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## *An insider perspective of lifelong learning in Singapore: beyond the economic perspective*

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# AN INSIDER PERSPECTIVE OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN SINGAPORE: BEYOND THE ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

## VOLUME ONE
## OF TWO

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# DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents my work and it has not been submitted to this or any other institution in application for admission to a degree, diploma or any other institution.

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and write and continues to practise her writing skills everyday, is an exemplary lifelong learner. My husband Lum Sung has been supportive in every way throughout the years. My three sons, Enhan, Enhui and Enming, assisted with the computer work whenever I called for help. My sister Siew Luan and niece Emily volunteered to proof-read and format all my six assignments and this thesis. Hence, this thesis is indeed the result of love, encouragement and support from all my loved ones.

**SIEW KHENG NG**

# AN INSIDER PERSPECTIVE OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN SINGAPORE: BEYOND THE ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

## ABSTRACT

This study traces the learning journeys of a group of people who overcame economic, social and/or educational disadvantages to engage in lifelong learning in Singapore. Studies in a number of countries have shown that people from economically, socially and/or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented in post-school learning. However, in every country, there is a small group that has succeeded in overcoming economic, social and psychological odds to engage in lifelong learning, and in this thesis such a group will be investigated in Singapore.

In 2002, twenty-three people within this category were selected by the community as lifelong learners in Singapore. Thirteen of them volunteered for this study. Data collected through in-depth interviews were analysed using grounded theory methodology.

The model of lifelong learning derived from emergent common themes shows that while it is true that utilitarian reasons usually accounted for the initial decision to engage in post-school learning, learning journeys were sustained by the development of learning careers, through the strengthening of learner identities and the development of learning dispositions.

Sociocultural factors, such as presence of positive environments and supportive relationships with significant others, also influenced learning decisions. The findings thus confirm recent studies of the need for a sociocultural theory of lifelong learning and a more holistic approach to lifelong learning.

There are important implications for Singapore which has achieved rapid economic growth since independence by adopting a pragmatic approach. Official discourses of lifelong learning are based on human capital theory. Hence, lifelong learning is seen as an investment in human capital, and often equated with skills upgrading for economic and political survival.

The implications of this study are, however, that instead of focusing on the political and economic aspects of lifelong learning, future initiatives should examine other micro-contexts like family, work, schools and other institutions, with special focus on how people within these institutions can help support lifelong learning. It is also evident from the findings, that lifelong learning should be seen in its whole spectrum, as learning across the lifespan, from cradle to grave (lifelong learning) and learning that covers formal, non-formal and informal learning (lifewide learning).

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# SECTION I – CHAPTERS ONE, TWO AND THREE

This thesis is divided into three sections with a total of nine chapters. Section I consists of the first three chapters: the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), the literature analysis (Chapter 2) and the methodology chapter (Chapter 3).

# 1  CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

## 1.1  Introduction

This introductory chapter states the research topic, which is a study of the factors that motivate some successful lifelong learners in Singapore. It explains why this topic is chosen and lists the research questions that frame the study. It further explains the significance of the research.

It starts by discussing the background of lifelong learning in the international and Singapore contexts and explains why an old concept like lifelong learning has gained international recognition in recent years. While there are many reasons for its recognition by almost all developing and developed countries, the concept is narrowly conceived in most countries. Policy interest in most countries is usually confined to that of human capital development for economic survival.

In Singapore too, the dominant discourse of lifelong learning, following the pragmatic approach adopted by the government since independence, is shaped by economic imperatives and framed in terms of human capital theory. Lifelong learning is advocated for the primary purpose of ensuring economic survival in the face of global competition. Hence, lifelong learning is associated with training for employment purposes.

However, survey results conducted in 2004 (Ministry of Manpower 2005) confirm observations elsewhere that the provision of learning opportunities does not, of itself, create participants who want to engage in education (Gorard and Selwyn 2005a; 2005b; Coffield 2000a; 2000b). Making learning opportunities available does

not create the structurally located dispositions involved in participation (Rees et al. 1997; Gorard et al. 1999b).

McGivney's review of literature (1993) on education and training and Sargant's study on wider participation in learning by adults (1991) provide evidence that older adults, those with limited initial educational experience, and adults from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are all under-represented in the take-up of learning opportunities.

Later studies have also found that adults who come from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds and those who left school early are generally under-represented as participants in education later in life. (National Adult Learning Survey 2002; NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2004; Gorard and Selwyn 2005)

In Singapore, for example, only 15% of those with lower secondary education participated in job-related training over the 12-month period ending June 2004. Among the non-learners in 2004, 17% indicated they had no motivation to go for training (Ministry of Manpower 2005:7).

In the year 2000, for the first time in Singapore's history, twenty-three people were chosen and awarded the Singapore Lifelong Learner Awards in a nation-wide contest organised by the national radio company. All these learners were chosen based on the criterion that they have succeeded in engaging in lifelong learning despite having to overcome great odds in their lives, which included adverse social and economic backgrounds and/or low initial education. Thirteen of these learners volunteered for this

study which aimed to explore factors that motivate and sustain their learning journeys.

## 1.2 Background

### 1.2.1 Lifelong Learning – an old concept that has gained international recognition

While many may perceive its origin as being in the 1970s when there were a number of highly publicised studies undertaken by international organisations such as the UNESCO and the OECD, the concept of lifelong learning (or lifelong education as was used in earlier references) is as old as civilisation itself. Hawes asserts that "although the name may be new", people have long been aware that "everyone has always had to go on learning if one is to survive". (Hawes 1975:18)

He mentioned several countries in Asia and Africa where very strong traditions of lifelong learning were inherent in the structure of societies and many forms of education existed which provided for different groups to learn more at various stages in their lives. The older members of the extended family in Kenya, for example, provide instruction, the closeness and support to enable individuals to learn from one another. In Malaysia, learners of all ages meet to study the Quran and its application to their lives under the pondok system. (ibid:18-19).

Dave notes that lifelong learning is, furthermore, not necessarily a conscious process:

Lifelong learning was always going on in one form or another without it being a conscious act. This is because learning is natural for human beings at any stage of life,

and there is always a need to learn something new as long as one is active and alive. (Dave 1973:15)

However, when lifelong education is to be a part of the offer made by societies and not just as part of family life, it is important that it should be open to all. As early as 1919, an official committee in Britain argued,

Adult education must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there, nor as a thing which concerns only a short span of early adulthood, but is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong." (cited in Field 2000:4)

This notion of lifelong education, as something encouraged by societies and supported in practical ways by them, attained international recognition when several decades later, in 1965, UNESCO's International Committee for the Advancement of Adult Education reached the decision that the educational process should be regarded as continuing throughout an individual's life from his/her earliest childhood to the end of his/her days. However, it was only in the 1970s that the concept of "lifelong education" first attained a new significance and wider acceptance at a conscious and conceptual level following the proposal by the UNESCO Institute of Education in its publication "Learning To Be" that lifelong education be used as a "master concept in the years to come for both developed and developing countries" (UNESCO 1972:182).

## 1.2.2 Reasons for promoting lifelong learning

In recent years, the concept of lifelong learning (which replaces lifelong education) is widely accepted by all countries as a solution to the problems of an ever-

changing, late or post-modern globalised world that is characterised by risk, uncertainty and insecurity. (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992)

Many governments consider lifelong learning to be imperative in today's world because of changes caused by a number of economic, social or cultural factors. Economic factors include the effects of globalisation and technological changes, especially those due to advancement in information technology. Demographic changes, such as an aging population, also lead to changes in the labour market. Thus, the economic argument for lifelong learning stresses the need to ensure competitiveness through a regular supply of a well-trained labour force that can adjust constantly to all these changes.

Social and cultural changes are also brought about through globalisation and the stratification of societies. Social and cultural factors include the increasing income gap between those who have the skills required in the new economy and those who don't. Lifelong learning is seen as a solution to social exclusion as it offers individuals a chance to improve their skills and hence is seen as a means towards creating social cohesion within the societies that promote it. By encouraging critical learning, lifelong learning can also help resist the global cultural invasion that is likely to come through the airwaves and the Internet (Smith and Spurling 1999).

In many countries, however, the concept of lifelong learning is narrowly conceived. Much of the policy interest in lifelong learning is usually restricted to one of building up a nation's human capital to ensure economic competitiveness through developing a more productive and efficient workforce.

Thus, Field declares lifelong learning as the "new educational reality":

Lifelong learning – that is, the recognition that learning may stretch out across a lifetime – is the new educational reality. All around, politicians and others are repeatedly warning that knowledge is the most important source of future advantage. Human intellectual resources constitute a new 'grey capital' to set alongside the more familiar resources of land, labour and capital. Human capital, uniquely, is a resource that anyone may use and renew – and at the same time, must use and renew." (Field 2000:1)

## 1.2.3  The Economic Agenda

For many countries that have felt the heat of increasing competition arising from the globalisation, information and technological revolutions, the economic agenda features prominently in their plans for the creation of a learning society. The British Prime Minister Tony Blair stressed the role of education in economic development. He said, "Education is the best economic policy we have." (DfEE 1998)  To David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, "learning is the key to prosperity".  In the Green Paper presented to Parliament in February 1998, he "set out for consultation how learning throughout life will build human capital" (DfEE 1998).

