Community Cohesion and Social Inclusion – ESOL learners’ perspective: Leadership challenges

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1. Executive Summary

This research project explored learners’ experiences of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and their perceptions of how learning the English language is supporting their integration and community cohesion in the UK. Through an ethnographic case study, based at the Working Men’s College (WMC), the research revealed that enhanced language skills improved self-esteem and confidence, communication, life styles and pride in a new identity as citizens of the UK. The findings also demonstrate that significant barriers in older women’s participation in ESOL programmes still exist. These barriers include lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Managers highlighted the reduction in funding and limitations of existing processes as barriers to meeting the challenges of the ‘New Approach to ESOL’ policy (DIUS, 2009). The report recommends a more flexible funding approach to the delivery of ESOL especially in relation to women in order for providers to meet the local need for ESOL. The research also highlights the significance of the provision of ESOL courses as a fundamental pre-requisite for effective integration and participation within the UK.

2. Introduction

This research depicts the learning journeys of Bangladeshi and Somali women, who attend English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes at the Working Men’s College (WMC) in Camden. As these women travel back through the time they have spent in England, they share their experiences and the impact of English language learning in everyday life and their perceptions about the role of language in social inclusion and community cohesion.

The Census 2001 data shows that 27% of Camden residents are from black and minority ethnic communities and have the lowest rates of employment. Amongst the minority ethnic groups settled in Camden, Bangladeshi and Somali people are more visible and the unemployment rate was higher amongst women from these groups, particularly if they were born outside the UK (Yeadle et al, 2006). This study also emphasised the findings of the Camden Council Scrutiny Report July 2003 which identified the lack of English language skills as one of the barriers to education and training experienced by refugees.

The timeline for the purpose of this report is approximately 30 years (1980-2010), which is based on the number of years that some of the respondents have lived in this country. Amongst the Bangladeshi women, two age groups have emerged, the long-term residents, who have lived here for over 25 years and the younger group
which consists of those who have been here for less than 10 years. Most of the Somali women have lived here for over 10 years. All respondents attending ESOL classes were married, divorced or widowed and are still, either onsite or in the community.

This research project is set within the context of recent developments in ESOL policy, such as social integration and community cohesion, citizenship and identity and employability (DIUS, 2008a). Following the Working Group Report ‘Breaking the Barriers’ (DfEE, 2000), ESOL became part of the national Skills for Life strategy in 2001, which was established to address low levels in basic skills, identified in the ‘Moser report’ (DfEE, 1999). However, since 2001 the demand for ESOL increased tremendously, partly due to an influx of economic migrants from the extended European Union and partly because of the growth in demand for ESOL from refugees and settled immigrant communities. During this period funding increased by threefold, but a review of ESOL revealed that there was still a high level of unmet need (DIUS, 2008a; NIACE, 2006).

English language proficiency is one of the key factors in supporting social integration and community cohesion for settled immigrants and new economic migrants (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007; DIUS 2008a; Ward, 2008). No doubt, community cohesion and social integration became the focus of the revised ESOL policy under the title of ‘A New Approach to ESOL’ (DIUS, 2009). This revised focus presents new challenges for leadership of ESOL due to an increased accountability of ESOL spending as an investment in the long-term which, it is hoped, will improve responsiveness. This also raises the issue of whether classroom based delivery of ESOL is sufficient to promote community cohesion.

One of the findings of the research carried out by Hodge, Pit and Barton (NRDC, 2004) showed asylum seeking and refugee ESOL learners expressing the need for opportunities where they can make friends and speak with native speakers of English. However, my own experience of teaching and managing ESOL suggests that the opportunities for part-time ESOL learners of meeting native speakers of English are limited.

After considering debates on current policies (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007; DIUS 2008a; Ward, 2008) and research on community cohesion (Communities and Local Government 2007) that has influenced the New Approach to ESOL policy (2009), I have chosen the following research questions.

1. What are the perceptions of ESOL learners of community cohesion and when and how do they use English for social integration?

