



Women's
Collective
Ireland



The Centre
for Effective
Services

Women's Collective Ireland Ronanstown

Case Study

September 2023



Case Study – WCI Ronanstown

This case study showcases the work of Women’s Collective Ireland (WCI) Ronanstown which provides community education to support lone parents and women, in general, in the Clondalkin area of west Dublin.

The research was funded by the Beachaire Fund, a charitable fund operating under the umbrella of Community Foundation for Ireland (CFI). One of the Fund’s objectives is to support education initiatives with a view to affording access to and the benefits of education to children.

In Ireland, households headed by a lone parent with low levels of completed education are amongst those at greatest risk of poverty, facing economic and social disadvantage that have potential lifelong adverse consequences for children. Community education programmes potentially offer ‘second chance’ return to education opportunities to lone parents and a progression for lone parents to improved mental health and wellbeing, further education, and employment. The Beachaire Fund appointed the Centre for Effective Services (CES) to conduct qualitative research, through case studies, to explore the impact on lone parents and their children from participating in community education programmes across Ireland.

The research was conducted during the first half of 2023. Twenty people contributed to this case study, including management/coordinators (2), community education tutors/facilitators (4), and community education participants (14), past and present, all parenting alone.

All participants received a one4all voucher as an appreciation for their contribution to the research. Participants shared the stories of their life journeys and the ways in which their participation in community education has transformed their lives. This case study also contains vignettes which offer insight into the varied and distinctive stories of participants as they move through their lives, with the support of community education.

The stories contain recurring themes of enjoyment of shared learning and support, movement towards educational progression, paid employment, more positive feelings around parenting and capacity to parent, enhanced mental health and wellbeing, a deeper sense of self, personal mastery, connection, creation of social networks and, for some, a greater capacity to be involved in their local community. This includes working in community development, political and civic engagement, and many different forms of volunteering.

The stories capture the courage and resilience of the women, many of whom have lived through difficult life situations, crises, and inter-generational trauma. These include early childhood experiences of growing up in poverty, experiencing addiction firsthand or through a family member, domestic violence, losing a business or home, and fear of becoming homeless. Caring and dedication to children, including those with additional needs, family members who are seriously ill, and ageing parents, feature prominently in the lives of many of those who participated in the research.



1. The Story of Ronanstown

Ronanstown Women's CDP is a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) running a childcare service and providing community education in the heart of Clondalkin. It is governed by a voluntary Board with representatives who have experienced their own journey through community education, from trauma to thriving.

WCI Ronanstown has been promoting lifelong learning for women in the Clondalkin and surrounding areas of Dublin for over 35 years. This includes community-based education and training with the provision of a childcare service.

Ronanstown Women's CDP began in 1985 as a small group of local women striving to improve opportunities and encourage social inclusion within the community. The organisation has continued to develop and grow throughout the years in response to the ever-evolving needs of the community. In 2011 WCI Ronanstown joined along with 16 other women's groups to form NCCWN¹ and then became known as WCI Ronanstown. This further affirmed the culture and ethos of community development and social justice, and alignment with the WCI vision of an Ireland where women in all their diversity are flourishing².

Services and Support Provided at WCI Ronanstown

WCI Ronanstown believes that community education is a catalyst for positive change and transformation in the lives of women. The organisation offers a range of programmes and supports to women within a community setting, which is an ordinary house and garden in a housing estate in Clondalkin. WCI Ronanstown publishes a brochure twice a year in January and September, full of opportunities for people to participate in diverse courses, workshops, and social activities. These include courses such as the STEPS³ For Women Programme and workshops on a whole range of health and creative topics and themes, including yoga, crafts, herbalism, mindfulness, and meditation. Courses are both accredited and non-accredited.

The WCI STEPS For Women Programme consists of a method of critical reflection, inquiry, and action. This programme supports women on their journey of understanding and unlocking their own strengths with encouragement to follow up on their interests in particular fields and to prepare for future careers. The programme allows WCI Ronanstown to engage with women in the community to reduce isolation, increase confidence, build relationships, and foster a sense of personal power in women, giving them space to consider their plans for future paid employment, education, and community engagement. The programme was run one day a week over fourteen weeks, covering the themes of the word 'STEPS,' which spells out:

S – Skills, **T** – Training, **E** – Equality, **P** – Participation, and **S** – Supports.

¹ Formerly known as the National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks (NCCWN).