In his inaugural address, Taiwanese President Shui Bian stressed the need to "encourage people to take up lifetime learning to creativity" since "human resources are Taiwan's most important resources.  Talent is the foundation of the country's competitiveness, while education is a long-term plan for empowering the people." (Chen 30 May 2000)

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At the Second APEC Educational Ministerial Meeting in Singapore, the ministers issued a joint statement on 7th April 2000 stressing that the meeting's theme, "Education for Learning Societies in the 21st Century", spoke of APEC's aspiration of providing education for all, for life. They further stressed that "education will help APEC to prosper and flourish as knowledge economies in a globalised world and advance the dynamism of member economies....It must equip the workforce with relevant knowledge and skills for the new economy and society of the 21st century". (APEC 30 May 2000).

Hence, the adoption of an economic agenda means that education is focused narrowly on the learning of generic vocational skills while lifelong learning is equated with training or skills-upgrading.

## 1.2.4 Human capital theory

According to human capital theory, human beings invest in themselves, through education, training, or other activities, which raise their future income by increasing their lifetime earnings. Society, in turn, benefits from increased productivity of educated individuals (Woodhall 1997).

Adam Smith (1776) first drew an analogy between investment in physical capital and investment in human capital when he noted that education helped to increase the productive capacity of workers, in the same way as the purchase of new machinery, or other forms of physical capital increased productive capacity of enterprises.

Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964) developed Adam Smith's original notion of investment in education and skill formation by suggesting that economic theory

can be extended to explain all human behaviour. According to this theory, the education system, and patterns within it, can best be understood as investments in increasing economic returns and in enhancing the place of individuals in the competitive labour market.

Coleman explains the concept succinctly:

Probably the most important and most original development in the economics of education in the past 30 years has been the idea that the concept of physical capital as embodied in tools, machines and other productive equipment can be extended to include human capital as well. Just as physical capital is created by changes in materials to form tools that facilitate production, human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways. (Coleman 1997:83)

While many countries have embraced the concept of human capital whole-heartedly, many writers have, however, criticised the overemphasis on human capital. See, for example, Coffield 1997a; Coffield 1997b; Bynner, Ferri and Shepherd 1997; Keep 1997 and Riddell et al. 1997. Some, for example, are concerned that a lifelong policy based on human capital theory will lead to further marginalisation of those who are already marginalised in society. As this is relevant to the group that is studied, this criticism will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

## 1.3    Lifelong learning in Singapore

### 1.3.1  Historical and political background of education and lifelong learning policies

Singapore is no exception to this almost universal consensus of the need to promote lifelong learning for the purpose of economic growth. In recent years, the government has adopted a very active approach in encouraging lifelong learning in Singapore. President S. R. Nathan of Singapore spelt out the government's agenda for the 21st century in this way: "Our workers will need training and retraining, to do new jobs requiring new skills. Otherwise as our economy advances, their old jobs will be phased out, and they may find themselves without jobs. Even skilled workers must refresh old skills and acquire new ones, to stay up to date. Hence we will promote lifelong learning." (The Straits Times, 5.10.99)

During the Asian economic crisis, Singapore's then deputy prime minister and defence minister, Dr. Tony Tan also said that "Singapore cannot rely on cost-cutting alone to survive the economic crisis but has to increase its skills content to stay highly competitive in the long haul" (The Straits Times, 10.11.98).

To understand the dominant and official discourse of lifelong learning in Singapore, it is necessary to have an understanding of the historical and political background of education and lifelong learning policies in Singapore. Education is regarded as an important economic tool in the nation-building process of Singapore. (Ashton et al.1999:35)

In fact, using this strategy, Singapore has achieved such a high rate of economic growth since independence that it has become one of the East Asian economic miracles, known commonly as the Asian tigers, which include South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore.

### 1.3.2 Education system of Singapore linked to economic development

Cheng observes that Singapore is "unambivalent in its nationalistic views about education". (Cheng 1995:4) He cites Yip and Sim (1990):

> A study of the ingredients which made for this success shows the pivotal role of education in the task of nation-building and in the fashioning of a vibrant Singapore economy with a competitive edge in the world market. (ibid.)

Citing Green (1995) who asserts that the development of national education systems can be explained by reference to the process of state formation, Ashton and Sung argue that there is a very close relationship between education and productive systems in Singapore. They conclude that education in Singapore is "subordinated to the needs of nation-building and especially of economic development". (Ashton and Sung 1997:207)

### 1.3.3 Education in Singapore based on human capital theory

According to some writers, Singapore has adopted a "pragmatic" approach in its economic and educational policies since independence in 1965. (Austin 2001:262; Kumar 2004:559)

As the Singapore government sees human resources as the most fundamental element in the nation-building, "education and training are at the heart of the nation's wider economic plans". (Ashton et al.1999:27) After independence, the goals of the education system were to establish a sense of national identity and sustain the development of the economy. (Ashton and Sung 1997:209)

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Singapore had been historically the trading centre for Southeast Asia since the late 1950s. However, realising the limited growth potential of entrepot trade, the government first embarked on an import-substitution industrialisation strategy in the 1960s before progressing into an export-orientation industrialisation strategy for further economic growth. Besides playing a very active role in encouraging foreign investments which brought with them foreign human and physical capital, the Singapore government also focused its attention on developing the local workforce through investments in human capital by restructuring its formal education system. (Chew 1971:301)

Mr Ong Pang Boon (1966), who was then Minister of Education, said:

Singapore's national wealth lies in our human resources, and our human potentials must therefore be developed to the fullest possible extent. An educated and enlightened population is our guarantee for a prosperous future. (cited in Tan et al. 1997:7)

With skill shortages amidst high unemployment, the strategy was to orientate the education system to deliver the expertise needed. The education system was restructured to produce a workforce that has a scientific or technical education besides the usual liberal education. (Tan et al.1997; Ashton and Sung 1997; Ashton et. 1999) This formal education system was based on human capital theory (Schultz 1961; Becker 1975; Woodhall 1997) which stressed the importance of investment in the labour force as one of the major sources of growth

Pang and Lim observe:

In Singapore, the human capital perspective has found great favour as shown in the

rapid expansion of technical and vocational manpower development programs. The secondary and tertiary levels of education are increasingly oriented towards the production of manpower thought to be vital to an industrialising economy. (Pang and Lim in Tan et al. 1997:364)

## 1.3.4  Rationale behind reliance on human capital theory in Singapore

Pang and Lim explain the rationale behind the Singapore government's initial use of human capital theory in this way:

Human capital theory suggests that schooling can be viewed as an investment. Schooling increases productivity because it develops skills and imparts useful knowledge...what is taught in school is knowledge useful in production. Education helps individuals to perceive more clearly and quickly the problems arising from economic changes. It thus improves their problem solving abilities. This ability to cope with change has been hailed by human capital theorists as one of the major benefits of education accruing to individuals in an industrialising society. (Pang and Lim in Tan et al. 1997:364)

In the early days of nation-building, viewing schooling as an investment that can increase productivity, develop skills and impart useful knowledge meant that the whole education system was geared towards the manpower needs of the economy. Policies were introduced not only to increase the number of educated people but also to steer the content of education towards vocational and technical training as a means of increasing productivity and incomes (ibid.)

### 1.3.5 Lifelong learning in Singapore based on human capital theory

Just as the educational policies during the early years of nationhood were based on human capital theory, later educational policies, especially those involving lifelong learning were also very much driven by the economic and political needs of Singapore, and hence also based on human capital theory.

Arguing that "lifelong learning in Singapore does not take place in a vacuum", Kumar says that "in the case of Singapore, the needs of the nation precedes that of individual needs." He further argues that the evolution and development of philosophies of learning are very much the product of historical, sociological and cultural factors. (Kumar 2004:567)

Describing Singapore's approach to lifelong learning as "pragmatic and rational", he says that policy makers view lifelong learning as "an antidote against unemployment" and use it "to enhance Singapore's competitiveness". (ibid.:559)

As the government recognised that human capital could be formed beyond the formal educational system, adult education classes, apprenticeship schemes, systematic or unsystematic on-the-job training were also encouraged. In addition to building more vocational institutes and industrial training centres, the government also encouraged employers to provide more in-service training for employees. (Chew 1971:304)

Over the years, as the economy continued to grow, and as neighbouring countries also started to industrialise, the government realised the need to move up the economic ladder by restructuring the economy further, so that it could compete with newly developing countries that have an abundant supply of cheap, unskilled

labour. It imposed a levy on low-paid labour to discourage companies from continuing to embark on low-value-added production. This levy was then used to create the Skills Development Fund which was used to finance a series of programmes to improve worker skills.

