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## **Restrictions into opportunities: How boundaries in the life course can shape educational pathways.**

### **Abstract**

This study explores relationships between experiences in initial education, subsequent life experiences/opportunities and the decision to return to education later in life. Semi-structured interviews with seven women returners to education, focused initially upon the women's perceptions of their aspirations and motivations at various ages, how these related to the choices that they felt that they had available to them at different points in time and their sense of agency. Subsequently, the interviewees considered the relationship between early educational experiences, post school experiences and their current choices. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts led to the identification of four main themes: Restrictions, Opportunities, Personal Development and an underlying theme of Planning. Consideration of the relationships between these themes led to the conclusion that it was life experiences rather than initial education that both motivated and empowered the interviewees to take advantage of opportunities for higher education.

### **Keywords**

Opportunities; restrictions; higher education; personal development

## **Restrictions into opportunities: How boundaries in the life course can shape educational pathways.**

### **Introduction**

This paper presents the findings from seven in-depth interviews with people who had returned to education later in life, asking how their initial education and life experiences helped to shape their decisions to enter higher education. In recent decades, a raft of policy changes, such as the widening participation agenda introduced in the 1990s, aimed to encourage people from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds to enter higher education (HEFCE, 2003a). This was an attempt to increase social mobility and social justice through greater opportunity for learning. This agenda also aimed to provide an opportunity for ‘non-traditional’ students to return to education for personal development (Waller 2004) and/or career development. Thus, education was not only a preparation for work (Holland 1997) but also a means to promote social mobility and personal development. According to Kujipers and Scheerens (2006), however, there is a lack of appropriate dialogue between students and school career guidance in exploring genuine talents, abilities or interests and how these might relate to education and work.

### ***Educational and Career Choices***

Career development models include, for example, Trait Theory which evolved in the 1950s (Super, 1953) where strengths and interests are matched up with available career opportunities. The model has been criticised at best as ‘oversimplified’ (Kidd 1984; Law 1981), taking little account of different influences on career decisions, particularly social factors and the role of opportunity. Developmental theory (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad and Herma 1951; Super 1953, 1980) refers to career decision making as where the individual develops and matures sufficiently to make a self-appraisal. However, this theory, like trait theory, is very much focussed on the self with little regard for contextual factors.

Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) attempt to integrate internal aspects of career decisions with the influence of context, arguing that earlier models only serve to explain career decisions of those who are being pragmatic and rational about their future.

Payne and Britain (2003) develop this idea further, by outlining three different approaches to studying young people's choices about their future. In structuralist approaches, young people are thought to be responsive to their environment and the assumptions that others hold about them, and to have a lack of agency in determining their future. Payne and Britain also outline an economic model, however, which suggests that such decisions are purely a matter of rational choice, weighing up costs and benefits in terms of preferences, effort involved, prestige, financial issues and so on. They suggest that pure rationality such as this is rarely seen in practice however, as young people often make decisions with imperfect information and are subject to other influences. The third approach suggested by Payne and Britain, therefore, is one of pragmatic rationality. This acknowledges the limitations placed on choice by structure, opportunity and qualifications, and highlights the roles of subjective perceptions and of chance events in determining the life course.

Roberts (2009) in his revisited theory of 'opportunity structures' develops Payne's (2003) conceptualisation, reiterating the point that often career decisions are not necessarily choices, but rather a result of the opportunities presented to the individual at any given point in time. Such opportunities are availed by the social networks, education and the labour market organisation. The changing nature of jobs in Britain, since the decline of manufacturing, the rise of globalisation and a knowledge economy, now means the range of careers that can be entered is vast (Doogan 2001). This perhaps serves as a further dismantling of existing opportunity structures, particularly for those where following family or parental occupations may have been an expected route to employment. Roberts (2009) also makes the point that whilst these opportunity structures themselves may change, their

predictive power is undiminished: an increase in the individual responsibility or ability for making these decisions is just another form of opportunity structure. Social networks, educational experiences, and the labour market, therefore, can be seen as both part of opportunity structures and part of the developmental processes that enable young people to take advantage of opportunity structures.

Eccles' (2009) Social Cognitive Expectancy-Value Model of Behavioural Choice presents a theory of motivation that pulls together these different perspectives on aspirations and decision making about education and careers. She suggests that behavioural choices (such as which educational pathway to take, or potential career opportunities to follow) are influenced by inter-related layers of factors. The first layer includes factors which are to some extent external to the individual, such as the wider context in which we operate, and accompanying cultural expectations, demographic characteristics of our families, the beliefs and behaviours of those around us, as well as previous experience. The second layer relates to an individual's perceptions and interpretations of the first layer, which are of course also influenced by previous experiences and how they made that individual feel. The third layer considers an individual's self concept: what they believe they are good at and who they believe themselves to be. The fourth layer relates to the particular choice which an individual is considering – how successful they believe they will be at a chosen activity, how enjoyable, important and useful that activity will be, how it fits in with their self-concept, and what the relative drawbacks or costs of that activity are. According to Eccles, all these layers feed in to the course of action an individual will choose. This model is useful in that it enables us to consider the many different contextual and psychological factors, which may provide opportunities and influence an individual's motivation and decision making about education and careers.