² https://nccwn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WCI_strategic-plan_web.pdf

³ [Womens-Collective-Ireland-PIEL-STEPS-for-women-programme-Survey-report-final_web.pdf](https://nccwn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Womens-Collective-Ireland-PIEL-STEPS-for-women-programme-Survey-report-final_web.pdf) (womenscollective.ie)



Each week, aspects of the themes or a combination were covered. The WCI STEPS For Women Programme encapsulated:

- Personal development and confidence building to support the women in becoming aware of their wants, needs, and potential.
- Women's wellbeing as highlighted by the 'Time for Me' aspect of the programme.
- IT skills and communications.
- Equality training: opening an understanding and discussion of women's position in society and discussing topics of women and leadership.
- Career planning and goal setting including CV building, interview skills, and job seeking skills.
- Guest speakers were invited to some programmes to share their skills, linking what is available in the community.
- Progression: Direction, Guidance, and Planning Pathways.
- Support such as childcare, computer access, and referrals were available.
- Mentoring was an ongoing aspect throughout the programme.
- Other opportunities previously offered include International Women's Day events, outings, theatre trips, and other workshops on offer at a given local Project.

There is also access to third level education within a community setting. A progression opportunity is a Level 7 certificate in Women, Gender, and Social Justice designed and delivered in partnership with University College Dublin (UCD). This programme brings the UCD campus to Ronanstown and exposes the community to the possibility of third level education. Since 1999, WCI Ronanstown has celebrated 181 graduates, graduating at both Certificate and Diploma Levels. This year, 2023, marks 25 years of celebrations for WCI Ronanstown, and they are currently contacting all past participants. WCI Ronanstown hopes to do a survey to see the impact of this programme and bring everyone together to celebrate it.

WCI Ronanstown offers information and support to women from the local community. Equality and capacity building are central to the work. Specific attention is invested in combating poverty, addressing isolation, supporting parenting alone families, young mothers, women from new communities, and older people. There is a creche facility for children aged 2 years to 5 years that offers an early year's programme. WCI Ronanstown heavily subsidises childcare for learners, with the maximum anyone can pay is €5.50 per day per child. In programmes such as STEPS for women, childcare is free, as childcare is recognised by certain funders as a key enabler of women's participation.

Sources of Funding

Ronanstown Women's CDP owns the house in Collinstown, Clondalkin. The organisation relies on a range of grants and funding sources to support the work in service and support to the community of Clondalkin and the surrounding area. WCI Ronanstown has built a strong relationship with Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board, who provide tutors for programmes that are delivered in the centre.

Funding sources are outlined below:

- Core staff wages and overheads are paid at a national level through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth.
- Creche and staff wages are funded by Pobal.
- Other funding sources include grants from South Dublin County Council (LCDC Community



- Enhancement Fund) for building upkeep, Department of Foreign Affairs – Reconciliation Fund for Bonding Bridging and Weaving All Island Project, and Age Action for programme funding.
- Other funding streams that support Women Gender and Social Justice over the past 25 years are as follows: most recently, Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB) – Reach Fund, Microsoft, Intel and ESB.
 - European Funding supported the STEPS Programme through the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of the Programme for Employability, Inclusion, and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2022, through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth.

2. Methodology

The Community Education Coordinator at WCI Ronanstown shared information about the research and its purpose with colleagues. They then identified community education participants, both past and present, who were lone parents and invited them to participate in the research through a series of focus groups and interviews.

The CES researcher met with a cohort of current community education participants and a cohort of past participants. The methodology included a mix of focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The focus groups were semi-structured and participatory and approximately 90 minutes long. They were designed to encourage participants to share their journey through and experiences of community education, including the benefits, enablers, and ripple effects on their children and families. The one-to-one interviews followed the same themes, inviting participants to share their own stories of their community education journeys.

All research participants were briefed about the research and assured that their personal details would be kept safe and confidential. All gave their consent to participate.

3. Current Community Education Participants

People who were participating in community education at WCI Ronanstown at the time of this research were invited to attend a focus group on 19th April 2023. This section sets out the results of the thematic analysis of the stories shared by the women during the focus group. A selection of anonymized quotes portrays the voices of the women.

Profile of Participants

A total of four women attended the focus group, and two more participated subsequently in one-to-one interviews. The women ranged in age from their early thirties through to their sixties. The majority were Irish, and one was born in the UK. All were lone parents, caring for children and grandchildren, having separated from their partners/husbands. Some had experienced difficult and abusive relationships with previous partners/husbands and two were caring for children with additional needs.

Awareness of and referral into WCI Ronanstown

The main way that the participants found out about and were encouraged to attend Ronanstown was through friends and/or family members who knew about and/or are involved in Women's Collective Ireland. Some found out about the courses through social media (e.g., Instagram), and many mentioned how the encouraging wording of the advertisements about the courses caught



their eye and captured their imagination at a moment in time. From their first point of contact with WCI Ronanstown, the women reported feeling a sense of encouragement and being welcomed.

'It was not the education that brought me here; initially, it was the welcome – someone taking the time to talk to me, welcome me, and support me – that was the starting point – the feeling of belonging.'

Starting Point

Participants shared the starting point of their community education journey and what had stirred them to begin. The women were attracted by the ways in which community education fit with their lives as lone parents and their caring duties, particularly for those with children with additional needs. This includes the timing of courses and classes that fit around the school day and term, as well as the understanding and flexibility that are offered. The community setting was noted as an attractor in terms of its accessibility and trusted reputation within the community.