The next strategy of economic development, therefore, was to redirect attention to producing more sophisticated goods and services which require higher skill levels and qualifications. The need for individuals to learn and re-learn became even more pressing. Realising the limitations of the traditional front-end education and learning model where learning and working life are neatly compartmentalised, there was a change in emphasis to one of continuous lifelong learning so that the workforce can be equipped to meet the changing needs of a growing economy. (Ashton and Sung 1997:209-212) Ashton et al. note the emergence of a coherent strategy for economic growth which involves "an emphasis on constant learning and upgrading as the basis for the economy's competitive advantage". (Ashton et al. 1999:26)

Mr Goh Chok Tong, who was then prime minister, said:

"Growth means change. We will not become better off just by doing the same jobs in the same businesses…we have to learn new skills and absorb new technologies…Older workers need constant retraining if they are not to stagnate, or worse become redundant…Singaporeans have the drive to upgrade themselves and are tireless in the pursuit of excellence. Let us give them the opportunity to do so. (cited in Pan 1997:46)

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century saw a greater need for the promotion of lifelong learning. Besides recognising the

traditional role of lifelong learning in ensuring "successful" competition, the Singapore government also saw it as the answer to other more recent challenges such as globalisation, and technological changes, especially those related to the rapid advancement of information technology. Demographic changes such as an aging population and the resultant changes in the labour market also point to the need to ensure a regular supply of a well-trained labour force.

## 1.3.6 Lifelong learning initiatives in Singapore

In his National Day Rally speech in August 2000, Mr.Goh Chok Tong who was then prime minister announced the setting up of the Lifelong Learning Fund, a hefty injection of $500 million to help workers upgrade their skills throughout their lifetime. Eventually the fund will be boosted up to $500 billion from budget surpluses. This fund will complement other schemes such as the Education Training Fund and the Skills Redevelopment Programme.

This fund can be used to pay unemployed workers fixed amounts each month, so that they can support their families while they study full-time or for compensating employers for the time taken for training. Mr. Goh stressed that information technology training should be one of the top priorities. (The Straits Times, 22.8.2000)

Much has been done by the Singapore government to equip its citizens with the knowledge, understanding and skills to ensure national economic prosperity. Examples include:

1. the creation of the Singapore Learning Institute

2.      the outlining of a number of proposals in a policy document, Manpower 21

These proposals include the need to target specific groups and industries, the creation of nationally recognised standards and the provision of a 'learning infrastructure' within both the public and private sectors to develop, promote and support the concept of lifelong learning in Singapore.

Other learning initiatives include a number of training programmes:

(a)     BEST (Basic Education for Skills Training launched in 1983 as national program to provide workers with a basic education so that they could upgrade their skills and keep pace with changes in the industry.

(b)     MOST (Modular Skills Training launched in 1987 to upgrade the skills of the workforce and enhance Singapore's competitiveness)

(c)     WISE (Worker Improvement through Secondary Education)

(d)     TIME (Training Initiative for Mature Employees)

(e)     ACTS (Adult Cooperative Training Scheme)

(f)     COJTC (Certified On-the-Job Training Centre)

(g)     CREST (Critical Enabling Skills Training launched in 1998 by Singapore Productivity and Standards Board (PSB)

CREST identifies 7 key areas of training: Learning to Learn; Literacy; Listening and Oral Communication; Problem Solving and Creativity; Personal Effectiveness; Group Effectiveness and Organizational Effectiveness and Leadership. Each of the 7 modules is offered at 3 levels - senior management, middle management and supervisory levels.

In addition to the above learning initiatives, the government has also set up the School of Lifelong Learning which aims to close the gap between skills demand and supply through the retraining of the workforce. It aims to provide the necessary infrastructure, training programmes, incentives and timely information for Singaporeans to continuously upgrade their knowledge and skills to meet the future needs of the economy. The school consists of five components – skills, standards and recognition, incentives, learning infrastructure, information provision and promotion.

The Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) was set up in September 2003 to manage both the Singapore Development Fund and the Lifelong Learning Fund. According to Dr. Ng Eng Hen, the Acting Minister for Manpower and Minister of State for education, its aim is to "lead, champion and drive adult continuing education and training (CET) in Singapore". Its purpose is to act as "the champion for workforce development", to "strengthen workforce competitiveness" and to "sharpen the nexus between industry and the Singapore worker so that plans to train and develop a skilled workforce for industry are co-ordinated with plans to develop and grow the industry". (Ng, 14.8.2006)

It is obvious from the above-quoted speeches and policy initiatives that the dominant and official lifelong learning discourse in Singapore is one that is shaped by

economic imperatives and framed in terms of human capital theory. Lifelong learning is advocated for the primary purpose of ensuring economic survival in the face of global competition. Hence, lifelong learning is associated with training for employment purposes.

However, there are issues in all this development which need to be questioned and it is to this that I now turn.

## 1.4  Statement of the Problem

### 1.4.1 Mismatch between demand and supply of lifelong learning opportunities

As discussed earlier, the dominant discourse of lifelong learning in Singapore, as in many other countries, is shaped by economic imperatives and framed in terms of human capital theory. Hence, lifelong learning is closely associated with training. Economic competitiveness, it is argued, is dependent on a highly skilled labour force and economic growth primarily reflects the capacities of individual workers to acquire new skills in the face of global competition. Education and manpower policies are co-ordinated with economic policies such that the needs of the nation precede those of the individuals.

Large sums of money have been allocated by the government towards achieving this goal. While such an approach seems to work for some who responded to the call for upgrading, the Ministry of Manpower statistics mentioned earlier showed that there are also many others who do not and will not respond, unless more is done to understand their plight.

Other studies have also found that adults who have lower initial education, qualifications and social-economic status are generally under-represented as participants in education later in life. (Davey and Jamieson 2003; McGivney 2001; Gorard and Rees 2002)

Singapore's experience has proven that a lifelong learning discourse that is based on human capital theory helps it to solve its unemployment problems and also provides the manpower for its development needs. However, the continual emphasis on the country's needs at the expense of individual learners' needs may lead to a mismatch between demand and supply of lifelong learning opportunities. The OECD made this recommendation:

> On the one hand provision of education and training cannot on its own create willing and effective participation; on the other hand, potential or actual demand of new kinds of provision may go unmet. There is a particular need to avoid an excessively "supply-led" concept of provision – courses and opportunities need to be sensitive to the needs and desires of learners, and not be based simply on new technological possibilities, the ideas of suppliers or their institutional interests. (cited in Pan 1997:36)

In her study of the Singapore perspective of lifelong learning, Pan states that effective and sustained lifelong learning "involves the whole DAMN cycle: *Desire* and *Ability* to learn on the part of the learner, the *Means* to support learning, and perceived *Needs* to prompt all these". (Pan 1997:35, emphasis added)

On the supply side, we cannot fault the government for its foresight and pro-active approach towards lifelong learning. Singapore recognises the *need* to emphasise lifelong learning. Likewise, the *means* for lifelong learning are supplied

through the various educational and manpower strategies and initiatives which were introduced and refined over the years, some of which were mentioned in the previous section.

The problem lies with the demand side of the equation of lifelong learning. Referring to the *desire* to learn, Pan points out that being a society built on meritocracy, "Darwinian natural selection manifests itself in a rather ruthless educational system of essentially one-try learning, streaming on the basis of examination scores which may or may not accommodate individual aptitude and interest, and great pressure to perform on and to demand". (ibid.:41) She cites a previous study which asserts, "This relentless pressure 'often makes school – and studying – a monumental pain...The worst part may be that [students] become permanently turned off learning'" (ibid.). With regards to *ability*, Singapore students have distinguished themselves with excellent results in various international examinations like the GCE A Level examinations and the TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study). Yet, they have also been stereotyped as "rote-learners" (ibid.:42) and "just more exam-smart" (ibid.:41). While, Pan notes that there have been many recent changes in the educational system to overcome the above weaknesses, nevertheless, she concludes that "the current environment is one where lifelong education is more supply-led than demand-driven, the result being that one half of the DAMN cycle outweighs the other." (ibid.:49)

She stresses that learners must have the desire and ability to learn before learning can take place. (Pan 1997:36) She further notes that "educators are increasingly acknowledging the relevance of learning theories and the centrality of the learner in the learning process". (ibid.) Taylor and Cameron, for example, assert, "Lack of success at school exerts a potent and lasting influence, and a number of

conditions need to be in place to combat deep-seated negative reactions." (Taylor and Cameron 2002:15) They recommend widening participation through a change of focus from supply to demand and from provider to learner. (ibid.:11)

This is precisely what I sought to do in this study. By choosing to examine the narratives of thirteen learners who have been chosen by the community as lifelong learners, this study acknowledges the centrality of the learner in the learning process. It looks beyond the official economic perspective, and focuses, instead, on an emic/insider perspective of lifelong learning. It aims to uncover from their own narratives, what, why and how they are motivated to engage in lifelong learning, while others from the same background are not.