### ***Education as an opportunity for personal development***

Engagement with education can present an opportunity for self-empowerment and confidence (Orth and Scheerens 2010). The return to education is often cited as a form of personal development (Waller 2004). Returning to education later in life was explored by Waller, who found that for mature students in his study, the return to education was often an attempt to ‘make good’ some of the failures of early education. This was particularly relevant when the initial educational experience left an individual with a ‘fragile academic self-esteem’, describing school as a ‘wasted opportunity’. Students returning to education regularly report more self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of empowerment, which was lacking in their earlier experiences of education when at school. The return to education can highlight strengths within the individual previously not revealed by earlier educational experiences, contributing to a greater sense of self-appraisal and agency (Swain & Hammond 2011).

It is possible that individuals with an uncertain career path at aged 16-24 could contribute to the number of students who return to education later in life as ‘mature students’ (Carless & Arnup 2011). Many young people can be uncertain about what they want to do in life, have little or no guidance, and lack the personal attributes or social environment to take a proactive role in planning their career (Krei & Rosenbaum 2001). This highlights the notion of career *indecision*, unexplored by many career development models where a career has not been decided on. Career development models do not address the issues faced by those who do not have the resources, be that in terms of education or opportunity structures, to make conscious career decisions.

Arnett (2006), on the other hand, emphasises how role exploration during the period of emerging adulthood (16-24) can be a time for gaining experience and knowledge of oneself. This period allows young people to establish strengths and interests, before settling into an enduring and satisfying career pathway. In this respect, career uncertainty during emerging

adulthood can enable young people to respond to a wider range of opportunities more easily. This is particularly poignant in the current economic climate and a rapidly changing world of work. Similarly, uncertain career aspirations can also mean greater flexibility – a quality desirable to employers (Beck, 1981). Gutman & Schoon (2012) found that pupils with uncertain career aspirations at 14 did better overall academically aged 16 than those with certain or high aspirations. From this, Gutman & Schoon suggest that this category of young people might benefit from this longer period of ‘moratorium’. But the most important point is that the period of extended moratorium should not be ‘aimless’ but *purposeful*. If it is fragmented with no sense of a plan or structure, then this uncertainty is likely to be aimless (Staff, Harris, Sabates and Briddell 2010).

Additionally, those with uncertain career aspirations are more likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds, which is related to a limitation of opportunities including seeking careers advice (Fouad & Bynner 2008; Bynner 2005). This goes back to opportunity structures: the opportunities afforded by background can affect agency and therefore take up of the opportunities offered by the educational system.

Success in initial education is correlated with occupational or career success (Ashby & Schoon 2010) and the research on education and career outcomes is plentiful, as is the research on ‘mature students’. There is a particular focus on decisions to return to education (eg McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Cree and Tett 2010), experiences of HE (eg Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010), the challenges faced (Reay 2005, 2010), or the courses studied (eg Cullity 2010). However, links between initial and later education are rarely specifically explored. This link is important in order to understand people’s experiences of the education system and how it contributes to personal and individual development - from those who are highly successful to those who do not achieve their potential and those in



between. This study seeks to explore links between initial educational experiences and how they may have contributed to a decision to return to education later in life.

This study explores how people describe their decision making about their educational pathways, and what opportunities were available to them in their life courses. Additionally, the study asks in what ways people believe their initial education is related to career pathways and a return to education; and how people describe the relationship between a return to education and personal development.

## **Method**

***Participants*** – Seven female participants from two English universities were interviewed.

They were asked to participate by the researcher who was also a lecturer for one of the modules on their course. All had experienced a break in education, and returned to university as mature students. They were studying on Foundation Degrees, which are two-year courses tailored for school support staff who may not have traditional qualifications for entry to degrees. Students can opt to continue for a third year and graduate with an Education Studies (or equivalent) degree. All participants had experienced a break in education, and returned to university as mature students. One participant was on a Masters degree in education at a different university and was recruited informally by the researchers to boost the sample, as someone returning to education in order to change their career pathway, rather than develop the trajectory on which she had started. The interview duration ranged from 25-45 minutes and took place in the first year of the degree course.

