From Self-Doubt to Self-Belief: The experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland

Introduction

Higher Education, both in an Irish and global context, has undergone significant changes in the past thirty years. One such change is the increase in participation of groups who were previously excluded from Higher Education, such as those with disabilities and mature students. Many studies have focused on the learning experiences of students with disabilities and mature students as two distinct groups; however, few have looked at the experiences of older students with disabilities or learning difficulties in Higher Education. Further, within the Irish context, little has been written on this area and there does not seem to be any peer-reviewed research papers looking at the experiences of this group of learners. Supporting this particular group of students is essential. A key aspect of getting this support right is understanding mature students with disabilities' experiences in college. This paper draws on a master's research study which looked at the experiences of mature students with disabilities in an Irish Higher Education setting, using an arts-based narrative approach.

Mature Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

In Ireland, mature students are all those who are aged twenty-three years old and over at the time of commencing their studies. Of the students with disabilities in Ireland participating in Higher Education, mature students with disabilities represent 12% of this group (AHEAD, 2020). It is somewhat surprising that so little research has been done into the experiences of older students with disabilities. That is not to say that the voices of mature students with disabilities are completely absent from research studies as a number of studies of disabled students' experiences included older learners (Langørgen & Magnus, 2018; Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Jacklin et al., 2007; Riddell et al., 2005).

Looking at these studies, with a particular focus on findings related to the experiences of the mature participants, a number of patterns emerge. These include time and power-dynamic, which may differentiate the experience of older and younger learners with disabilities in Higher Education. For mature students with disabilities, time of diagnosis or identification of difficulty is important. Riddell et al. (2005) included thirteen mature students in their qualitative study. It would appear that, for older learners re-entering education later in life, the experiences of a school system that was previously much less supportive or inclusive impacts their studies in Higher Education. For support staff and lecturers who work with older learners in Higher Education settings, it is important to bear this in mind - many mature students arrive at college having experienced a far harsher and less supportive system of education compared to their younger peers. The participant in Riddell and Weedon's (2014) study noted how she was made to feel intellectually inferior when in school in the UK in the 1980's/90's due to her having dyslexia. Interestingly, she compares this negative experience to her daughter's school life in the 2010's as a child with dyslexia and notes that her daughter was supported in her primary school and did not see dyslexia as a barrier to her achieving in a formal education setting.

As well as time, there may be a power dynamic in play here for older learners with disabilities that is not as salient for their younger peers. Langørgen and Magnus (2018) found that the older learners in their study wished for more equal partnership with support staff. In this regard, they sought to flatten the power imbalance when dealing with staff. Similarly, Caskey (2019) found that older learners with dyslexia wanted teaching and support staff to be more like 'critical friends' than the traditional 'authority' in the classroom. Their younger peers may not be as aware of these dynamics as they come from school settings where power is very clearly and unevenly delineated between teacher and pupil. Power dynamics and time may differentiate the experience of older and younger learners with disabilities in HE. Whilst mature students with disabilities are not entirely absent from the wider literature, their learning experiences are yet to be explored as distinct from their younger counterparts. For these reasons, the study upon which this paper is based explored the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education.

Methodology

This study took the form of a qualitative, Narrative Inquiry, which analysed stories shared by five participants who were all mature students with disabilities enrolled in Higher Education programmes in Ireland. Interviews were conducted and the transcripts were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study also included a participatory aspect to data analysis in order to ensure that the voices of participants are both seen and heard. A 'found poetry' technique was employed to achieve this (Szto et al., 2005). Found poetry is produced by reviewing interview transcripts and using the responses of the participants to construct poems. In this study, the researcher and participants worked collaboratively to create poems by extracting key elements from their interview transcript. Three of five participants opted to take part in this aspect of the project and a sample of their poems are presented below. Approaching found poetry collaboratively also aligns with Melanie Nind's (2019) principles for 'doing research inclusively.' Nind (2019) states that it is important for researchers working in the area of inclusion to do research with and for, not simply on participants. As mentioned in the previous section, mature students with disabilities seek equal partnership with staff and to be partners in the learning process. Co-creating poems by extracting excerpts from the interview transcripts, helped to flatten the power imbalance in the researcher-participant relationship, giving the participants an active role in the research process.