## 1.4.2 Further marginalisation of those who are already marginalised in society

While many writers have observed the transformative and empowering effects of lifelong learning (Antikainen 1998; Bennetts 2003), others have also criticised that a narrow concept of lifelong learning may lead to further marginalisation of those who are already marginalised in society, such as those with very little initial education, those who are disabled and those from the working class. (Field 2000; Gorard and Rees 2002)

Research by Bynner and Parsons shows evidence about the increasing marginalisation of a sub-group in society: those with poor basic skills. Adults with low skills in literacy and numeracy experience longer periods of unemployment, more low level jobs and less training, poorer physical and mental health and have more children at an earlier age than their contemporaries with good skills. (Bynner and Parsons 1997)

Some writers claim that there is also increasing polarisation between those "getting on", those "getting by" and those "getting nowhere", the third group having "neither the personal resources nor skills to even get into the game." (Bynner, Ferri and Shephard 1997:2) They further assert that informational technology is creating a new form of inequality, between the technological "haves" and "computer illiterate have-nots".

Others have noted the complex process of re-engaging in learning and the influence of personal, institutional and structural factors that can either support or limit an individual's learning career (Gorard et al.1997; 2001; Gorard and Rees 2002; Gallacher et al. 2002; McGivney in Coffield 1997a). Not only does an individual's background restrict the career opportunities available to him/her, an adult with a low initial educational level or in blue-collar occupation with traditionally little professional development beyond an initial form of skill-training, is also less inclined to participate in lifelong learning. (Rees et al. 1997)

Past experiences of failure in initial education may in fact be a deterrent to this group of people. Referring to an apparent consensus that early educational experiences determine later ones, Kennedy (1997) pessimistically concludes, "If at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed' (cited in Taylor and Cameron 2002:3).

Referring to the UK's experience, McGivney says, "those who ostensibly have the greatest need participate the least." (McGivney 1997:131) She believes that "some aspects of recent policy actually militate against the participation of non-traditional learners" (ibid.:135)

In the same way, Riddell, Baron and Stalker believe that "an economistic reading of the learning society may prove problematic for adults with learning difficulties, since it may be argued that this group is unlikely to be highly productive and therefore will not provide a good return on money invested in education and training." (Riddell et al. 1997:473)

Gender is another important factor. Jackson (2003) argues that despite the rhetoric that surrounds lifelong learning, barriers to participation for working-class women are too often ignored or made invisible. Hayes and Flannery (2000) note that although women's lives are diverse and varied; they often share common challenges and experiences in continuing their education.

In short, a human capital approach is likely to have serious consequences for members of less powerful groups, such as single parents, people living on peripheral housing estates or in rural areas, and disabled people, particularly those with learning difficulties, since their access to education and training is restricted by structural, cultural and financial barriers. In contrast to the human capital perspective on lifelong learning, Riddell et al. and other writers suggest an alternative perspective of lifelong learning, namely, the social capital perspective. (Riddell et al.1997; Taylor & Cameron 2002)

Social capital can be defined as consisting of "social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them and the value of these for achieving mutual goals" (Schuller et al. 2000:1) Coleman (1988) demonstrated that school children's performance was influenced positively by the existence of close ties between teachers, parents, neighbours and church ministers. The concept is generally used to refer to the resources

that people derive from their relationships with others. Putnam (2000) says that social capital is built through civic engagement. Strong networks and educational achievement are usually mutually enforcing (Field et al. 2000). Empirical evidence suggests that there are highly significant links between people's networks and their learning (Field 2005:6) Survey data show that adults who take part in various organised cultural activities are more likely to take part in learning (Field 2005:13)

If, indeed, people who have had very little initial education and/or who experience economic and social deprivation face such great difficulties to participate in lifelong learning, it will definitely be beneficial to identify people from among them, who have managed to engage in lifelong learning, so as to understand how and why these people are able to "buck the trend" (Davey and Jamieson 2003) and overcome barriers to engage in lifelong learning, in a society where lifelong learning is defined economistically.

## 1.5 Purpose of the Study

In the context of the above research findings, I consider it vital to understand why and how some people in Singapore, who came from disadvantaged social and/or educational backgrounds engage in lifelong learning. The purpose of the study was to develop in-depth understanding and insight into the experiences of thirteen people who have been identified by the community as people who have overcome odds to become lifelong learners in Singapore. It aimed to use grounded theory methodology to derive common themes from data gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The common themes would then be further synthesised to enable the emergence of a model or theory of lifelong learning for this group of learners. As the theory or model is

grounded in data, it reflects an insider perspective of lifelong learning. Its findings can be used for larger scale studies on lifelong learning in Singapore to evaluate if they are indeed representative of other lifelong learners here. Theory derived from such studies can then be used to illuminate lifelong learning processes and inform future lifelong learning policies aimed at reaching out to the marginalised section of the population who are least likely to participate in lifelong learning.

## 1.6    Research questions

Following the principles of qualitative research advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998), I started with an initial research question which is open and broad enough to allow for flexibility and even ambiguity so that theory can be drawn from the data that are collected. Hence, the original research question asked was "What is the life story of each of these thirteen lifelong learners and how and why do they engage in lifelong learning?"

The concept of "learning journey" emerged from the first interview that I conducted.

As I did not want to "taint" my research with preconceived notions of lifelong learning, I did not have too many research questions initially. The following questions emerged from the analysis of data of the initial interviews that took place at the same time as the later interviews were being conducted.

1.    What are the factors that cause these learners to start on their learning journeys?

2.    What are the factors that sustain their learning journeys after they have started?

3.    When the voices of these learners are allowed to be heard, do their discourses coincide with the official discourse on lifelong learning, which is usually instrumental and economistic in nature?

4.    In the light of the findings in this study, what are some strategies that can be recommended to encourage more lifelong learning in Singapore?

## 1.7    Significance of the research

This study is significant because it deals with the debate of whether lifelong learning can be promoted and sustained by an appeal to pragmatic and utilitarian motives, as is commonly advocated by the official discourse which propounds human capital theory as the basis for lifelong learning.

Bachkirova (2000) argues that the push for lifelong learning in a society is usually based on a pragmatic approach where individuals' needs are suppressed for the fulfilment of the system's needs. Our earlier discussion has shown this to be the case of Singapore.

Explaining Singapore's lifelong learning as part of the socio-political agenda of Singapore, Pan says, "As a small country with limited human and other resources, education is essential for social cohesion as well as economic health, and continuing education will ensure the ongoing development of a highly skilled workforce which will sustain Singapore's growth rate and viability." (Pan 1997:47)

As a result, the official appeal for greater participation in lifelong learning is often made on manpower needs. Kumar notes that there have been more than a hundred speeches delivered by various ministers on the importance of lifelong learning. (Kumar 2004:561) Since most of the Singapore lifelong learning literature is based on the official and dominant discourse, this study addresses an existing gap in our understanding of lifelong learning.

The findings derived from a grounded theory approach of analysis of information elicited from some people who overcame odds to become lifelong learners in Singapore can provide information about how and why these people took up the opportunities offered to them. This, in turn, can help illuminate the question of whether this particular group of lifelong learners in Singapore reflects the dominant discourse of lifelong learning and whether they participated in learning because of economistic rationales. What is even more important is the reason for their continued learning. Do these learners continue their learning journeys as a result of economic reasons as suggested by the official discourse or are there other factors that help sustain their learning journeys? The answers to the first three questions can help illuminate lifelong learning processes and inform policies.

If the learners are found to be motivated by rationales other than economistic ones, it will be necessary to examine other motivating factors for their continued learning. While there has been much research on motivation for learning among children in the area of formal learning, especially in the school context, there is a definite dearth of research on motivation for lifelong learning. For, on the one hand, in the last few decades, there has been an increase in the number of studies that examine the motivation of adult learning, such as those of Miller (1967), Rubenson

(1977), Boshier (1973), Mezirow (1971), Wlodkowski (1999) , Merriam and Caffarella (1999) and Cross (1991). Yet, on the other hand, it is only in recent years that motivational studies include those on lifelong learning. Even then, many of the studies are conducted in developed countries, international or regional groupings and are large-scale surveys that study general trends in participation and non-participation in lifelong learning. Many of these studies focus on formal learning, ignoring non-formal and informal learning. Incidents of non-formal and informal learning (sometimes undertaken subconsciously as argued earlier with reference to African families) can usually be elicited only after participants have been given some time to reflect upon their learning histories.

Hence, I believe that a qualitative study using in-depth interviews should help elicit information about the motivating factors and processes that lead to lifelong learning in the local context. This study can serve as an exploratory study to discover common themes which can be used as factors for a larger scale study, either locally or elsewhere.