### ***Participant Profiles***

Participant 1 is age 27 and left school at age 14, when she became pregnant. Prior to and after her pregnancy, she moved schools regularly, experiencing instability in her early education. She came from a family with a history of worklessness and is the first person in

her family ever to go to university. Her second child suffered from ADHD which inspired her to help out at her local school because he needed extra support. She returned to education as the opportunity arose from her work at the school and she decided to take it.

Participant 2 is in her mid-30s and was educated in Pakistan. She was married according to social and cultural expectations, cutting short her education. Although from a fairly affluent and educated family, she was married into a family with less education and more limited means. When she came to the UK, she found it more acceptable and affordable for her to continue education even as a wife and mother, and decided to take advantage of it.

Consequently, she experienced resentment from her husband who accused her of neglecting her primary duties to him and her two small children. Although educated from her home country, the expectations at a UK university differed considerably and she regularly felt challenged by the work.

Participant 3 is 44 and fell into her family line of work running a post office, as expected by her parents. She said that she did not pursue her interest in dance at the time due to financial constraints and because her father thought she did not fit the image/size of a dancer. A later divorce made her feel more independent and determined to pursue what she wanted to do. However, she adjusted her expectations of becoming a dancer herself by opening a dance school with her daughter, teaching dance to aspiring youngsters.

Participant 4 is in her mid-40s and is a learning support assistant. She has returned to education to gain qualifications to become a teacher. She did start an art course at university aged 21 but left when she found the course too prescriptive. She then took on the role of homemaker until her children started school, after which she began helping there. It was here that she found a renewed interest in art, which she had almost abandoned after her

initial departure from university. She returned to education to pursue teaching hoping to specialise in teaching art.

Participant 5 is in her late 50s was from a secretarial background, having done a range of jobs which “paid the bills”. She also helped out at the local school with her own children which inspired her return to education. Working at the school meant she came into contact with, and assisted a range of professionals who worked within the school. Prior to these experiences, she was unaware of the variety of education-related roles, wanted to explore them further as career opportunities, and decided to go to university. Her children were grown up and extremely supportive of her decision.

Participant 6 is 27 and has been engaged in short term jobs since leaving school. She said that she did not pursue education initially as she was not sure what to do, nor what she was good at. This participant was planning to start a family and the university course was a chance for her to get a degree for when she wanted to work again. She had not planned a particular career route at the time of the interviews but did some work as a peripatetic music teacher. University was an opportunity for her to gain further qualifications to increase employment opportunities.

Participant 7 is 38 and had held a range of jobs in IT and personnel in the corporate world, before returning to education as a mature student. She completed a degree in psychology, after deciding that was what she was really interested in and then pursued a Masters course. She had not yet decided exactly what she wanted to do afterwards but was sure that she wanted to work with people. The university course was an opportunity to gain relevant qualifications. At the time of the interview, she was volunteering at various youth groups and counselling organisations.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The first author was a lecturer to all but one of the participants. Interviews were conducted after the duration and final assessment of the module on which the first author was teaching. There was no compulsion to participate. The ethical issues of this research were approved by the second author's institutional ethical procedure. The sample shows a variety in respondents in terms of their backgrounds and experiences.

### ***Data Collection***

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The first question focused on the participant's career or occupation before embarking on their course of study. This also allowed participants the opportunity to discuss significant experiences which may have influenced their lives and career pathways. Subsequent questions asked about aspirations and motivations at various ages, such as 14, 16 and 18, exploring potential choices and sense of agency. Later questions were designed to encourage participants to consider their early education and subsequent pathway in relation to what they were currently doing. The final topic focused on participants' decisions to return to education, considering motivations, benefits, and the effect on their lives. There was no direct question on social class or background. Social class can be defined and interpreted in many different ways, and this research was more concerned with participants' perceptions and descriptions of their backgrounds.

### ***Data Analysis***

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used to analyse the data after transcribing each interview. Inductive codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2008) were assigned to extracts of data that were relevant to the research questions and the researcher's interpretations, by

reading and re-reading the data, identifying themes and patterns. A substantial range of codes were generated following this method for all the interviews.

Initial codes were then merged to better represent the data extracts, or discarded if there was not enough data to support them. At this point in the analysis, the raw data sets continued to inform codes and themes to ensure coherence and that the meaning of the data, either as a whole or the extracts, were not diluted or distorted (Braun & Clarke 2006). This grouping of codes led to generating some general and broad first-order themes which were then refined to create the main themes.

## **Results**

The four main themes identified were *Restrictions*, *Opportunities*, *Personal Development*, with subthemes in each, and an underlying theme labelled as *Planning*. These are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Themes generated from the data.

