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Experiencing the barriers: non-traditional students entering higher education

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes part of an ongoing study of the experiences of 32 mature, 'non-traditional' students as they make the transition to higher education. The paper draws on the stories of three of the participants to highlight some of the financial and institutional barriers experienced by mature minority ethnic students. It points to the need for institutional change if non-traditional students are to thrive within a system that purports to be directed towards widening participation. The study reveals the non-traditional student as a frustrated participant in an unresponsive institutional context and questions the tendency to problematize students from non-traditional backgrounds, rather than the educational institutions responsible for their progress. This paper is based on research carried out with adults involved in a community-based, flexible access to higher education project in an inner-city area of the UK. The study involved the development of a participatory research design to encourage mature students to speak directly to an academic audience and to reflect on their experiences as they made the decision to aim for higher education entry, and as they entered a variety of part-time and full-time higher educational establishments and courses.

Keywords: access, higher education, participation, non-traditional students

INTRODUCTION

A number of factors have combined to stimulate the growth in numbers of mature first-time entrants to higher education in the UK (Parry, 1995; Watson and Taylor, 1998). The decreasing birth rate in the late 1970s forced both government and educational institutions to look at other ways of maintaining recruitment. A mixture of economic necessity and social justice arguments have been advanced to support a change in government attitude toward adult entry to higher education. A rise in adult unemployment and a massive restructuring of the industrial sector

Marion Bowl is Project Manager for Birmingham REACHOUT.

were accompanied by exhortations to workers to reskill themselves for future employment, and the requirement for education and training to respond to the demands of the economy has become a clarion call of governments from the mid-1970s (Callaghan, 1976) to the present time (DfEE, 1998). At the same time, arguments on social justice grounds have been made on behalf of those underrepresented in higher education. As a result, access courses have been developed within further education colleges, targeted towards people labelled 'disadvantaged' in terms of their early education (Zolfiqar, 1995), and an increasing number of students with characteristics designated 'non-traditional' – over 21 years of age, female and minority ethnic – have entered higher education. However, disparities remain in the proportion of higher education entrants from the most deprived socio-economic backgrounds (NCIHE, 1997; p.103).

Since Labour's election in 1997, a number of government-sponsored reports and consultative documents have considered how access to higher education can be widened to include groups identified as underrepresented and how a system of mass higher education can be created (The Dearing Report: NCIHE, 1997; The Kennedy Report: FEFC, 1997; The Fryer Report: NAGCELL, 1998; The Learning Age: DfEE, 1998). Currently, concern is focussed upon the underrepresentation of people with disabilities, people from working-class backgrounds and poorer localities, Bangladeshi women and African-Caribbean men (DfEE, 1998; Ch. 5).

The REACHOUT Project on which this report is based, set up in 1996 and sponsored by a government grant, was aimed at increasing levels of entry to full- and part-time higher education. Its focus was an inner-city area where rates of entry to higher education were around 50 per cent of the average for the city as a whole. Being appointed both development worker and researcher for the Project, I worked alongside a group of non-traditional entrants to higher education over a sustained period of time and was able to explore, from their standpoint, their progress towards higher education and the ways institutions responded to their needs.

RESEARCH INTO MATURE ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Much of the research on adult participation in education (McGivney, 1990; Woodley, 1987) has been conducted from an institutional perspective, and has examined the institutional and dispositional factors which combine to deter adults from returning to education. A number of recent studies, carried out by researchers based in higher education institutions (Tett, 1999; Macdonald and Stratta, 1998; Merrill, 1999; Preece, 2000) have explored the perspectives of those taking part in particular institution or community based initiatives aimed at non-traditional students. Macdonald and Stratta and Preece both conclude that an increase in access needs to be accompanied by a change in the culture of higher education institutions and that such a change would benefit mature and non-mature students alike.

Susan Weil (1986, 1989) examined the impact of informal learning on non-traditional students' expectations and experiences of higher education entry. She described the disjunction between the home and early schooling experiences of research participants and how this disjunction may also be felt by those moving into higher education. According to her, entering higher education can be a shock, accompanied by a sense of personal powerlessness. Evidence from other research with non-traditional students, indicates that higher education is experienced in different ways than by standard, 18 year-old entrants (Macdonald and Stratta, 1998; Pascall and Cox, 1993). It is seen initially, at any rate, as a struggle for personal, academic, financial and emotional survival.

Susan Weil's research concentrated mainly on the experiences of white adults returning to study. Until recently, students of African-Caribbean and South Asian origin have been underrepresented within higher education and thus in research on higher education entry. Autobiographical accounts (for example, Cunningham-Blake, 1995) indicate that university can be traumatic and isolating in ways not experienced by white working-class students. Eva Stina Lyon (1993) has described the way in which research on race, ethnicity and education has tended to focus on perceived deficits or problems of learners themselves, rather than on institutional racism, and how it affects black students' progress.