Furthermore, besides the usual objective of increasing lifelong learning participation, there is also a need to widen participation within the population so that those who are marginalised will not be further marginalised. Even when lifelong learning is defined in its usual narrow way, that is as continual education and training to meet labour needs, Singapore does not have a very good track record with respect to encouraging the lower educated, as is reflected in the 2004 survey results of the Manpower Ministry mentioned earlier.

This study is, therefore, significant because it addresses an important area of

lifelong learning, namely, the participation (or, more accurately, the non-participation) of people who had very little initial education, many of whom also came from "deprived" family backgrounds, to use the words of some of the participants.

An overview of the organisation of this thesis is provided below.

## 1.8    Overview of the thesis

This thesis is divided into three sections with a total of nine chapters. Section I consisting of the first three chapters, includes the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), the literature analysis (Chapter 2) and the methodology chapter (Chapter 3). Chapter 1 has discussed the topic of lifelong learning in general, and focused on the problems of lack of participation by certain groups of people in society, such as those with very little initial education and those who come from "deprived" family backgrounds. It then introduced the topic under study, namely, the lifelong learning experiences of people who "bucked the trend" (Davey and Jamieson 2003) by overcoming odds in their lives to engage in lifelong learning in Singapore. This chapter also presents information about the purpose of the study, the research questions and significance of the research.

Chapter 2 includes an analysis of the most pertinent literature that relates to lifelong learning and the studies related to motivation of adult and lifelong learning. It discusses the factors that motivate and limit lifelong learning participation from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Chapter 3 explains the methods and procedures used to obtain and analyse the data and identifies some ethical issues that were taken into consideration throughout the

research process.

Section II, which covers Chapters 4-7, displays the results derived from analysis using grounded theory methodology. As lifelong learning is seen as a journey with eight different stages/phases, the different stages/phases are examined in detail for factors that either motivate or hinder lifelong learning. At the end of Chapter 6, a partial model of lifelong learning participation illustrating the factors that influence learning in the eight stages is presented. After taking into consideration the role of positive environments and significant and influential others, a more complete model is shown at the end of Chapter 7.

Section III includes Chapter 8 and Chapter 9. Chapter 8 summarises and highlights vital points in earlier discussions and compares the model that represents the learners' perspectives (an insider/emic perspective) of lifelong learning with the economic perspective of lifelong learning upon which the official discourse is based. It does so by answering the first three research questions listed in Chapter 1. At the same time, the findings are also compared with some of the studies mentioned in the literature analysis in Chapter 2. Chapter 9 answers the last research question. It puts forward plausible conclusions and implications of the study and suggests future research possibilities.

# 2 CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE ANALYSIS

## 2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 analyses relevant literature related to the topic under study to identify gaps and provide a context for the present work.

While the notion of lifelong education (the precursor of lifelong learning) came into prominence only in the late 1960s, a literature search of lifelong learning will result in many hits, as the notion has, in the last few decades, achieved a tremendously heightened status among countries and international organisations which view it as a solution to the many problems that a changing world faces. However, I will only focus on a selective review and analysis of the literature which is relevant to my study.

As I am interested in uncovering the factors that influence lifelong learning participation among those from disadvantaged social and/or educational backgrounds in Singapore, I will focus only on literature related to this topic. However, some background knowledge is required before proceeding to any further discussion. In Chapter 1, I have reviewed literature on the background of lifelong learning in Singapore. This literature shows that the dominant discourse of lifelong learning in Singapore is shaped by economic imperatives and framed in terms of human capital theory. In the same chapter, I also reviewed literature to demonstrate the concern among some writers that a human capital approach will lead to further marginalisation of those who are already marginalised in society.

In this chapter, I will first analyse literature to show that the concept of lifelong learning is firstly, a confusing concept and secondly, a contested concept,

since different stakeholders tend to define it differently to suit their purposes. Despite this, I believe that it is still necessary to define some of the concepts before proceeding on to other parts of the review.

I will conduct a brief historical survey of the origin of the concept of lifelong learning so as to set the stage for understanding its usage in some past literature, such as those related to policy recommendations, or adult learning from which lifelong also originated. I will also review briefly some models explaining adult participation in learning. I will focus on Cross's Chain of Response Model as I will be comparing her model with the one that is constructed at the end of this thesis.

However, as lifelong learning covers more than adult learning, I will also review some recent writings about motivation for lifelong learning. I intend to focus, however, on some related studies, such as the comparative study by Davey and Jamieson (2003) on participation in higher education by early school leavers in the UK and New Zealand, and Gallacher et al's study (2002) on the return to further education of those who are most at risk of social exclusion. Writings by Gorard and his associates (1997, 2001, 2002) on learning trajectory, as well as those by Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000a, 2000b), Gallacher et al. (2002) and Crossan and Osborne (2004) on learning career will also be reviewed here as I believe that the concepts of learning trajectory and career shed light on the motivation and sustainment of lifelong learning participation.

## 2.2    Concept of lifelong learning

### 2.2.1   The conceptual confusion surrounding literature on lifelong learning

Many writers have complained about the conceptual confusion surrounding

literature on lifelong learning. Cross considers the term "lifelong learning" to be "slippery, strikingly inconsistent, and subject to varying interpretations" (Cross 1981:253) This is worsened by the apparently similar terms – *'éducation permanente'*, 'further education', 'continuing education', which are often used interchangeably with each other. (Aspin & Chapman 2000:2)

Tuijnman and Bostrum state that "the wide-ranging orientation of lifelong learning poses insurmountable conceptual problems for scholars and policy analysts alike." They even suggest that lifelong learning could be "proposed as a panacea for solving all kinds of social ills and economic problems, precisely because the term is not exact and therefore evades evaluation". (Tuijnman & Bostrom 2002:105)

To make matters more complicated, the term 'lifelong learning' itself is also a contested concept.

## 2.2.2 'Lifelong learning" - a contested concept

Different stakeholders like educators, governments, employers and unions choose to use different terminologies with slightly different meanings, sometimes to their own advantage. Some governments or international organisations have been criticised for adopting a narrowly conceived concept of lifelong learning and its related concept of learning society. (Coffield 1997a; Field 1997; Gorard et al. 1999b; Evans 2003; Williamson 2002)

Coffield has criticised the British government and the EEC for "building the learning society with straw". He directs his criticisms at their policies, which, he argues, are based on a "technocratic model" which presents a dangerously

over-simplified account of the impact of changes in production and technology on education and training, and which, to him, is "everywhere couched in the same language about 'the drive for competitive advantage'". (Coffield 1997a:79)

International organisations like UNESCO, OECD, EEC and APEC also have different interpretations of the concepts at different times. Comparing the different terminologies used by UNESCO and OECD, Boshier asserts that UNESCO deployed the notion of "lifelong education" as an instrument for developing civil society and democracy (Bolshier in Holford et al. 1998:4) while the OECD's usage of the concept of "recurrent education" was fuelled by concern about the global economy, workplace and individual learning and hence "barely a hint of the democratic vision proposed by *Learning to Be*". (ibid.:15)

Edwards observes that since the economic crises of the mid-1970s, there has been a growing interest in the development of lifelong learning opportunities among policy formers and makers in many of the industrialised countries. Comparing the earlier concept of 'lifelong education' to the later concept of 'lifelong learning', Edwards claims that earlier discourses of lifelong education as a condition of and for equality and forms of democratic politics and citizenship meant that strategies were "aimed at providing opportunities for adults to learn, what, when and how they wished." In such discourses, "strategies were particularly needed for those adults 'disadvantaged' by lack of success in initial education." Such discourses have, however, been displaced by the later but dominant discourse of lifelong learning where lifelong learning is seen as necessary for 'successful' competition in the 21st century. (Edwards in Field and Leicester 2000:7)

Furthermore, since the debate now involves policy-makers, employers, trade unionists, besides educators, the role of lifelong learning in creating conditions for self-realisation and citizenship has been replaced by a notion of lifelong learning which embeds market principles, economic relevance and individualism. Thus, greater emphasis is now "placed on the learners to secure their lifelong learning in a marketplace of opportunities throughout their lives". Earlier discourses which focus on the role of education in providing opportunities for adults to be educated so as to enable them to be active citizens have given way to one that places greater emphasis on the economic relevance of learning. "Certain forms of lifelong learning are constructed as conditions for economic competitiveness in a globalised economy." (ibid.:8)

Concurring with Edwards, Field refers to the 1988 English white paper on lifelong learning and notes that, although there are mentions of the more humane aspects of lifelong learning like "the human development and growth that can arise from an open, enquiring, reflective approach to learning at any age", yet "when subjected to closer inspection, much of the policy interest in lifelong learning is in fact preoccupied with the development of a more productive and efficient workforce" (Field 2000:viii).

Evans argues that by concentrating on economic arguments to promote lifelong learning to strengthen the economy, "governments risk ignoring other aspects of life which are of paramount importance for individuals, and hence for politicians' own constituents". (Evans 2003:2) He claims that this can lead to "an almost fatal mismatch between government intentions and the reality of day-to-day living for millions of people'. (ibid.)