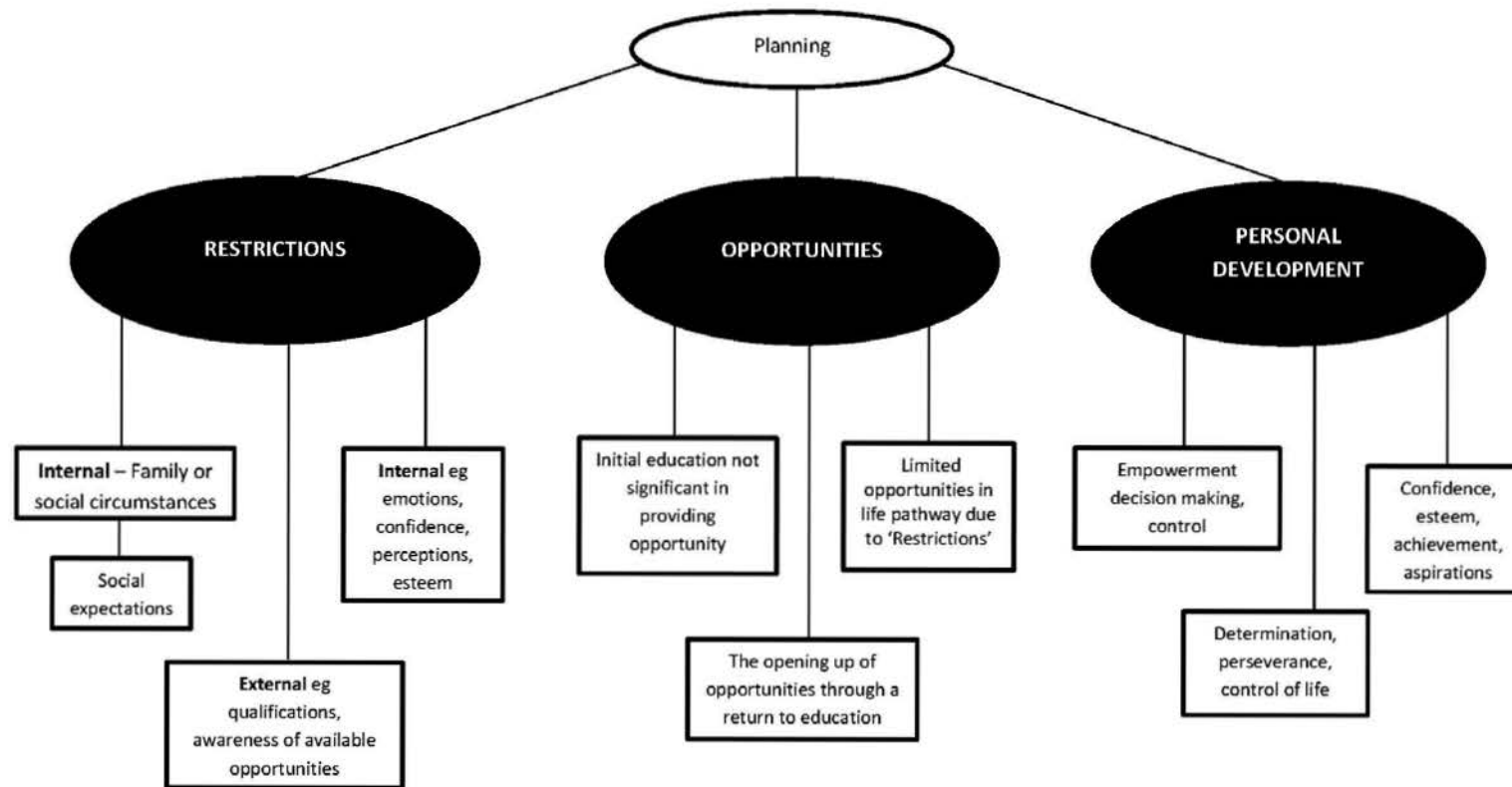
*(See Figure 1 on next page)*

### ***Experiencing Restrictions***

All participants frequently referred to a range of restrictions they felt held them back in exploring or pursuing their interests. These tended to fall into two main categories: internal or external. External restrictions referred most often to family or social circumstances, and

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Figure 1. THEMES



were generally contextual, environmental or financial factors which may have prevented participants from pursuing what they really wanted to.

*'When I got married then I fell pregnant and my in-laws were totally different to my mum's family so they were not...they did not encourage me to go into education...and so I did not ask anybody' (Participant 2)*

Other external restrictions included not being aware of what was 'out there' and that if you were not aware of opportunities, accessing them was not possible. In this way, opportunities and restrictions were closely linked, as restrictions limited opportunities and a lack of opportunity became a restriction. This is important because it demonstrates the inter-connectedness of the themes where despite being distinct, they interact in several ways.