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of the transition to mainstream higher education from the point of view of the participants themselves; to move away from institutional perspectives and to gain an insight into the experiences of learners entering a range of full- and part-time higher education courses. It sought to examine how the institutional rhetoric of 'mass higher education' was experienced in practice by non-traditional students – primarily women from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The research process was informed by the belief that mature students' family lives and concerns are not merely the background against which their educational careers develop, but are integral to their experience of higher education study. It was important that the research positioned itself alongside the students and did not assume that institutions and courses were unproblematic. Further, it was important that the research process and results be accessible to the research participants, as well as policy makers. I aimed at a methodology which was critical (Giroux, 1986; Troyna, 1994), illuminative, and which attempted to involve the research participants in contributing to and commenting on the process of the research. In doing so, I was influenced by feminist methodology (Lather, 1991; Roberts, 1981), action research (Elliott, 1991) and critical educational research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

The study told a story, which was mainly, but not entirely about women. It also became a story which was mainly about black women – black British women, black Caribbean women, black African women, Indian women, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin. Feminist methodology recognizes that women have been systematically disadvantaged by educational and occupational structures. They experience barriers which relate to their gender position – as mothers, frequently as lone carers and as workers directed towards particular occupational roles with poor wage and career structures. There is a danger, in attempting to research working-class, black and women's experiences that the participant becomes 'the problem' to be researched, rather than the structures within which racism and sexism are perpetuated. I wanted to work in a way which enabled participants to speak directly and to reflect on their own experience, rather than concentrating on institutional interpretations of non-traditional students' experience.

The study was based on practice. It engaged participants in the research process in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues affecting them. As such, it does not make claims to generalizability. However, it does claim to bring alive the experiences of non-traditional students, and to provide a rich account that may contribute to change.

AN EVOLVING RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

It was important from my methodological perspective that the research encouraged the involvement of participants in data collection, theory building and disseminating the research findings. This meant that research methods evolved, within the general framework above, and were not prescribed in detail in advance. Data analysis was ongoing; themes emerged from the data, rather than being imposed upon them.

Action research (Elliott, 1991; p. 71) involves cycles of activity. My research design involved a series of stages which increased participants' involvement, leading to the presentation of their views directly to academics and educational policy-makers. The 'reconnaissance phase' of the study, which lasted for most of the first year, involved attempting to identify themes. Data collection was based on my diary reflections and on detailed written recordings of informal conversations. From this preliminary phase, a number of data collection methods evolved.

Informal discussion

I recorded discussions in two diaries – a report of daily encounters and a weekly personal reflection on the research questions emerging. During the initial phase, I made it clear to participants that I was conducting research on the experiences of mature students.

Individual interviews

To build a picture of the educational histories of participants I carried out initial interviews with seventeen students. The interviews explored participants' experiences of school and college, the advice and guidance they had received on their possible educational and career options, and their educational ambitions.

Approximately one year later, I conducted a further 12 interviews with participants who had been involved with the project for more than 12 months and who had the clear aim of moving towards higher education. Nine of those interviewed had by this time entered higher education. The focus for this round of interviews was discussion of participants' perceptions of their progress. I also began to seek participants' help in other ways, including commenting on and amending interview transcripts and discussing ways in which we could bring to a public forum the issues which they had raised as obstacles to their educational progress.

Seeking involvement

The collectivisation of women's experience is not only a means of getting more and more diversified information, but it also helps women overcome their structural isolation in their families and to understand that their individual sufferings have social causes. (Mies, 1983; p. 128)

In the first stages of data collection I aimed to develop my understanding of issues in the field of adult access, build awareness of the research among potential participants and explore ways in which they might be prepared to be involved in the research process. During our discussions,

it became clear that a number of participants were concerned about inadequate funding, lack of childcare, difficulties with the benefits system and the unresponsiveness of educational institutions to the issues faced by adult students with childcare responsibilities. Some talked of the alienation they felt from the ethos of higher education institutions, and a sense of isolation, that they felt other students did not share.

It seemed that the organization of group activities around these issues might be a way in which a number of objectives could be met. Participants' involvement in collaborative activity – a conference aimed at other students, academics and policy makers – could help to articulate shared concerns and break down isolation. It might also increase the participants' confidence to challenge the status quo without risking further isolation. In this sense, there was a possibility of conducting research, which could claim to be emancipatory (Lather, 1991).

I asked those participants who had previously taken part in individual interviews and who had moved on to higher education, whether they would be prepared to participate in follow-up activities. I sought their involvement in planning and contributing to a conference. Thirteen students agreed to take part. Nine agreed to contribute directly as conference speakers. Preparation for the conference involved four group sessions, facilitated by myself and a colleague. The aims of these sessions were to help participants develop public speaking skills and to enable me to collect further data on their experiences of higher education through our group discussions.