'It is so handy and just around the corner. It's local, and that is great and makes it possible for me.'

'The flexibility of community education takes the stress away and makes it possible for me.'

Timing was also named as a factor, timing in their life situation and psychological readiness on the part of the women, including strong signs of self-motivation and the impulse to seek personal development, education, and their own personal growth. Some mentioned their growing realisation that their children were growing up, and so they were preparing for a future when they would no longer be caring full-time for their children. This was the beginning of a shift in their focus from caring for others to caring for themselves.

Each woman had a story about how their community education journey began. One woman shared that she had begun with an introduction to women's studies; another was involved in a cross-border project bringing women from both sides of the border together; and another had entered through a Community Employment Scheme. The majority were participating in the Level 7- UCD Programme, having progressed over time from other programmes and accredited courses, such as introduction to women's studies and the STEPS for women programme.

Enablers

Participants were invited to reflect on the different types of support that enabled their engagement with community education in Ronanstown. The following are the main enablers that support participation:

- The warm welcome and culture of solidarity and encouragement within Ronanstown.
- The open and inclusive atmosphere and the sense of being understood rather than judged.



- Flexibility and blended nature of the learning, with options to do some of the classes online.
- Peer support, camaraderie, and sharing of information and experiences.
- Childcare.
- Laptop loan and IT support.

'There is no judgement, and the setting helps you to be your true self, to relax, and to learn.'

'From the start, you just know and feel that your situation, as a lone parent, is acknowledged. You know you have this going on in the background. They accept that you are on your own and trying to do everything, and this is not baggage; it is what it is; you know, it's the reality of our lives.'

'There is so much love and support in everything we do here, from making a cup of tea to sitting with someone. I feel blessed that I'm here. I'm blessed that I'm around such supportive women.'

'The support is as good as therapy, being with like-minded people who are happy for the slightest little thing you achieve, it doesn't matter if it's an art class; it is a step towards other things.'

Impact on Lone Parents

Participants were asked to reflect on the difference that participating in community education has made to their lives and the lives of their children.

All expressed appreciation for their experience with community education and gratitude to their tutors. All cited examples of the positive impact that community education has had on their lives. This includes a noticeable positive shift in their self-confidence, particularly for those who have had their confidence shattered by a difficult life experience. The women valued the friendships, peer support, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to the development of self-confidence.

Other benefits noted include an improvement in their financial situation, promotion, and progression in their work and employment prospects. Those in paid work progressed to better paid, more satisfying work and a sense of personal mastery. Learning occurs with ease and naturally through shared experiences and what one woman described as engaged pedagogy.



'I love it [community education], and I've had a promotion in work since I started the course. I work in homeless services, and mainly migrant women.'

'It has been a huge benefit to me personally and financially in terms of the way I manage my life.'

The women shared how their experience and learning is opening their minds to possibilities of more education, further training, and belief in their own potential and choices in life for themselves and their children. They described a shift in their perspective, greater self-understanding, and appreciation of wider society. They described a sense of knowing they have changed in terms of their outlook and what they choose to place their attention on and set their sights on in terms of employment in the future.

'Community education has opened my eyes.'

'It is totally different now, even what I listen to, what I want to be reading, and what I prioritize my time with.'

'I could get a cleaning job somewhere, but I don't want to do that. I need something to keep my brain healthy and get a good job for when the kids have moved on. It's more about me and obviously money as well, but maybe more about my brain and not being stuck in a horrible job. I am making new friends. It has opened my mind to a lot of things.'

Their experience with community education over many years has changed how the women view their role in society and how they act as citizens and members of their community. It has brought new feelings of empowerment, as described below by one woman:

'Empowerment for me is a sense of being seen — that to leave a relationship to leave your home too. I would have had all that in the back of my head as a list of negatives, and then someone here in Ronanstown would say, did you actually do that? Were you brave enough to do that, and it's huge to have your strength affirmed and the shift in your thinking that occurs leading to a different way of viewing things. I could feel myself and my thinking change to thoughts of possibility, and what else am I strong enough to do now?'



One woman expanded to describe a deeper understanding of her own experience of abuse and how community education has supported her understanding of social justice.

'I did not even realise until the course, that I was struggling with certain areas of my life. Sometimes it is only when you are shown by others, I think, especially with the feminist element in the course, that you realise that things are not right, you know, I'm not the only one that thought that what happened was wrong because it was fundamentally wrong. It wasn't just wrong for me. That behavior was wrong, wrong, you know.'

Participants indicated that they feel more aware of themselves as women and their power to do good, share information, and support others, particularly other women who are on similar paths. It is as if their experience of solidarity and being supported has ignited their own capacity to emulate these behaviours.