Further, participants regularly cited social expectations as a restriction. Social expectations included cultural differences, financial or family circumstances and associated expectations. Marriage and motherhood was a social expectation which affected all but one participant (who had decided not to have children) in this research. All were female and many of them parents already or expecting to become mothers at some point soon. This was significant because their role as mothers placed substantial boundaries with regards to accessing careers or education, due to caring responsibilities. It meant that any pursuit of education or a career had to negotiate these restrictions. Participant 1 described how the expectations of her, as a teenage mother, from the professionals who were supposed to be supporting her, were limited to working in a supermarket checkout. Their view, therefore, was that she did not need many qualifications. Consequently this shaped the support and opportunities provided. However, in several instances participants' caring responsibilities ultimately

shaped career choices and created opportunities. For example, Participant 1 also expressed that she decided to enter education to be able to care for her son who suffered from a range of learning difficulties:

*'...and then it was family issues really, it was my little boys health, I wanted to be closer to him so I gave up my job doing that and went to the school and started doing learning support assistant, to be with him really.'* (Participant 1)

This situation, then, could be interpreted alternatively - not just as a restriction but as a life path or experience that shapes the individual and contributes to what they eventually decide is the career path for them. In some instances the family circumstance originally described as a restriction then became the tool which opened up opportunities, once again demonstrating the blurred boundary between restriction and opportunity. Similarly, some participants who had formerly been in what they described as 'jobs which paid the bills', turned to education as they became involved in their own children's schooling. This became their opportunity to flourish in a career which meant more than 'just paying the bills'. The context of having a family and a range of work experiences, contributed to an appreciation of education and a passion for entering a career which excited and motivated these participants, as opposed to 'just a job'. No participant described experiencing this focus or passion when they left school.

Many of the restrictions discussed were relevant to traditional female roles, in terms of caring responsibilities or social expectations. When participants discussed how they saw themselves in these traditional roles as a reason not to pursue something, these restrictions can then be thought of as internalised.

Lacking the confidence or feeling uncertain of the path to take, becomes a restriction where believing that something was not possible became a reason not to do it:



*'...but I wasn't sure how to progress, thought I wouldn't be able to go to university'*

*(Participant 5)*

One participant described internal restrictions as the biggest barrier and these could be described as *perceived restrictions*. Another person might perceive the same situation as something entirely different. Defying social expectations was a large part of this restriction, demonstrating how this can shape one's own cognitive restrictions and beliefs about oneself (Hewitt, 2009). For example, Participant 2 had to change her own beliefs about the role of wife and mother before she could begin to think of returning to education. When she found herself in a country and culture which she believed to be more encouraging for a mother engaging in something in addition to household duties, this participant felt confident enough to pursue education. Hence, the return to education itself represented considerable personal development.

Not having the appropriate qualifications to pursue a career in a desired field was a further restriction:

*'you have to have a degree...I have been to so many workshops and seminars and all the experience and personality in the world is not good enough...you have to have the degree.'* (Participant 3)

Many participants reported a lack of qualifications obtained in initial education was a main reason to return to education. This was often twinned with a desire to do something for oneself as a means of personal development. All, but one participant, reported going through early education being uninspired by their initial school experiences. All reported no career guidance or focus and participants had left school with no plan or particular direction. This appears to have resulted in them being led in life rather than leading their lives. It seemed, though, that participants took control and felt empowered later in life. One way in

which this control manifested itself was a return to education. This sense of agency seemed absent or dormant in reports of earlier educational experiences.

Life experiences since leaving school appeared to have shaped participants' sense of self and direction. Perhaps, due to some of the reported restrictions, they would not have been in a position to have this agency earlier in life. Restrictions, however, are not necessarily always negative: for these participants, restrictions also became opportunities.

### ***Re-appraising situations***

In the data, the theme of *opportunities* (sometimes referred to as a lack of opportunities) was about options participants felt were available to them, particularly in earlier careers or schooling. This was closely tied in with restrictions. Earlier school years and opportunities were linked, in that participants felt that school did not provide them with opportunities at the time. There could be a number of reasons for this: all but one of the participants discussed how they went through their early education in 'a bit of a daze' - they just did as was expected of them, not necessarily engaging.

One participant summarised school as just being "something you did", before progressing to employment. This participant did not expect education to be inspiring or necessarily life-changing:

*'We did not really get any guidance, we just went along with what we were supposed to do...'* (Participant 5)

Nevertheless, possibly with the benefit of hindsight, opportunities were linked to initial education regularly by participants. It could be that, because many of the participants reported not being engaged in school, they did not identify and hence access opportunities

that could have been presented at the time. Participants also believed that careers guidance was never a focus at school, which may mean that potential opportunities were missed.

