The construction of ‘age difference’ and the impact of age-mixing within UK further education colleges

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Introduction: assumptions about the distinctiveness of age groups

Sociological perspectives

Sociological theorising about age has tended to emphasise the important distinctions between those of a different age, whether this be from a functionalist perspective, stressing the importance of age differentiation for social continuity (Eisenstadt, 1956; Parsons, 1954); a cohort perspective, emphasising the importance of a person's location in historical time on their views of the world (Mannheim, 1952); or a political economy perspective, focussing on the ways in which different age groups are treated within society and their differential access to social power (see Pilcher, 1995). Youth, in particular, has been conceptualised as a special phase of the life course with its own distinct characteristics. Indeed, the *dependent* status of young people, at this time in their lives, is commonly emphasised. In these accounts, it is argued that, to secure adult status, young people need to achieve at least some of three inter-related transitions: the transition from school to work; from family of origin to family of destination; and from the parental home into their own housing (Coles, 1995). As Maguire *et al.* (2001) have pointed out, ‘normalising discourses’ about adolescence typically stress its individualized nature – as a young person moves away from the influence of others, towards an independent life of their own. Recently, however, sociologists have documented the lengthening of the period of youth and semi-dependency in contemporary society. Such trends are argued to be inextricably related to the extension of full-time education: as young people spend more time in further and higher education and/or training, achievement of economic independence is delayed and they choose to marry and have children later (Furlong and Cartmel, 1999).

Nevertheless, while many sociological accounts continue to emphasise age distinctions, a number of writers have highlighted important *continuities* between youth and adulthood (for example: Valentine, 2003; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Aapola, 2003). Indeed, Plug *et al.* (2003) suggest that ‘when and on what grounds one may consider oneself to be an adult is not an unambiguous point in time and social space any more’ (p.130). The European Group for Integrated Social Research (2001) has identified three ways in which the distinction between youth and adulthood may be blurred, and in which people are able to combine both youthful and adult behaviours. First, they suggest that some young adults experience aspects of youth and adult life simultaneously and live ‘divided lives’ (for example, following a training course but experiencing freedom in their personal lives). Second, they identify ‘pending lives’, experienced by those who perceive themselves as neither youths nor adults. This, they argue, is a result of the youth status of transition having ‘lost its clear and attainable destination of a completely integrated adult’ (p.103). Finally, they outline the ‘swinging lives’ of those who consciously alternate between classic biographical

phases. Here they cite the examples of young parents who cling to youth culture and professionals who continue to take part in raves. The European Group for Integrated Social Research maintains that while these trends may represent a phase of discovery and self-actualisation for some young people, for others it offers no more than a prolonged period of isolation. Similar themes are pursued by Côté (2000), who has suggested that, for many in contemporary society, early adulthood may be characterised by as much confusion about one's identity as the period of youth.

Other writers have argued that emphasising the distinctiveness of age-groupings may overlook significant differences between people of the same chronological age, as well as important continuities across age groups. Wyn and White (1997), for example, argue that much conceptualisation within the sociology of youth has been tied to a horizontal frame of reference 'in which youth as a life stage is emphasised at the expense of seeing that the experiences and perspectives of young people are integrally related to those of other people who share their social location' (p.97). They go on to argue for the inclusion of a vertical frame of reference that would take account of continuities – between generations, women, men, local geographical communities and cultural groups. Indeed, their argument is premised on the assumption that, although young people do have some things in common because of their age, social divisions and geographical location have the effect of placing young people in close proximity to older adults who share the same social circumstances.