'Communication skills are such a big benefit, and the language that we have now helps us to understand trauma, and to express it, and relay it back to people, and their families and the community.'

'I purposely go out and spread information that I have learnt through my experience as a mother of children with additional needs.'

'It is the sharing of information and experiences that will make someone else's journey that bit easier.'

'I think being in places like WCI Ronanstown, there is just a huge sense of respect for you, and it's expected of you too, to have respect and compassion for other people in the real world.'

Participants also mentioned the benefits of being in a safe group and the natural sharing of information that occurs within the group setting. They cited examples of finding information that they would never have known relating to topics such as health, menopause, form filling, applying for carers allowance, and where to access specific support for children with additional needs.



Ripple Effect

Participants were invited to share the difference they believe coming to WCI Ronanstown and participating in community education has made in the lives of their children.

The women described their feelings of satisfaction with being role models and encouraging their children and grandchildren to engage fully in education. They recounted how they enjoy and feel empowered, demonstrating to their children that women/ mothers can follow their dreams in terms of participating in education at any stage of life and finding meaningful employment. They shared how they feel very purposeful in this regard and believe that their restored confidence has strengthened their relationships with their children and overall communication within the family. One reported that she has noticed that her children are more independent, self-sufficient, and helpful around the house since she has returned to education.

'It feels good to be able to be on a level with my children as well, and now they tell me stuff, and we discuss things.'

'I love learning and the time for myself, and my children are more independent now; they have become great cooks because I've been studying. They have learned how to cook, and they know how to use a washing machine. They know how to do all this because of my studying and return to work.'

4. Past Participants

People who were past participants in community education at WCI Ronanstown were invited to attend a focus group on the 26th April 2023. This section sets out the results of the thematic analysis of the stories shared by the women during the focus group. A selection of anonymized quotes portrays the voices of the women.

Profile of Participants

Five past participants of community education attended the focus group at Ronanstown on 26th April 2023. Three others participated in one-to-one interviews in the week after the focus group.

The majority were women from the local community. The age range of participants was between thirty and sixty-five years. The courses completed by the participants included a range of hobbies and courses that explore creativity, the STEPS Programme, and the level 7 outreach programme from University College Dublin (UCD). The majority had started their journey over a cup of tea at Ronanstown, easing in through a short creative course or personal development programme before moving on to an accredited level 3 or 5. All were at a point in their journey where they had completed the Level 7 – UCD Programme or the equivalent, and one was preparing to start a master's degree in social policy.



Awareness of and referral into Ronanstown

The main way that participants became aware of WCI Ronanstown was through word of mouth, usually from a friend or neighbour who had discreetly encouraged checking out the range of courses on offer at Ronanstown.

Starting Point

The women shared what initially attracted them to community education. This included the trusted location, the warm welcome and reputation of Ronanstown, and the accessibility and timing of the courses. The invitational and encouraging ethos drew them in from the outset, despite their reluctance and fears. All mentioned the warm welcome and the cup of tea, which was described as:

'...as a symbol of warmth and welcome, someone making an effort, it is a symbol of solidarity and support and conveys an environment of trust - breaking bread with someone.'

'A cup of tea changed my life; the love and the care saved my life; they welcomed and accepted me and my child.'

'The hours and accessibility of the course was perfect for me and my situation at the time, with myself and my child at home.'

The women recalled the beginning of their community education journey, and for most, it was over ten years ago and began with a short course that got them started.

'After the end of that first short course, I could feel my head lifting and lifting and my confidence returning.'

Enablers

The women shared a range of factors that enabled their participation and completion of community education. The dominant theme was their experience of encouragement, the safe and nurturing atmosphere, psychosocial support, and peer support, encouraging each other along. One woman described how she had never felt supported and encouraged before, and the impact that the encouragement of tutors and peers had on her was life changing so much that she is now considering embarking on a master's degree.

'The encouragement was phenomenal, and I had never experienced that feeling of encouragement before in my life.'



'Someone giving you support and caring encouragement, particularly when you are not used to it, makes all the difference.'

'It is the little things, like the crackers and the cheese, and the feeling of being welcomed and nurtured – feelings that I had not felt before in my life before Ronanstown.'

The tutors and facilitators were noted for their excellent tuition, kindness, and encouragement to stick with the learning and to be open to possibilities. One woman recalled how firmly and consistently she was encouraged to progress to Level 7, as if the tutors could see potential in her and other women that they were unable to see in themselves at that time.

'I would not have reached this stage (starting a master's degree), if I had not come to Ronanstown I would not be doing what I am doing now.'

'Your name is on a seat in UCD; if you want it, it is there for you, and if you want to do it, you can do it; it is up to you to go and get it.'

The diversity of women, the sharing of experiences, and the role models of those who had gone before were named as enablers.