2. What issues or barriers do ESOL learners with limited English have in integrating with the community in which they live?

3. How is the WMC strategic planning on community cohesion informed?
By using data collected mainly through qualitative approaches, I explored the responsiveness of existing ESOL provision towards promoting community cohesion for ESOL learners in general and specifically at WMC.

3. Research Framework

This section reviews relevant literature by exploring, firstly the link between community cohesion and English language learning, secondly how colleges are expected to promote social integration and community cohesion, and finally the contradiction between the policy and practice in ESOL.

The term ‘community cohesion’ grew out of the Cantle Report that was produced in response to the riots in some northern towns (Home Office, 2001). Since then the Government has defined it in various ways, resulting in changes in the understanding of its meaning.

In order to understand the context of the research, it is necessary to establish what ‘social integration and community cohesion’ mean. Whilst different meanings have evolved, most definitions seek to promote good relations between and within communities while valuing differences, encouraging awareness of the need to eliminate social, economic and educational inequalities and promoting civic and political engagement. The clearest definition of community cohesion appears to be the following, produced by the Department of Communities and the Local Government in response to the report from the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007).

“Community Cohesion is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together. A key contributor to community cohesion is integration which is what must happen to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another.

- People from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities
- People knowing their rights and responsibilities
- People trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly

And three key ways of living together:

- A shared future vision and sense of belonging
- A focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside a recognition of the value of diversity
- Strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.”

(Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007)
The emphasis of this definition goes beyond race and faith as it includes the individual’s rights and responsibilities, citizenship identity and the integration of individuals within their communities.

Furthermore, the definition by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007), adopted by the New Approach to ESOL policy (DIUS, 2009), below clarifies the difference between cohesion and integration:

“Cohesion is principally the process that must happen in all communities to ensure different groups of people get on well together; while integration is principally the process that ensures new residents and existing residents adapt to one another.”

(Coission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007, p. 38)

From the above definitions the concept of community cohesion seems to be straightforward, based upon people living together by adapting to each other and responding to emerging demographical changes. For such adaptation, the ability to speak English is regarded as a key factor in promoting the way newly-arrived migrants and immigrants live with those who have made a long-term commitment to living here (Commission on Integration and cohesion, 2007; DIUS 2008b; Ward, 2008; LSEB, 2008). The term ‘get on well’ as referred to in the definition implies a two-way communication between new migrants and settled communities but as described above there are high expectations from new migrants. There is some evidence of effective bridge building activities between different community groups reducing hostility and prejudice (IVAR, 2009).

The emphasis on language for integration is not new; it surfaced in the 60s when Further Education (FE) colleges were tasked to offer English language classes for the immigrant population (DES, 1965). However, its recent re-emergence bears expectations from all newly arrived immigrants and migrants; such that even politicians emphasise ‘playing by the rules’ and ‘learning English’ (Gordon Brown, 2006 cited in Roberts et al, 2007, p. 20). To be able to communicate in a host language is a step towards effective access to their rights and public services that enable them to play an active part in the society. To play an active part they need to learn about citizenship and have an ability to speak in English, in other words to gain a new identity. The focus of new identity as a British citizen is on change of values and not cultures and involves ‘…the right to be different, the duty to be integrated …’ (Blair, 2006, cited in Hickman et al, 2008, p.14).

At the same time migrants bring a wealth of skills with them and only after developing their language skills can they make full contribution towards the skills shortage in the UK highlighted in the Leith report (LSEB, 2008; Ward, 2008). This should benefit the whole community. However, to work in Britain, they would need a good command of English alongside knowledge of the employment system. Without command of the English language, migrants would not be able to use their skills and knowledge as effectively as they could and they would lose out on opportunities for greater
integration, community cohesion and independence. Those migrants who have children, speaking English helps them ‘contribute as fully as possible to their children’s development and educational attainment’ (DEMOS, 2008, p.19). Research by Collinson and Collinson (2007) also illustrates that the Muslim children place a high value on their parents learning English and playing a greater role in their children’s education.

