING:** Learning was distinguished into formal and informal learning. Several people specified that it was ‘different from a qualification’ which appeared to focus on the informal type of learning process. One woman said, “most of us know the physical side of caring for a child but it may be the emotional or spiritual side that we don’t know how to give”. The word ‘knowledge’ was used frequently to describe what is learned and one woman commented on this as being something “we should have learnt in school”. Perhaps this was best summed up in a statement from a woman in the last focus group who said

“...you realise that you do that everyday but then you come here to get advice”

2. **MOTIVATION FOR ENROLLING:** Although acquiring personal knowledge and gaining a qualification were frequently cited there were two major factors influencing attendance. Firstly many of those attending felt that they already possessed the skills of caring for children but wished these to be formally recognised. This was particularly a confidence issue but it also reflected a need for personal recognition and “ a qualification proves you can do it” both to themselves and to prospective employers:

“I have seven children and I’m lucky to have a job but if I lost this I’ve nothing to prove I can do it.”

The second major motivator is financial, many said that they needed a recognised qualification in order to earn money and achieve more job security.

3. PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE: Most comments recorded during the focus groups showed that the women considered that coming on a college course would build confidence and provide a forum for sharing learning with others of like mind. Several women gave this reason in direct response to an opening question about why they had enrolled on the course. Several expressed a desire to ‘do better’ as parents but also were nervous of the ‘learning’ involved. In the first group an interviewee considered that the course was about “making educated choices”. The social dimension is an interesting one given that NVQs have been specifically designed to give workplace-based training.

On completing the focus groups I felt that the NVQ childcare courses were attracting women who felt that a career in childcare would enhance their informal parenting abilities as well as to re-enforce their current practices and to build up self-esteem. The learning that they intended to achieve appeared to be a professionalisation of currently held knowledge or understanding so that they could take their skills into the workplace and earn money. My initial reflection from this data was that these potential adult returners would feel very threatened in a formal environment where they might consider that their role of parent was under scrutiny. It is notoriously hard to ‘unlearn’ and perhaps this would make discussion and change hard to effect. Tough (1979: in Jarvis, 1998:19) suggested that many adults’ learning projects “were completely self-directed and that neither a teacher nor an educational institution was necessary to their successful completion” but in this case the interviewees are deliberately seeking some kind of mentorship to assist their learning. How can we, as tutors, claim to have taught a subject such as childcare, which is already in these women’s experience? And how can we measure learning other than by the traditional methods of recording achievement of a qualification?

An important part of action research methodology is the constant reflection in action by all involved parties. Triangulation of data by use of critical friends (McNiff, 96:12) is a means of maintaining the tension and preventing complacency. Having finished the focus group interviews I now gave the transcripts to the collaborative team and having read the transcripts we outlined three areas for action by exploring

- The students' reasons for coming on the course
- Any potential barriers to learning
- Possible action planning suggestions.

5:2 Devising a questionnaire

I did not intend to use questionnaires within this research paradigm. Action research should be a dynamic and responsive process that is suspicious of the neat categories provided by questions. However, in keeping with the fundamental tenet that, whilst the research was co-ordinated by me, I had the role of facilitator and needed to constantly take heed of colleagues, I agreed that the use of questions for basic information gathering purposes could prove useful. The resulting questionnaire was piloted with another early childhood part-time course before being distributed personally to all the new NVQ students. Its place as a course management tool was therefore established for monitoring and quality purposes and I was able to reflect some of the information as a general background description during this study. It is important to note that the questionnaire also highlighted the problems with providing open-ended questions which require some sophistication with the language being used since several of the NVQ students were unable to interpret or answer the more subjective questions used to attempt to discover feelings about personal learning.

The questionnaire (Appendix B) needed to be unambiguous and written in plain English. I was conscious that all questions asked should be relevant and necessary. For example, in the pilot I requested information on ethnic origin that was split into black Asian, black afro-Caribbean and so on. *One woman challenged this since she felt that she was not given an opportunity to reflect her ethnic background accurately. She wanted to know why I was even asking the question and I needed to justify it to her.* The final questionnaire took these comments into account by adding more categories of ethnicity, including 'other'. One reason for retaining the question on ethnicity was that it is a means of showing, on quality assurance documentation, that we operate a policy of equality of opportunity when enrolling students on this course and this is in line with the whole concept of widening participation in education. Secondly it may be possible to seek confirming evidence for Watkins and Regmis' (1992:103) suggestion that people have culturally different learning styles.

The first page of the questionnaire sought to provide the information gathering routinely requested by the department to assist in day-to-day planning. It gave a good description

of the student group in terms of age gender and ethnic background. For example we have realised that attempting to commence enrolment in early September disadvantages students who are Jewish since a major festival takes place at this time and this has been accounted for in future planning. All of the participants in this questionnaire were told that it was for marketing purposes and that I was doing research into adult learning. The main reason people gave for not filling in all the sections was due the time constraints, although as mentioned later some respondents had more difficulty with the open questions as English was not their first language.

The results of the questionnaires are summarised here

PAGE 1

Gender 92% female

Age range: 71% between 30-39 years

28% of children were under school age 57% were of school age

Ethnicity: 57% white 28% Indian or Pakistani 14% put 'other'

English speaking/writing: 42% did not have English as first language

PAGE 2

Academic qualifications: 50% had GCSE or equivalent 50% did not record any qualification

Currently in **Employment:** 50%

Reasons for choosing course: *Looking for retraining* 14%
Necessary to get desired job: 71%
Never had the chance to complete FT 21%
To prove I can study 14%
A way of meeting people 7%
Ready for change 28%
To gain useful skills 64%

Found Course through: *College:* 50%
Library 21%
Friends 35%

Ease of getting information: *Easy or quite easy* 57% *difficult* 21%

PAGE 3

Cost a factor in enrolling 35% cost a factor in remaining 50%

Course meets expectations 85%

Most useful resources? *Library and canteen* (85%)

Tutor rating : 93% very good or excellent Importance of accreditation 86%: very

(1 person did not answer this question)

The first page simply gives some descriptive information about the cohort of students used in this study. As can be seen the group is made up almost entirely of women who have been 'outside of the magic circle of education' for some time. The majority were parents and therefore were commencing the course with personal experience of childcare and many also had special requirements in terms of meeting their childcare needs. Around half of the group were multi-lingual with English not being their first language. Some of the students had elected to complete the NVQ at the recommendation of an established work placement. Frequently a woman would offer to help at her child's pre-school on a voluntary basis and then be asked to stay on as an unqualified assistant. After some time the employer exploits their potential by suggesting that the woman gains a recordable qualification before becoming an established member of staff. Some women had held responsible posts in other countries and found that their qualifications were not recognised in this country. Despite having a degree level education these women find it hard to gain employment without retraining and have opted for childcare as an occupation which can fit in with the demands of home and family commitments. One woman had been doing community work with Pakistani families for several years whilst her children grew up and had many valuable skills that she wished to find a focus for.

The next pages of the questionnaire offer a flavour of the motivating factors for choosing the NVQ course. The answers, whilst not being definitive did give some cues for the subsequent in-depth interviews. The major reason given for joining the NVQ program was the desire to get into employment, closely followed by a wish to gain useful skills. The majority of respondents wanted accreditation for having completed the qualification. This points to different motives than those expressed in the focus groups and has been reflected in the popularity of awards evenings, which were introduced as an action point at the end of the first cycle, for vocational students. The college appears to have correctly targeted the students who have joined the courses but it is impossible to deduce from this whether it is actually reaching all the people locally who could benefit from training. This issue is now part of the Borough Partnership strategic planning.

The data from the open questions is helpful background information but would not, in itself, lead to any dynamic changes. However by asking if the respondent would agree to be interviewed in more detail I was able to gain consent to carry out interviews with around 25% of the NVQ students. I was very fortunate in having a near total positive consent on the returned questionnaires. I had handed out 25 questionnaires and received 20 responses. Some of these had only replied to the factual questions but 6 (30%) went

into considerable detail. In discussion with the personal tutor I selected interviewees equally across the group to include those that had been articulate, those that had not and those who had not responded at all. On completion of the questionnaires I now had achieved a sample group of eight persons to interview in depth.

5:3 Interviews

All respondents were approached informally initially to acquaint them with my objectives and to enlist their agreement to taking part. I then gave out questionnaires, as mentioned in 5:2, and asked whether the individual would be willing to be interviewed. To a certain extent, therefore, the interviewees were self-selecting but I also took advice from the personal tutor in order to obtain a cross-section in terms of age, ethnicity and academic background. Before setting up the interview sessions I explained that all transcripts would be treated with confidentiality and no identifying details would be used. Transcripts of the interview were offered to each respondent for comment and alteration where appropriate. All interviews took place during the students' normal college day with the permission of the tutor.

Having obtained consent from the interviewee I arranged to see them individually for around forty minutes and to use a tape recorder as an aid to accurate transcription as soon as possible afterwards. I reassured each person that her comments would be totally confidential and that I would erase the tape after use. Personal information would be stored in a secure cabinet and would not be used in the report. In two cases I agreed to a request for paired interviews. To conduct these sessions I negotiated that each person would take turns in answering structured questions to allow both respondents to contribute. The first two women chose to be interviewed together as they had become friends in class but both said that they felt nervous about speaking on their own. One was Spanish whose second language was English; the second woman was Irish with no recordable academic qualifications. Her questionnaire had been completed only in the sections requiring a tick response. For the second double interview one woman had impressive academic qualifications from Bangladesh but said that she found expressing herself in English difficult; her 'pair' was a single parent who said that she would feel more confident with a partner.

Each interview had three sections but although I had a set of potential questions as well as a clear focus, the interviewee was always allowed to set the pace. I was seeking to discover their reasons for returning to education and what, if anything, they hoped to

achieve on completing the course. I also wanted to collect data on barriers to effective learning that could be used to construct a more enabling curriculum.

Following a brief introduction I asked about the student's prior experience of learning and training. A typical opening question would be "Tell me about what prompted you to come on this course?" I focused on their attitudes towards their previous educational experience and how successful they had found it. In the second section the focus moved on to their awareness of education and training and their expressed barriers to this. If they hadn't already brought up constraints without prompting I asked whether economic issues led to them not being able to take up or continue training and what non-economic considerations were important. In the final section I asked what lifelong learning meant to them and whether it could become a reality if actual (or perceived) barriers were removed. I summed up by asking what their current and future plans were. In the follow-up interviews the structure remained very similar and I found that this cohort of students appeared keen to revisit the questions by actually re-introducing some of them without any prompting.