The *Students Speak* Conference took place in December 1998. It was based on a report of the preliminary research findings and the verbal contributions of myself and nine women students from non-traditional backgrounds. We acted as keynote speakers, each making a brief contribution from our own perspective, on the issue of mature students' access to higher education. In addition, conference workshops were facilitated by project tutors and co-facilitated by student participants. The aims of the workshops were to promote discussion between students, academics and policy-makers and to make positive proposals which might improve the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education. The outcomes of these discussions were reported to the conference and disseminated by means of a special newsletter sent to community organizations, politicians and students (Birmingham REACHOUT, 1999). The research findings reported therefore, have been distilled from personal reflections and recordings, individual and group interviews, conference workshops and feedback from both students and education practitioners.

FINDINGS: THREE STORIES

A detailed analysis of the findings is not within the scope of this paper. However, I will attempt to convey some of the emergent themes by focussing on the stories of three participants who were involved in the REACHOUT project from its earliest stages and who eventually went on to study at university. Their experiences, while unique in themselves, in different ways typify those of other participants. Salma, Helen and Ruth each took different routes to higher education. However, there were similarities in their backgrounds, and in the experiences they describe in their quest for careers and qualifications that they felt to be worthwhile.

Salma's story

Salma was a successful school student who passed her GCSEs and began her A-levels. However, she was discouraged from staying on at school by her parents, whom she described as 'restrictive':

We didn't have any books at home or anything. There was no back-up, because my parents aren't educated, and I was the eldest. So there was no back-up or anything. So I never thought I could go into higher education and become something.

Salma married and had two children but her marriage broke down and she was left to fend for them single-handed. With few qualifications and no work experience, she realized that she would have to do an access course if she was going to make progress. She was unable to attend college as there were no childcare facilities available. She undertook a flexible access course with REACHOUT, which enabled her to study from home when the children were in bed. She completed it successfully within six months and gained a place to study Social Policy at Brookdale University – a Russell Group University in her home town. As soon as she arrived at university, however, Salma keenly felt the difference between herself and other students:

We went into the hall. I couldn't really see any mature students anywhere, and there were hardly any ethnic minorities. I just felt that they were all young and middle class really. . . . If you're not white and middle class, you're not accepted. There's nothing overt, you just sense it.

Her ethnicity, her poverty and her age set her apart. Salma's financial and personal situation was very difficult. By the end of her first term at university, Salma was destitute and extremely confused about her financial entitlements. She had been led to understand that, as a single parent, she could continue to claim Income Support while studying full-time for a degree. However, she was then told that she would be liable for full payment of fees if she did this.

I have to claim a loan because my tuition fees will have to be paid. The thing is, because I'm a single parent, I'm therefore eligible to claim Income Support. But I still have to get a loan . . . but the thing is, I have to get my Housing Benefit paid. I don't know how that is going to be affected by the grant. I've talked to Social Security, but they haven't been much help . . . I don't think that many people go to university if they are on Social Security!

At the same time, Salma was being threatened with exclusion from the university because she had not paid her fees. She approached her tutor for help:

When I went to talk to my tutor about my grant thing, he said: Oh well, you'd better get that cleared up, because [Brookvale] don't hang around waiting for people to pay their tuition fees. They're going to come after you.

During the Christmas vacation Salma found herself with no money coming in, apart from Child Benefit. She was struggling for survival and felt unsupported in her struggle:

I don't know if other universities are different. I've got no knowledge of that. There's certainly no back-up, no support. And they sort of make it clear you're not going to get any. So there's no use asking. That's the impression I get.

By the beginning of her second year, Salma began to feel more in control of the situation. She had developed the skill of reading only what she needed to read to complete assignments. She had borrowed money to buy a computer. Because of her childcare commitments, she could not spend her free time at university using the computers there. The word processing of essays was a course requirement of which she had not been made aware in advance. It became another thing which set her apart from course colleagues. She was the only one who could not afford a computer:

There is an underclass of people, those without I.T. knowledge. I.T. is everywhere now; more people have got computer knowledge. . . . And there's a gap between the haves and the have-nots.

She remarked on the irony of her personal poverty in the context of the course she was studying:

They talk about people like me in Social Policy. I feel like I'm living Social Policy, rather than just reading it from textbooks which other students are.

However, she kept the reality of poverty in her life out of seminar discussions:

I don't tend to broadcast it around. Because it makes me feel apart from the group, you know what I mean?

In spite of her many difficulties, Salma successfully completed her course and gained a second class degree. Looking back, she felt that she had survived in spite of the university, rather than because of the support offered to her:

I think perhaps I changed; I don't think they did! . . . Yes, it's: sort it out or you're going to be kicked out.

Salma has graduated and is looking for work. She is worried about her job prospects, even after gaining a degree:

We talk about sexism, and we talk about racism and it's been quite well documented that if you're a mature students you're less likely to find a job. If you're a minority, it's harder again; if you're a woman, it's harder still. It's a triple jeopardy thing.

Helen's Story

Helen's early education was in Jamaica, she began her schooling in England in the early seventies, when she was 11 years-old. As an African-Caribbean child in a small Midlands town, she was one of only 15 black children in a school of over 200 pupils. She felt that she had come to Britain with a good educational background. Her strongest memory of school, however, was of being left at the back of the class, to get on with whatever she felt like doing:

We were put at the back of the class, sort of thing. I remember that distinctly. So I just learnt what I could. But we weren't concentrated on like the rest of the kids. And at that time, you just don't know how to do anything about it.