Policy perspectives

Many of the assumptions about the distinctiveness of age groupings that underpin sociological thinking are reflected within policy debates in the UK. In common with many other European countries (Aapola, 2003), the British education system is strongly age-differentiated. Throughout compulsory schooling, students typically learn alongside others of a very similar chronological age. Young people and older learners rarely mix within schools and other educational institutions. Within the higher education system, although in terms of numbers, mature students (i.e. those over 21) overtook school leavers in the early 1990s, they are unevenly distributed, remain in the minority on many courses (Bowl, 2003; Merrill, 1999**) and may be alienated from the younger students in some institutions (Wakeford, 1994). Jones and Wallace (1992) have argued that one consequence of the strong age focus in much state policy in the UK – and particularly that relating to education and training – is that all sense of dynamic within the life course is lost: 'each age group or age grouping... becomes static and membership within each group is frozen, so that within each age group, no process is involved – all sense of process is channelled into the transition from one age grouping to another' (p.148-9). Moreover, they argue that such an age focus also tends to overlook the considerable differences – and different life experiences – of young people of the same chronological age.

However, in contrast to this generally high level of age-differentiation in the UK's education system, further education¹ (FE) colleges have traditionally been much more mixed, catering for students from 16 (and, more recently, 14) through to the over-60s. Indeed, although FE colleges are the largest providers of education for 16-19 year-olds, this age group constitutes only about 20 per cent of the total FE student body. This pattern of age-mixing is largely a result of FE colleges' flexible responses to local need, their complex institutional histories and the need to form economically viable learning groups.

Despite this tradition of age-mixing, there have recently been various pressures towards age segregation within the FE sector. First, national policy tends to treat 16-19 year olds very differently from older students. For example, the Learning and Skills Council (the UK body responsible for funding and planning education and training for those over 16 years old) has separate committees for the two groups, and there are separate inspectorates and inspection regimes. Furthermore the questions which inspection addresses tend to be age-specific and pay little, if any, attention to the age mix of classes, and any effects it might have on outcomes. Second, over recent years government ministers have suggested that age segregation may improve achievement and that 16-18 year olds should be in some way protected in separate institutions or centres. This has led to the creation of numerous ‘sixth form centres’ within FE colleges, which are believed to improve academic attainment and student retention (Morris *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, by the end of 2001, 58 of the 270 general FE colleges had created such centres (DfES, 2002). At college level, this trends have been exacerbated by the perceived need to offer separately-identified 16-19 provision to compete with school sixth-forms.

The government perspective was articulated clearly by the then Minister for Lifelong Learning, Margaret Hodge, in a speech in June 2003. Outlining what she saw as the important benefits of distinct educational provision for 16-19 year-olds, she explained that:

We mean it should meet the particular pastoral, management and learning needs of this age group, wherever they learn. It is about creating a really distinct learning environment, clear and separate management and support arrangements which respond to young people as individuals at a time of complex transition in their lives. And it is about giving young people a clear base, separate management and tutor arrangements. Young people must know that their provision is managed by a team of people concerned exclusively with the quality of the offer to them and the success of young people in achieving their ambitions. (Hodge, 2003, p.5)

Although some people have interpreted this as referring to separate pastoral and tutorial arrangements within a large institution, others have interpreted it as a steer towards separate institutions, or age-segregated classes in separate parts of an FE college. In both interpretations, however, the perceived distinctiveness of 16-19 year-olds is central; Hodge clearly believes that their needs are distinct from those of older learners and, at some level, require more support and separate provision.

The ‘Learning Together’ research projectⁱⁱ

Despite these assumptions about the distinct needs of younger and older learners and the increasing salience of ‘age’ within policy debates within the UK, there has been virtually no research about the prevalence of age-mixing within the further education sector, nor about the perceived costs and benefits of students learning together in this way. The literature that does exist is mainly polemical, designed to ‘defend’ particular age groups from curriculum or pedagogy believed to be more appropriate for other age groups (see, for example, Lucas, 2000). The ‘Learning Together’ project, upon which this paper draws, was designed to address this gap: to explore

both the prevalence of age-mixing within the UK further education sector and its impact on the process of learning. The study was underpinned by seven distinct research questionsⁱⁱⁱ, two of which will be discussed in this paper: first, how do students and staff understand ‘age’ and ‘age difference’? And second, what do staff and students believe is the impact of age mixing on educational outcomes?