Impact

Participants were asked to reflect on the difference that participating in community education has made to their and their children's lives. All have achieved level 7 qualifications, and all are actively pursuing careers in areas such as community development, social care, leadership, and social justice. All noted the significant impact that their engagement in community education has had on their sense of self and their confidence. This was described as a slow and steady, incremental process of rebuilding lost confidence.

'I just felt I wasn't fulfilled before. Personally, I always felt I wanted something more, education-wise. Then I did the introduction to women, gender, and social justice a couple of years ago, and Oh my God. It's like I was hooked. I went on to do the UCD programme, and I ended up getting a job in community development working with women, and I was like, I'm home. I'm home. I am with my people.'



'It is different now - a different awakening and sense of confidence.'

The group expressed appreciation and gratitude for their experience with community education, the support received, and the opportunities that were opened for them. Many became emotional, reflecting on and recognising how far they had come on their journey, from crisis to a sense of strength and possibility. The group described positive changes in their outlook, attitudes, and self-belief.

'Women supporting women, I would have been afraid to change, and now I do not mind change; I welcome it.'

'I have a completely different outlook now; through community education, I began to see possibilities that I did not see before. When education is broken down, put in front of you, and explained to you in an accessible way by people who know, and you trust their experience.'

One woman shared how her participation in community education has impacted her mental health positively. She recalled how vulnerable she had been when she first started her community education journey, over ten years ago. She had experienced acute anxiety and the real threat of becoming homeless, alone with her three children.

'The mental health benefits of community education were big for me because I was on my own with three children and we were becoming homeless, so I was on autopilot for years, like trying to buy a house and organize the children. It was the little courses that I was doing when they were in school, that supported me and prepared me for further courses, and now I am working in a job I love.'

Another woman shared how her literacy has improved; she is confident in her reading and writing skills now and in her own capacity to learn and develop.

'I left school very early, at age 14, and was very bad at spelling and a lot of things I did not do because of this, the little courses helped me to feel confident again.'



'All the courses that I did over the years helped me to slowly realise what is possible from education – I had never known this before because of conditioning and where I grew up.'

Another woman described a new vitality and motivation she noticed within herself to continue to learn, give back, and pay forward through her work within the community.

'For me now, I have the self-belief and the confidence to give things a go, and my fear and doubt has gone. I can take a knock now and get back up, whereas before I would not have even tried.'

'I feel my language has changed, and my perception of failure has changed now that I am more educated.'

'I am a warrior for women and diversity now.'

The women reflected on how their experience of women's community education, particularly Level 7 - Women Gender and Social Justice - has opened them to possibilities and helped them see their own potential. They believe they have gained a deeper understanding of themselves and clarity about their own motivations and desires. They also reported feelings of strength and resilience to persevere with life's challenges. One woman shared how it has stirred a shift in her mindset and way of thinking and viewing the world, from one of fear and doubt to one of hope and possibility. She described community education as a form of therapy, personal development, and transformation.

'It is what it does to your mind and how it opens you up to possibility.'

'I will always be grateful to Ronanstown.'

Ripple Effect

Participants were invited to share the difference they believe coming to Ronanstown has made to the lives of their children. They described how they now feel that they can trust in education, and believe that it is good, and are encouraging their children to participate and complete their education. They noticed having higher hopes for their children and their education. Some reported feeling more secure and better off financially, bringing a sense of independence that ripples through the family.



| *'I am not in poverty anymore; I am prospering now.'*

One woman shared how community education has resulted in her becoming employed, earning more, and securing a home for her family.

| *'I am not homeless now; I have a home, and I am full time employed – all that happened as a result of Ronanstown and my participation in community education.'*

The women described their growing awareness of experiences and issues in society and their understanding of social justice. This has helped them to parent more purposefully whilst also looking after themselves. They discussed how they instill values in their children and appreciate education and good employment, breaking generational cycles of trauma and poor education. One woman described how the diversity of her connections, through community education, has instilled respect and appreciation for diversity in her children.

| *'As a lone parent, you are trying to do little jobs to keep your life together, and yet you want more – you inherit caring role as the lone parent – you end up deeper and deeper in the caring role – and it is only when you do community education that this want or desire to care for yourself bubbles up.'*

| *'You can make something work; community education allows you to make things work because it is flexible and fits with the reality of your life as a mother – because women and mothers are involved in the design of community education.'*

| *'All the little things come together eventually.'*

5. Facilitator/Tutor Perspective

The CES researcher facilitated a consultation with tutors/facilitators over zoom on 5th April 2023. Four tutors participated along with the coordinator. The group included community-based tutors and the university-based Associate Professor who leads the Level 7 – Women Gender, and Social Studies⁴.

⁴ Director of the Gender Studies Outreach Programme for over 20 years in UCD.



The tutors have been involved in community education or related community development for many years. Four have come through community education, and three are graduates of Women, Gender, and Social Studies. They bring a wealth of qualifications and experience from other educational and community settings and further and higher education. All are highly committed designers, deliverers, and advocates of community education.