To ensure newly arrived immigrants and migrants and long-term residents play a greater role in their integration and community cohesion, a partnership approach has been recommended in which colleges play a vital role (DCLG, 2006). In colleges students from different cultures, races and ethnic background sit together in classes. In such places, issues regarding inequalities, diversity, social justice and citizenship are discussed and embedded in the curriculum. The Government expects colleges to promote community cohesion, as it is clear from the following statement:

"It is clear that, although colleges and Adult Education institutions are primarily focused on individual student achievement and progression, with the appropriate strategies and leadership initiatives they can also play a key role in promoting community cohesion within their towns"

(DCLG, 2006 Para. 4.6.77)

FE colleges do currently facilitate active citizenship and promote community cohesion through curricular and extra-curricular activities, particularly for disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised people (LSC 2007). However, recent discussions around the role of colleges in promoting community cohesion are heavily geared towards the ‘prevention of violent extremism’ (DIUS 2008b). This would suggest that the focus is directed towards young men. This change in focus could prove to be disadvantageous to women.

The take up of ESOL by women from these ethnic groups is less and they are underrepresented in the economic market, particularly in the case of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Somali women (LSEB, 2008; Ward and Spacey, 2008). Nevertheless, in contrast to men some women have a multitude of issues to deal with, such as oppression and violence (Dumper, 2002). They also experience ‘racism, harassment and anti-social behaviour’ (Ward and Spacey 2008). In addition, Ward and Spacey highlight that some women consider age as one of the factors that inhibits their learning (2008). It appears that for women to develop their independence and play a full part in society, fluency in English is vital and this is possible through access to appropriate ESOL provision.

However, a study by Collinson and Collinson stressed that ‘plans to restrict the funding for ESOL create a significant challenge for those in leadership positions within FE colleges’ (2007, p. 20). This is due to the inconsistency between policy and practice; on one hand the Government stresses the importance of English for integration and on the other decreases ESOL funding (Roberts et al, 2007). This is evident from the way the new ESOL policy, ‘the New Approach to ESOL’ is being implemented. Local councils were assigned to identify and prioritize local need in
ESOL and submit their Action Plans to the LSC only to discover that in December 2009 the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) announced a reduction in ESOL funding (drop in ESOL Weighting from 1.4 to 1.2) from September 2010.

The above discussion has touched on some of the benefits of social integration and community cohesion to individuals. English language skills give people a new identity within the community and empower them to take control of their own lives, secure employment, make progress at work, communicate with English speakers and have their say in civic decision making.

4. Methodology

This case study explored the experiences of Bangladeshi and Somali women participating in ESOL courses at Working Men’s College (WMC) London. The research interviews explored women’s perceptions of the extent to which acquiring English language skills has supported their social integration and community cohesion. The research drew on qualitative methods to investigate the positive and negative experiences of Bangladeshi and Somali women.

Time constraints necessitated a small sample that included 25 women with different levels of English language ranging from beginner (pre-entry) to Level 1 and included equal numbers of settled immigrants and new migrants. The age range of the respondents was between 19 and 68.

The first stage of data collection involved focus group discussions, which informed the direction of the research and identified themes for interview questions. Initially the research sample included both men and women, but the focus groups were attended by a majority of women (90%). This imbalance in the sample and the fact that there was limited research available on women from Bangladeshi and Somali communities informed the decision to concentrate on these groups of women. The focus groups and in-depth semi-structured interviews involved the following respondents:

- 4 focus groups involving 30 learners (27 women, 3 men); 2 groups from two community based mixed Entry level women’s classes, 3 college based classes -1 from Level Entry 3 and 1 from Level 1;

- Semi-structured interviews with 20 women in Entry Level courses (Entry 1/2/3) using interpreters where appropriate. For some women, it was a follow up from a focus group meeting, who either volunteered for 1:1 interviews or were requested to attend a 1:1 interview based on their positive or negative comments;

- 3 college Managers responsible for Curriculum, learner involvement and community outreach. A Head Teacher of the Primary School where one of the ESOL groups participating in the research is located. Two Managers from two Community Centres where WMC ESOL classes are located and where some of the respondents attend ESOL classes. These respondents shared their
observations of women’s attendance at extracurricular activities, their use of English and the difference in confidence levels of the women before and after attending ESOL classes.