To address these questions we explored various different types of age mix across a wide range of subject areas and both academic and vocational qualifications^{iv} (see Table I). Between December 2002 and March 2003, we conducted fieldwork in six further education colleges in England: three in Yorkshire and three in the south-east. The two geographical areas were chosen to enable us to explore colleges located within very different labour markets and educational markets, while the individual colleges were selected because they had examples of age mixing within individual classes, as well as across the institution as a whole. In each college, we worked with six classes or ‘learning groups’. Each class was observed on at least one occasion and interviews were conducted with the class tutor and ‘older’ and ‘younger’ students (usually interviewed in age-distinct groups). In each college we also interviewed senior managers, heads of department and several members of staff with college-wide pastoral responsibilities. In total, we conducted 79 in-depth interviews with teaching staff and senior managers, 75 focus group interviews with students and 39 class observations. All respondents were asked about their own experiences of learning within or teaching an ‘age-mixed’ group: what were the advantages and disadvantages of being in such a group and how did it compare with their experiences of more age-homogenous groups? Three different patterns of age mixing were explored across the sample of learning groups: (i) where young students (under 20 years of age) were in a minority; (ii) where older students (over 24 years of age) were in a minority; and (iii) where the age mix was evenly balanced^v. All selected learning groups matched one of these patterns and, in each college, our sample included at least one example of each type of mix. Clearly, there are many other possible types of age mix but, for the purposes of this project, we thought it more fruitful to explore a small number of distinct mixes across different institutional contexts and subject areas (see Table I).

[Insert Table I]

Constructing ‘older’ and ‘younger’ learners

Respondents’ understandings of age

From our interviews, it became clear that many students and members of staff believed that there were important differences between students, related in some way to their age, that affected the process of learning. A very small number of respondents highlighted such age-related differences between older adults. For example, the vice-principal of College 3 described what would be considered, in Mannheim’s (1952) terms, a distinct ‘cohort effect’:

40 is a significant break in terms of education. When people of 40 plus were at school in the 60s and 70s the curriculum delivery was very different to what we expect in the 21st century. Their learning styles tend to be very different.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of such age-related differences corresponded, broadly, to what respondents considered to be a dichotomy between ‘youth’ and ‘adulthood’.

As in other discourses surrounding adolescence (see, for example, Raby 2002), the former tended to be associated with less responsible and independent attitudes to learning while, in contrast, ‘older learners’ were typically perceived as self-motivated and strongly committed to their studies. Although these assumptions were common across all six colleges in the sample and amongst learners of all ages (including the youngest students, themselves), there were significant differences in the precise location where the boundary between younger and older learners was drawn. Although some of these corresponded to the traditional markers of adult status outlined above (such as gaining economic independence and moving out of the parental home), others did not. This variation is explored below.

Work experience

Many respondents thought that chronological age was less useful than work experience in explaining differences between students. For example, numerous students across all six case study colleges emphasised the importance of full-time work experience in conferring adult status. Interestingly, however, few of these respondents thought that such status was dependent on retaining a full-time job whilst studying and, in several cases, even one year of full-time employment was considered sufficient. In College 6, for example, a head of department described how a 17 year-old student had recently made a specific request to be enrolled on an ‘adult’ course (i.e. not one comprised entirely of 16-19 year olds) for the following year. She felt she had little in common with 16 year-olds as a result of the year she had spent in full-time work. In contrast, part-time work experience, gained whilst a full-time student, appeared not to have the same value to respondents; a period of work whilst away from education was considered a more important marker of an ‘older learner’.