Prior experiences of learning

Students' prior experiences of education were very varied. Some had enjoyed school but had been discouraged from continuing whilst others had found the discipline and structure inappropriate when they were younger. The vast majority of respondents expressed their lack of confidence in learning and their nervousness at re-entering education. They spoke frequently about their previous learning experiences in school as a time of not being in control or of not being ready for learning. One woman admitted that she "had been a cow at school". Some had enjoyed school whilst others complained about the 'useless' information that they had to learn, for example several asked me why they had needed to learn algebra? One student commented that her benchmark of learning at school had been the number of pages that she had filled with notes whereas she said that now

"I found it hard to sit down and do assignments at first but once I got the flow and S had marked it it's fine. I know I can do it."

When they talked about reasons for returning to formal education student's replies could be sub-divided into two distinct categories. Firstly they mentioned the extrinsic motivators and on the whole these reflected those mentioned in much of the literature

(E.g. Taylor, 1994; McGivney, 1999) where the need for qualifications in order to gain better-paid employment is paramount. One woman said

“So, I think for me its like now I’ve got a qualification. And hopefully that will be the first of a few.”

Motivation to return to formal education

The initial incentive frequently comes when a person has a good experience in a work situation, perhaps helping out on a voluntary basis or it may be that they have been encouraged by a member of the family to give it a try. Accreditation was therefore important from a financial point of view but it was also an issue in the second category, which was far more personal. The second, and equally important reason, for returning to formal education was the need to prove to themselves that they could achieve something. Despite an initial fear of failure and of the unknown there was a will to succeed that could overcome this once they had taken the first step. One woman said that she would love to come to college every day but couldn’t leave her present job because it was funding her course fees. Several mentioned that possessing a recognised qualification would raise their self-esteem by no longer being ‘just a mum’. And one said

“It [a qualification] shows you know things.”

However increasing knowledge also meant learning new practical skills as one respondent pointed out

“I don’t think you just come to college and learn...because I don’t think that until you do something practical that you’ve got it.”

In this situation the emphasis is on the practical element and the need to get this right in the placement situation. Most students commented that they might already actually possess the practical skills discussed in the classroom situation but that they now developed more understanding of reasons behind, often instinctual, behaviour. Applying this knowledge in a practical situation provided reinforcement to continue with previous practice. In other cases the new learning was seen as a valuable commodity to enable them to review their own childcare skills. The learning expressed here therefore is not necessarily *new* so much as being confidence gained by consensus

“Knowing and learning makes you secure, especially in the workplace and things like that.”

“In some situations the knowledge [from what you read] doesn't match. You need that practicability.”

In other cases the new learning was seen as a valuable commodity to review their own childcare

(Me) “So you are doing this because you want a job?”

“No. I had a really hard time with my daughter. I want to know more and more about children because I've had four years of trouble. I wanted to know what I'd done wrong.”

All these statements illustrate the constant need for reassurance and confidence building expressed by the majority of the interviewees. This confidence appears to come from group interaction as well as from being awarded a qualification. Sharing ideas with peers in a non-threatening environment reinforces previous knowledge and gives many a new sense of self-worth. The social context within which learning is situated was mentioned by most of the respondents and they expressed pleasure and satisfaction with the new friendships that they had made.

“We've all accepted each others' little ways. We have little groups that we go to but the whole group gets on well”.

The importance of social support

Peer support continued to be a major motivator to continue on a course, even when the going got hard. This is particularly interesting when considered in the context of the NVQ structure, which is not tailor made to provide this kind of support, but the social contact obviously works for many

“Yes. 'Cos you feel like you are all starting from the same place and working together.”

“It really helps. You'd never do it on your own.”

And finally it had to fit in with the demands of family, not to supersede it, therefore courses had to be local and to be held at convenient times. Two members of the group

both expressed a desire to be in more control of the pace of their learning, and one was particularly scathing of the formal learning environment of the college

“I wouldn’t advise anyone to do this [the classroom component of the course]. I’d like to come in and a tutor say ‘do this, do that’ and I’d go home and do it.”

This woman was the only member of this cohort not to complete her portfolio of work in order to gain her full award.

The need for enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem

Reinforcement, especially by peers, is a new sensation for a large number of the interviewees. The vast majority of respondents expressed their lack of confidence in learning and their nervousness at re-entering education. In some cases previous experience reflected the cultural background. Having been educated to matriculation in Pakistan a woman told me how she gained a place at University there to do a degree in education. She had been unable to finish, she said, due to family pressure which made her feel that if she were educated she would not find a husband. When her marriage subsequently failed she then discovered that in Pakistan there was no facility in University for enrolling mature entrants. During the interviews some students began to paint a picture of their lives that demonstrated a very low self-esteem which had in turn caused them to doubt their own abilities. Two described violent partners and gave disclosures of abuse. In other cases students mentioned their feelings of inadequacy when meeting ‘educated’ people

“My husband said I was uneducated because I was not qualified.”

Barriers to returning to formal education were often reflections of the reasons for wanting to come. Being stuck in job because one needed the money or because it fitted with other family commitments was a frequently expressed problem. Not knowing what the course entailed or how to find out was another. A few commented on their fear of having to write assignments but this was not a major issue once they were established on the course, although the volume of paper work required for the portfolio of evidence was.

When asked about lifelong learning or future plans interviewees at the start of their course were reticent to reply. More pressing concerns at this stage were finding coping strategies and survival techniques for juggling the demands of family and study. A

common statement was that family commitments would always take priority over any personal interests.

“Well you’re a mum. You always come last.”

For others, however, applying this new skill meant moving on and using the confidence gained to consider enhancing this qualification by opening a nursery or even starting on a Higher Education course

(Me) “So accreditation is important to you?”

“It does seem to be to employers doesn’t it?”

One woman’s comment as we finished her initial interview seems to sum up our objectives in good action research

“I can do now. I can do MORE!”

The eight original in-depth interviews gave an insight into the new returners’ expectations. Of particular relevance here is that 87% of the women interviewed had already been involved in the process of raising their own children and often referred to this when talking about learning. They said that had not come on the NVQ course simply to gain a paper qualification and a lot of their expectations had more to do with self-esteem than getting new knowledge. Another important outcome reflected the comments made by some members of the focus groups earlier; these women really appreciated having their opinion sought and said that it made them feel valued and more motivated to continue. I decided to carry out interviews towards the end towards the end of this first NVQ course to determine whether there were any differences in the way that these returners experienced learning.

The second round of interviews

For various reasons it was not possible to interview exactly the same women at the end of their period of study but I was able to talk to eight women about four weeks before they completed. One comment from a student appears to sum up the changes that had occurred:

“...but learning isn’t just about brand new things is it? It’s about reflecting ideas off each other. Many things we already knew but didn’t know how to put it across.”

Another woman talked about the changes in herself since starting the course:

“ I’ve changed. Oh yes, definitely. See if you’re at home and then you go back out, it helps the confidence. I’ve learned a lot but actually quantifying it is hard. I can’t tell you.”

In the first round of interviews this sentiment was not really expressed at all. In fact two women spoke of already having the understanding required to obtain formal recognition in order to upgrade their employment status. Looking back over the transcripts there was little reference to reflection or to new perceptions. At the end of their course many of the group still had the same surface approach to study, doing what it took to complete but always aware that this was second in the pecking order, and therefore learning needed to be disposable if the external situation demanded it. One woman actually said that she had not and would not change her outlook. Adult students returning to formal education are bringing in many different experiences, good and bad, that may affect their ability to look at things from a different perspective. Richardson (1994b: 383) rejects the stereotype mature student who is more deficient in academic study skills and says that

“...older individuals tend to be more proficient in aspects to cognition which have to do with expertise and with the development of systems of knowledge.”

In another article (Richardson and King, 1998:73) he goes on to say that adults have the capacity for learning “both in terms of memory and in terms of the mental flexibility required to adapt to new perspectives”. Several of the interviewees in my research said that they felt that age gives you learning. In this instance clarification of the statement led them to use the words learning and experience interchangeably. Only when I interviewed students for the second time did I obtain feedback on learning that demonstrated a deep approach to study. One woman spoke of “being able to reflect upon what you already knew”. She contextualised this by talking about how she now appreciated the reason why she was doing things in her nursery and was beginning to plan different activities for different age ranges to meet their needs more appropriately. A number of my informants said that their recent experience of learning had changed them as a person. In two cases this had led them to consider going on to higher education, pursuing dreams that they felt had passed them by. This feeling of liberation was not total however since it was often placed in the perspective of their role as mother, partner, daughter and so on.

“It [learning] is changing me as a person but I still have to keep my role.”

This woman spoke of attempting to change her partner's outlook in terms of delegating household jobs but still found that her college work had to wait until late in the evening because he was "so busy."

At the second interview there was more emphasis on the future in terms of employment and even continuing in education. – *"I'd like to open my own nursery". "I might do more. I'd like to do level 4 in a couple of years"* -were typical comments. Finally a comment from one woman appears to sum up the changes that had occurred for her over the previous nine months

"...but learning isn't about brand new things is it? It's about reflecting ideas off each other. Many things we already knew but didn't know how to put it across."

5:4 Using an action research diary

Throughout the first cycle I found a diary to be cathartic. Some days I used it as a 'dumping ground' for pieces of information that appeared to have no particular relevance at that time. On other occasions I used it to reassure myself that others valued what I was doing. Mostly however the diary recorded, contemporaneously, day to day information gathered in the course of the study. It was a little idiosyncratic but provided a faithful record of events, as I perceived them. One other member of staff decided to write her own journal and we both found that it is often easier to write down thoughts and feelings than it is to discuss them publicly. For example I reported in my own diary on the 3rd March:

"S had written down some of her thoughts about the course. She feels that learning isn't often the first thought – the course is seen as a means to an end such as freedom, gaining knowledge etc. ... one very interesting observation was made by S at the end when she commented on not having had an appraisal and how she really felt the need for support and time to discuss issues with our manager"

When we talked about this we reflected that it is often easy to plan for others and to express the need for staff to use praise and recognition with the students. We were not necessarily so good at meeting the same needs in the staff. McNiff (1996:101) suggests that diaries can serve many purposes. They can be used as a time-line, to illustrate general points, as raw data and to chart general progress. My diary has been most useful as an *aide memoir* especially in recording anecdotes. I have found myself constantly referring back to my diary when I am examining other data sources as it contextualises the situations more graphically than more formal records can.

5:5 Discussions with the collaborative team

Discussions with staff take place informally every day. We share a workroom, and in some cases even 'hot desk' due to having many part-time and fractional post members of the team. It would not be possible to record all of the conversations that occur between individual people. However, my diary as already noted above has been an invaluable prompt and general time-line to give a perspective on events. Any reference made to these conversations is only commented upon here when I have repeated the substance to the person concerned usually in the form of a clarifying question.