These research methods were considered appropriate due to the nature and sensitivity of the research focus. Participants were given the research overview and the outline and context of questions prior to the interviews. Interviews were scheduled to suit the availability of respondents. The project brief and main themes were translated into appropriate languages and, where necessary, a Bengali/Sylheti translator was used to support the interview process with respondents who had limited speaking and listening skills. This methodology enabled participation from women who had fluent or limited English. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, were taped and transcribed.

The 1:1 interviews enabled women to share their experiential accounts of ESOL courses, and contribute to a shared understanding of not only ‘what worked’ for them personally but also what they considered hindered their learning. Closed questions, were used to ascertain factual information, whereas open questions were used to encourage participants to reflect on their experience, emotions and attitude. To facilitate more in depth information some probing questions were used, an example of which was the following:

‘Please could you tell me more about how you felt when…’

The process of data collection took longer than anticipated for two reasons; firstly, the interviews carried out with learners with limited English were time consuming as interpreters had to be involved. Secondly, some of the interviews had to be rearranged due to the snow in December and January months. Overall, the methodology has been successful in gathering the relevant data.

5. Findings

This section presents a summary of the findings of the research drawn from the interviews with Bangladeshi and Somali women, learning ESOL in college or community based courses in Camden, offered by the Working Men’s College in partnership with local schools and community centres.

I drew on the research frame when the themes for interview questions and data analysis. The data from interviews with internal managers and external partners supports the findings. Furthermore, the ‘verbatim quotes’ from the interviews are used to substantiate the findings.

Women’s learning Journeys through time

Age, Culture and the Significance of English Language Skills
Most of the Bangladeshi women respondents came to England to accompany their husbands who migrated to England or were born and grew up in the UK. Alongside the culture change, taking on new roles, such as of a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law (most lived with their husband’s family and some are still living in an extended family unit) meant their own identities almost became non-existent. While creating a picture of their first 15-20 years of life in England, at least 80% said that their own identity diminished and they lost a sense of themselves due to obligations in various other roles. As one commented:

“Coming to England changed everything for me… I was a good wife, mother, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law and looked after my family… I never thought of me, that’s why I can’t see myself in this Picture.”

(Time in UK-25 years)

When the Bangladeshi women first arrived in England, learning English did not seem to be a top priority as they became fully dependent on husbands and members from extended family for interpreting and translating due to restricted English language skills and most were also illiterate in Bengali. Some also said that they were not permitted by their husbands and or in-laws to attend any classes and their prime role was to look after their children and sometimes an elderly member of the family. Some of the women said that they did not learn English straight away because:

“I wanted to learn English and get a job but my husband didn’t want me to go out by myself … he said that I didn’t need to learn English … it will bring shame on the family if I go to work.”

(Time in UK: 30 years)

As a result of this, some women felt they became extremely dependent and through reliance on their families lost their own identity. At the time of their arrival here, this support was their lifeline. However, at the other extreme, reflecting back on the lost time that they could have used for learning, some women felt it ‘crippled’ them; as one of the women explained:

“You see at that time I felt very lucky … my husband did everything for me and sometimes I took my son to the doctor with me when the younger children were ill, I did not need to learn English, all that help crippled me … now, he is not here and I am too old to learn … I can only blame myself … my son had to miss school and did not get good job… other children have very good jobs.”