Experience of post-compulsory education

Other students and members of staff also distinguished clearly between 18/19 year-olds and 16/17 year olds, but on the basis of their educational experiences. Within the photography group at College 2, for example, the 18 and 19 year-olds who were interviewed identified themselves as ‘older learners’ and felt they had little in common with those who had come straight from school. The older students in the carpentry group at the same college made a similar distinction, believing that 18 year-olds were considerably more mature than 16/17 year olds, after having gained a year’s experience of post-compulsory education. For one respondent, at least, these changes were a direct result of the nature of post-compulsory education:

They come to us at 16. We know that after a year they have changed considerably. So I think the marker is around 17-18 – they are almost different beings. Here they have to be much more self-sufficient, whereas at school they were spoon-fed. Here they have to plan their work, they have to plan their days, they have to plan their assignments. So they pick up a lot of planning skills they can possibly apply to their lives. So you see definite changes there. It's also the way we teach - it tends to be highly assignment-based, so if they don't have the planning they find it really difficult initially and then as they pick those skills up you can see a clear change in them and their life and lifestyle. (Head of construction, College 1)

Domestic transitions

Other respondents placed greater significance on specific life events and domestic transitions. For example, some older women thought that one of the most important age breaks was related to whether or not one had children.

I did feel a bit frustrated cos I felt my life experiences were....cos I saw things slightly differently. Whereas if you're in an adult group, say from 25 upwards, I think that would be different. The three of us here are all mums and I think that makes a huge difference....I can only suggest that it might be very helpful for them [the under-25s] to have us in the group. (33 year-old psychology student, College 2)

Other common markers of adult status were also referred to in the interviews, such as leaving the parental home and committing to a long-term relationship with a partner.

It's outlook, it's not an age thing. Jasmine is 19. She's lived away from home since she was 16. She's lived in London....It is more experience and stuff. (28 year-old photography student, College 2)

I think below 30 is young....you get to 30 and it's your life changing direction. You either stick with it or you look for a career change. Either way could lead you into education. (Senior manager, College 2)

Nevertheless, despite these differences in definition, to most respondents, age remained an important social category. As Roberts (1995) notes:

'Anything goes' in any life stage has not become the new rule. It has not become possible to tackle major life events in any order. Age remains a powerful basis for social discrimination in most situations. (p.119)

Indeed, as the quotations above suggest, staff and students appeared to find it relatively easy to identify both 'older learners' and their younger counterparts (even if the bases of their definitions varied considerably) and then to outline certain ways in which these groups differed. The importance of such age-related distinctions was highlighted further when respondents were asked whether they thought that learning in a group with students of a different age had any impact on their learning or that of their peers. It is these responses that provide the basis of the second part of this paper, and are discussed below.

Inter-generational relationships and the perceived benefits of mixed-age learning

In the same way that almost all our respondents drew learning-related distinctions between 'older' and 'younger' students, the majority of those we spoke to believed that the age composition of their groups had a direct impact on the process of learning. Almost without exception, respondents believed that mixed-age learning groups had a positive effect on the learning of the younger students and sometimes on the learning of the older students. There was also widespread agreement that mixed-

age learning groups conferred a number of important wider benefits that were not directly related to educational outcomes.

Creating a more positive and learning-oriented atmosphere

First, many staff and students believed that learners benefited from the positive atmosphere that was engendered by many mixed-age groups. Younger learners, in particular, were believed to benefit from the commitment of the older learners:

They [older students] have usually made a very definite decision to come back into education and get as much out of it as they can...what generally happens, we have found, is that the way they talk about their experiences now and what they want to get out of it has a positive effect on the younger ones and they take it seriously. (Head of business, College 1).

Similar views were expressed by the students themselves, outlining how learning with older students encouraged them to act more maturely and behave in a more 'grown up' way:

If it was a group of all 18 year-olds we'd probably behave differently because you want to fit in, don't you? We probably wouldn't get any work done because we'd be talking all the time. It would be really disruptive. (18 year-old administrative procedure student, College 2)

Several staff also believed that, in their area of work, older students often produced higher quality work than their younger counterparts. This, it was felt, generally contributed to the learning-oriented atmosphere and helped the younger students to achieve. Furthermore, several respondents commented favourably on the absence of 'peer pressure' within mixed-age groups. These factors – the positive example set by older students, the high standards of their work and the absence of peer pressure – were felt to have a direct impact on the commitment to learning and the attainment levels of the younger students:

In the best-case scenario it can have a positive impact. It can give younger students a sense of what is achievable – seeing someone putting in the work and doing well, who is not necessarily more gifted. It can be a really useful role model. (Student welfare adviser, College 3)

It's more motivating being in a group with older students. Because they have been out to work and are paying for the course they are more motivated and focused and that rubs off – you aim to get to their level. (19 year-old administrative procedure student, College 2)

There was less consensus about the impact of the atmosphere of mixed-age groups on older learners. Some staff thought that although such groups tended to be more work-focused than 16-19 groups (for the reasons indicated above), they may be less learning-oriented than exclusively 'adult' groups. In contrast, however, several other members of staff thought that atmosphere of mixed-age groups did offer specific benefits to the older learners:

Younger learners somehow get older learners to be less anxious, to calm down, to have a social life, to see things in a broader perspective....The synergy between the two groups is sometimes really good and positive. The youngsters grow up and get a bit more organised and the adults learn how to have a good time and become more relaxed about the whole thing. (Head of English and literacy department, College 6)

I find this group very stimulating. I think I would be bored stiff if I was in a group with my own age....it brings out the more relaxed side of you. (42 year-old psychology student, College 2)

Relationships in the classroom

Mixed-age groups were also thought to further students' learning through the types of relationships that were established in the classroom and that these, in turn, had pedagogic implications. Again, these were largely perceived to be due to the presence of older learners and to benefit the younger students. First, several students and members of staff believed that older learners were more willing and/or able than younger students to ask the tutor probing questions. By clarifying concepts and challenging assumptions in this way, respondents believed that students' learning was enhanced (even if they were only listening to the questions and responses):

Older students make good contributions to group discussions. You can learn from them....We have better discussions in class – the older students are less worried about getting things wrong. I'm quite scared saying stuff in case I get it wrong. (16 year-old photography student, College 2)

I sometimes hesitate to answer, but as soon as they [older students] answer the question....ideas come into my head and I actually hold a conversation with them...these mature students give you that little push, they answer the first question or they give you a little hint and that just gets you ticking. (19 year-old e-business student, College 4)

Furthermore, one respondent (the head of student services at College 4) thought that older learners were more willing than younger students to complain about poor teaching, and that this could also advantage the younger and less assertive members of a group. Second, some tutors thought that students were more willing to share their work and ask each other for help in mixed-age classrooms than when they learnt in single-age groups. Again, this was believed to advantage the younger learners more than their older counterparts:

The older learners can act as unofficial mentors – they can help tutors by pulling up the stragglers....older students can act as go-betweens, bringing younger ones' problems to the teacher in a tactful way. (Head of social sciences and childcare, College 1)

They look at the tutor as someone who is preaching to them, whereas they are looking at the mature students' experience and sometimes they seem to take that on board more. It's like we will talk about a specific example, and they will have had some experience of it themselves and they will input that into the class, and somehow they will take that on board more than just being

talked to by the tutor. They seem to believe them more! (Learning support assistant, College 3)

Learning from each other's work and life experiences

Another perceived benefit of mixed-age groups was the greater range of work and life experiences that such groups encompassed, when compared to groups with a much narrower age range. In most cases, both younger and older students were felt to benefit from this variety of experience:

We're taking from them like their work experience (admin. stuff, typing and practical things) and they are taking from us like the stuff we did last year, more computer work and business skills – some of the older ones don't know that. (16-19 year old administrative procedure students, College 2)

The mature ones have the experiences, they have a lot of information they can share and are good at giving the younger ones advice....The younger ones help the older ones with IT. (Medical secretaries tutor, College 5)

Developing specific course-related skills

In a number of subject areas an age-mix was considered very useful in developing specific course-related skills. For example, beauty therapy tutors in two of the Colleges (3 and 6) outlined the advantages to students of being able to work on skins of different ages. Tutors of vocational courses that focused on client care also emphasised the benefits to students of being able to work with learners of different ages and thus develop their interpersonal skills. Tutors of other subjects also believed that mixed-age learning groups helped to foster more varied and interesting discussions. As a result, students became more sensitive to other possible interpretations of texts and images, which enhanced their learning. In these cases, older and younger students were both believed to benefit from the age composition of the group.

