

Invisible barriers to adult education in the East End of Glasgow

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Introduction

In this article, which is taken from a larger research project, I explore the barriers which working class people in the East End of Glasgow face when returning to education. In particular, I examine the experiences of five adults who live in Bridgeton in the East End, four of whom are current adult learners attending a community learning centre and one who is presently not engaged in any learning. I chose to conduct my research in Bridgeton because I have lived in the East End of Glasgow most of my life and many of my relatives are from the Bridgeton area. This project evolved because of my passion for education and my belief that it is a key driver in helping people at all stages of life, regardless of ability or background, fulfil their potential and contribute positively to society.

To have a clearer understanding of this research it is important to gain some knowledge about the area, its history and its present conditions. The Bridgeton area of Glasgow is a district to the south-east of the city centre. During the 20th century Templeton's Carpet factory employed masses of local people as did the industrial factories such as Sir William Arrol's steelworks and Mavor & Coulson's engineering works. Carpet making and other industries left the Bridgeton area in the 1970s. Virtually all of the area's steelworks and engineering plants, which once employed tens of thousands, have closed. As I worked on this research project in Bridgeton I began to feel a sense of injustice. My own realisation of the magnitude of the social problems was slow to unfold, but nevertheless I have a new understanding of the impact which 20th century industry has had on areas such as Bridgeton and the part education could play in its transformation.

According to staff at the learning centre unemployment is a huge contributing factor to the feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness that seems to infiltrate certain sectors within the community. Local people who are now second generation social benefit claimants have little or no formal educational qualifications and are ensnared by the very system that supports them and, as a consequence, foresee little opportunity for social mobility. Bridgeton's social problems are much like those of any large inner-city area. Glasgow contains some of Britain's most impoverished neighbourhoods and the official unemployment rate in Glasgow's East End is more than twice the national average of 5.2 %, but in total, around half of the working-age population in the East End are without work, many of them in receipt of invalidity or disability benefit (World Socialist Website, 2008). According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2009) Glasgow has Scotland's highest rate of people on out-of-work benefits, the highest rate of people with limiting long-term illnesses and drug addiction, the worst problems with overcrowded housing, and the highest concentration of pensioners living below the poverty line. Half of the adults in the East End have no educational qualifications, and more than half of all households do not own a car. Furthermore, Glasgow also has the lowest life expectancy in Britain. The best indicators for

Glasgow's East End point to a figure of 69.3 years for men and 76.2 year for women. This falls even further in the most impoverished neighbourhoods, such as Calton which borders Bridgeton, where male life expectancy is staggeringly low at 53.9 years (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009). Such is the combined impact of these statistics that there are claims the East End of Glasgow now has a lower life expectancy than the war-torn Gaza Strip!

The Glasgow 2020 website claims that in 10 years time economic and social divisions will have become so entrenched that Glasgow will be virtually two cities living side by side in blissful ignorance of each other; one half believing that talent and skill automatically rises to the top and that those who do not believe this are choosing to leave themselves behind, the other half thinking that living in social housing estates and existing in temporary jobs or on state benefits is the normal way of life (Glasgow 2020). The participants of my research live very close to where I live but inhabit a completely different world. Being brought up in the East End I was fortunate enough to have been successful within the 'system' of formal education and given a comfortable upbringing by two parents who owned their own home and business. However, for many working class people caught in the trap of poverty, this cycle has become self-reproducing through the generations, with people born in poverty, growing up in it, dying in it, and experiencing no social mobility.

The Barriers

For the participants of this research project their reluctance to enter the world of adult education was caused by a host of inter-related and complex issues which included family commitments, motivation, confidence, previous educational experience and lack of time. By far the biggest barrier mentioned was the learner's low self-esteem. Four of the five participants stated that motivation to learn was a huge barrier. One spoke about her own experience of being in "a rut" and "doing what she always did" and another said she felt like "there were not any incentives to get back into learning". Their lack of motivation was deep-rooted in their own feeling of insecurity. The participants all believe this is still the case for many adults living in the East End. Lack of employment opportunities had driven most participants to perpetuate a life existing on state benefit. Another participant spoke about her aspiration to "better herself" and another spoke about her desire not to become a "victim".

Social Class

During the interviews only one of the five participants made reference to social class as a barrier to adult education. One woman felt that entering into education at this stage in her life was a turning point and it somehow signified a change in her normal way of life. She spoke at length about "bettering herself" through education and how she felt she was "leaving behind where she had come from". I was surprised that only one participant spoke about this because I thought that being a working class adult and returning to education would have stirred feelings of class imbalance. The reason for the noticeable absence of discussion about social class in the interviews, and the

part it plays in creating barriers for working class people returning to education, may rest in one or both of the following explanations.