Workrooms are notoriously busy places. Ours is no exception and at peak times can have as many as ten members of staff in occupation and perhaps a student or two. Given this atmosphere, discussion with staff needed to be carefully pre-planned, and in one case it was sited outside of the work environment completely. Within this workroom atmosphere the persons making up the collaborative group function alongside other staff members working on Early Childhood courses and these staff often contributed to the discussion. The actual members of the collaborative team however all had specific functions on the NVQ childcare courses. One was the team leader, one was myself and the other three were regular teachers/assessors of TDLB courses. The breadth of experience included a qualified Early Years teacher, an OFSTED inspector for Early Years, an NNEB with experience of opening a private day care establishment and one who had considerable experience in a range of different childcare settings. All staff members held either a Certificate in Education or a Further Education teaching qualification. At team meetings for the NVQ courses there was also an opportunity to direct discussion at other members of the teaching staff who had input onto NVQ courses.

One member of the core team was S who had a managerial role in the running of the NVQ childcare courses. The college had employed her specifically for her expert and recent knowledge of the day care environments and of the assessment techniques unique to NVQ. She had arrived in time to be instrumental in the setting up of the new courses but said that she had been concerned over the 'top-down' approach used initiating them. S was enthusiastic about the action research project and actually kept her own journal during the research, which she shared with us.

The group discussions at the early stages of the study are summarised in the following paragraphs and were instrumental in the setting up of action points for the second cycle of the research process.

The conflict between meeting the needs of the students versus the pressure to fill places on courses.

S suggested that recruitment of students was 'a lottery' given that there is always pressure to fill places and for the college to make money. Some students would not be suitable to work with children and this cannot always be apparent at interview. There is no stereotypical student. Some are from split cultures where even members of the same family have been brought up in different parts of the world and this can lead to conflict. Some may be seeking escape from violent relationships that may, or may not, have an impact on their own relationships with other students and children. Although all potential students are police checked this could lead to issues of child protection and the fact that students themselves need counselling. Most adult returners are however egocentric and can be very attention seeking. This often makes the role of the facilitator into a distinctly mothering one, which can be stressful and time-consuming. They frequently challenge the lack of their 'own' tutor and need to have an environment created that is 'safe' to allow discourse to take place.

Reasons for returning to college

Most of the students use the course as a means to an end, as a form of escapism. They wish to break the mould of no job- no qualifications- no job and are looking for freedom from their own children as well as wanting to gain knowledge that they could use with their own children. Returning to the learning environment means broadening their horizons and increasing their belief in themselves. It also importantly means ditching a lot of personal baggage about their self-perception, their perception of tutors, and also their perception of the college.

Teaching and assessment

We agreed that that teaching involved transmission of knowledge in order to enable the student to achieve their award. It also encompassed the mothering role as an answer to educational, social, emotional and personal problems. This puts a strong emphasis on the social element of the teaching environment that would not be easy to achieve in the workplace. Once a safe environment is created in college it allows open discussion within the social groups. The teacher's perspective is a dual one in that they want to assist each student to reach his or her full potential. However, the other agenda is the pressure from the college to achieve maximum success rates in terms of completion of the course. This can lead to pressure on staff to consider candidates for progression when their intellectual ability may not be sufficient or where they may not really be suitable

for childcare. This is particularly the case with the foundation level (NVQ2) student but there can also be issues with those joining the level 3 programme. Although they have previous practical experience in childcare this is sometimes found to be poor practice which is much more difficult to ‘unlearn’.

Understanding can be difficult to assess without assignments. Many of the NVQ students have English as a second language and the literacy requirements can be challenging, particularly for level two. In one group of twelve students this problem had resulted in losing seven before completion.

Is caring for children professionally perceived as too easy?

The whole arena of childcare appears to be fraught with potential problems and begs the question: “Do people want to work with children because it is perceived as easy?” We felt that the tutor was under considerable pressure, as mentioned above regarding the dual allegiance, but also the ethical issues of personal baggage. For example two adult students had made disclosures (due to the safe environment?) about abuse which demonstrated that the traditional boundary between tutor and tutee had dissolved. In the classroom situation these frequent personal problems can make it difficult to divorce the subject matter from any other intimate issue. After discussion we agreed that some areas for action in the second cycle. Firstly, and of great importance, was the issue of siting a vocational course within a further education college I have summarised a few of the differences in the table below.

Figure 3 – Issues concerning siting of NVQ courses

<i>COLLEGE</i>	<i>WORKPLACE</i>
Students personal time-table availability is affected by their children’s term dates	Not driven by term dates etc. or by curriculum administration
Although there is literacy support it is rarely used.	Could be threatening when assessments are due (E.g. placement defensive if practice is suspect). If not competent what happens to the student?
College staff are possibly able to be more objective, especially in terms of poor practice. However there is a risk of ‘teacher’ emphasis.	Informal information gathering by role modelling and peer support (but this could be directed from the college)

AREAS FOR ACTION Before we initiated the second action cycle we decided on four areas that required change and could be integrated into the next NVQ course.

1. At present the assessor is always a different person from the course tutor and this is considered to be good practice. This situation is difficult to maintain due to staffing availability. One solution would be to create a rolling program whereby the member of staff commencing teaching of a group is automatically removed from the list of assessors for that group. This effectively means that a member of staff is not free to assess for one year out of every four.

2. There is a danger that units are dealt with in isolation, which gives that impression of having 'done' an area, rather than considering childcare holistically. Some system of information crossover needs putting in place to ensure that this does not happen. This will involve careful negotiation with all staff, including assessors since they will be working closely with students in signing off portfolios.

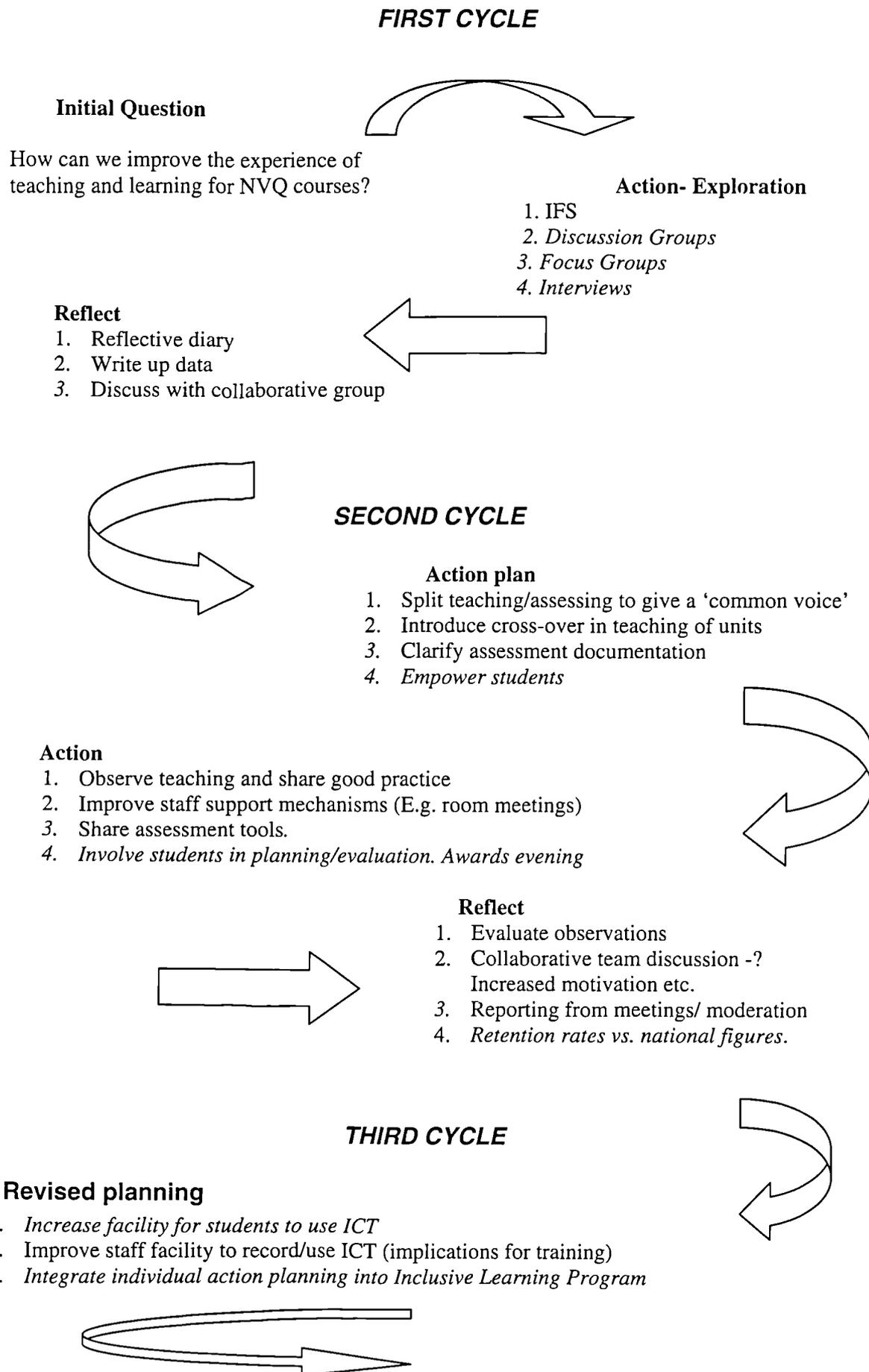
3. S felt that there could be a 'hidden agenda' that is not laid down and this could shake the status quo. Policies and discussion of assessment criteria need to be made clear from the outset and adhered to in liaison with verifiers.

4. Students working towards level three can, and should, be better empowered to effect changes, as they will be able on qualification, to work unsupervised. We need to take more time to establish the ability to do this, for example ensuring that students are capable of risk assessment.

SUMMARY

I had now collected a considerable amount of data and had developed some plans for action. My first cycle was nearing completion and a new group of NVQ students were being enrolled. The diagram on page 79 demonstrates how the model of action research out-lined on page 57 has evolved and illustrates how the first cycle has been effectively used to gain information about the context of the problem by taking deliberate steps to investigate how the experience of learning of one group of NVQ students has been influenced by international policy, local initiatives and personal history. Using the first cycle to focus clearly on the situation enables the collaborative group to hone the problem and to initiate action that can be observed and evaluated in the next cycle and so on. In the interests of completeness I have also included the revised planning put in place at the beginning of the third action research phase to show how the iterative cycles constantly seek for variation and for ways to improve practice.