Findings and Discussion

A number of findings are presented and discussed below. The poems created during the study are also presented to compliment the findings and give voice to the participants' experiences in Higher Education.

Poem 1 - Grace

I was diagnosed later,

Not until my Junior Cert,

All through school, struggling.

Made it as far as 5th Year,

Can't sit in this environment again,

I tried. I tried my best.

If you're gonna do it, do it now,

I'm going to college,

I'll try it for them and see.

I was nervous,

The people around me- 'You can do it,'

I'll try it for them and see.

It's a bit degrading,

One-on-ones with our lecturers,

Explaining I have dyslexia.

Admit again that something is wrong with you,

Because I'm thick and I can't do this,

To prove that I'm thick.

Having to go into every single one.

If I didn't, then nobody would know,

I just have to, go slow and carry on.

It's overwhelming. It's all or nothing.

Got my grade back, shocked myself,

I can do this. I've done it once.

Accessing Support in a Medically Modelled System

Grace's (pseudonym) poem illustrates how the process of disclosing and registering can be difficult for some mature students. For the students in this study like Grace, where diagnosis 'came later' and was the culmination of an educational journey heretofore characterised by struggle, declaring and disclosing a disability was a significant experience. Grace faced particular difficulty in registering for supports after disclosing that she has dyslexia. She did not have a psychological report that could serve as 'evidence' of dyslexia and had 'to re-register and go through the whole process again of getting tested,' (Grace). This dilemma may not be experienced by younger students with disabilities who may have formal documentation obtained from their schools or even as part of the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) application process. This is a barrier to accessing supports faced particularly by mature students returning to education. They may not have had a formal diagnosis or had one that has since been misplaced or expired. This raises the question as to who can access extra support and who do colleges identify and encourage to access extra support. In the case of mature students with disabilities, this evidence suggests that there should be a move away from the current procedure of seeking supporting documentation in order to register and receive supports funded by the Fund for Students with Disabilities. The fact that students must produce written evidence of a disability highlights the medical nature of accessing support systems in colleges in Ireland and elsewhere (Rath, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017).

Disappointment after receiving assignment feedback led Grace to seek support. Prior to this, she was not aware of supports for students with dyslexia in the college. The participants in this study all eventually found their way to support services and got the help they needed. However, John (pseudonym), another participant, questioned whether mature 'students [are] aware of the comprehensive supports that are available to them, be it physical disabilities or otherwise.' These systemic changes and improvements in supports may lead to mature students not being aware of their rights or the provision of supports, causing a delay or reluctance to engage with support services (Langørgen & Magnus, 2018; Scothon, 2005). In this regard, it appears that time matters for older learners with disabilities, not only life stage in returning to education but also systemic advancements since they last engaged in formal education. This is an important finding as it may be an issue that impacts older learners with disabilities particularly, as their younger peers are more accustomed to accessing supports and are easily identified as applicants through the DARE initiative.

Poem 2 - Gavin

Got through my schooling somehow,

Wilted away or been hot and cold,

Creating a lot of conflict - not what I wanted,

I wasn't there to have conflict.

26 years of age, diagnosed with ADHD,

I was angry. I looked back,

I should be in college.

I should be finished.

I should be set up right now.

But I'm not.

Took a bit of time to work on myself,

And then I said, okay,

I want to go back to education.

Psychology.

Didn't want another child to be misdiagnosed,

Left with all these other problems.

Back to education.

I'm way out of my league here.

Way out of my depth,

It's a constant battle, the academic setting,

Intense internal battles -

Doubt and fear, not trusting yourself.