Helen gained a strong sense of being different and, in particular, of being treated differently from other pupils because of differences in language:

Because we speak a patois, you can imagine, they found it hard to understand me, and I found it hard to understand them until about a year afterwards. . . . They ignored you, because, you know, they couldn't communicate. . . . I learnt a few things, but not what I wanted to learn. They kept you back. If you speak to all the girls that were in my class, they'll tell you the same thing. We had to leave town because it was – oh it was really difficult. You could go to college but, again, you were pushed to the back of the class. You'd really have to excel to be noticed.

Helen felt that, although her parents were supportive of her educational efforts, they were unable to provide practical guidance because they were not familiar with the education system;

They didn't know. Our family was just saying: you should do better at school, you should do better. But they didn't know how you could do better because there weren't any guidelines. Do you understand? They couldn't go to the teacher and say: why isn't my daughter achieving like the that white girl? There wasn't any legislation; there was nothing.

Unable to make progress at school because of her sense of marginalization, she also felt discouraged by her careers advisor:

She pushed us into doing what we didn't want to do. Was it teaching? Was it that thing that everyone wanted to be – an air stewardess? I think I wanted that as well. The glamorous life. And she said: No, I think it best you go and do something like cooking. . . . And I did get a job in catering. I left about two months afterwards, I hated it so much. And then you thought: what else can you do? So you hop from job to job until you meet some sort of man, and then you fall in love, type of thing. Then that's the end of that.

Helen began a vocational qualification, but did not complete it. She married and had the first of her four children. She decided to return to education after her fourth child was born, her mother died and she was deserted by her partner:

Then I realized I was on my own. My mum died and I thought: I'm on my own. I can't go to anyone and say: can I have some money? And I didn't have any savings or anything. . . . I've always wanted to have a career, but I didn't quite know what. . . . And I thought: well, I like people. What can I do that will involve people, so I thought, well, Social Work seems something I could try.

She did not know where to go for advice, or whether her idea of being a social worker was a realistic one. By chance, she met the wife of the local vicar at her child's playgroup:

She said, why don't you try REACHOUT, because I was saying I'd like to try Social Work . . . and I sat and thought about it; and I thought, that sounds good. And she just said: try it. She was saying about higher education. And I thought oh, I haven't really done anything in the last few years, so that might be a problem. And I thought, yes, I'm going to try it.

Because you don't know until you try. So I tried it, and then I came on the phone. Do you remember?

Helen started an access course with REACHOUT which paid her childcare costs to enable her to study. Within a year she had been accepted to train as a Social Worker. A few weeks before starting her course, she expressed her worries mainly in terms of coping with being a mother, as well as a student:

My main worries are just the kids at the moment. You know, will I be able to just work, without any interruptions. . . . I'm sitting here trying to do the essays and everything, and take notes, and the kids are in the background going: 'Mum!' That worries me more: 'Mum! Mum! Can I have this Mum?' And I'm working, and I'm thinking – if I put them in bed, and get back to it, but you've lost your thought. Oh that is hard. That is my main worry.

She had other worries, too, based on her past experience of education:

Well, you've been stopped at school because of racism. . . . You don't want to go back to that. You don't want to go back to where you have to make a stand and say: well, I'm just as good as you are. You don't want to go back through all that.

Helen chose to apply to train at a small local college. One reason for doing so was that it was likely to be less anonymous; the other reason was that she would be with three other women she had met during her studies with REACHOUT. On arrival at college, she was nervous, but she felt supported by her friends:

When I got there I thought: oh no, am I capable of doing this? Have I got in over my head?

You know, I haven't been through A-levels and so forth. It was a bit difficult, but because of the help I had from us as a group, it was good. It helped me. And when I was stuck, I asked questions. It is good that we can stick together and ask questions and get information from each other. It was good. I think if I was isolated, I would have a lot more trouble.

Helen struggled with the academic demands of college. She found it difficult to write in the way that was required by tutors:

It's reading it as well as putting what you read into your essay. How to do that. I can read and understand it, but then you have to incorporate it into your own words, but in the words they want you to say it in. . . . The words, the proper language.

I don't know. Maybe it's because I have difficulty pronouncing certain words; I avoid using them, so they're not familiar to me. So when I'm writing, I find that because I'm not familiar with the words it's hard to write them. I think that's what it is.

Although Helen's Social Work training strongly emphasized anti-oppressive practice, as well as academic and practice-based performance, there was a sense in which issues of 'race' and racism were 'silenced' in class discussion:

There's a nice atmosphere, apart from when we discuss things like black issues. It's still a nice atmosphere, but you can tell that they don't understand. . . . I think it makes them feel they've done something wrong. It's not them that's done it; it's people above their heads – their ancestors or whatever – but because the issue is still there, it still affects us. And I think when you're a minority, you feel oppressed more than if you're in a majority. So the majority doesn't feel what the minority's feeling. It's hard for them to take on board. But as social workers, I think they have to. They have to understand what's going on in the field or they won't be able to work in the field.