The discussion centered around understanding community education, the approach, ethos, and values; the benefits and barriers that participants encounter; and their vision for the future of community education. This section sets out the views of tutors.

Terminology and unique features of community education

The tutors noted that the distinctive features of community education are its accessibility, flexibility to be participant-led, and offering a space for participants to become comfortable and feel safe and supported as they learn. In many cases, it involves overlaying previous poor school experiences with more positive and supportive ones, and this has a particular resonance for lone parents.

'There is a sense of safety in community education that you would not have in another third level institution. The learners feel validated that their experience is valid. Safety is a huge factor to support people to step into the new space where they might feel vulnerable.'

It is a holistic way of teaching, incorporating a check-in piece and emphasizing wellbeing and the use of creative arts, poetry, and music. All classes or sessions start with supporting participants to relax in the learning space.

'A key quality is that tutors recognize that each woman that comes through the door is unique and to see where they are at and be part of their journey with them, to be with them on that journey, to know what their struggles are, and to create a safe space for them to be in and to feel welcomed.'

'A way of being with reverence or consciousness when you are with a group.'

The tutors believe in all participants, sense their potential from the outset, and look forward to getting to know them and reading their assignments. Time is invested in developing a connection with all the students.

'It feels quite personal and authentic – there is no power dynamic – student and facilitator are equal and both human.'



'We believe in the women, and believe in their transformation, and take it seriously because there is so much at stake. We know how much they have risked stepping into the space, and we respect this. The conditions for community education to be transformative are well set.'

According to the tutors, community education is intentionally designed to be accessible and welcoming. Support manifests as a warm and welcoming environment, continuous encouragement, and practical help, and guidance with information, laptop loans, mentoring, study support, peer support, and childcare. The emphasis and ethos are generating a learning culture in which people feel seen and valued. The model of collaboration that exists between University College Dublin and WCI Ronanstown offers community-based access to third level education to people within the community. The programme is a community-university partnership drawing on and sharing the specific strengths of both arms. UCD provides academic expertise and governance, and WCI Ronanstown, the community partner, provides the community setting, sense of belonging, and psychosocial support.

'The access is about how we open the door fully and wide and bring participants in – it is not just about the door; it is about drawing people in, and bringing them through the door, and welcoming them. Then we ask them about themselves and their story, and what would encourage and support them to participate and stay.'

'We offer childcare, links to other services, resources, and supports, including counselling services, library donated by UCD, and finances/grants. Childcare is a biggie.'

The tutors believe that this pre-development is a vital component of community education, and this can take the form of a personal development or foundational programme such as STEPS. Predevelopment work is an important part of the beginning stage of community education. It is time-consuming and often invisible work. Community education is a lifelong process of personal development.



'Confidence is key at the start of the process – many participants do not see education as something for them – and this might mean they do a personal development course at the start, and this helps them to see that education is for them.'

'The journey begins and does not end – it is an ongoing lifelong journey of learning.'

Benefits to lone parents

The tutors/facilitators believe, based on their experience, that the main benefit to lone parents participating in community education is that it is life changing and transformative. The shared experience and coming together through community education affect each person individually, with ripples of positivity through the community. The fact that community education is community based and easily accessible helps draw lone parents in. It is a gentle entry into the world of learning and personal development.

The tutors see community education as a powerful vehicle for personal growth, progression, and transformation. The movement through community education varies and can be a slow and meandering process facilitating incremental personal development, growth, and progression to further training, education, and employment. Participants become role models and champions of education within their communities.

'If you can see it, you can be it, and they become champions in their own community who have begun their journey and the stories about education that they are spreading in the community.'

6. Vignettes

The following vignettes offer insight into the transformational power of community education and how it impacts the lives of participants. The vignettes highlight the importance of the ethos of community education, the quality of facilitators, the wraparound support offered, and the incremental impact of being engaged in community education. These vignettes are real life stories adjusted to guarantee anonymity for the women who shared their journeys.



Vignette 1: 'Monica' (Pseudonym)

This vignette highlights the incremental journey through community education, as a starting point and support for a return to mainstream education.

Main Points:

- Self-motivation and readiness to return to education with careful timing to align with caring duties.
- The draw of the reputation of WCI Ronanstown and its location in the community.
- A child with a diagnosis of autism who is now in late teens, and Monica was ready to return to education.
- Caring patterns and commitments have kept Monica busy throughout her life, until she is now ready to attend to her own education, dreams, and progression.
- Through community education and related support, Monica experiences a *gradual* shift in self-confidence, capacity, and clarity about her needs and ambitions.

Starting point

Monica is a lone parent in her late forties with four children. Her life, until recently, has been characterised by caring roles, including caring for elderly parents until they died and for her daughter, who was diagnosed with autism and is now in her teens. Monica worked nights for over twenty years in healthcare, nursing homes, and other care settings. This choice of work was determined by her desire to be around during the day for her child, so other forms of more regular nine-to-five employment were not possible.