Wider benefits

In addition to the various benefits to students' academic performance, many respondents believed that mixed-age groups offered other advantages to both older and younger students. Several respondents thought that mixed-age groups conveyed positive messages about 'lifelong learning' to younger students: first, that it was possible to return to education at any stage in one's life and second, that the value of learning lay not only in its instrumental role:

It's quite encouraging to think that other people have come back to education, which means that it's not always for young people – you can come back and do more. I think it's quite nice. (18 year-old psychology student, College 2)

It's sort of a role model type thing, that people learn to some extent for the love of it, it's something they want to do. They're not simply trying to gain a qualification that's going to open a door for them. And I think perhaps some of the younger ones realise that and appreciate that there's some value in that. (Sociology tutor, College 6)

Furthermore, both students and staff believed that pastoral support between students was often greater in mixed-age groups, as learners of different ages had different experiences and skills that they could draw upon. Several younger students in colleges across the sample described, in very positive terms, how they had been 'looked after' by older students in their learning groups. Equally, one student (in her 70s) at College 1, was very grateful for the lift home that some of the younger students provided. It was also clear that, in some groups, older students were keen to provide advice about life in general to their younger counterparts.

The most commonly cited 'wider benefit' of mixed-age groups was that such groups prepared students well for other parts of their life in which they would be likely to mix with people of a different age. It was felt that working with older or younger students not only helped to overcome age-related stereotypes but helped learners to develop interpersonal skills that could be used in other contexts. Indeed, one 17 year-old brickwork student explained:

It's a good idea to have mixed classes because if you have to work on site, most bricklayers are older, about 30-34, so it's important to be able to work with people of different ages.

In contrast, other respondents pointed to the age-segregated nature of contemporary society and the divisions and misunderstandings between generations. In this context, many believed that mixed-age learning could play an important role in helping to increase inter-generational understanding and respect. A childcare tutor at College 1 believed that, 'It helps to break down stereotypes about teenagers, seeing beyond the behaviour and the clothes', while students echoed similar sentiments:

I benefit from it as it's broadening my feel of things. As a mum of a 17 year-old, it helps me see things....I didn't come and do it as sociological research on what my son gets up to in the classroom, but it does help me. (42 year-old psychology student, College 2)

Indeed, several members of staff who were interviewed emphasised the social importance of the more generally diverse environment of FE Colleges, and the value of students learning to work with others who they initially perceive to be 'different' from themselves. Age diversity was considered to be an important part of this – alongside diversity in ethnicity, gender, class and nationality:

... you have women returners sitting at one table, people with learning difficulties on another, international students from 70 different countries coming in. That melting pot is seen as a benefit. Somewhere like [this town] which is relatively safe, white and middle class - those are things that are positively different and they are things we have worked hard on, to get that mix - cultural mix, age mix, students for whom school has not worked out for. (Vice Principal, College 1)

Discussion

This evidence from the Learning Together project raises two sets of questions. The first of these concerns our understanding of age and its relationship with the process of learning. The second relates more broadly to the way in which age-mixed educational institutions may offer students an important site for the negotiation of intergenerational relationships, and an opportunity for both ‘younger’ and ‘older’ learners to establish interdependencies across traditional age boundaries. Both of these are explored below.