As well as the academic and practical demands of the course, Helen was having difficulty financially. Although REACHOUT helped her with her childcare costs, she struggled to pay the rent. Helen could not, like child-free students, work in her spare time to make ends meet. She had childcare responsibilities once college finished:

You don't realize the problems financially until you start. Like your rent. And when you realize that when you get a loan or whatever you get, you have to pay your rent. . . . Financially, you get into this thing of: how am I going to live? So you tend to cheat a little bit. You know what I mean? Because you can't do it any other way.

Helen passed her course, and gained her Social Work diploma. For the first few months after graduating she was too ill to seek work.

Ruth's story

Ruth came from Jamaica to join her mother at the age of nine. Her experience of schooling in rural Jamaica was quite different from her schooling in an English city:

We were very poor. I'm not ashamed to say this. The school was a long way from home and they didn't have buses allocated for school children like you do here. People went to school when they could afford it. . . . I think when I came here, I was behind in my schooling. . . . Yes, I was behind and my reading was poor. But luckily, I loved reading and I soon caught up reading.

Ruth made friends at school, but she felt that her Jamaican accent marked her out as different:

I think a lot of teachers at that time – I think that they felt that a lot of black children were no-hopers. I don't quite know why. If you had any sort of assertiveness at all – which I think should belong to all people of colour or whatever you are – I think you should have some sort of substance about you. But I think, if you did as a black person, you were sort of 'marked' by it. If you were subdued – sort of 'yes sir, yes miss' – not known to have an opinion – you were left alone to get on.

Ruth did not feel that her mother was in a position to encourage her:

My mother was, I think, uneducated herself. And maybe if she was a bit more educated, things would have been different. I don't actually blame the school for everything. I think

parents have a role as well, of encouraging their children to do something, to take up something, to make good for themselves. And I don't think I was encouraged so much in that way.

Tension at home meant that Ruth ran away at the age of 15. She was admitted to care for a while. By the time she returned to school, she had missed her exams:

By the time I went back to school, the exams were over. I didn't take them. . . . I thought I couldn't stay on, because everyone I knew would have been gone. . . . I wasn't encouraged to; nobody told me I could.

On leaving school, Ruth was directed to a Youth Training Scheme in catering. She worked in hotels and then as a club dancer. She went to Germany as a club dancer until illness forced her to return. When she recovered, she took up training as a secretary:

By then I was getting desperate. You can't strip off your clothes all the time. I've got to make something of myself. I'll be old one day. I went up there and I was trying to do this secretarial course. And I thought, I don't really want to do this.

Ruth left the course and became a model. She went to Germany again and married there. She learned to speak German fluently and this made her realize that she had academic ability:

I hadn't got any qualifications. Without qualifications, I'm helpless, and I felt vulnerable. And I also felt that I could not compete with anybody who had qualifications. I thought, well, there's no way I'm going to get anywhere – not on the straight and narrow, anyway. So, at this point I got to Germany. I couldn't speak German you see. And I decided I want to know what people are saying about me. That's how it started. I started to learn German. And I realized I have a flair for languages.

Ruth then undertook a beauty therapy course in Germany – studying entirely in German. However, she was not allowed to take her final exams when it was discovered that she did not have any previous qualifications. She came home to England and started all over again, gaining her qualification in England. She soon realized that she was not fulfilling her potential:

I thought I must be capable of something else, or something more. So I started doing little bits first, like evening classes and I did an introduction to counselling. Then I did an acting course. I was trying to think: what do I want to do? Do I want to go into acting or something like that, or do I want to go into counselling? And I realized I wanted to learn something. But I still had doubts of whether or not I had the ability to do so. Then one day, I was reading something . . . and I realized maybe, just maybe I'll be able to do something else, in the psychological field.

Ruth did some preparatory study with REACHOUT and shortly afterwards enrolled as a part-time student aiming for a certificate of higher education in psychology. She gained excellent marks on her course, and completed it successfully. However, she did not feel that a part-time course offered a great deal of support and described it as being: 'stapled on to the margins' of higher education:

Most tutors on part-time courses work all day in full-time teaching jobs. When the mature student arrives in the evening, no matter how enthusiastic she is to learn the subject, the enthusiasm is dampened because the tutor has no enthusiasm left. Tutors arrive, overworked and tired. Do part-time students get the 'left-overs'?

Ruth is now considering whether to complete her degree on a full-time basis. Reflecting on her experiences she said:

I think everyone needs someone to have faith in them first. It helps them to see that they can do things well. . . . We needed our parents to have said that to us from a very early age.

THEMES EMERGING

Through the stories of Salma, Helen and Ruth it is possible to gain a picture of their school experiences, and the advice, support and guidance available to them in their quest for higher education qualifications. What emerges from their descriptions and from those of others in the study, is their engagement as 'frustrated participants', rather than non-participants in education; as people who have battled, often with little support, to find an educational and career direction. From their later descriptions of university study, a picture emerges of people struggling against financial poverty, lack of time, tutor indifference and institutional marginalization.