Figure 4 – Methods used during the early iterative cycles of action research



CHAPTER SIX– THE SECOND ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE

Chapter six describes the second action research cycle. Moving on from the reflect/revise stage of the initial cycle the intervention consists of:

- i. Clarifying teacher/assessor roles by ensuring that staff members who teach on a particular NVQ course are not involved in assessing any of the students on it. In this way it is hoped that students can be allocated an assessor earlier on in their programme and can begin the assessment process at an appropriate time for them rather than having to wait until the final term, as at present. A number of students had mentioned how the fear of being assessed had been prominent in their minds during the first five months in College and how they would have felt much less stressed if they had been introduced to the assessor earlier.
- ii. Whilst wanting to create a strong understanding of the separate, yet interdependent, roles of teacher and assessor it is also necessary to ensure that all staff members on the NVQ programme are providing continuity of provision. This is especially difficult on this type of course which relies heavily on fractional and part-time staff. The intervention here will be to carry out lesson observations with the intention of reporting good practice and then discussing ways to increase learner autonomy and self esteem. The College is currently involved in a FEDA project on inclusive learning and reference will be made to how this is incorporated into the action plan.
- iii. The previous action research cycle had highlighted a need for staff support. The ways in which this has been encouraged will be described, and then later, evaluated.
- iv. The main characteristic of action research is its commitment to change. In the case of adult returners intervention in the second cycle consists of creating ways that enable students to become both autonomous learners and autonomous practitioners of childcare.

6:1 Do adults learn differently?

My first action research cycle considered the way that present policy encourages widening participation in education. The Learning and Skills Bill is anticipated to be

finalised by July 2000 and to introduce a new centralisation of funding for post-16 education and training under the umbrella of a Learning and Skills Council. Five months before its completion the White Paper appears to be separating 16-18 and adult education (Lecturer editorial, February 2000:2) despite a commitment in previous government policy statements made in 1944, 1973 and 1988 on inclusion. The White Paper said that the government would make the FE system more responsive to pressures on the ground as well as to current central initiatives. However, as Tuckett (1999, NIACE conference speech) suggests “no one should suppose that it would mean the end of differential investment in the curriculum”. If current policy is committed to welcoming non-traditional students then the curriculum needs to be made flexible enough to meet any challenges thus created. Recent recommendations from the government include the need for all teachers of adults to have specific teaching qualifications. The ultimate judge of our effectiveness as adult teachers must lie however in relation to the quality of our students’ learning and this needs to be contextualised within our own on-going understanding. As Bathmaker observes (1999:188) the training for FE teachers should be considered within the “context of lifelong learning” if they are to help others to become a part of the learning society. By observing teachers, who all possess teaching qualifications, interacting with adult students and by then sharing good practice with the team members this intervention aims to enhance the classroom experience for students and to open up discussion on teaching strategies for adults in a non –threatening forum.

Classroom observation is a tool regularly used in this College for quality assurance documentation of FEFC funded courses so both staff and students are familiar with persons sitting in during lessons. Non-FEFC funded courses are not, at present, subjected to regular scrutiny although they are observed periodically by the ACE manager. As FEFC are not actively involved with non-schedule two courses the adult learners would not generally be so comfortable with this kind of interruption; however our team teaching approach in Early Childhood makes the situation much more commonplace. Any observations carried out during this part of the study would therefore not have seemed intrusive but on each occasion I sought permission from the tutor and explained the purpose of the visit to the students. Each observation lasted for around thirty to forty minutes during which time I took longhand notes on a prepared form, similar to that used for routine surveillance and took time to speak to the students as appropriate. I also recorded my impressions in my diary as soon as practicable after the sessions. Each member of staff provided me with a lesson plan prior to the session and we spent time discussing the lesson immediately afterwards. It is difficult to remain detached and

objective when observing lessons given by your own team members to your students. At times it was almost impossible not to be drawn into a discussion point at the risk of missing recording the interactions. On the positive side it was much easier to recall nuances made by students whose names were familiar and, most importantly, I was also in a personal learning experience when seeing the teaching from a different perspective.

Peer observation is one method of monitoring classes suggested by Richards, (1997:1) as less threatening and “not difficult to practice”. It follows a logical sequence, which involves the teacher in self-reflection and the observer in dialogue with the teacher as soon as possible after the lesson. One purpose of these classroom observations was to discover whether the teacher and observer had different perceptions of how the lesson went and to discuss areas of strength and weakness. The pre-session enables both parties to discuss what they each hope to gain from the experience and to set ground rules. Some tutors were happy for me to sit amongst the students during the session whilst in other situations I was invited to sit outside of the teaching circle, behind the students. At this stage it is valuable to have a detailed lesson plan and subject overview so that one can focus on the context of the lesson to be observed. Negotiating a time to observe, particularly if unable to observe a full lesson needs careful planning if one isn't to disrupt the session. I used an observation format that is common to the College so that these observations could also become part of the quality assurance documentation required by FEFC. The main differences were that many of the students were not funded by FEFC, due to being part-time, and I also took more detailed notes about classroom interaction than is required usually and some of the information will have resource implications that can benefit the teachers concerned.

- a. Map of the room: All lessons, with one exception, took place in ‘mobiles’; that is portacabins that had been erected as temporary structures around ten years ago. They measured around thirty feet by twenty and contained hexagonal inter-locking tables, which could be arranged in a variety of different ways, dependant on the situation. Several cupboards and a wipe board completed the furnishings. Some display work provided colour in an otherwise uninviting room. One lesson was observed in a purpose-built science laboratory in the main teaching block despite the lesson not requiring this facility. This description of an uninspiring or unsuitable environment appears to confirm the findings of Roderick mentioned in chapter one about adult students being taught in substandard accommodation.
- b. External factors: A major advantage of working in portacabins is that they tend to be on the fringes of the site and are reasonably free from disturbance. However, one of

these buildings happens to be next to one of only three smoking areas for the whole college. Subsequently daytime classes can be disrupted by the noise of younger students congregating immediately outside. During one lesson observation some students actually attempted to come inside to shelter from the rain and required firm removal from the room. On the whole it was noted that mature students arrived in advance of the lesson commencement with the exception of one class where a woman came approximately fifteen minutes late. Other students, in the mixed sessions did arrive late with varying excuses, and causing a certain amount of disruption in the process.

- c. The learning environment: The tutors generally set a comfortable tone to the lessons, introducing the theme and a general outline, in a friendly manner. Voices were not raised and the ethos, despite the physical environment, was positive. After two of the sessions however mature students did comment that this was not always the case and that they sometimes felt annoyed at the time wasting allowed of younger students. They felt that they had limited time to spend on learning and thought that more could be done to create a more disciplined atmosphere.

- d. Use of questions: It was apparent from my observations that tutors who were used to having more adult learners tended to use questioning throughout the lessons in order to check learning and to modify their teaching. For example a commonly used question was “what do you think of?” This method appeared to generate a lot of dialogue, some of which was not entirely relevant but experienced tutors were able to deflect speakers effectively. One tutor who taught primarily on the A level program introduced the lesson clearly and on both occasions then gave out work sheets from which he asked each student in turn to read, going around the whole group who were seated around a circle of tables. This actively engaged everyone but was not popular with the adult learners who expressed feelings of being threatened by reading aloud and also felt that they could have achieved as much ‘learning’ by independent reading. Feedback afterwards elicited the response that these classes were not ‘valuable’, as they wanted a more analytical approach. Questions from students were invited by all but one lecturer, again a person who did not teach on any other vocational courses. In this one, isolated case, the lecture was teacher dominated with almost no interaction initiated with the students. It was not felt that this strategy was any more difficult for either the 16 –19 year old or adult since both expressed frustration with the lesson.

- e. Developmental flow of the lessons: Since all staff had experience of lesson observation, and had previously been given specific forms to fill out for FEFC inspection, lesson plans were structured and relevant. From the perspective of the adult returner lessons were welcomed when they had associated handout material to take away as a resource. No tutor specified any difference in the planning when adult students were present and the impression was that adults actually enhanced the flow of the lesson by personal anecdotes and experiences. In the de-brief this impression was validated by several comments made about the value of having a mixed group. One tutor speculated that more lesson time was probably spent administering detail and in summarising content when adults were present since they tended to be less 'shy' about saying when they didn't understand something. NVQ courses are predominantly assessed on practical skills. Written assignments are used to supplement this knowledge and to provide extra evidence for their portfolios rather than to test learning. I observed two lessons where (adult) childcare students were required to do set assignments within an academic framework. In these cases the adults present were enthusiastic learners although they did admit to more stress related to the written work. A quick trawl of the mark sheets for recent work showed, however, that these students had higher grades than average and had completed work to the time frame stated using a variety of sources.
- f. Interpersonal interactions: Observing tutors who were experienced in working with adult students one could see a more democratic approach throughout, even when this sometimes did move the lesson focus away from the plan before meeting its objectives. There was a feeling of autonomy that was lacking in the other two lessons and also a dynamism, which enabled some students (not necessarily the adults) to deal with someone who was talking out of turn and so on. The experienced tutors spent more of the time walking among the class and providing personal comments to individuals (a factor which was commented upon during my earlier interviews in chapter five). One of the A level tutors spent the whole hour in front of the class delivering his lesson from either notes or from overhead acetates.

SUMMARY

From these six classroom observations, done as a snapshot, over a period of three months it can be seen that adults on vocational courses tend to enter a physical learning environment that is frequently not ideal. Similar problems were being reported as long

ago as 1987 (HMSO: 23). This HMI-commissioned study of part-time advanced courses found that they often involved a long day in college without private study, or tutorial time. It went on to say that the learning environment was often in poor quality accommodation and that students found it difficult to find time to use library facilities. This picture of adults studying for vocational awards under these pressures is not reflected in professional courses organised by the Business Training Unit, which take place in accommodation that boasts carpeting, good lighting and lunch. When, as a result of these observations, I asked College management about the discrepancy I was reminded of the financial implications and about the higher than national average successful completion rates for our NVQ courses. The implication here was that motivation to succeed gave sufficient impetus in itself. Observation of lessons provided a forum for discussion and debate with team members about ways in which we could meet the learning needs of all students in the groups. Whilst all core staff members possess relevant professional qualifications as well as a lot of experience in teaching adults being able to share examples of good practice was underlined as a positive outcome. Being the main observer I frequently found myself thinking 'I must try that' or recognising a similar problem that had happened in my classes. Acknowledging common ground and finding time to share ideas can become a luxury but by using the action research model as a motivator the group were able to gain a fresh perspective on their practice. As McNiff (1993:1) suggests we need, at critical times to be able to "narrow the focus and to 'freeze' the intellectual action and crystallise ideas." Most curriculum planning carries with it the "notion of object and product, something to be mastered and internalised, an external entity by definition" (Thorpe, 1993:6). When teaching on an A level program, for example, the need to achieve the end product may result in strategies that are nearer to the traditional model of knowledge transmission that may inhibit students' ability to use their initiative. Adult learners may feel more comfortable with this model when they first return to education since student centred learning may be "disturbing initially, especially to mature students" (Thorpe, 1993:35).

By moving away from the traditional INSET type of research that has the observer giving advice on improving another's practice, and shifting the focus to self, these observations sessions empower the individual teacher to offer an account of his or her own practice which can be validated by the collaborative team. However the NVQ works to competences, which are defined as the standard required to successfully perform an activity or function. This shifting of priorities from inputs to outcomes can challenge the traditional teacher-student relationship and my observations have shown that tutors who do not normally teach on vocational courses may fail to recognise this unless they can be

involved more closely in planning. We need to fully understand our own practice in order that we can move forward to enabling our students to be aware of their “own potential for unlimited acts of creation” (McNiff, 1993:20) and become active knowers.