Following the deaths of her parents and her youngest daughter reaching secondary school, Monica noticed that she had more time and freedom from caring duties. This stirred her to begin exploring her own education and progression prospects. Timing and readiness were important factors for Monica – the timing of her children's stage of development – all in their late teenage years, combined with her own readiness and drive to receive an education.

Monica happened to bump into a woman in her local shop, and they got talking and discussing life in general. The woman was aware of Monica's family situation as a lone parent of a child with additional needs. The woman discreetly mentioned WCI Ronanstown and the range of courses and supports. This chance encounter sparked an impulse in Monica and activated her motivation to explore the possibility of returning to education.

Monica loves learning and felt a desire to return to education. However, she did not believe she was smart enough and never thought returning to education was a possibility for her. She found out about the STEPS Programme through social media and was instantly drawn to the idea of returning to education. The low cost of the course, along with the flexible hours, meant that she felt it was possible for her.

'You forget who you are when you are caring for others, I wanted to find myself and be more than just a mother.'

Benefits to self

Monica shared that she feels that the small and carefully sequenced steps of community education worked for her and supported her to progress at her own pace and without feeling overwhelmed. She experienced the tutors as clear and encouraging and their support sparked and encouraged a deeper sense of self-motivation within her. This helped overlay previous experiences of secondary school which were difficult for Monica. She describes the supportive environment at WCI Ronanstown as facilitating a gentle build-up of positive energy and a gradual shift in her power. This transformation means that Monica now feels able to make decisions to support her own future and progress further with her education. The class discussions and sharing helped her to understand her own life and appreciate what she has done and the skills that she already has. The fears about her own ability started to fall away and going to college began to take shape as a real possibility.

'The preparation for college really changed me, and I began to be more mindful of myself and to put my needs and ambitions first.'

'The way the tutors facilitated our learning was absolutely fantastic; they listened, encouraged, and were there after class for one-to-one support – we just had to get ourselves to class, and after that, the magic unfolded.'

'It has opened my mind to my own potential and to life's potential. I cried when I achieved an A in one of my assignments.'

'I realise that if I had had more support as a younger person, my life could have gone down a different road.'

'I have become clearer, more assertive, and more focused on what I want to do with my life.'

Benefits to Children

Monica has noticed that since she started community education, her children place a firmer value on education. They are watching her study and are interested in what she is learning, and they want to discuss this with her. They see the changes in her confidence and her enhanced sense of satisfaction with life. Monica's youngest child, who is still in secondary school, has started talking about college and going to college – words and intentions that Monica had not heard her voice before. Monica's son, who left school before his Leaving Certificate has recently returned to education and started a course. Monica believes that she is a role model for her son, and it was her example that spurred him to do this.

'If you can do it, I can do it.'

Challenges

Monica noted the challenges that lone parents have to overcome to return to education. These include the challenges of finding accessible and affordable childcare, a lack of support and/or low expectations of family, and where you come from/geography. Monica noticed that she and some of her peers struggled with writing essays and assignments and welcomed the support from tutors around academic writing and study skills.

Hopes

Monica expressed hope for her future as she prepares to commence her degree in Social Care. She described how she can see a possible pathway to go on from the STEPS Programme and complete a degree and a masters. She is exploring these options and feels that all this is possible because of the support that she has received from the people in WCI Ronanstown.

*'I feel my life is getting better; I am happier in myself.
Before community education, my life looked so bleak.'*

Monica expressed gratitude to WCI Ronanstown and the tutors, who have been such a support and inspiration to her.



Vignette 2: 'Maria' (*Pseudonym*)

This vignette highlights the transformative power of community education to support lone parents to rebuild confidence and self-belief to return to education. Access to childcare and the ethos of support and personal development are the building blocks for the journey which is composed of incremental steps.

Main Points:

- Childcare is a vital support for lone parents to return to and complete community education.
- Self-motivation as an activator, when combined with the ethos of encouragement and accessibility of community education to begin an education journey, is the magic formula.
- The gradual, incremental nature of community education – the building blocks of confidence – personal development as a starting point.
- Involvement in and plans to continue serving her community up to and well beyond retirement.

Starting point

Maria is a lone parent in her late fifties. Maria had her first child in her early 20's and became a lone parent in her late twenties. Maria knew that full-time college would not have been an option for her, so part-time community based / outreach education was the only way for her given her circumstances.

Maria started on a Community Employment (CE) Scheme when her first daughter was about one year old. Maria recalled doing community development studies on an outreach basis at the Waterford Institute of Technology. In 2006, Maria got a job as a development worker in a community resource centre in Dublin City. This was a direct result of the CE scheme and personal development.

Enablers

Maria recalls that the features of community education that attracted her were access to onsite childcare and the flexibility of the hours both during the CE scheme and the community education programmes. The fact that community education was free and that at that time she received a social welfare payment made it possible for Maria to participate and continue.