Schooldays

Participants' descriptions of their schooldays revealed aspects of school experience which led them to feel that higher education was not something to which they could aspire, and that their futures lay in vocational training, early entry to the job market or marriage and family life immediately after leaving school. Their experience of 'difference' at school and lack of family information and support were two key factors influencing the direction their education took. These factors interacted to reveal a picture of frustrated participants, motivated to succeed educationally, but unable to do so.

The experience of difference

Ruth and Helen both had their initial education in the country of their birth – Jamaica. Their arrival in the English school system left them feeling inadequate and different from their classmates on the basis of their background language and culture. They underwent secondary education before the Swann Report (1985) highlighted the consistent disadvantage experienced by children from ethnic minorities. Since then, there have been numerous studies directed towards uncovering the reasons for 'underachievement' among ethnic minority pupils. Some of these (Wright, 1993; Mac and Ghail, 1989) have described the formation of counter-school cultures among school pupils as a consequence of their sense of marginalization from school ethos and aims. The sense gained from Ruth's and Helen's stories of school life is that pupils coming from backgrounds which were other than white and British sensed that they were viewed with caution and distance by their teachers. None of the participants' stories revealed

them as having anti-school attitudes or as participating in anti-school subcultures. On the contrary, they seemed to remain committed to education both while at school and afterwards, in spite of the lack of encouragement they experienced.

The linguistic marginalization of students from working-class backgrounds, fed by theories of restricted linguistic code (Bernstein, 1973) has been discussed by Gillian Plummer (2000). The linguistic marginalization of pupils from ethnic minorities has also been noted (Moore, 1993). The assumption of cultural and linguistic superiority, and its inculcation, embedded in the education system and its modes of teaching, has been described as *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). It seemed that, for participants struggling with their newcomer status in British schools, symbolic violence was done to their concept of themselves as learners, linguists, and as people with a strong cultural and linguistic heritage, which was denied in the classroom.

Lack of family information and support

Participants felt that their parents' relationship to the school system held them back educationally. In particular, they felt disadvantaged by their parents' outsider status and the lack of information and guidance which they were able to offer as a result. Those whose parents were not educated in England seemed to be at a particular disadvantage. In the English post-16 education system, the choices between vocational, academic and other courses on offer are often unclear. How much more mystifying must it be to a parent who was not educated in England, and who has not experienced its school system? Diane Reay (1998) has discussed parents', and particularly mothers' roles in helping their primary school children to accrue *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1988). The availability of time, information, knowledge and the ability to be assertive in relation to the education system, appear to be important factors in enabling children to gain benefit from it and, ultimately, to gain economic capital. Reay concludes that migrancy, and in particular the experience of being educated outside Britain, is likely to affect the extent to which parents can access the benefits of education for their own children.

Gillian Plummer (2000) has also described the family pressures which keep girls from working-class backgrounds from developing their educational aspirations. There was evidence in this study that a number of the women experienced similar pressures – expected to fill the domestic place of absent or sick mothers or become economically active as soon as possible, to improve the family's economic situation. The middle-class school student who successfully takes the requisite number of GCSEs at the age of 16, passes A-levels, and applies for and gains a university place at the age of 18, has the benefit of advice and guidance at each stage in the process. There is informal support, advice and guidance from family and friends, experienced in the ways of higher education. Parents know what questions to ask teachers and careers advisors. They may also have access to information about a wider range of educational and vocational options compared to the parents of a working-class student. However well-motivated, non-traditional students seemed to be disadvantaged in advice and support at home. It also became clear, however, that these disadvantages were not compensated for by official advice, support and guidance which participants received from careers advisors.

Advice, support and guidance

Informational disadvantages seemed to be compounded by the way in which careers advice was offered, particularly to those who had not, by the age of 16, been considered successful in their school careers. Careers advice was described as short-term, negative and based on existing qualifications, rather than an assessment of future potential or ambitions. It did not take into account factors such as school absence, home difficulties or undiagnosed learning problems, which featured in a number of participants' accounts of their school careers. They felt screened out of further academic opportunities because of assumptions made about their perceived failure, rather than an assessment of their abilities and potential. If they did wish to continue in education, they tended to be directed towards vocational courses – secretarial, nurse nursing or catering. The option of re-sitting GCSEs, or staying on to improve existing qualifications rarely seemed to be offered.

For those who did eventually enter higher education, support and guidance were cited as crucial factors enabling them to move on. Only occasionally, however, was it mentioned as coming from teachers or careers advisors. In the absence of guidance from official sources, a number of participants identified key people who had encouraged them. Sometimes, this might be a comparative stranger. Helen was directed towards REACHOUT by the wife of the local vicar. Ruth heard of REACHOUT through a friend. Direction seemed to come in a haphazard way, depending on chance meetings and relationships. An appropriate system of advice, guidance and support was not there to help participants make informed choices when they were ready to do so.