(Time in UK-29 years)
They felt that using their children, as a means of communication was a necessary support mechanism and not an option. Up to the time, some of the Bangladeshi women had their children; they relied mainly on their husbands having learnt very little English or no English at all. Later when they started their own families and as their children learned English, they began to use them for interpretation. This was particularly so when their husbands were at work and the interpreting service was not provided, so, some of them began to depend on their children at places such as the doctors. The realisation of the consequences of dependence for support especially on their older children filled some with remorse that they disrupted their children’s education and as a result they achieved less than the other siblings.

A long-term resident looked back on her experiences when she first came into this country and did not know any English and the difference that English learning made to her life.

“All people looked like aliens to me; I did not understand or speak any English … you know, it felt like I lost my voice, life here felt like being in prison. I used other people’s (husband, friends) voice and this made me very sad. … Now, I speak English and can talk to other people.”

(Time in UK- 16 years)

In summary, the interviews with older women who had been resident in England for between 30 and 16 years demonstrates that their lack of English language skills meant they became isolated and dependent on their husband and subsequently their children for communication. This in turn contributed to their sense of isolation and loss of identity.

Respondents believed that throughout their life in England, they needed to rely on their children for assistance with communication in English, which had a negative impact on their children’s education. Therefore this research suggests that women’s lack of competency in the English language can have a detrimental impact on the educational attainment of their children.

**English Language Skills and Social Interaction/Community Cohesion**

All respondents seemed to agree that when living in this country they cannot just stick to their own community groups and that integration of different ethnic groups plays an important part in creating a cohesive community, which should be the responsibility of all individuals living in the same neighbourhood. For this reason they place a great value on developing an understanding of different cultures and see English as a ‘common language’ that binds people together and gives them a sense of belonging.
This acknowledgement of the importance of English as a common language is a positive finding in relation to issues around community cohesion. However, the age of respondents appeared to be a significant factor in the extent of women’s confidence to interact with people outside of their own ethnic community.

In order to address issues relating to Community Cohesion it is necessary to understand how community is defined/understood by women within different ethnic groups in society. The concept of ‘community’ for Bangladeshi and Somali women is very different from the generic term used in existing community cohesion government reports that describe the term. They identified themselves belonging to a faith, race or ethnic community rather than the community in which they lived. They felt that belonging to a community is an important support mechanism. Instead, the term ‘neighbourhood’ was used to describe the community of place. Their views of neighbourhood varied from the close proximity of the street they lived on, to the surrounding area that they were familiar with. In the words of a Somali learner:

“Now we are here, we must learn English and learn about ways of this country … we all (migrants) have to use English where ever we go. My children have friends from many countries and when our (neighbours) children play outside, we parents talk to each other, they are from different countries.”

(Time in UK – 12 years)

Bangladeshi women, who can be classified as long-term residents and had little or no formal education from their own country, were inclined to have greater social interaction with people from their own ethnic community. As one woman said:

“In my block (of flats) not many people are from my community… I like my neighbourhood, a good area, people in my area are from different countries and some neighbours are very helpful”

(Time in UK- 10 years)

The lack of or limited English hampered the women’s efforts to improve communication with their neighbours and some mentioned the embarrassment they felt when they misunderstood some of the terms used by their neighbours which led to misinterpreting what they had asked when they replied and consequently gave
incorrect answers. However, most learners said their communication was limited to salutations.

Another issue that older women discussed was their belief that their age was a contributing factor affecting their slow progress in learning English.

The first experiences for women with very little English language skills who have recently arrived are similar to the long-term residents.

“I feel scared and embarrassed you know, scared because if someone ask me something, I can't answer them and embarrassed because if I can't, ... if I can't reply them, I feel embarrassed.”

(Bangladeshi, time in UK- 2 years)

However, in contrast to the reticence/anxiety of the women who were long term residents, the keenness to 'fit in' was more visible in younger women, particularly those who have arrived within the last 10 years to join their spouses. Some younger women even wanted to be part of local social networks and developed positive relationships with their neighbours who were of different races and engaged in activities of common interest, such as residents meetings about improving their neighbourhood security.