The above review summarises some of the concerns with regards to adopting too

narrow a definition of lifelong learning. The next section includes some definitions of concepts that will be used throughout this thesis.

## 2.2.3   Definitions of Concepts

Despite the elusiveness of defining lifelong learning and its related concepts, for the sake of practicality, I have selected from among the various definitions, at least one definition for each of the related concepts of lifelong learning:

### 2.2.3.1   *Lifelong Education and Lifelong Learning*

While some may use the term interchangeably, the term "learning" and "education" are not synonymous.

### 2.2.3.2   *Lifelong education*

According to Rogers, education consists of planned learning opportunities, constructed and purposeful activities, wherever it takes place. (Rogers 2002:47) It, therefore, implies the provision of conditions that will facilitate learning. Ironside defines lifelong education as "the organised provision of opportunities for persons to learn throughout their lives". (Ironside in Titmus 1989:15) Pan too says that lifelong education refers to a set of extrinsic, supply-oriented factors which identify the needs and provide the means while lifelong learning is intrinsic, demand-oriented and heavily dependent on learner motivation and ability. (Pan 1997:35)

Lifelong education, therefore, implies the deliberate influencing of a person's process of learning through the provision of educational environments.

### 2.2.3.3  Lifelong learning

Ironside defines lifelong learning as the "habit of continuously learning throughout life, a mode of behaviour". According to Knapper and Cropley, lifelong education is a set of organisational and procedural guidelines for educational practice. On the other hand, its goal (and also its method and its content) is lifelong learning – learning carried on throughout life. (Knapper & Cropley 2000:11)

#### Lifewide learning

Even as early as 1973, Dave's concept of lifelong learning was one that included both a vertical (lifelong) and a horizontal (lifewide) perspective. He says, "Lifelong education includes both formal and non-formal patterns of education, planned as well as incidental learning." Besides advocating "vertical integration" to ensure unification of "all stages of education – pre-primary, secondary and so forth", he declares that "lifelong education also seeks integration at its horizontal and depth dimension at every stage of life." He specifies, in particular, integration between the physical, intellectual, affective and spiritual aspects of life" for "performing personal, social, and professional roles". (Dave 1973:14-15)

Tuijnman notes that while the concept of lifelong learning is "lifelong" as it refers to a process of individual learning and development across the entire life span, from cradle to grave, the concept also has a 'life-wide' dimension – referring not only to formal education provided in institutions but also to non-formal learning at work and informal learning occurring at home and in daily life. (Tuijnman 2003:474)

Tjuinman and Bostrom (2002) suggest that elements from formal, non-formal and informal learning be synthesised and strong links developed between them so that the systems of lifelong learning can evolve. (Tjuinman and Bostrom 2002:97)

### 2.2.3.4 *Formal, non-formal and informal learning*

In 1974, Coombs and Ahmed distinguished among the three modes of learning as follows:

(1)     formal education — the highly institutionalised, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured system of education, spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of university;

(2)     non-formal education — any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population; and

(3)     informal education—the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment—at home, at work, at play, from the example and attitudes of family and friends, from travel, reading newspapers and books or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. (cited in Rausch 2003:519 )

The *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* which was adopted in March 2000 by the European Commission states that "Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts". (Commission of the

European Communities, 2000:3).

It also states that lifelong learning relates to all meaningful learning activities: to formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning processes. The definitions for learning that can take place in different learning contexts are given below:

*(a)    Formal learning*

Formal learning processes take place in the classical education and training institutions and usually lead to recognised diplomas and qualifications.

*(b)    Non-formal learning*

Non-formal learning processes usually take place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training – at the workplace and activities, in the pursuit of sports or musical interests.

*(c)    Informal learning*

Informal learning processes are not necessarily intentional and are a natural accompaniment to everyday life.

(Commission of the European Communities, 2000:8)

### 2.2.3.5  Learning society

Coffield's definition of the learning society given below is seen by Riddell, Baron, Stalker and Wilkinson as a happy marriage between the human and social capital

versions of the learning society (Riddell et al. 1997):

> A learning society would be one in which all citizens acquire a high quality general education, appropriate vocational training and a job (or series of jobs) worthy of a human being while continuing to participate in education and training throughout their lives. A learning society would *combine excellence with equity* and equip all its citizens with the knowledge, understanding and skills *to ensure national economic prosperity and much more besides*. The attraction of the term 'the learning society' lies in the implicit promise not only of economic development but of regeneration of our whole public sphere. Citizens of a learning society would, by means of their continuing education and training, be able to engage in critical dialogue and action to improve the quality of life for the whole community and *to ensure social integration as well as economic success.*

(cited in Riddell et al. 1997:477 – emphasis added)

This definition, not only takes into consideration the objective of economic development, but also includes the other equally important objectives of equity, social integration, improvement in the quality of life and that of the citizens' ability to engage in a critical dialogue. By including the last objective, it encompasses not only the economic and social imperatives, but also the democratic imperative suggested by Ranson, that "learning as discourse must underpin the learning society as the defining condition of the public domain" (Ranson 1994:112). Also, by suggesting the acquisition of a high quality general education and appropriate vocational training, it ensures that policies implemented will not be based on too narrow a definition of a learning society, as was discussed earlier on.

I will now proceed to briefly examine the historical background behind some lifelong learning literature to analyse why there is a gap in literature related to this topic.

## 2.3 Lifelong learning – emerged from a much older discourse of adult education

Cropley (1980) says that "'lifelong education is…an old idea" which becomes "a new urgency" as a result of "the 'crisis' of modern education". (Cropley in Titmus 1989:9) Showing the link between existing adult education and the new concept of lifelong education/learning, he says, "Since most lifelong learning is carried out by adults, for the simple reason that adults spend much more of their lives as adults than as children, it is obvious that adult education would be a major element in a system of lifelong education." (ibid.)

Lengrand traces the origin of the concept and policies of lifelong education to two meetings among adult educators in 1960 and 1965:

> The International Conference on Adult Education held in Montreal in 1960 shed light on the necessity to situate adult education within the global context of education continued throughout life. However, the meeting of the International Consultative Committee on Adult Education in 1965 can be considered as a key event. On the basis of a document prepared by UNESCO secretariat, the Committee formulated a series of proposals referring to lifelong education, which were well-received, extended to, and specified in, many educational spheres. (Lengrand in Titmus 1989:8)

Hence, it is not surprising that much of the literature of lifelong learning was written by adult educators who sometimes do not differentiate between adult learning

and lifelong learning. Cropley mentions Cross (1981) as one such example. (Cropley in Titmus 1989:9)    Similarly, many of the contributors to Titmus's book also do not mention lifelong education/learning at all even though it is entitled "Lifelong Education for Adults: An International Handbook" (Titmus 1989)   With the exception of Boshier who identifies a need for more research on motivation for participation in adult education (Boshier in Titmus 1989:151), none of the others mentions the question of motivation and this is where there is a gap which needs to be addressed.

## 2.4    Lifelong learning – emerged also from within policy

Lifelong learning is a policy concept influenced by the work of UNESCO and OECD.   In fact, UNESCO and OECD were responsible for most of the literature in the '70s and '80s about lifelong learning. (Edwards 2000:5)

In September 1969, the Director-General of UNESCO indicated that the principle of lifelong education would be UNESCO's major educational commitment during the 1970s.   Later in 1972, UNESCO published a report, *Learning to Be* and proposed "*lifelong education* as a master concept in the years to come for both developed and developing countries." (UNESCO 1972:182)   This document has been widely praised for its humanistic principles.

The concept of lifelong education was later replaced by the concept of lifelong learning.   In 1996, the UNESCO International Commission on Education for the 21st Century headed by Jacques Delors published a report entitled *Learning: The Treasure Within*, where the concept of *learning throughout life* is advocated as "one of the keys to the 21st Century (UNESCO 1996:22).   It stressed the need for education to be organised around four fundamental types of learning throughout a person's

life, which will in a way be "the pillars of knowledge: *learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be.*" Besides that of lifelong learning, another recommendation put forward by the commission is that of the "learning society".

In 1973, OECD published a report which proposed the use of the concept of *"recurrent education".* (OECD 1973) Field criticises this report as being "couched more in terms of human capital thinking, although still laced with a few dashes of radical humanism". (Field 2001:6) Tjuinman and Bostrom, in their review of the changing notions of lifelong education and lifelong learning, assert that the concept of recurrent education as envisaged by OECD "was more limited in scope and more utilitarian than lifelong education". They criticise recurrent education as being "manpower oriented" and holding "a more utilitarian appeal", unlike lifelong education which emphasised "holistic and humanistic ideals" (Tjuinman & Bostrom 2002:100-101)

The OECD later replaced recurrent education with the concept of *lifelong learning.* Nonetheless, Edwards criticises the notion of lifelong learning envisaged by national governments and international organisations like the OECD as a notion which "embeds market principles, economic relevance and individualism". (Edwards 2000:8)

As will be shown in the next chapter on methodology used, the use of grounded theory methodology to analyse data in this study led eventually to the construction of a model based on the learners' theory of lifelong learning participation.