Adult learners (and presumably 16-18 year olds as well) work best when the tasks they do are “real and have purpose” (Konicek, 1996:13). They usually have experience of making choices and working autonomously in their family life. Konicek suggests that adults therefore respond better to teacher as facilitator, someone who can provide relevant information and skills whilst fitting these alongside the personal needs and expectations of the learner. Responses from adults in the classes that I observed with contract teachers demonstrate the frustration they felt at not being involved in the process of learning. One would suspect that personal learning would be more difficult to achieve under these circumstances although this is difficult to prove since adult grades are generally higher than those of their younger counterparts. This probably stems from the fact that adults can manage, and take responsibility for, their own learning and exhibit a more problem-centred approach to learning. Richardson (1994:309) suggests three reasons for this: “that mature students are more motivated by intrinsic goals; that younger students acquire a surface approach to learning in the final years of secondary education; and that the prior life experience of mature students promotes a deep approach towards studying”. Both this, and a subsequent paper (Richardson, 1995b) investigated mature students in higher education but commented upon the access routes of these students through FE. The papers concluded that mature students were more likely to adopt a deep approach towards their academic work rather than a reproducing orientation. Certainly observing the use of questioning by adults on the NVQ program points to a more meaning orientation to study than the younger students that is not always picked up on by less experienced tutors.

Although mature students on these vocational courses may have expressed concern, when interviewed, over their immediate environment and with facilities such as the canteen none of these factors appear to prevent them taking part in the learning experience. In evaluating the sharing of good practice witnessed by classroom observations the next action cycle can incorporate the need to raise staff awareness of the need to interact fully with students and to use methods such as questioning to aid understanding. The class observations suggest that time should be used to make staff members aware of the differing perceptions of learning between tutors and students.

6:2 Increasing staff support

Another issue outlined for action in cycle one was that of staff support. Many of the staff members involved in teaching NVQ students at the College, in common with many adult programs, are employed on a part-time or fractional basis. Only two of the NVQ tutors, including the course manager, are full-time members of staff. As the one workroom is shared by all staff this results in desk share and some staff are rarely in college during the daytime to meet colleagues. When reflecting and revising the first action plan it was decided that regular team meetings were effective but did not allow for informal dialogue and networking. We initiated room meetings as a forum for raising any issue pertaining to the day to day running of the department but not regularised by committee. This democratic meeting slot was deliberately held at different times to enable all team members to attend, if they wished, and had notes posted on the room wall for comment and information. At the first meeting several issues that had been worrying people were discussed and resulted in redesigning the layout of office furniture, which was a huge success. Desks were grouped into mini-workstations to enable staff to communicate more effectively; 'phones were allocated to these workstations and messages recorded so that persons ringing in for information would be able to contact the most appropriate member of staff. Without causing a schism in this busy office the efficiency was boosted using a think tank to achieve consensus. Room meetings, not only improved the environment for staff; they also planned a 'reward' system whereby we aimed to meet together socially. The first outing was bowling which proved to be a good team game. Subsequent outings have included a visit to the theatre, meals and a health club visit for our end of year planning meeting. Members of the collaborative team now say that atmosphere of the workroom is a very positive one and that they have a clearer understanding of each other's role in the room. Because staff are now actively pooling resources, our technician is creating a file system of common teaching materials that can be accessed for personal use, and also for providing cover if another staff member is absent. In this open environment staff are able to share ideas and have developed a system of information crossover between modules, rather than teaching in isolation, which is negotiated at regular NVQ meetings. Previously one member of staff had been allocated particular module to 'do' without necessarily having the time or the remit to cross reference to other modules. This is entirely in accordance with the philosophy of NVQ where each person is empowered to synthesise information and to act upon it. However an immediate result of a holistic approach has been that students are encouraged to start cross-referencing their own work earlier in the course and are therefore ready to discuss assessment at an earlier stage than the previous group (see

comments in chapter 7). Staff support has thus been co-incidentally instrumental in developing learner autonomy.

6:3 Increasing learner autonomy

Pelavin (1997:1) offers many characteristics of the adult learner. He suggests, amongst other things that they:

- Want to be able to relate content to specific contexts in their lives
- They prefer to have some degree of control over their learning
- Their sense of self has considerable influence on the meaning of the learning situation for that person
- They prefer a variety of learning styles and want an opportunity to apply theory to practical situations in their own lives.

If the fundamental aim of adult learning (Dirkx and Lavin, 1995:) is to facilitate growth in critical thinking, problem solving and learning to learn then we need to give students more opportunity to take control of their own learning experience as far as is practicable. This approach to learning is closely associated with andragogy, the art or science of helping adults to learn. Brookfield (1986:1) recommends that facilitators must create a “climate of humanness, physically and psychologically conducive to learning” by

- a. Circular seating arrangements
- b. Creating a climate of mutual respect among all participants
- c. Emphasising collaborative modes of learning
- d. Establishing an atmosphere of mutual trust
- e. Being supportive
- f. Emphasising that learning is pleasant

By using the term facilitator, instead of tutor or teacher, Brookfield has already taken a psychological step towards humanising the learning process for adults. Teaching suggests an unequal relationship of dialogue in which the learner is dependant on the

instructor for learning and that the instructor takes full responsibility for what is taught and how it is learned. In this situation the motivation to learn is generally mediated by external pressures and the learner comes to the activity with little experience that could be tapped as a resource for learning. Facilitating learning implies a less uneven balance and allows internal motivators such as self-esteem, recognition, and better quality of life to be activated. An important part of this process, for the NVQ students, who frequently (See chapter 5:2) comment on their lack of confidence, is helping them to become more critically aware and to question their previously held assumptions. Action in the second cycle also concerns curriculum content, by providing more scope for problem posing, for praxis and for negotiation. This is monitored through assessment of group assignments where students are required to work together towards a common goal that is workplace linked and by observing any changes in power sharing. Action will also be monitored by observing general group dynamics, and individual reflection, following a workshop on team skills. Self-reflection will be built into the group work but may be more difficult to impose on the NVQ competency structure that focuses more on outcome than process.

During the first action cycle staff had expressed concern that many adult returners did not receive much tutorial support. Sometimes this was due to the adult learner not having the time in their busy schedule to negotiate individual tutorial time; often it was because their classes took place at night when less student support was available; finally it could have been because of the financial implications of costing extra tutor time into a course. On the NVQ childcare course individual tutorial slots had so far been sited at the end of a long College day with the rationale that those students not needing to speak to their tutor could go home. We now implemented a new regime by having a full College day each term completely devoted to personal tutor support. This provided more time for each student to have quality time without giving them the pressure to prioritise between childcare and personal study.

FEDA is currently running several research projects on inclusion, which aims to develop both staff and curriculum in widening participation. At the College being used for my current research a draft action plan for inclusive learning is being initiated that aims, amongst other things, to monitor the impact of a raised awareness of learning styles on teaching and learning strategies. First year A-level students were used as a pilot group to assess a new Individual Action Plan that resulted in improved achievement and retention. As part of my action planning, independently of the FEDA initiative, it is intended to integrate into the College plan, using mature students. I have already been co-opted onto the College inclusion working party in order to achieve this. A long-term

aim of this initiative will be formalising a new initial assessment plan that specifically considers the needs of adult returners.

6:4 Evaluation of the second action research cycle

This chapter has shown how iterative cycles of action research dovetail into each other. Action points raised by the initial cycle have been translated into intervention strategies after discussion with members of the collaborative team. Introducing clearer roles for tutors in terms of teaching and assessing involved all Early Years team members in discussion and planning. It has also demonstrated the need for constant dialogue between staff and with students of all ages so that learning can be facilitated effectively. This 'common voice' removes the confusion often felt by part-time students who frequently report difficulty in obtaining consistent advice and guidance. Initiating an alternative structure for tutorial support has underlined its importance to students rather than relegating it to an 'add-on' status. Classroom observations have revealed that adult returners can have a very positive effect on the overall learning environment but that we need to be both pro-active and reactive to their learning styles. Again, the concept of a common voice in terms of a holistic approach to teaching and learning should provide continuity whilst ensuring that team members are constantly reflecting upon and revising their own practice. Peer observation is less threatening than manager-initiated observation as well as reinforcing the team collaboration that is part of the departments' philosophy. By sharing aspects of good practice we will also be more aware of our own teaching and learning strategies and become more "active knowers" (McNiff, 1993:20) ourselves. Some students may never achieve the qualification that they set out to achieve, or they may take a much more circuitous route. In evaluating the effectiveness of this kind of learning programme it is valuable to build in flexibility and to widen outcomes to include such things as increased literacy skills, work performance, study skills and even cultural appreciation. As the second cycle is concluded reflecting on the action strategies needs to be contextualised within the research question, which specifically asks how do *I* as a tutor improve my practice in order to enhance the learning experience of adult returners? By returning to my action points this question will now be mapped alongside what I perceive to have been achieved with my collaborative group over the last four months:

- i. Assessor / teacher roles: Improving my practice as both a teacher and assessor has involved my professional development as a teacher. In order that I facilitate my students' personal development I also come to increase my critical awareness of the learning process and move around the circle of making that

knowledge available to others who wish to become a part of it. Therefore my own theory of learning is constantly under revision and testing out new ideas then encouraging others to do the same. As McNiff (1993:107) states, “ ‘Teacher’ is not a licence to instruct; it is a licence that proclaims the status of a professional learner.” One example of how this has benefited the student group can be seen in the potted case history of ‘Lisa’ mentioned earlier who had a poor experience of initial schooling: Lisa had quickly made friends within the group and was often making people laugh. She came across as articulate and with an in-depth understanding of the role of a child carer. As her assessor I was able to witness a strong team member who was able to use her own initiative and respond appropriately to the children’s needs. Several of these children had recognised special educational needs and Lisa was particularly good at involving them in the placement activities. The staff at the College was therefore confident of Lisa’s ability to gain her qualification. During the first action cycle most planning was geared holistically for the needs of the majority and it was only as the cycle was at the reflect stage that we realised Lisa was not actually coping. She attended College regularly and continued to work well in her placement. However no written evidence was coming in to prove her ability. Lisa admitted that she was disorganised but this didn’t seem to fit with the picture of a single parent who had juggled the needs of her family with College and work for six months. Her fellow students were now progressing quickly with their portfolios and in fact the majority completed by the target date and gained their awards. Lisa had lots of reasons why she hadn’t reached this standard, most of which revolved around her family. It was at this point that I did my second round of interviews (designed to consider the changing perceptions of students who had nearly completed their course) and asked Lisa if we could talk. She told me “It’s been really nice coming to College, seeing S. You know. I just think it’s been nice.” She went on to acknowledge how this kind of learning had been different from initial schooling and said, “I still need to be kept on my toes”. As we began the second cycle and acknowledged the need to stop compartmentalising the individual units we agreed that Lisa needed a more formal approach to her learning since she had not been able to respond to a student-centred approach. I took on the role of mentor, giving formal instruction to Lisa about what work I expected and when she was to come and discuss it. We worked together to devise an Individual Action Plan and insisted that she sign the plan on each visit. This worked well until the long school holiday and we nearly decided that Lisa was not going to complete. Once the holiday period was over and Lisa could

give herself permission to continue working for her own satisfaction we started afresh by breaking down the workload in to smaller units and signing each one off in front of another member of staff who could then reinforce the process. Signing Lisa off had been a challenge with a capital C and meeting her needs involved understanding her personal and academic needs as well as having the flexibility within the system to provide appropriate support. Lisa was relieved and happy to have got her qualification. She said, “It’s because you know that officially, when you get your certificate it says that you’ve done it. That will be up on my living room wall you know – the first”.