“I am a volunteer in my children’s school and meet many other non-Bangladeshi parents, we do things together, like making and selling food to raise money for the school … I like it … improve my English and learn about people from different countries.”

(Bangladeshi, time in UK 7 years)

Younger women aspired to work, to support their children’s education and some are ambitious about achieving more than or at least the same as their husband. A Bangladeshi woman shared her aspirations as:

“I want to learn English and I also want to work in Sainsbury’s, its my dream, ... because my husband works there ... after two years I want to be a manager ... if I learn English properly and I change my mind to be a teaching assistant, I will be a teaching assistant.”

(Time in UK – 2 years)

Some younger Bangladeshi women were more confident and had different aspirations to those who came here more than 25 years ago. They saw English learning as a means to acquiring employment and had better awareness of their own rights as citizens of this country. They also considered themselves as equal to men and were willing to prove their competence in language skills by gaining appropriate
qualifications. Below, a Bangladeshi woman describes the barriers that she had to overcome to fulfil her ambition.

“**My main achievement is improving my English and to be able to do things for myself and my family. My husband was very strict and did not allow me to go out to learn or to work, but I am very ambitious and believe that women have the same rights as men and should have the same freedom as men. I had to start from the beginner level and now I can speak fluent and correct English and have my qualifications to prove it.**”  
(Time in UK – 2 years)

One factor that was evident when contrasting the difference in confidence between older and younger Bangladeshi and Somali women was that the level of knowledge about the culture of this country was higher amongst recently arrived younger Bangladeshi women who had been educated beyond primary level within Bangladesh. Most of them acquired this knowledge via the internet or by watching programmes on international TV Channels, prior to arriving in the UK. They were equipped with basic IT skills and were keen to use mobile technology in learning. This familiarity was obvious during a mixed level community based ESOL class, mainly consisting of younger women, all enthusiastically participating in a mobile learning project. The women were all focused on developing language skills using netbooks outside the classroom. The respondents who did not have home access to the internet said they have taken their children to the local library so that their children could use computers.

In comparison, the older women who have lived in the UK for more than 20 years and have just started attending a class or had returned to an ESOL class after a long break had little knowledge or interest in technology and were hesitant at attempting to learn to use a computer. With low confidence and low self-esteem they felt intimidated by younger and more confident women.

The data demonstrates that women’s lack of ability to speak and understand English has a detrimental effect on their confidence levels and ability to integrate within wider society. Even where there is an ability and willingness to connect within the wider community, some respondents encountered problems in relation to sections of the community.

Somali women were happy to develop links with people from different countries living in their neighbourhood; however, the distance was still there in relation to white people. Some have also talked about the hostility and racism that they have experienced from their white neighbours. At the same time, they have forged friendships with women from countries other than the UK, who live in the neighbourhood or have children in same schools.
Some of the Somali women have suffered racist attacks and had to move from their area into a more ethnically mixed area that they felt would be safer.

“There were so many people who called us names, made fun of our language, sometimes they blocked our way to our flat. When we made complaints to their parents, they ignored us … then we decided to move near to my auntie.”

(Somali, time in UK – 12 years)

Some Bangladeshi women shared similar experiences where their neighbours made racist remarks and even threw things, such as rotten tomatoes and eggs at their doors. One person remarked:

“It was like living in hell … whenever we went out the teenage boys called us names, made fun of our language, sometimes they blocked our way to our flat. When we made complaints to their parents, they ignored us … then we decided to move near to my auntie.”

(Bangladeshi, time in UK-14 years)

Although the women discussed examples of racism which undermined community cohesion, the consensus was that a handful of individuals ruin the peaceful neighbourhoods and create misunderstandings about people from different countries. They felt that learning about different cultures was important for migrants, long-term residents and the established community.