In all of this work however, there is a dearth of models on motivation for lifelong learning in particular, and so I will, instead, analyse some more general models

of adult motivation for learning. As Cross's model is a composite model that integrates a number of past models, I will explain how I intend to compare my model with Cross's model, and then in Chapter 7 the complete model of this study is discussed.

## 2.5   Models of Adult Motivation for Learning

Cross notes that one of the most underutilised vehicles for understanding various aspects of adult learning is theory and cites Boshier (1971:3) who calls adult education a "a conceptual desert" and Mezirow (1971:135) who complains that the absence of theory is a "pervasively debilitating influence" in adult education.

Merriam and Caffarella describe models as visual representations of how concepts related to participation interact to explain who participates and perhaps even predict who will participate in the future. Included below are brief descriptions of seven models to enable some comparison with the model derived in this study.

They are:

1.    Miller's force-field analysis (1967)

Miller builds on Maslow's theory of needs hierarchy (1954) and the force-field analysis of Lewin (1947). According to Miller, participation and non-participation depend on the extent to which an individual has been able to meet a range of primary and secondary needs and the influence of positive and negative forces. Hence, socioeconomic status and participation in adult education are inevitably related and the members of the lower social classes will only be keen in learning to meet their survival needs, such as job-related training and adult basic education, while the upper social

classes will seek education to satisfy achievement and self-realisation needs.

This theory explains why those with very little initial education tend to seek job-related education, while education aimed toward self-understanding, recreation, personal development is sought by those who are more well-educated. It can also be related to a person's life cycle. Younger people, for example, are more likely to take up job-related training as it meets their survival needs while those who are older, retirees for example, are more likely to take up courses that enhance status or meet self-realisation needs.

### 2.     Boshier's Congruency Model (1973)

Boshier asserts that "both adult education participation and dropout can be understood to occur as a function of the magnitude of the discrepancy between the participant's self-concept and key aspects (largely people) of the educational environment." (cited in Cross 1981:119) Hence, participation is more likely to occur where there is some congruency between the learner's concept of him/herself (self-concept) and the educational environment, such as when the participant feels comfortable with him/herself and his/her teachers and classmates.

### 3.     Rubenson's Expectancy-Valence Model (1977)

Rubenson drew on the work of Lewin, Tolman, McClelland and Atkinson and proposed a recruitment paradigm which took into consideration expectancy (or anticipation of being successful in an educational situation and its consequences) and valence (the perceived value of an educational activity). Everything depends on a person's perception of the environment and the value of participating in adult

education, which in turn are developed as a result of socialisation by family, school and work.

4.    Cookson's ISSTAL Model (1986)

ISSTAL stands for "interdisciplinary, sequential specificity, time allocation and life span." It is interdisciplinary in that it includes concepts from several disciplines; sequential specificity relates to the causal interconnectedness of variables leading to participation; and time allocation and lifespan assumptions have to do with viewing participation in adult education as but one form of an adult's overall social participation. (cited in Merriam and Caffarella 1999:64)

5.    Darkenwald and Merriam's Psychosocial Interaction Model (1982)

Darkenwald and Merriam emphasise "social-environmental forces, particularly socioeconomic status, not because individual traits or attitudes are unimportant but because less is known about their influence on participation." (cited in Merriam and Caffarella 1999:64)

They propose a sequence of interacting variables which can influence participation or non-participation.

- early individual and family characteristics

- preparatory education and socialisation

- socio-economic status

- "learning press" (the extent to which current social or working environment requires or encourages further learning)

- perceived value/utility of adult education

- readiness to participate

- specific stimuli

- barriers to participation

(cited in McGivney 1993)


6.    Henry and Basile's Decision Model (1994)


According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), "Henry and Basile's model is unique in its incorporation of *both* motivational factors and deterrents to participation to help explain adults' decision to participate in formal adult education." "In some cases, a strong motivation may be overcome by the lack of a specific course offering, or by some negative impressions of the programme or institution. In other cases, a strong institutional reputation and availability of a convenient course may induce participation despite a weak motivational interest. The conceptual framework allows the empirical investigation of these complex relationships" (cited in Merriam and Caffarella 1999:65)

After testing their model with a group of 138 learners who enrolled in a continuing education course and 180 participants who had sought information about a course but failed to enrol, they confirmed "...that both motivations and deterrents influence the decision to participate". (ibid.) They also found that "work-

related factors pile up in favour of participation: typical is a person who has a job-related interest, received a course brochure at work, and has an employer who is willing to pay the course fees" (ibid.:67)

7.    Cross's Chain-of Response Model (1981)

McGivney (1993) considers Cross's, Rubenson's and Darkenwald and Merriam's theories or models to be "composite theories or models" as they integrate some of the other theories.  Cross, for example, synthesises the common elements in Miller's (1967), Boshier's (1973) and Rubenson's (1977) models to come out with the chain-of-response (COR) model.  Her model "assumes that participation in a learning activity, whether in organised classes or self-directed, is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment." (Cross 1981:125)

Cross's model depicts a seven-stage process of adult learning:

A.  Learner's own self-evaluation

B.  Learner's attitude towards education

C.  Motivation to learn (goals and the expectation that these goals will be met).

D.  Life transitions

E.  Opportunities and barriers

F. Information on educational opportunities

G. The decision to participate

## FIGURE 1: CROSS' CHAIN-OF-RESPONSE (COR) MODEL
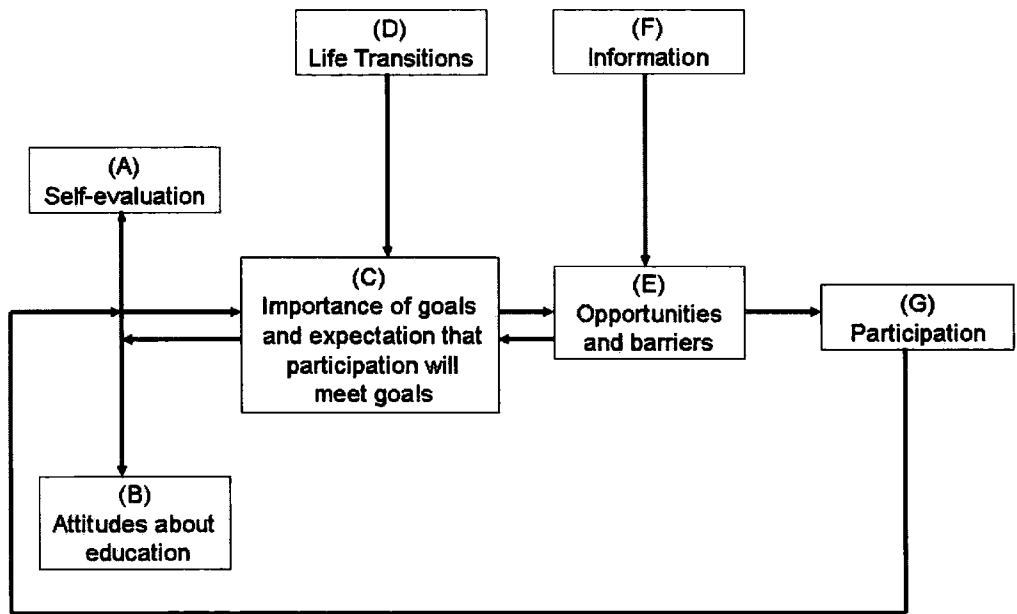


Merriam and Caffarella (1999) note that Cross's COR model is the first to incorporate life events and transitions which they define as "those events and changes that all adults encounter as they move through the life cycle". They cite Aslanian and Brickell (1980) whose study found that life events and transitions like graduation, marriage and retirement account for 83 percent of the motivation to participate in adult education. (Merriam and Caffarella 1999:67)

Although Cross's model shows some environmental factors such as information, opportunities and barriers at later points in the chain, Merriam and Caffarella consider it to be mainly a psychological model. They point out that by suggesting that

adult educators start from the beginning of the model, she is implying that psychological factors are the most important. (ibid.:68)

Gooderham (1993) draws attention to the need to consider sociological factors since antecedent sociological factors are those that shape the factors in Cross's model. He suggests that one's attitude to formal learning (Point B) is actually determined by antecedent factors of "social origin" and "degree of success at school" (ibid.:68)

Although there are similarities, there are also major differences between Cross's model and mine. I will show that while Cross's model synthesises other models/theories to arrive at a conceptual framework designed to identify the relevant variables (influencing participation in adult learning) and hypothesise their interrelationships, my model is grounded from the data collected through in-depth interviews of the participants without previous knowledge of Cross's model. Moreover, Cross's model starts with self-evaluation while mine starts with a triggering factor, and hence takes care of antecedent sociological factors. (See Figure 6 in Chapter 7)

I will also show in the discussion in Chapter 7 that my model is different from Cross's, not only because it is grounded in primary data, but also because the participants have included sociocultural and contextual factors in their narration of their learning journeys, and hence their theory of lifelong learning participation shows the importance of such factors in accounting for lifelong learning.