These perceived missed opportunities may have also been partly due to low parental involvement. Participants reported that parental engagement in their education was relatively low:

*'They [parents] did not really push it [education] that much. They were quite laid back about it actually.'* (Participant 6)

There is a considerable body of research which shows that when parents are very involved in their child's education, children are more likely to follow a structured career path with a degree of planning (Dietrich & Kracke 2009). The level of parental involvement participants spoke about could partly explain low levels of engagement with school.

Educated parents are more likely to be aware of and have access to information, which they can then provide to their children in the form of greater opportunities (De Fraja Oliveira and Zanchi 2010; Eccles 1993).

Relating this to the return to education, the opening up of future opportunity was reported by many participants as a reason to return. This was primarily in the form of qualifications not obtained during initial experiences. Options were restricted without certain qualifications and a return to education was a stepping stone to further progress and career development.

Participants also recognised that life experiences and a better knowledge and awareness of self, meant opportunities presented in later life were more likely to be recognised and taken up than when younger. This demonstrates that, in some instances, the range of experiences in life meant individuals now possessed the personal qualities and confidence to take up

opportunities. It could be argued that an opportunity is only an opportunity, to the extent that an individual feels ready to be able to take on challenges presented with it.

For example, Participant 5 believed that had she gone to university when she was younger, she would not have had the confidence to continue. She maintained that it would not have been her priority, as it was in this current stage of her life, because it would have challenged what was expected of her at that time.

This theme of opportunities arising from restrictions can be linked to the individual's personal development over time and through life experiences.

### ***Empowerment and recognising potential***

The decision to return to education for all participants represented particular challenges, many of them arising from the restrictions described earlier. All participants had to challenge the social expectations of their families, as well as counter stereotypes or prejudices due to age or social background. One participant explained how her family considered her a 'snob' and above them because she had decided to go to university.

Returning to education was a major decision for all participants, representing a sense of empowerment and control over their lives, the lack of which had formed part of their internal restrictions. The challenges academia presented were no longer something to be afraid of, but a milestone to be achieved. Participants had considerably higher and more certain aspirations than they reported having at the ages of 14, 16 or 18:

*'...not until my early 30s did I really find what I was wanting to spend my time doing when I started to work with children... it took me that long!' (Participant 5)*

Many expressed the confidence to achieve these by not just waiting for opportunities but actively seeking them. During interviews participants often reported not having opportunities presented to them earlier in life, but this rhetoric seemed to change when they talked about the future representing a more proactive approach:

*'Confidence, self-esteem, achievement, recognition that I can do it. Age is immaterial. And to enjoy the challenge. It's the worst thing I did and the best thing I did, because it is hard to fit in but a huge sense of achievement.'* (Participant 4)

Personal development enabled the overcoming of restrictions, not only to access, but also to create opportunities. Life experiences and dealing with life challenges shaped individuals' sense of empowerment. For example, one participant had an unplanned pregnancy which led to marriage and more children. Initially she resented this, but eventually she turned it into a challenge and threw herself into motherhood. Through her children's schooling she became involved in and passionate about education, focusing on the difficulties faced by children in the classroom, fuelled by her own experience of school life.

The decision to return to education was a part of this development and the qualities that seem to have contributed are those identified as determination and perseverance. These acted as the forces which enabled participants to make decisions forming part of their personal development. Consequently, all participants indicated how they now felt able to plan where they wanted to go and be in life.

### ***The process of planning***

Planning refers to the process and the practical steps undertaken to achieve a goal or reach a destination (Smith 1999). It is often considered a key to success, be it the planning of an event or the planning of one's life. It also refers to the consideration of barriers and challenges and how these can be either overcome or turned into an opportunity. A degree

of certainty of where one wants to go means challenges are just that: challenges to overcome en route to a particular goal.

Many participants reported active planning as something they had never properly engaged in previously. This could be related to the perceived enormity of restrictions, which may have prevented participants from engaging in the process of planning in their formative years.

Additionally, the reported social environments of the participants did not lend themselves to the conscious planning of life pathways. All participants believed they 'fell in' to particular jobs or roles because of financial and social pressures or expectations. In these cases, this pressure did not provide the opportunity to consider a longer-term future.

However, had all these participants 'planned' their lives and careers, it was very possible that they would not have entered the field that they were in currently.

*'What I am doing now... I never ever thought I would be doing today!' (Participant 1)*

The diverse life experiences of people often lead them into unexpected career or life pathways. Unplanned-for experiences and how they are addressed can present a range of different, challenging and potentially rewarding opportunities. However, this is dependent on the individual (Krumboltz 2009). The personal qualities of determination and perseverance that many participants displayed seem to be important in overcoming challenges and restrictions. These skills were apparently developed through life experiences, and not via school or education (see Table 1 for summary).