Age and the process of learning

In their research with young people in Norway and the UK, Brannen and Nilsen (2002) show how distinctions between youth and adulthood varied by their respondents’ experience of time, which was, in turn, informed by their gender, class, ethnicity and the educational and training opportunities open to them. For example, they contrast the very clear line between youth and adulthood, drawn by the young women on vocational courses in their sample, with the view of the two phases as overlapping and similar, held by their male counterparts who were expecting to follow well-established pathways, embedded in collective male traditions. Similarly, Plug *et al.* (2003) found class-related differences in their respondents’ understandings of adulthood. Although such clear differences by social group did not emerge from the students in the ‘Learning Together’ project, their responses, some of which have been outlined above, illustrate a similar level of variation and degree of complexity in the comparisons they made between themselves and their peers of a different chronological age. Although most respondents thought that age was an important dimension in explaining differences between students and their engagement in learning, few appeared to concur with policymakers that the most significant change occurs at the age of 19 or 20. Indeed, chronological age was thought to be a poor proxy for other, more profound changes in one’s life that may affect the process of learning. This suggests a certain tension between, on the one hand, the ways in which FE students and staff construct notions of ‘older’ and ‘younger’ learners and, on the other, the discourse of age that is dominant in policy debates, and which was outlined in the first part of this paper. As Aapola (2002) has argued, in relation to her study in Finland, young people’s constructions of age rarely conform to the discourse of ‘institutional age’ (i.e. the standardised definitions of chronological age within particular social institutions) and are, instead, commonly located within a range of different discourses relating, for example, to physical appearance and conduct, how old one feels, and age-related symbols and rituals.

Although many respondents believed that the most significant age breaks, in the context of the FE classroom, were related to some of the traditional transitions to adulthood (for example, engaging in full-time work and moving out of the parental home), other markers were also introduced. As noted above, these included experience of post-compulsory education. This may indicate that, as a result of the expansion of education and training, post-school learning is no longer perceived as part of youth and the transition to adulthood but, instead, associated with adulthood itself. It is possible to hypothesise that in these examples students of various ages may be coming to their own decisions about what it means to be an older learner and/or an ‘adult’ in contemporary society. Moreover, far from signalling ongoing dependency and an ‘indeterminate status’ (Côté, 2000), engagement in post-compulsory or lifelong learning may, for some learners, be increasingly associated with the pursuits of adulthood. Just as Maguire *et al.* (2001) have argued that

continuing familial dependence (and interdependence) may form part of a new understanding of adulthood (see below), so may participation in post-compulsory education.

Negotiating intergenerational relationships

As noted at the beginning of this paper, gaining independence is often considered a defining characteristic of youth, with young people moving towards independent economic status, away from the parental home and into the 'family of destination'. Moreover, much of the concern about the effects of extended youth transitions is predicated on the assumption that independence is now taking much longer to achieve, with deleterious consequences for many young people (Côté, 2000). In pursuing this argument, Furlong and Carmel (1999) contend that:

Whereas the protraction of domestic and housing transitions has created the potential for young people to develop as individuals and experiment with different living arrangements, new forms of vulnerability have also been introduced due to the removal of state support and the increasing unreliability of access to family resources. In this context we have suggested that the establishment of adult identities has become more problematic. (p.111)

However, the evidence from the six colleges involved in the Learning Together project suggests that the focus on independence, assumed within much of this literature, may obscure the extent to which *interdependence* is important to young people (see also Ahier and Moore, 1999 and Wyn and White, 1997). This paper has suggested that, within FE colleges at least, there are strong interdependencies between students of different ages. Indeed, young people themselves are able to articulate clearly what they believe they gain from older learners – in terms of both their educational attainment and wider social benefits. The strong rhetoric around the importance of individualism, independence and autonomy that has been documented by many empirical studies of the lives of young people was notably absent from these students' accounts. Furthermore, the evidence presented in this paper also offers a riposte to some of the gloomier prognoses about the future of intergenerational relationships. Zinneker (1990), for example, has suggested that tension between different age groups is likely to increase over coming decades, as a result of shifts in the balance of social power. He maintains that as young people become a scarcer resource – 'a luxury item' – intergenerational tensions are likely to shift out of the family and into the public sphere. Moreover, Côté (2000) has argued that 'the adult segment of the population has shirked its responsibility to the youth segment' (p.184), offering young people little guidance about what it means to be an adult or how to negotiate transitions into adulthood. In contrast, this paper has suggested that within one particular public domain (the FE college), younger and older learners are both willing and able to forge what they perceive to be positive inter-generational relationships.