This case history demonstrates how interventions in the second cycle had empowered Lisa to complete her qualification, which was the first successful outcome she had gained since leaving school, and provided her with the positive reinforcement to continue in the future. Being solely involved in assessing Lisa in the workplace left me free to observe her practical competency but regular dialogue with her tutor enabled us to monitor and revise her overall progress effectively.

- ii. Continuity of provision: Taking part in the observation of lessons involving teachers on the NVQ programme mirrored, in many ways, the on-going quality assurance mechanisms that are a requirement of the College. We have all been observed formally, and graded for our teaching methods on a particular day with a particular group of students. This snapshot type of assessment of our overall abilities can be personally stressful with little provision for critical evaluation. Although I was not observed during this intervention period, my role of observer was a unique chance to take time out to simply be a part of my students’ learning experience and to attempt to see things from a different perspective. The feeling was rather like being in the eye of a storm where you acknowledge that all the pressures of day to day living are ‘out there’ but for a short period of time you are afforded the luxury of absorbing the here and now. For this reason alone I feel that we should continue to monitor good practice in this supportive way and to continue to engage in dialogue that allows us to explore our own practice. I acknowledge that classroom observation can be threatening, perhaps asking to ‘sit in’ on a class, without paperwork would lessen this potential effect and also prepare us for the more formal sessions that occur at least twice yearly? Both the FEDA presentation that I was involved in (see chapter three) and the present

project on inclusive learning reinforces this recommendation for more sharing of good practice in order to improve curriculum and also assessment of learners.

- iii. Staff support It has already been mentioned that Early Years teaching is often furnished by casual or fractional staff. Only three members of the total Early Years team of fifteen are full-time. This obviously means that some members of staff may rarely meet their colleagues and that it is unusual to have team meetings with a full complement of staff in attendance. Having created a working rota that provides the flexibility for staff to teach on one NVQ course whilst contemporaneously assessing on another has created a more secure environment for the students as well as standardising overall provision. Assessment of this outcome is discussed in more depth in the concluding chapter by giving comparative figures of achievement between our college and national figures. My own evaluation of the implementation of more staff support has been of a 'feel good' factor. By acknowledging that we are learners too rather than individuals imparting understanding to others I no longer feel the need to hold on to ideas so much as to share them. Creating the central files of teaching material has been a psychological as well as a physical boost, for me, as it makes the term 'collaborative team' a highly appropriate one. Room meetings have been evaluated by asking staff members whether they have found them useful and what issues should be brought up during them. The most recent example of acceptance was when a team member noted that our placement supervisor was very stressed. This team member suggested that we have a room meeting to discuss ways of relieving the pressure on the placement officer by perhaps inviting her into classes and discussing options clearly with all students. The room meeting date was arranged to allow the key persons to attend and with the objective of supporting a colleague. Any management issues resulting from the meeting could then be summarised and taken forward to the appropriate forum.
- iv. Empowerment of students Enabling students to take on their prescribed role, particularly for level three candidates, of being able to work unsupervised is a major part of the learning process. In the workplace this can be very difficult as unqualified staff are not allowed to actually work unsupervised, and qualified staff are expected to already have the expertise. Adult learners, as already discussed, have much in the way of life experiences to bring to both college and their training placement but this is not always in the context of the professionalism required for the job. My personal learning during this second

cycle has been that providing a more tailor-made tutorial support allows experienced staff to focus on individual needs and to encourage self-esteem and self-confidence. Many of the students, when interviewed had expressed their concern at their lack of confidence despite feeling, in many cases, that they already did have the 'knowledge'. For example 'Tavinder' had very different needs from Lisa and she had a strong academic background. Her major problem was finding time to study and she had frequently 'escaped' tutorials during the first term. Providing a special day for tutorial support gave Tavinder the autonomy and confidence to speak in a non-threatening environment as well as coincidentally freeing up time for her to use other facilities such as the library. We have now built in more group work scenarios to allow the students to practice these skills in a secure environment and to allow them also to deal with constructive criticism. College teaching had originally been planned simply to provide underpinning knowledge evidence but student surveys now show that they value the practical classroom input. When we began to plan the action research I was personally quite sceptical about delivering a practical skills course in a further education college. As we move into the third cycle I am re-evaluating my opinion of this and the results of our college based course, compared with other local work-place providers appear to bear this out.

The concluding chapter evaluates the effectiveness of practitioner research and how it may be used to enhance student learning. It provides an account of the revised planning at the start of the third action research cycle as represented on page 80. It will go on to suggest ways in which a lecturer in a further education college can formalise his or her reflective practice in order to understand the learning needs of adult returners. It goes on to claim that action research methodology can be effective and workable intervention tool in the delivery of a high quality childcare course to adult returners. By standing outside of the process suggestions are made for ways in which this methodology can be integrated into similar vocational courses and on the implications to a further education college in terms of planning, use of resources and so on.

CHAPTER SEVEN – CONCLUSIONS

Since the Kennedy report in 1997 local education authorities have been charged with putting mechanisms into place that will encourage persons from disaffected groups, such as the long-term unemployed, ethnic minorities and women returners, to access lifelong learning. Whilst these initiatives have been specific to each authority and I have only given documentary evidence for one LEA, it appears that the concept of lifelong learning is welcomed as an appropriate and necessary move to meet the economic, technological and social changes of the twenty-first century. Much of the data reported in chapter three describes the need for co-operation and partnership in meeting these needs in order that resources can be used effectively. One would expect therefore that equal stress would be given to every formal learning opportunity in terms of provision and funding. This is beginning to happen with, for example, the removal of schedule two from the F and HE Act of 1992 and the setting up of Learning Skills Councils. However as the physical barriers for entry are removed (see chapter 3:3) there are still many obstacles for women returners that are linked to the way in which the role of wife/mother and so on is perceived since, as Thorpe (1993:3) suggests, it is not possible to divorce knowledge from its social context. Women now account for forty-seven percent of the total labour force in this country, women returners for thirty three percent (McGivney, 1999:2). However many studies (for example, McGivney, 1993; Coats, 1994) show that a high proportion of the jobs that these women hold are part-time and often in small firms. Women suffer a 'status penalty' where society neither "values nor rewards women's unpaid work in the home". Motherhood is praised but there is no reality of personhood within the role and women who work are not considered "proper mothers" (Watkins and Rodriguez, 1997). Thus the low self-confidence of these women stems from gender-based attitudes and attitudes.

The way that these women express their learning experiences is different from the perceptions expressed by persons who plan and implement learning episodes and there needs to be more communication between local colleges and the communities that they serve if these real, or perceived barriers to widening participation are to be removed. One example of this is the mapping exercise carried out as a collaboration between the College and the LEA as a means of uncovering postal areas that do not provide students. The problem with this kind of exercise is that whilst gaining information on general trends it has not differentiated between for example, adult age bands and has only collected data for the 19-59 year old. Secondly it cannot detect the person who may have

enrolled on a course several times and this could skew results. However the mapping does demonstrate that the highest concentration of enrolments is from the immediate College environs and along the major transport links. It would be interesting to turn this exercise on its head and to investigate why residents do *not* attend since this could illuminate barriers to participation more effectively. Figure five illustrates the dichotomy detected in the interview data.

ADULT RETURNERS	CURRICULUM PLANNERS
Altruistic motives	Money motives
Low self-esteem/ self confidence so want and value support from peer group	Desire to create autonomous learners
Receive less tutorial support than traditional students. Have severe constraints on available time to study	Adults need to negotiate their own learning styles and demand more attention from tutors
Fear of written testing but have a deep approach to learning as long as it appears personally relevant	Adults need more experience with Key Skills such as English, IT and numeracy
View learning as enabling them to access more learning events	Learning by most adults seen as closed events with limited aims and objectives
Desire to enter/re-enter the job market in a field linked to prior experience	College is required to implement national policy directives and to supplement dwindling numbers of traditional 16-18 year old students.
Learning is external to the need for meeting demands of home and family <i>but</i> highly motivated	Adults have high dropout rate. College needs to be flexible <i>but</i> needs to fit in with college curriculum model.

Figure 5 – the dichotomy between adult returners and curriculum planners

Extracting common themes from my interview data has established that the cohort of students used for my research have many intrinsic motivators affecting the outcome of their individual learning experience. These are arguably equally as important as completing the course of study. It has become apparent that returners can place disproportionate demands on the academic and learning support systems. Having noted

how beneficial it is to integrate adult students with 16-19 year olds it may be more cost effective to develop a 'buddy' system that could raise the adults' sense of self worth whilst enabling staff to spend time more efficiently. Data also shows that the meta-cognitive skills such as self-assessment and reflective practice are not the sole prerogative of the lecturer and these skills carry a high value in most disciplines where one needs to be capable of more critical thinking (McNair, 1996:11) and in a world where the entry and exit points to education are becoming more blurred alongside traditional definitions of adulthood. In its exploration of the plastic nature of the term adult this thesis has shown and how this has affected both policy and research. Further study is now required to explore these questions of categorisation in order to ensure that lifelong learning opportunities are made available to all those who wish to avail themselves of them. Given the removal of the dichotomy between vocational/ non-vocational education funding this will have enormous implications in terms of resources.

We can no longer consider learning simply as passive reception of knowledge. Rather, it should be seen as inseparable from a sense of personal identity (Lave, 1993:115). In the case of these women returners it needs to be acknowledged that responses to questioning may have been influenced by the relationships established between the female members of staff and those women who comprised the NVQ cohort. As Caplan (1993:3) suggests this is a dilemma of this kind of research which should be embraced for the richness of the data that it is capable of producing.