Frustrated participants

What was surprising about the educational careers of those interviewed was not their previous lack of participation, but their high level of engagement in education and training, since leaving school. All but three of the thirty-two participants had taken part in one or more formally organized courses in the three years prior to their contact with REACHOUT. These ranged from basic English parent volunteer courses, access courses and, in one case, the first year of a degree. In spite of their commitment, they did not feel they had made progress. The doors which should have opened to them remained closed. What became clear from the research was that most of those interviewed were not non-participants; they were *frustrated participants*. They had been active educationally, but unable fully to use their education and the skills they had gained to win themselves a more satisfying job, better pay and a better lifestyle. They were frustrated by lack of guidance and support, and a sense that higher education was 'not for the likes of them'. The pattern emerging was of non-traditional students engaged in a struggle against a failure on the part of official advisors to take their aspirations seriously. This struggle involved most participants in returning to formal and informal education before eventually finding their way, often by chance, towards their goal of university entry.

Anticipating change

Mature students from non-traditional backgrounds often encounter an alien world when they enter higher education. Frequently, there is no family experience of university life against which

to assess the likely impact of change. There may have been little contact with university prior to entry. The stakes can seem high: intending full-time students may have given up secure jobs. A number of participants described traumatic experiences of previous education. There was a strong fear of failure, of past humiliations being repeated. For women students with children, practical problems were anticipated: finding time to study when children want attention in the evening; arranging for children to be picked up from school if lectures go beyond 3.00 p.m.; meeting the cost of childcare. A great deal of preparation was needed, over and above academic preparation. Universities rarely seemed to take account of the complex arrangements to be made.

Anticipating higher education entry, participants tended to stress the practical, rather than academic challenges of university life, and the sense of urgency that they felt as adults who were running out of time to reach their goals. There has been discussion (Edwards, 1993; Woodley, 1987; West, 1996) of whether mature students are more vocationally or academically oriented than 18 year-old university entrants. The data from this study indicates a pragmatic, goal-directed approach to higher education as a means to a better life. Further research may indicate whether participants develop a stronger sense of themselves as learners, but this was not present as students anticipated starting their courses.

University entry

Most participants experienced higher education entry as traumatic and isolating (Weil, 1989). Kathleen Lynch (1999) in her study of inequalities in Irish higher education, identifies three broad areas in which class constraints operate to impede the progress of working-class students: the economic; the institutional; and the cultural. In doing so, she provides a useful framework for exploring the first year experiences of students in this study. There is a danger that such categorizations can mask the complex and interactive nature of the barriers which non-traditional students face. They may also omit the dimensions of age, gender and 'race' which interweave into the stories of these participants. However, Lynch's analysis does move us away from seeing the nontraditional student as 'the problem' in widening participation and enables us to focus upon the contradiction of widening participation in a society where economic and structural inequalities persist. Mature students, especially those with children, cannot build their social and academic lives around university. They have complex financial, personal and caring commitments around which they have to fit university. Participants were both financially poor and time poor (Edwards, 1993). Although things appeared to get easier as time went by, for most, study was to be endured, rather than enjoyed.

Financial poverty

For full-time students, like Salma and Helen, lack of money was identified as the most pressing difficulty in their studies. Their financial situation changed drastically when they moved from state benefit to student loan. Financial entitlements were not established until well into the first term, meaning that they were dogged by uncertainty, unsure how they were going to make ends meet. The banks, by offering further loans, were seen as a part of the process of increasing students' debt and poverty and reinforcing their feelings that they could not cope. Although part-time students like Ruth did not have to pay fees, either because their fees were waived

or because REACHOUT met the cost, such students were often low paid and unable to afford books, childcare costs or computer equipment, which were the norm for more affluent students.

No allowance is currently made by the government for the childcare costs of students who are parents. Participants had to search for cheaper, community-based nurseries and after-school facilities. This, in turn, complicated arrangements for dropping off and collecting children and increased travelling costs. Some students were unable to undertake paid work during the holidays or in the evening, as the cost of childcare cancelled out the financial benefits of working.

The sense of poverty in relation to better-off students can itself be isolating. Going home and knowing that there are bills to be paid, which cannot be paid, and that the cost of travel to university is eating into the money for the family budget can set poorer students apart. It may make them feel that they are not coping as they should, rather than that the system of higher education funding is causing them so much difficulty. There has been discussion in the educational press (*THES*, 8 October 1999) about the effects of the introduction of student loans on the recruitment of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. The evidence of this study confirms that finance is a major barrier, that there is a reluctance on the part of adult students with families to resort to further loans, and that poverty is a reality for non-traditional students.