The observation of managers/head teachers on the impact of language learning in centres and schools

The interviews of the external partners (Managers of Community Centres and the Head Teacher of a Primary School) and Managers at the WMC indicated clearly that English is vital as a common language of communication in today’s diverse society. Some of the benefits they identified of being fluent in English to a high level include: better relationship with neighbours and friends from diverse ethnic background, inter-cultural conversations with neighbours and friends from different ethnic groups, increased independence, supporting their children’s education, progressing onto
further and/or higher education, getting into employment, progressing at work, which in turn benefits the whole community. In addition, they felt that mothers spend more time with their children and having good English language skills would enable them to help their children with their homework. The Primary School supports ESOL classes for the parents and the Head Teacher highlighted the difference these classes had been making, both for the school and the mothers; improved attendance at open days and parents evenings, increased inter-communication between mothers at the coffee morning and other celebratory events, enhanced understanding of the support that children may need with their homework and above all they needed fewer interpreters at parents evenings, open days and meetings.

The managers from two different community centres agreed that community based ESOL provides a stepping-stone for most learners which was crucial in engaging hard to reach learners. As they developed their confidence, their participation in other activities at the centres increased and some also progressed onto college based courses or into work. However, the engagement and retention of older women still seemed to be difficult. This was indicated by their sporadic attendance despite the constant support provided by the outreach workers. According to one manager, this was due to a number of factors, such as, age, lack of confidence and self-esteem resulting in little motivation and the anxiety of being in the same class with the younger women who were more confident. One of the managers felt there was a need for building trust between older women, their teacher and the centre to bring them back into learning:

"They need to boost their confidence, which together with gaining fluency in English is a huge task in itself, for some of them it is like coming out of the prison after 30-40 years."

As the personal circumstances changed, for some older women, they found that their family support decreased for various reasons, such as the children moved out or the women lost their husbands, which resulted in feeling isolated and confused.

The general consensus amongst all respondents is that there is the need for pre-class activities for older women where they can meet women of their own age group who have similar aspirations for learning. Alongside learning English through informal activities, they felt it would enhance their confidence and self-esteem, which would lead to them progressing onto an intergenerational group when they would be ready to do so.

The Outreach Coordinator at WMC supported the above view emphasising the need to engage older women into ESOL through outreach, which is as important as for the new arrivals, ensuring the College differentiates the teaching and support strategies to suit each group:
Until now, the College has been successful in developing partnerships with local schools, community centres and day centres, in engaging hard to reach learners through informal activities, such as coffee mornings, open days, community festivals.

However, the College Manager for community based ESOL shared her worries about the effects of the ‘New Approach to ESOL’ and reduced funding from September 2010, which she thought would be detrimental to community based ESOL courses. She felt that the colleges will have to deliver ‘more for less’ and there is a danger of bigger class size and/or class closure where the numbers will not satisfy the college enrolment criteria.

To summarise, the interviews with external and internal managers highlight that the impact of English language learning for individuals, families, particularly for their integration into wider community is fundamental. They also raise their concerns about not fully meeting the needs of older women, which may increase their feeling of isolation.

At the same time, the College Manager for community based ESOL draws attention to the contradiction in the ESOL policy and practice and the danger of further reduction in community based ESOL. The New Approach to ESOL focuses on localised individual need, which is likely to be marginalized against target orientated funding.

6. Conclusions

The importance of English language skills for Women

The study highlights the clear link between English language fluency and social inclusion, inter-cultural and intergenerational communication as well as individual empowerment through the fulfilment of their aspirations and community cohesion. The evidence from this study suggests that women, both newly arrived and long-term residents acknowledge the need for English language learning and their desire to fulfil their aspirations. For younger women English language learning is a first step towards their employment goal, which is mainly in childcare, either working in a nursery or as a teaching assistant. The older women want to be able to take control of their own lives. The evidence from this study also indicates that by improving their competency in English, younger women feel empowered, have improved confidence, and progressed through learning, even getting voluntary employment.
in increased participation in local community activities organised through a school or a community centre. Therefore, equal access for all to ESOL classes is fundamental.