A lot more battles behind closed doors,

Can be so damaging.

All things that were ingrained in me,

Took a lot of work to undo,

But, look at me now,

Three or four weeks away,

From a psychology degree

From Self-Doubt to Self-Belief

As Gavin's (pseudonym) poem (above) and Rose's (pseudonym), which can be read below, illustrate, arriving in Higher Education may bring feelings of self-doubt and fear. Gavin's poem also conveys how secondary school had been a struggle, 'wilting away' in the classroom and creating unwanted conflict. In analysing the stories of other participants, it became clear that self-doubt was linked to negative prior experiences of education. For instance, Rose had left school following the Junior Certificate, and at the start of her Higher Education programme her 'insecurities really started to come back again.' There is evidence in the wider literature that previous experiences of education can cause feelings of self-doubt (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Riddell et al., 2005). The participant in Riddell and Weedon's (2014) single participant case study noted how she had been made to feel intellectually inferior whilst at school, and this had impacted her self-belief when returning to education in later life. This evidence highlights how support in the early stages of programmes for mature students with disabilities is key as it may be a particularly challenging period.

In spite of the initial challenge, the participants in this study all managed to settle in and build confidence. All three poems co-created by the participants, and researcher, demonstrate this journey from initial self-doubt to building

self-belief. Feedback from assessment was actually key to building self-belief - as Grace notes in her poem, she got an excellent grade and was shocked. Likewise, grades and feedback served as evidence of achievement and aptitude for other participants. Jessica (pseudonym), another participant in the study, did, however, offer the caveat that assessments must be seen as valuable- otherwise 'what was the point?'. This finding ran contrary to other research studies, which saw assessment as more of a stumbling block for mature students with disabilities rather than a means of building self-belief (Tett et al., 2012; Riddell et al., 2005). As well as feedback, supports played a role in building confidence and having success as a student. Rose's poem (below) demonstrates this, as did John's story of feeling a warm welcome and being 'listened to' when accessing supports. These findings highlight that quality assessment feedback and welcoming support services are key to building self-belief for mature students with disabilities.

Poem 3 - Rose

Rose

There reaches a point in every mammy's life where your kids don't need you anymore,

I have reached that point, best way forward was by doing a course.

I left secondary school after doing my junior cert,

My parents: 'You're not going to go on to college, you're not good enough.'

I said 'no to hell with it, I'm leaving.' And I left.

September and we started getting our first assignment,

Overwhelmed- I can't do this, there's no way I can do this,

Me. I was definitely the main challenge,

Nobody's gonna want to know what I'm saying.

Why the hell am I here?

The two devils on your shoulder,

One is saying: 'Yeah, you can do this.'

And the other- 'No, you're stupid. You're worthless.'

That was tough to try and do that,

To get rid of that other devil.

I don't share the same experiences as them,

But I do have my own experiences that I can bring,

Stopped putting myself on mute.

Connected with a few of the others-

Students having the same struggles as I was having.

Student support was like a torch in the darkness,

You're not a number. You're seen as a person,

Because they actually listened if I was stumbling.

But it was still so frightening and still so scary,

Shaking like a leaf, but confidence wise I knew I could do it.

My experience of education, like chalk and cheese-

I wish I had gone back earlier, done the degree.

You know, I might still do that yet.

Conclusion

This paper was based on the findings of a master's research study into the experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland. Being a mature student with disabilities in Higher Education may present its own particular set of challenges. Older learners may have experienced a far harsher system of education that provided less support for those who need it, this experience may lead some to re-enter education with a degree of

self-doubt or even fear. Equally, mature students with disabilities may struggle to obtain the documentation needed to receive support or accommodations, a challenge not often experienced by their younger peers. However, as the poems co-created by the participants in this study demonstrate, these challenges can be overcome with quality feedback and supports, which helped to build self-belief.

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