Time poverty

An important aspect of time management was combining study, childcare and family responsibilities as well as, in some cases, paid work. Imposing a structure on these demands was a key issue for most participants. The picture emerged of women running to keep up with all the demands on their lives, but determined to do so. Managing tight timetables meant that participants were aware that they could not give as much time to their studies as they would like. They had to develop strategies for coping with the work without neglecting family responsibilities. This inevitably involved skimping: reading only what was essential to pass the assignment and snatching time to study wherever they could. Other than attending lectures, participants on full-time courses were not able to spend time at university learning informally, researching around their subject or attending tutorials. Rosalind Edwards (1993) has described women in this situation as 'Teetering on a knife's edge with a finely-tuned structure of arrangements that they had constructed for fitting family and education into their lives (p. 73).

Time management was identified as a major issue in ensuring successful completion of participants' studies. They put the onus on themselves to solve the problem of reconciling the demands of family responsibilities and study. However, what was interpreted as a problem of time management seemed to be more of a structural than a personal issue – linked to poverty itself and to gendered assumptions about the responsibility of women to be home managers and child carers as well as breadwinners.

Institutional barriers

Within the university itself, there was another set of obstacles to be overcome: learning the rules of academia. The difficulties experienced by both full- and part-time students included time management, reading and structuring assignments. These in themselves are common

enough problems. However, running through participants' accounts were the difficulties of understanding what tutors wanted and what advice and support they were prepared to offer, and of comprehending the mysteries of academic culture and conventions. The requirements of tutors were experienced as unclear and inexplicit. Approaching tutors for help and support did not tend to bring hoped-for clarification. Participants tended to blame themselves for their inability to understand what tutors required of them.

There was a sense in which students' own life experiences, including those of poverty and racism were not seen as legitimate for discussion in the classroom, either because it would mark them out as different from their course colleagues, or because they sensed that discussion of 'race' and racism was not welcome among white students. This seemed to be the case on both degree courses and on professional training courses, where anti-oppressive practice was stressed as an essential aspect of the students' expected learning. It seemed that the valuable life experiences which this group of students could have brought to their studies was censored, either by the students themselves or by other course members who were unwilling to explore perspectives other than their own. Furthermore, the experiences of racism and poverty did not appear to be taken on board in the classroom, even when, as in the case of both Salma and Helen, it was highly relevant to curriculum content. Overall, the onus seemed to be on the students to adapt themselves to the institution and its rules, rather than on the institution and its main players to adapt in response to the fresh perspectives which participants brought with them.

CONCLUSIONS

Maggie Woodrow (1999) has pointed to the tendency for explanations of under-representation of low status groups in education to concentrate on the shortcomings of 'the victims' – the disadvantaged groups themselves. She stresses the need to examine systemic and institutional factors which act to exclude certain sections of the population. The data collected in the course of this study indicate that financial, institutional and class-based barriers impede the progress of non-traditional students. These barriers emerged early in the educational careers of the participants and, once outside the school system, they experienced difficulty moving forward, in spite of demonstrated and sustained commitment to education as a means to a better life. The picture of the non-traditional student which emerged was that of a highly motivated but frustrated participant unable to gain access to support and constructive advice.

As other studies have indicated (Weil, 1989; Pascall and Cox, 1993), transition to higher education has complex practical and emotional implications. The 18 year-old student can build social and academic support networks around university life. For the non-traditional student financial responsibility, childcare, family and community expectations are central features of life, around which study must be fitted and, as Rosalind Edwards (1993; p. 10) states, they are not simply 'bag and baggage' which the student brings with her. From the non-traditional student's perspective, life arrangements must be made before entry to the institution and there is an assumption that the institution has little interest in the life circumstances of non-traditional students.

The evidence supports Susan Weil's assertion (1986) that university entry is experienced as a dislocation and disjunction which is intensified if the learner is 'non-traditional' in more than one sense. Dislocation seems to centre on class, gender and ethnic difference between the overall ethos of the institution and that of the non-traditional student. The relations between student and tutor can be problematic and students tended to blame themselves for their failure

to understand what was required of them. Participants, whose educational aims were stated in terms of survival as much as in terms of learning and academic enrichment, found that the voice of their experience, as working-class people on low income and as black women, was silenced.

The experience of the first stage of this study has raised questions for the next phase of data collection, which will focus on participants' reflections on their journeys through higher education. For example, how do students resolve conflicts which arise? Do non-traditional students in higher education develop a stronger sense of 'learner identity' over time, as Susan Weil (1986) asserts, or do they merely adopt coping strategies which involve denying or submerging their 'real life' identities as black, working-class, mature women? Does the disadvantage experienced by non-traditional students continue beyond university, as ageism in the job market is added to the ways in which their marginalization is felt?

By adopting a participative methodology and focussing on student, as opposed to institutional perspectives, it has been possible to examine the ways in which official sources of support and guidance fail people who are committed to improving their own and their families' prospects through education. It has also been possible to uncover some of the subtle institutional barriers which make survival at university difficult for mature non-traditional students.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Project Manager, Birmingham REACHOUT, St. George's Post-16 Centre, Great Hampton Row, Newtown, Birmingham, B19 3JG, U.K.

Tel: +44 (0) 121 212 9624; Fax: +44 (0) 121 236 7021; E-mail: marion_bowl@hotmail.com