**Race & Gender**

Most women showed their awareness about racial issues in society and some shared their personal experiences, mainly from this country. The women believe that these issues can be overcome through cultural awareness and improved inter-cultural communication. There should be equal efforts from new arrivals, long-term residents and established communities to learn about different cultures within the society. Women could play a vital role in the development of children and influence the thinking of a younger generation. By this means, an ability to communicate in English can facilitate intergenerational interaction effectively.

**Age**

Confidence is a particular problem for older women. ESOL funding is focussed on targets and great emphasis is placed on maximisation of externally accredited achievements. Given that the aspirations of older women are not to gain employment and combined with their low confidence, the present emphasis on achieving exam success within ESOL courses can be a barrier for older women. Their limited communication skills restrict their participation in class and their low confidence and low self-esteem inhibit their social integration in the community. The ESOL programme should have flexibility and an interim stage to help build confidence and ability.

**Intergenerational relationships**

Children, born and brought up in this country have a better understanding of English language than their own mother tongue. English increases women’s ability to understand the lives of second and third generation children. Previous studies have identified a lack of English limits parents’ ability to fully participate in their children’s education, as they are unable to attend parents’ evenings at the college (Collinson and Collinson, 2007). Improved intergenerational understanding contributes towards social cohesion and promotes community cohesion.

**Social inclusion/community cohesion**

Raising the English language abilities of women within ethnic minority communities assists their wider communication and participation. It enables them to interact with the wider society outside their own ethnic group. Even though their definition of community is limited to their own ethnic group, they have shown interest in learning about different cultures. Equally important for them is to live in harmony with diverse groups, as part of the wider community. Younger women want to equip themselves with language and vocational skills so that they can fulfil their aspiration of getting employment and making equal contributions to society. English language competency should empower older women to live their lives independently and will release women from total dependency on their husband and children.
Challenges for ESOL Providers

The report has highlighted the contradictions between policy and practice of ‘A New Approach to ESOL’. Formally, this approach is designed to emphasise the achievement of social integration and the promotion of community cohesion through meeting the ESOL needs at local level. However, to engage the long-term migrants, particularly older women, may involve tremendous efforts and additional resources. At the same time, the weighting for Skills for Life including ESOL has dropped from September 2010, which means the colleges face even bigger challenges in terms of catering for unmet local need.

Acquiring the capability to use English as a common language is a fundamental prerequisite for effective integration and participation within the UK. It is particularly crucial for younger and older women. As these research findings demonstrate, significant barriers to older women’s participation in ESOL programmes still exist. Given the Government’s focus on the importance of social inclusion, it would seem essential for ESOL funding to be increased and be applied in more flexible ways. Such policies would crucially enhance community cohesion.

7. Recommendations

This study contributes to the existing research on women’s experiences of accessing ESOL courses. The research revealed the issues and barriers that they face. It also highlights the need for further research to establish how age and gender effects English language learning and the impact of restricted language skills and low confidence on women of different ages.

In response to these research findings the project proposes the following recommendations for leaders in the college. Some of these recommendations could also be applicable to other providers of ESOL.

- Strengthen existing partnerships with community and refugee organisations to explore ways of maintaining smaller learning groups specifically for older women.
- Use targeted and differentiated strategies on ESOL courses to develop the confidence of older women prior to joining an inter-generational group.
- Work together with the Social Inclusion Department at the London Borough of Camden to plan language learning courses that assists the integration of older and younger learners.
- Explore strategic planning in partnership with local providers of ESOL and other Service Providers in Camden to ensure maximisation of funds for ESOL through the pooling of resources.
• Develop structured progression pathways for younger women to enable them to obtain employment and include opportunities for work experience through voluntary employment or tasters.

• Develop cultural awareness amongst people from the local community by creating opportunities for inter-cultural events.

• Broaden access to the activities of WMC Languages Club for the local community.

• Widen the use of mobile learning through the use of mobile devices in language learning and develop sustainable models of blended learning models for ESOL.
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