Maguire *et al.* (2001) have demonstrated how, within the family context, post-adolescence or emerging adulthood may be characterised, not by a disengagement from parental influence, but by ongoing, complex and far-reaching kin relationships. Indeed, many of the young adults involved in their research spent the largest proportion of their time with their families, and remained dependent on their family structures for their housing, finance and emotional well-being. Maguire *et al.* surmise

that ‘older dichotomies of dependence-independence might not be adequate to account for shifts in family structures and relationships’ (p.209), while maintaining close relationships with kin may constitute an important component of the script of a ‘new’ adulthood. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the narratives of the students who took part in the Learning Together project. They suggest that younger learners (as well as many of their older counterparts) were aware of the benefits to their own development and learning of actively engaging with those of a different age. Far from wanting to assert their independence at all costs – or bemoan their continuing dependency – many of the young people who were interviewed emphasised the strong interdependencies between learners and the important advantages of intergenerational interaction.

Equally, the strength of the intergenerational relationships outlined in the students’ accounts may also be affected by a re-evaluation of what it means to be an adult and/or a student on the part of the *older* learners. For example, Pilcher (1995) has documented some of the ways in which the meaning of middle age has changed over recent decades. She claims that for many women, the menopause has come to be seen as a prelude to personal and sexual liberation and a fresh beginning, while the ideal of an active middle age, which has more in common with youth, has become increasingly pervasive. Moreover, as Dwyer and Wyn (2001) note, ‘the physical attributes of adolescence, middle life and age have been modified in ways that dislocate the established time sequences of “maturation” and “ageing” on which the traditional markers relied’ (p.170). In this way, the combination of ‘adult’ and ‘youthful’ behaviours (discussed previously) and appearances – on the part of both younger and older students may have an important bearing on the success of mixed-age interactions.

Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the UK education system remains largely age-segregated. Moreover, in many cases, age-segregation is often closely associated with elite forms of education. This may suggest that some of the interdependencies outlined above are not generalizable to other institutional contexts. However, the congruence of views from students on both academic and vocational pathways, as well as from those located within very different educational markets, suggests that the rethinking of age boundaries and intergenerational relationships may be common across different types of qualification and different social backgrounds. Clearly, in institutional terms, it is possible that the age-mixed nature of the FE college may be a factor that helps to differentiate it from the school sixth-form and, thus, by association, age-mixing may seem unattractive to 16-19 year-olds (and their parents) keen to pursue an elite form of education. Nevertheless, in the light of policy pressures to segregate further on *pedagogical* grounds, it seems valuable to explore both the way in which students and staff understand ‘age difference’ and the extent to which age mixing may affect the process of learning. This paper makes a contribution to this important debate.

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ⁱ Further education can be defined as part-time or full time, academic or vocational education and training which takes place within the post-compulsory sector, but not within schools or universities.

ⁱⁱ This project ran from April 2002 until August 2003 and was funded by the Learning and Skills Development Agency. The research team comprised Pam Cole and Gareth Parry, from the University of Sheffield, and Rachel Brooks and Stephen McNair from the University of Surrey.

ⁱⁱⁱ The seven research questions that underpinned the project were: (i) how do staff and students understand 'age' and 'age difference'? (ii) how extensive is age mixing in teaching, social and other groups in FE institutions? (iii) does age mix affect educational outcomes? (iv) does age mix affect learning relationships? (v) does age mix make programmes of study more or less attractive to students? (vi) do staff or students prefer different kinds of age mix? (vii) to what extent is age mix controlled or controllable, and by whom?

^{iv} In each college we chose at least one learning group from each of the following subject areas: business, humanities and construction/engineering. These were chosen because of their relevance to particular policy debates. In addition, we asked colleges to suggest other subject areas in which students were taught in mixed-age groups.

^v These age bands were chosen for policy-related purposes. The 16-19 year-olds are differentiated from other, older students by the Learning and Skills Council and have a separate inspection regime. Over-24s are considered 'adult learners' within European policy.