Summary Table: Initial barriers and later positive and negative life experiences

Barriers – perceived or actual	Subsequent opportunity/restrictions through life experiences
<p><b>Participant 1</b>                      Unplanned teen pregnancy and education cut short</p> <p>Second child diagnosed with ADHD</p> <p>Family/social expectations meant that pursuing education or a career was never presented as an option</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity to help out at local school to be near child with ADHD</li> <li>• Exposed to the opportunity to go to university</li> <li>• Family and social expectations – initially presented as a barrier but then became a supportive network which was proud of her determination</li> <li>• Wanting her children to achieve and enter careers rather than be workless.</li> <li>• Higher aspirations for herself and her children created yet further opportunities as well as a means of overcoming barriers.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Participant 2</b>                      English as a second language</p> <p>Marriage, motherhood and family/social expectations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moved to the UK. Different social expectations, financial assistance to study became available</li> <li>• Challenge of childcare in a new place. Marital strain due to additional workload and responsibilities</li> <li>• Challenge of a different education system academically</li> <li>• Cultural perceptions and expectations of education itself.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Participant 3</b>                      Expectation and responsibility to join the family line of work</p> <p>A perceived barrier of the participant feeling her ‘build’ was not conducive to pursuing her dream of becoming a dancer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence and determination to follow own dream due to a divorce</li> <li>• Age was a barrier in becoming a dancer but participant changed what could be achieved but determined to pursue own dream. For example, decided to open a dance academy instead of becoming a dancer herself</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualification to become a teacher was a barrier and to overcome it, the participant started university which provided more opportunity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Participant 4</b> Abandoned an early interest in art due to the ‘restrictive’ nature of the curriculum at school.</p> <p>Did not complete a university course in art due to an unexpected pregnancy and then opted to be a stay-at-home mother</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rekindled a love for art when children started school and helping out there made her realise she could teach art and encourage children to explore for themselves</li> <li>• Further opportunity to return to university and train as a teacher</li> <li>• Grown up children meant a career plan was now possible</li> </ul>
<p><b>Participant 5</b> Perceived there to be no opportunity within the family to pursue education or a career</p> <p>Felt that the system for further education was biased against girls.</p> <p>Work was a means to pay the bills and did not initially feature as a way of personal development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaged in ‘mundane’ admin jobs.</li> <li>• Becoming a mother meant access to schools and opportunity to ‘help out’ and be exposed to many new roles within the school system, such as support staff. It meant that this participant could explore a role within a school that was not purely admin and could be an opportunity for self-development.</li> <li>• Parental responsibilities lessened and there was support from her adult children.</li> <li>• Opportunity to attend university course was provided at the school.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Participant 6</b> Limited guidance and plans for the future meant this participant was unsure of what to do next</p> <p>Felt as if she was floating from job to job</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working as a music teacher on a freelance basis presented an opportunity to go to university which the participant took in order to gain further qualifications</li> <li>• It could be said that attending university was another thing this participant was presented with and she ‘went with the flow’</li> </ul>



<p><b>Participant 7</b></p> <p>Pursuing a career which the participant thought would lead to job security turned out to be unfulfilling</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decided to go back to university as a means of career change</li> <li>• Economic situation meant there were few appropriate jobs and an opportunity to re-train.</li> </ul>
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## Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that participants experienced restrictions in their initial education and earlier lives, but personal development during the life course gave them the agency to turn these restrictions into opportunities. They now felt able to plan and shape their own life courses, rather than being at the mercy of happenstance.

Krumboltz (2009) would argue that many factors direct life pathways, suggesting that initial education must play a role in enabling individuals to take full advantage of all experiences of learning, both formal and informal. This is important, not just in making a single career decision, but to stimulate all learning and take appropriate actions to enable a satisfying and fulfilling career and personal life.

### *Restrictions and opportunities*

All the themes were inter-related, particularly the relationship between restrictions and opportunity. Participants reported restrictions to be internal and external which is relevant to the understanding of aspirations, career uncertainty or indecision, and career development models. The findings demonstrated how having low or uncertain aspirations may relate to participants' social backgrounds. This was also evident in research in the 1970s (Willis 1977) and more recent research (Gutman & Schoon 2012):

despite the widening participation agenda, aspirations and career decisions still seem to be linked to social background in Britain. Reay (2005) emphasises how differences in social and cultural capital continue to mean that access to higher education for people from lower SES is restricted due to less awareness or knowledge about courses, how to access courses, and where a course places people in terms of career opportunities.

Further, as suggested by the Willis study, individuals co-construct their social identity, thereby perpetuating social backgrounds by internalising restrictions. Many of the participants in this study reported family or social restrictions, which they believed prohibited them from seeking or accessing opportunities. All the participants in this study were women and many of the restrictions (some of which then turned into opportunities) reported related to gendered roles, such as wife or mother, or to social expectations about gender and image (such as participant 3). This can be viewed in the light of Bourdieu's (2008) *habitus*, which refers to the social and cultural environment within which one is situated. This habitus contributes to the individual's self-appraisal and consequently the way one approaches restrictions or opportunities.