This research has taken place during the implementation phase of Kennedy's proposals and it suggests that lifelong learning will remain a myth particularly for those at higher risk of social exclusion such as, women with dependant children, ethnic minorities and less well educated people (Clayton, 1999:15). The British pattern, according to Clayton remains that social classes C1, C2 and C3 have the lowest participation rates and have less access to knowledge about courses that are available to them. This has been mirrored in the College mapping exercise. Students enrolling on the NVQ childcare courses do not always fit tidily into these occupational descriptors, especially when their first experience of learning was in another country. However, they were typical of the people most at risk of social exclusion mentioned in the Kennedy Report. Much of the literature quoted in chapter two pre-dates Kennedy and my study indicates that the entry points to FE are being widened as much due to government plans to increase childcare and education places as to lifelong learning initiatives. The concept of learning through life may not therefore be a realistic interpretation of individuals' needs so much as a reflection of internationally imposed policy. This current policy implies that learning

equates with training and goes as far (Woodhead, 2000:I) as to suggest a “moral authoritarianism”. Woodhead attacked Blunkett’s plan for a learning society as a ‘Utopian’ ideal that forces people into education.

Despite Government plans to increase overall further education student numbers there has been a consistent slump in enrolments since they tightened the rules on franchising of courses. According to the FEFC (Hall, 2000:I) between one hundred and one hundred and fifty colleges are below “acceptable tolerance limits” for student growth and are showing a drop in enrolment of older students of 4.6%. Does this mean that adult returners are to be fêted in order to swell depleting student numbers or will the proposed FE budget increase, for 2001-2002, of £365 million really be used to invest in lifelong learning initiatives? The one thing that does appear to be certain is the heightening profile of further education, at least in terms of media coverage, in abandoning its Cinderella status. According to the new minister of lifelong learning, Malcolm Wickes (Kirsh, 1999:3) this means that FE is the sector of the future and will make “lifelong education ...the battering ram to challenge inequality”. At present however there still remains this dichotomy between provision for 16-19 year olds and adults, which in the college included in this research, has resulted in a managerial separation of ‘adult’ and ‘sixth form’ learning that is contrary to current government strategic planning. The new director of adult college has put forward some exciting initiatives but this still leaves part-time adult learners who are integrated into full-time programmes sitting on an educational fence that could fail to recognise their individual needs. Some of our childcare students will be in this category and future planning needs to take this into account.

7:1 Adults in further education

The adults in this study were predominantly female and had usually returned to formal study in order either to retrain or to gain a recognised qualification that would enable them to combine working with meeting the demands of their home commitments. There is a wealth of research about adults as learners in HE (see Entwistle, 1992; Richardson, 1995, Beaty, 1993) but much less, prior to the Kennedy Report, about students in further education. Chapter two discussed the fuzziness inherent in defining and describing adult learners, therefore there is no intention here to generalise the findings of my interviews or focus groups. It is possible, however, to draw out similar themes to those that have been discussed in studies of HE students, whilst also showing that there can be no blueprint to impose on the adult curriculum. In particular, adults entering HE tend to have already achieved a recognised success academically. Although the boundaries

between further and higher education are blurring (Jarvis, 1998:244), and many HE establishments are now accepting mature entrants with Level 3 qualifications, the women attending this FE institute had often had a chequered educational career. This thesis therefore has concentrated on a group of students who have not been widely researched previously.

The quote by one woman on page 71 illustrates some peoples' need to negotiate their own time for learning rather than having it imposed upon them. And although the group were very supportive of one another, which could be seen as a positive effect of the college environment, individuals valued 'their' tutor and the new tutorial system which gave them private time with her. The adult students often displayed a more deep approach to learning than their 16-19 year old colleagues. Evidence of this could be seen in the higher standard of written work (even when English is not their first language) submitted by adults generally and also in the way that they responded to questioning. Adults can also have frequent crises of confidence due to this desire to engage more deeply with the subject matter. The NVQ programme, as mentioned in the previous chapter, requires a complicated system of cross-referencing between units and adult learners on this course demonstrated their ability to transfer information freely across different units. When younger students have been put on an NVQ programme we have noticed that they find this information crossover much harder and consequently we do not recommend this route for them except in exceptional circumstances.

7:2 Contribution to theory

NVQs have received a mixed press since their instigation ten years ago and have placed considerable emphasis on its assessment in terms of outputs (Jarvis, 1998:222), which can make it difficult to evaluate a student's wider knowledge base. Performance, in terms of competency in childcare, is assessed in the workplace whilst the knowledge underpinning these actions is frequently delivered in further education colleges. The cohort of students used for this present study had therefore really returned to formal education by a backdoor route and the curriculum had originally continued to focus on meeting needs in terms of outcome rather than process. Until this intervention project there has been very little engagement with the learning experience of these students and teaching had been concerned with enabling the students to gain a qualification.

This thesis has used action research as an intervention tool to examine the present situation against a backdrop of theory, including theories of adult learning, which is novel to further education although it has been reported in Early Childhood Education (see Borgia, 1996) and in Higher Education (for example Hughes, 1994). By using my own experience as an adult learner as a focus for intervention this study has been able to demonstrate that the reflective domain is highly significant for personal learning. Andragogical approaches to teaching and learning have been discussed in the previous chapters and include factors such as increasing learner autonomy, providing a meaning orientation for the learning, and by enhancing internal motivators to learn. My research suggests that this approach is highly relevant to most further education students and that teachers in FE need to consider the pedagogical assumptions of the traditional classroom before attempting to improve learner engagement with, and understanding of, the learning material. Ways in which this might be achieved include

- Sharing responsibility for learning with students. This could be by using individual action plans, as described, or introducing more open questioning and debate in class.
- Flexibility and negotiation in setting up the curriculum to provide a more realistic environment that mirrors the workplace and therefore is more empowering.
- There is a need to acknowledge that the process of learning is as important as the outcome. Richardson (1994: 1995) has demonstrated that adults often have a deep approach to study and have more meaning orientation. This is particularly true if tasks are seen as relevant and if the person is able to engage actively in learning. My research shows that the NVQ students were not actually engaged in 'new' learning much of the time so much as using the formal environment to see things from a new perspective and then being encouraged to express it effectively.
- It is not usually sufficient to simply have external motivators for study, such as accreditation. Adults in this study have demonstrated how vital it is for them to also have personal motivators such as self-esteem and confidence encouraged. This appears to contradict findings in the HE studies. FE students who have been self-directed in the home and even in the workplace do not necessarily transfer this to study situations initially. People interviewed at various stages of their learning experience in this FE College felt the need for consistency in terms of tutorial support and environment. Rather than these adults being truly autonomous learners they required a high degree of mentorship, which is not always available to part-time students and which can be very time-consuming for tutorial staff.

Theories of adult learning (see for example Knowles, 1978) have distinguished andragogy from more pedagogical approaches by suggesting that adults are responsible for their own learning and that their learning efforts are more problem centred than for younger students. In this small-scale piece of research the findings have not been totally consistent with previous findings and some of the interventions suggested by action research have been directed at increasing this learner autonomy. Lowered self-confidence could point to a possible barrier to returning to formal education since adults may need their self-esteem raised to an appreciable level before feeling able to even approach a college, particularly if previous experience of learning has not been a positive one. The IFS contained within this thesis has demonstrated that the commodity values attached to FE and ACE courses often lead to a separation of learning from its social context. It has also shown that the curriculum needs to acknowledge this social base if it is to remain flexible enough to facilitate adult learning. And if lifelong learning is to become a reality it needs to accommodate the fact that learning for pleasure and learning for interest is to be valued for its own sake. Once a potential returner has had a good learning experience then this can be appropriately exploited to enhance the individual's motivation to repeat or continue with education. As a department we have found the awards evenings to be a strong motivator. They are well attended by students, family and employers providing a forum for raising awareness of the value of the NVQ qualification and the role of the college in facilitating this. At our most recent awards evening we nearly had an 'extra' member of the audience as one successful student was so keen to acknowledge the event that she attended on the actual day that her new baby was due!

7:3 Outcomes of this research

This thesis set out to use action research intervention in order to improve practice for adult educators within a collaborative team. One cannot improve one's own practice unless or until one understands the basis of that practice. In the introduction I described my personal journey of discovery as an adult learner. This journey has now incorporated the collaborative team in evaluating and reflecting upon teaching and learning strategies used when working with a particular group of NVQ childcare students. We have found that using reflective practice against a theoretical framework makes teaching a more satisfactory experience for us and has coincided with increased retention and completion rates for the students. At this stage it is too soon to make claims about the direct relationship between the two but early indicators suggest that this aspect would bear further investigation. For example a recent report by the NVQ course manager shows

that our college has improved upon its completion rate consistently during the period of action research and attributes much of this success to the revised tutorial and peer support system. At the beginning of the study, in April 1999 the success rate was above the national average at 82%. In June 1999 this figure rose to 85%, in December 86% and completion rate for April 2000 is projected to be 92%. It suggests that adult returners to further education who are given the appropriate environment in which to learn can be high achievers and also reflects Bourdieu's (1972) notion of 'cultural capital' in that we are motivated to repeat successful acts. We have demonstrated that a more humanistic approach to teaching can benefit adults and younger learners alike and is in line with the government's philosophy of widening participation for non-representative groups. When adults are integrated into a classroom with younger students they can, themselves, act as mentors and as a counter-balance to those who may have lower attention spans. This fact could be utilised in other departments although, as mentioned in the earlier chapters creating a separate adult college could undermine this situation and serve to devalue any widening participation or inclusive learning initiative.

As Konicek (1996:13) reminds us there is more need in the adult classroom to provide meaningful tasks, interactive learning and a supportive atmosphere and this requires the facilitator to have "a deep understanding of the adult psyche". Experience with the NVQ students shows that they do appear to need high levels of reinforcement together with praise and recognition for efforts in order to achieve a deeper approach to learning. Bower (1981:541) suggests that using reinforcement procedures often enhances adult study skills. Once the student is more in control of their learning it will be appropriate to introduce a deeper critical awareness in diagnosing their own needs and becoming able to transfer the learning to other environments. Whilst there is considerable research into learning amongst adults who have re-entered the 'magic circle of education' it would be useful to consider those adults who have not. Using NVQ childcare as a starting point it should be possible to set up interviews with people who are working as unqualified and/or volunteer staff to compare their previous experience of learning with that of those students who have found their way onto a course. In seeking for differences in the way that these two groups experience learning it should be possible to improve adult learning episodes in further education and to target potential students appropriately.

In a relatively short piece of research it has not been possible to explore all the potential contexts within which these adult returners operate. Some contexts, such as gender, have only been added as a 'flavour' in terms of significance and would warrant a more extensive investigation. For example, why does the NVQ childcare course recruit so few

men? Why does the teaching staff on childcare courses rely almost exclusively on female tutors? Policies may be providing strong incentives for inclusive learning but one suspects that the social climate for putting policy into practice is not yet prepared to fully embrace the concept?