The first may be because of the setting in which the participants' education took place. The learning centre is located in a community setting and this may provide a less formal learning environment than a college or university. The community location may have also suppressed social class hierarchies which infiltrate Further and Higher Educational institutions. I suspect that the participants, although initially wary, felt that they 'fitted in' at the learning centre because everyone was just like them and they weren't 'outsiders'.

A second possible explanation is that class issues are so innate that they are not mentioned or even acknowledged by those who are disadvantaged. Participants possibly did not view their lives within the wider context of society and therefore relate their struggles and problems to class issues or the present economic and social climate in the West of Scotland.

If the second explanation is true, and is to be addressed specifically, it would require the participants to engage in a process of critical reflection, hopefully leading to what Freire referred to as 'conscientisation' (Freire, 2005), i.e. they would become aware of structural explanations for their 'oppression' and perhaps become empowered and motivated to affect change in their lives .

Despite being asked direct questions tackling the subject of social class, no participant ventured into this area in any depth during the interviews. This was disappointing as I thought the answers to these questions would probably become the main focus of my research. Almost all the participants skirted round the questions or simply ignored them, changing the subject. From my limited knowledge of the participants, I do not think they were avoiding the issue to be awkward or throw my research into jeopardy, I believe they were either unable to articulate their feelings on this sensitive area or unable to recognise the place they occupy within the class system.

Freire (1972) argues that when people are unaware of the structures which oppress them, they may be inhabiting a state of 'Magical' or 'Naive' consciousness. In 'Magical' consciousness, people passively surrender to a superior force and do not question the injustices done to them. In 'Naive' consciousness they are not so submissive to fate but do not make connections between their problems and the outside world. Perhaps the interviewees were at a stage of 'Naive' consciousness in that they had identified their difficulties and a need for action but as yet had not seen any connections between their own problems and wider social issues of class and disadvantage.

However, reaching a state of conscientisation will not necessarily solve people's problems. Ohliger (1995), for example, suggests that conscientisation does not propose concrete measures for improving people's lives and that the concept is even patronising; do ordinary men and women need to be 'conscientised' before they recognise that they lead oppressed lives? I agree partly with Ohliger but I still believe that promoting the process of critical reflection or conscientisation is a worthwhile endeavor.

Trying to be one of ‘them’

By talking to the women I began to understand their struggle and how different their lives were from mine. Coming from the East End of Glasgow I had thought I would have much in common with my interviewees and be able to connect and identify with them. However I soon realised otherwise. Though I live only a few miles away, my general upbringing, linked to my experience of education, was and continues to be completely different from theirs. I felt disappointed in the extent to which I was able to connect with the participants. I believe the group saw me primarily as a university researcher, then possibly a Glaswegian, but definitely not one of them. This was a significant lesson for me, both as a researcher and an individual: it reinforced a growing belief that I inhabit both a middle-class dominated academic world and a working-class world, but do not truly belong to either.

Conclusion

The barriers which exist for working class people returning to education are many and complex. During this project it became clear that if the learning centre is to help radically change the lives of its learners it must be careful not simply to encourage a merry-go-round system of education where people continually move from course to course and dip in and out of classes. If the learning centre is to enrich the learner's experience and positively influence lives for the long term, then it must look beyond the 'back to work' and 'motivational' initiatives which I believe are short-term solutions. The learners should have the opportunity to challenge the hegemonic systems which often limit their capacity to achieve. Conscientisation does not provide a one step solution to the complex problems of modern life, but it does at least encourage people to explore and engage with issues which affect them such as structural power dynamics and social justice.

My own understanding about the participants of this research and their place within the system of adult education has changed. I anticipated that class consciousness would be at the forefront of the participants' responses; however, connections were not explicitly made. The evidence from this research suggests that awareness of social class does exist amongst people living in Bridgeton, but is implicit rather than explicit. Many of those whom I interviewed understood their problems on an individualistic level and believed that they experienced difficulties in their lives because they lacked capability and not because of where or how they live their lives.

It could be argued that the ability to think critically about experiences is what is required for people, such as the participants of this research, to transcend their own boundaries and that education could provide the necessary tools for this. The findings of this research suggest that for many working class people living in the East End of Glasgow a return to education remains troublesome: thankfully, however, a growing number of 'ordinary' people still manage to achieve it.

References

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