Furthermore, many of the participants in this study reported a lack of awareness of opportunities, citing limited or no guidance from schools or parents on potential pathways. This relates to Roberts' (2009) 'opportunity structures' arguing that opportunities are only those which are available to individuals through the local labour market organisation (ie jobs available), through social networks, education or careers advice. If the opportunity structures are not there, then people's ability to access them would inevitably be limited. The findings of this study confirm that opportunity structures, including restrictions, continue to play an important role in career pathways. Roberts emphasises that it is not just people making the 'wrong choices' which create imbalances, but also when aspirations do not match opportunities.

The backgrounds of most participants emerged during the interview responses. Participants' commentaries seem to support existing research, in particular that of Eccles (2009), in that family, social and cultural factors impacted on the individual self-belief of what could be achieved and the motivation to achieve. The internal restrictions referred more to self-belief in what was possible and realistic. People aspire to achieve what is achievable, rather than aim for something that seems unattainable (Ashby & Schoon 2010). For example, for several participants, university was not even a remote possibility following initial education, but as the individuals' *habitus* changed through life experiences, so too did their appraisal of opportunities and the ability to overcome restrictions to take advantage of those opportunities. As the individuals developed confidence through life experiences, such restrictions were less significant.

The findings also demonstrated how often a restriction itself became the driving force. For example, several participants had caring responsibilities which was a significant restriction (both internal and external). These responsibilities, however, were pivotal in taking the decision to enter university because participants wanted more for their children or had decided to take control of their lives. Furthermore, caring responsibilities provided purpose or direction which was lacking in participants' earlier lives. Significant life events often act as the trigger to change one's life (Walters 2000). So what appeared as a restriction also became an opportunity, but what was important in this appraisal was the change in the individual's perceptions.

### ***Engagement with initial education***

The findings of this study revealed that initial education was not engaging or stimulating and did not sufficiently prepare participants for the world of work, specifically in terms of qualifications, confidence and opportunities. This is concerning because one of the aims of education is to do just that (Ozturk 2001). Yet there is

plenty of research which suggests that education is failing some children and leaving them with a 'fragile academic self-esteem' (Waller 2004). However, at the same time, these findings also indicated that participants had low expectations of their education. They did not feel engaged sufficiently at school to be proactive in their own educational planning and consequently, were either uncertain of their future careers or simply channelled into whatever was available at the time.

### ***Planning and personal development***

The participants in this study 'fell into' jobs which they found unfulfilling, resulting in frequent job changes and a lack of focus or planning for the future. In this regard, the extended period of moratorium or role exploration was 'aimless' and not purposeful. This is somewhat reflective of previous research, that those with uncertain career aspirations may demonstrate such aimlessness (Staff et al. 2010; Gutman & Schoon 2012).

This study demonstrated that personal development was an important part of returning to education. The return to education gave participants a sense of empowerment, confidence and self-esteem which enabled them to be determined and persevering in what they set out to do. This personal development was in evidence when contrasted with descriptions of initial educational experiences, which had left many participants feeling ill-prepared to tackle the challenges of life, with a sense of bewilderment and no sense of direction. Personal advancement can be seen not only a crucial motivator in returning to education (Osborne, Marks and Turner 2004), but also the lever for making the decision to return. Without a level of personal development already occurring through life experiences, accessing the opportunity for higher education would not have materialised (Walters 2000).

As highlighted by Sullivan and Baruch (2009), changing attitudes towards career development and control is relevant in people taking responsibility for their own lives. This was absent during and directly after initial education for the participants in this study, where 'happenstance' (Krumboltz 2009) was more the dominant controlling feature and perhaps a reason why planning was neglected.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this small study build on a body of existing research on the role of education in personal development. Research shows that there is a correlation between education and self-esteem, and that engagement with education presents an opportunity for self-empowerment and confidence (Orth et al. 2010). This study suggests that education does not always completely fulfil the role of equipping individuals with the aptitude, aspiration and flexibility (or personal development) necessary to continue in education or keep up with the demands of the world of work. This is especially likely if an individual's background is not 'aligned' to taking advantage of opportunities presented (Chowdry, Crawford, Deardon, Goodman and Vignoles 2010).

Perhaps this is preventing true social mobility, because if an individual does not have the personal development to access or seek opportunities, then education that simply provides skills or knowledge is not going to change the status quo. Consideration of the relationships between restrictions, opportunities, personal development, and planning in this study, led to the conclusion that it was life experiences rather than school and education that both motivated and empowered the interviewees to take advantage of opportunities for higher education.

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