This action research had been temporarily arrested in order to evaluate its effectiveness fully as an intervention tool. However the third cycle is being implemented as described on page 80 and will be integrated into departmental strategic planning. In terms of resources it could be argued that higher levels of man power will be needed to provide tutorial support and to assist in individual action planning and this could have an influence on its potential when costing out future programmes. In terms of projected increased retention rates and successful completion, which will need more in-depth evaluation, there does appear however to be a strong case for such intervention being cost-effective. Even more important is the issue of quality, which is very difficult to measure. Staff using this strategy has commented on increased levels of job satisfaction and one assumes that this would permeate into their teaching. It would be useful to build in a means of documenting this and it may be that questionnaires would be an efficient way to evaluate this kind of intervention, as suggested by McNiff (1996:104). A first step would be to take these preliminary results of the action research to a wider forum within the College for critical appraisal. A second step would be to record students' learning events on computer in order that an accurate map can be made across the whole college of individual learning and also to create a database of persons who may be interested in new developments and updating of skills. Until now the only formal database has been for students undertaking courses funded by the FEFC. Separating the College into departments that effectively isolate adult part-time students from the recently named 'Sixth Form College' could be a barrier to widening participation for women returners unless records are merged. If action intervention were to be embedded in the Colleges' strategic planning a database would provide a good way of evaluating progress and negotiating interventions. When FE colleges are being exhorted to make maximum use of the physical site it may also open the way for a more enabling curriculum.

7:4 Personal learning outcomes

In the introduction to this thesis I outlined my own experience of learning as an adult. This was not intended to be a solipsistic journey of self-gratification but was used as an

illustration of one of the wide variety of ways in which we live our personal realities. Formal learning episodes usually need to compete with multiple demands on adults' time and energy. This thesis has shown that many people accessing further education already have sufficient motivation to succeed and cope with the cognitive demands of vocational training as well as their younger counter-parts. The challenge is to facilitate this within a supportive framework whilst meeting the curriculum requirements of the wider college. Marton (1992, in Bowden, 1994:90) said that some people are better at learning than others "because people differ in their approach to learning tasks". My research has confirmed this when comparing adult returners with traditional 16-19 year old students. It has found that the majority of adult learners exhibit a deep approach to learning by their active questioning in class, by their ability to relate ideas from one module to other aspects of the course, and by their constant motivation to continue despite all the constraints on their time. By providing them with theoretical information *and* the forum to put that theory into practice the NVQ students have integrated learning and understanding into their everyday practice. Although the vast majority of informants said that they did want accreditation and attended the awards evening it was not the prime goal. This was most frequently the wish to grow in confidence and self esteem.

My personal development has followed a similar route. I have discovered that learning is not a linear pathway and that each new experience has to be individually negotiated and assimilated. In using an action research approach, that is a process that is grounded in everyday experience, I have found that it commits participants to regular critical dialogue, which in turn assists in the personal experience of understanding. Borgia (1996) stated that action research is an approach that can enhance both professional development and student learning in Early Childhood Education. For example she says that early childhood educators "often use ineffective traditional rituals and practices, such as rote learning exercise... in lieu of methods that result in meaningful reading or mathematics learning." Borgia goes on to say that good action research can become a "way of life" as a proactive resource for change and suggests a mnemonic for involvement that also reinforces the way that adults make sense of their world. The five C's are commitment, collaboration, concern, consideration and change. My action research has included all these components by making time for knowing and trusting members of the research team and treating each member as equal. By maintaining a critical dialogue that does not cease with the formal writing up of this thesis and finally by not being afraid to suggest or to initiate change that is worthwhile.

Have I improved my own practice through this research? Student surveys are carried out, for FEFC quality documentation, on full-time courses within the college and voluntarily on part-time courses. They allow students to give confidential qualitative feedback on individual subjects and tutorial support. Results of these, coupled with evidence from formal observation of my teaching, show that my practice has improved. However the most important lesson that I have learned is that there is no one right way. Each day each group of students, regardless of age, demands skills of listening and reflection in order that an effective environment is created for learning. By being prepared to share that critical reflection and to adapt is to contribute to that dynamic tension between the socio-cultural world and all of us as learners.

Is lifelong learning a myth? From this investigation, into the learning experience of adult returners to formal education, it would appear that the motivation to adapt and to change through life is inherent within each individual and is being promoted as a necessary way for the modern world to meet the needs of the on-going technological and sociological revolution. It is not clear however whether further education can meet the individual needs of adult returners whilst it holds on to such an institutionalised curriculum. If lifelong learning is to become a reality we need to create a responsive and appropriate service for all age groups and to continue to find ways of dissolving the barriers to participation in education.

Even as this thesis draws its own conclusions political parties are still divided about the concept of lifelong learning. Whilst the ruling Labour Government consider that the 16-19 year old student must have priority (Atkins, 2000:29) the Tory and Liberal Democrats are attacking this as undermining the needs of older learners. For me the experience of learning will continue. Action research methodology has provided a framework of reference for maintaining a high quality service to adults that may in turn enable them to use *praxis* in their future practice.

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Appendix A –

sample of letter to LEA/FE staff requesting interview. Identifying details have been removed to preserve confidentiality.

Kate O'Donnell

26 June 1998

Director of Education, London Borough of ...

Dear Mr X:

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I am currently employed as a course manager in one of the local colleges of further education and in order to enhance my practice I am enrolled on the EdD program at Brunel University doing a phenomenographic study of a cohort of adult learners. My particular interest is in adult returners to formal study; their motivation for re-entering education and how they perceive their needs as learners. In your professional role you have a wealth of experience of the whole education system, especially of how that system relates to education in this Borough. I would like, with your permission, to ask you about your opinions of the concept of Lifelong Learning. Your response will be treated with the strictest confidence. It will be used to inform the background to my thesis. I have listed the questions below for your consideration. If you are unable to meet me personally, perhaps you would be kind enough to send me a written response to these points? How do you interpret the current policies regarding widening participation in further education?

1. What do you see as the main problems, for a Local Education Authority such as this, in meeting the needs of adults who wish to return to formal education? Could you comment on how you see these problems being solved by the LEA?
2. In your opinion, is there more that could be done to promote widening participation in further education? If so could you suggest ways in which this could be done?
3. Is the concept of lifelong learning realistic or do you think that the notion of learning through life is unachievable? Why?
4. Your co-operation is valued. In the next few days I will contact your department by telephone to arrange either a personal contact, or to collect your response. Please feel free to contact me in the mean time if you have any queries or suggestions.

Sincerely,

Mrs Kate O'Donnell MSc. RHV, RGN
Course Manager, BND/C (Childhood Studies) atCollege

012345 456789 E-mail: odonnell@claranet.com

Adult Returners Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this important questionnaire. None of your personal details will be made available to any other source, at any time. Please try to answer all questions as fully as possible – tick more than one box if necessary. We welcome any other comments that you care to add. Please can you return this form within 14 days to either Kate or your personal tutor.

Personal Details

Title: Mr./Mrs/Miss/Ms.....

Surname:.....

Forename:.....

Address:.....

.....

(Please tick where appropriate)

Gender male/ female

Age on 1st September 1998:-

19 –21 years..... 50 –59years

22- 29 years..... Over 60 years.....

30–39 years Retired? Yes/ No
 40–49 years

Marital Status Single/married/divorced/widowed

No. Dependant Children

Age 0 –5

Age 6 –10 Age 11+

What ethnic group do you consider yourself to be?

White Black Caribbean

Black African..... Black Other.....

Indian..... Pakistani.....

Bangladeshi..... Chinese.....

Other.....

Is English your first language? Y/N

If not, do you consider yourself to be fluent in

a)written English? Y/N

b) spoken English? Y/N

Do you suffer from any disability registered with the Job Centre?

Y/N

Adult Returners Questionnaire

<p>Present College Attended.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Date Enrolled (dd/mm/yy).....</p>
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Q.1 What academic qualifications (if any) do you already possess? *Please tick any and give number obtained*

- a. GCSE
- b. GCE O Levels
- c. GNVQ Foundation
- d. GNVQ Intermediate
- e. GNVQ Advanced
- f. BTEC National
- g. BTEC Higher National
- h. GCE /GCSE A level
- i. Scottish/Irish Leaving Certificate ..
- j. Degree

Q.2 Have you been in paid employment since leaving full-time education?
Y/N

Q.3 If so, what is/ was your last job?.....

.....

Q.4 Which course are you now enrolled on?.....

.....

Q.5 What made you choose this course? *(please tick any that apply)*

- a. Sent by employer.
- b. Recently made redundant and looking for retraining.
- c. Necessary to get desired job.
- d. Never had a chance to complete full-time education.
- e. Didn't enjoy school but would like to prove that I can study.
- f. A way of meeting new people.
- g. Ready for a new direction now that my family are independent.
- h. To gain useful skills.
- i. Other *(please specify)*.....

.....

Q.6 How did you find out about the course?

- a. Employer.
- b. Direct from college.
- c. Local press.
- d. Library.
- e. Friends

Adult Returners Questionnaire

f. Support Group (*please specify*)

.....

.....

Q.7 How difficult was it to get details about the courses on offer?

- a. Very difficult.
- b. Difficult
- c. Not very difficult

d. Easy

e. Very easy.

Please comment if you wish.....

.....

Q.8 How difficult did you find it to register on the course?

- a. Very difficult.
- b. Difficult
- c. Not very difficult

d. Easy

e. Very easy.

Please comment if you wish

.....

.....

Adult Returners Questionnaire

Q.9 Are the course hours suitable for you? (delete as appropriate)

a. Yes.

b. No

.

Q.10 Is the course held-

a. In the day-time?

b. In the evening?

c. A combination of these?

Q.12 Could the cost of the course influence your decision to continue?

Y/N

.....

* Q.13 Has the course met your expectations? Y/N

Please add any comments here

.....

.....

.....

Q.11 Was the cost of the course a factor in your decision to enrol? Y/N

Adult Returners Questionnaire

Q.14 Which of the following resources do you make use of at the college?

	N/A	Excel	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very Poor
Learning Resource Centre						
Student Services						
Library						
Canteen						

.....

Q.16 How would you rate, your tutor, at meeting your needs?
 a. Excellent.
 b. Very good.
 c. Good. d. quite good
 d. Poor.
(please comment if you wish)

.....

Q.15 Please list any other facility that you would like to have access to ,
 but is not available

.....

Adult Returners Questionnaire

Q.17 As an adult learner, do you feel that your needs are different from those of younger students? Y/N

Please comment

.....
.....
.....
.....

Please use the rest of this form for any further comments that you feel would be relevant to helping us to make further education more accessible to all.

Q. 18 How important is accreditation at the end of your course to you?

- a. Very.
- b. Not very.
- c. Not at all.

Would you be happy to be interviewed in more detail? Y/N

Your time and interest is much appreciated. Please don't hesitate to contact either Kate O'Donnell or your Tutor if you have any queries concerning this questionnaire or would like assistance in filling it out. May we take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your college course.