Maria believes that the journey was possible and made easier through the combination of her own determination and self-motivation and the support provided. For Maria, it was a very different environment from her second level school experience. The community education environment was safe and encouraging, and there were expectations that the women would enjoy the learning and progress.



'The creche was a major support, along with support typing up the assignments, printing out and proofreading, the chat with other women, and space to express safely the stress of deadlines – having lunch together...'

'I did not enjoy secondary school very much; I would think I am dyslexic but gathered skills along the way. I did not have concentration skills, and school was not a very nurturing environment. If I was put under pressure, I clammed up as a child; school did not feel like a safe place for me.'

'The expectations were low for women; school was not a good experience then; there were very low or no expectations of us.'

Benefits to self

For Maria, the main difference that community education has made in her life is that she is now employed in community development work that she enjoys. The personal development components that were part of community education helped Maria build lifetime habits of self-care and the sense of self-confidence and resilience that have carried her through her life so far.

'I felt safe to express and to process the content that we were going through and learning – I felt fire in my belly and became more self-aware, and my development encouraged my own children into education.'

Maria believes that the cumulative effect of all the short personal development courses prepared her for longer, bigger academic courses. She looks back and sees that she moved along through the levels, accumulating skills, and confidence along the way.

'I remember participating in improving English classes, which was essentially literacy training – this was a first step towards me working towards my Level 7 degree in Social Policy at University College Dublin.'

The support that Maria experienced at Ronanstown included access to books, resources, and handouts onsite, as well as the power of the group and peer support.

'We did go to UCD library, but we did not have to go there to access material and resources as everything was available at Ronanstown.'

'We were encouraged to study together and support each other.'

'The way of being makes a difference – the welcome, the smile, effort around the tea breaks, and the relationships – even for a two-hour class, we purposefully built in time to socialise and allow conversations to happen and friendships to develop.'

On reflection, Maria feels that she was drawn into women's studies and social justice, and her interest in community development work has grown slowly and gently over time.

'It was incremental development through the certificate courses at the community level.'

'There was no history of third level in my family; community education opened up that world for me.'

Benefits to Children

Maria is certain that her own journey through community education over the years has influenced her children's interest in and commitment to their own education. She recalls the shifts over time in her own attitude toward education and a growing sense of what is possible. Maria shared how she was the first in her family to continue her education to degree level, and her own daughter went to college and achieved her master's degree.

'If you help a woman, you help her family – there is a whole ripple effect.'

'When I graduated out of UCD, I was determined my children would go to college. I even started saving for third level and encouraged all my children in their education.'

Hopes for the future

Maria has completed her degree in Social Justice and Women's Studies and has plans to continue learning. She also plans to continue working in community development and is now volunteering on a number of Board structures at local level.

Maria was delighted to be invited to participate in this research and glad to share her experience of the power of community education. Maria considers it a lifelong journey of learning and giving back to her community.

'I look forward to entering retirement and joining the active retirement group in Ronanstown. I look forward to being in community groups, supporting women and men (through the men's sheds). It is not until you move into a time in your life – becoming a mother and a grandmother – that you realise that if you know the resources in the community and link into what you need, you will be supported. Sometimes you do not know what you need until you encounter challenges; you cannot put a price on community education and community supports.'

Ronanstown is a home from home; there is support everywhere; it is about relationships and the support given

Participant Feedback on the research process

Participants were invited to give their feedback on their experience contributing to the research. Overall, it was considered a positive experience. Participants welcomed the opportunity to participate and were eager to share their expectations of how their feedback would be used to inform policy. Some offered suggestions around better financing for community education, ensuring community houses in more locations around Ireland, an increase in the allowance for CE participants, and more financial incentives for lone parents to engage in community education.

'Everyone needs support at some point in their lives.'

'We have the opportunity to use our voice today, so it is worth investing in these services and community education as nurturing and preventative measures.'

7. Conclusion

The overall message arising from this case study is the transformative power of community education and the impact that it has on the lives of those who engage in and advance on the journey.

The effects of participation in community education can be seen across a range of policy domains, including social inclusion, health and wellbeing, mental health, education, social networks, the labour market, housing, and family support. Attention is drawn to the holistic nature of community education and its subtle power to draw people in and gently activate and support personal development and progression. The collaboration that exists between University College Dublin and WCI Ronanstown offers community-based access to third level education to people within the community.

The power of a warm welcome, wraparound supports including counselling, tutor qualities and dedication, and the feminist and community development ethos is evident. The culture and practice of psychosocial support are recurring themes, with encouragement being one of the main drivers of engagement, participation, completion of community education, and political and civic engagement. The incremental nature of community education, the importance of personal development and access to onsite childcare are highlighted.





Women's
Collective
Ireland



The Centre
for Effective
Services



Produced by Centre for Effective Services, 2023.

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