Merriam and Caffarella list the unique features in the different models. Rubenson makes use of member and reference groups whose norms determine one's perceptions of the usefulness of education. As mentioned earlier, Cross includes life

transitions as an important determinant of participation. Darkenwald and Merriam's model is differentiated by the concept of the "learning press, which includes general social participation, occupational complexity, and lifestyle – all of which, in combination, press one in varying intensity toward further learning. Henry and Basile combine motivational factors with deterrents to explain participation. Cookson's ISSTAL model includes an intellectual capacity factor which can be related to persistence.

They observe that there has been relatively little testing of the above-mentioned models, "partly because of the difficulty in operationalising complex variables such as personality traits, structural factors in the environment, and learning press and their interrelationships with each other." Although they rate some recent efforts at mapping these interactions to be "promising", they emphasise that "continued work in this direction might yet result in a good explanatory model of participation that will be of use to-researchers and educators alike". (Merriam and Caffarella 1999:70)

Referring to the study of participation in adult learning, they note that it was not until 1965 that the first national study of participation by Johnstone and Rivera was published. This was followed by surveys by the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCESS), Aslanian and Brickell (1980), Penland (1979), and UNESCO (Valentine 1997). They observe that "regardless of the study, the profile of the typical adult learner remains remarkably consistent: white, middle class, employed, younger, and better educated than the non-participant. Further, employment-related reasons account for the majority of participant interest in continuing education." (Merriam and Caffarella 1999:70-71)

The participants in my study are entirely different from this typical profile. They consist of people from different ethnic groups. Most of them either had very little initial education or did not consider themselves to be successful in their initial education. They came mainly from lower income groups. All of them had to overcome great odds to engage in post-school education. Many of them relied initially on informal and non-formal learning as they did not have the qualifications or the confidence to re-enter the formal educational system after they have left school. Hence, a study of these people would be quite different from previous studies.

In his review of participant motivation, Boshier concludes:

Despite the longstanding interest in motivation, adult education researchers and practitioners confront many unanswered questions. There is a need for research concerning relationships between motives that impel people into adult education and forces that foster persistence in adult education. There is a need to study (a) motivation changes that occur as a result of participation in adult education; and (b) interactions between participant motivation and instructor variables; and (c) the motivation of people who make (and fail to make) use of the broadening array of opportunities for learning in the natural societal setting. (Boshier in Titmus 1989:151)

This study aims to fill some of the above gaps, that is, to understand the relationship between motives that impel people into adult education and forces that foster persistence in adult education. Through studying motivation changes that occur as a result of participation in adult education and the influence of people within the environments, such as family members, teachers, colleagues and employers on participant motivation, I hope to derive a model that explains lifelong learning

participation among those who are most in danger of being excluded. (Refer to discussion of results in Chapters 7 and 8.)

## 2.6 The Gap in Literature on Motivation for Lifelong Learning

In Chapter 1, after surveying some local literature, I mentioned that there is a gap in literature on motivation for lifelong learning in Singapore as most of the official literature in the local context relates to the dominant discourse of lifelong learning. Hence, lifelong learning is equated with learning to meet manpower needs of the nation and to ensure employability of individuals.

Internationally, there is also a gap in the literature related to motivation for lifelong learning. Previous studies on motivation have concentrated on motivation for learning of children. Referring to the dearth of adult psychological literature then, Bischof lamented, "Most psychological literature on human growth and development starts with the ovum and ends with the adolescent...The assumption appears to be that development completely stops with the end of adolescence...between the infant and the infirm there is a hiatus in research and knowledge." (Bischof 1976:3)

While adult education was taught as a field of graduate study as early as the 1930s in North America (Ironside in Titmus 1989:14), it was only in 1976 that the term "adult education" was defined clearly by the United Nations. (ibid.:15) In the last few decades, there has been an increase in the number of studies that examine the motivation of adult learning, such as those of Miller (1967), Rubenson (1977), Boshier (1973), Mezirow (1971), Wlodkowski (1999), Cross (1981) and Merriam and Caffarella (1999).

However, if the studies ignore the participants' background, they are also deficient in explaining motivation for lifelong learning since lifelong learning involves "learning from cradle to grave". An understanding of how and why people continue to learn throughout their lives is different from an understanding of how and why children or adults are motivated to learn.

The overemphasis on individual motivation has also been found to be a weakness of psychological studies on motivation for learning. While providing an understanding of how individuals can be motivated to learn under certain circumstances, many studies do not take into consideration the influence of environmental factors, both human and situational. Referring to children, Galloway et al. argue that "more attention is needed to contextual influences on motivation." (Galloway et al. 1998:19-20) They say that motivation is increasingly seen as the product of interaction between individuals and an unlimited range of experiences in their environment. Personal identity, for example, develops in a social context, and if schools do not give their pupils a sense of belonging, with a feeling of being valued as contributing members of a socially cohesive group, they will turn elsewhere to meet this basic human need. (ibid.:122-123) Brookfield emphasises the need for a culturally relevant perspective of adult learning. He says, "The differences of class, culture, ethnicity, personality, cognitive style, learning patterns, life experiences, and gender among adults are far more significant than the fact that they are not children or adolescents...it is necessary to challenge the ethnocentrism of much theorising...which assumes that adult learning...is synonymous with the learning undertaken in university continuing education classes by White American middle-class adults in the postwar era." (cited in Wlodkowski 1999:7)

It is only in recent years that motivational studies include those on lifelong learning. Even then, many of the studies are conducted by developed countries, international or regional groupings and are large-scale surveys that study general trends in participation and non-participation in lifelong learning. Many of these studies focus on formal learning, ignoring non-formal and informal learning. Incidents of non-formal and informal learning (sometimes undertaken subconsciously as argued earlier with reference to African families) can usually be elicited only after participants have been given some time to reflect upon their learning histories.

In 2000, the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) published a book entitled *Motivating Students for Lifelong Learning*. As is obvious from the title, it studies motivation of students as opposed to the adult learners that are studied here. It is a report by OECD which focuses on secondary schools and a variety of youth projects in eight countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Norway and the UK. It gives background knowledge of the countries concerned, discusses student motivation issues, main policy approaches and discusses the outcomes of some innovations that took place in each country. It concludes that each of the projects visited is effective in its own way but also expresses regret that each project emphasised academic achievement. It suggests that this may be due to the national emphasis on product and outcomes in education and the difficulty of measuring motivation.

*Lifelong Learning: Riding the Tiger* by Smith and Spurling (1999) shows what a lifelong learning culture would be like, and what practical steps are required to move towards it. Following this, the same authors published *Understanding Motivation for Lifelong Learning* in 2001. It answers the question of what is needed for

people to participate in a "cradle to grave" learning culture in the UK. It is a very comprehensive study that covers motivation for work-related learning, community-related learning, individual and family-based learning, besides also including four chapters on motivation as a mental process. Although a number of diagrams are used to summarise the points discussed in each chapter, the diagrams are different from the adult learning models discussed earlier as well as the model constructed at the end of this thesis, and hence will not be used here for comparison purposes. However, the findings of this book will be discussed and compared with the findings of this thesis in Chapter 7, where the learning journeys of the participants are found to be influenced by their families, work, schools and other educational institutions, as well as the government, economy and community.

Before concluding with an agenda for action, Smith and Spurling suggest the need for the UK to adopt an across the board approach and draw flexibly on these approaches, without any compulsion. They further suggest that people must be helped to learn much more in personal, family and social dimensions without being swamped by learning with economic interests. (Smith and Spurling 2001:114)  The comprehensive list of findings and recommendations would definitely help towards the development of a culture for learning if, indeed there is enough will-power for such a wide range of activities to be co-ordinated and carried out at a national level.

In contrast to bigger studies like this, and since I do not have any external funding for this study, my aim was to study a small sample with the intention of helping them to reflect on their learning experiences so that their perspectives, rather than the official perspective, can be presented. By requesting that they tell their life stories, this study provides a platform for their voices to be heard (Bennetts 2001).  In

other words, the study aims to provide an insider perspective of lifelong learning.

The following writers have influenced the focus of my study through their ideas and philosophy about learning. Williamson, for example, advocates the study of the lifeworlds of people. He says, "It is a vital task of those who wish to understand lifelong learning, to find out how different groups of people in society actually construct their understanding and interpretations of their world." (Williamson 1998:26) He laments that "the study of lifelong learning has for too long been confined to the contexts of education or professional development in employment". (ibid.) Referring to personal change in adulthood, he says, "Personal identities in adulthood are not fixed. People change." (Williamson 1998:173) He further asserts:

> In modern societies, people can choose the identities they wish to have…modern identities are "open". We are not confined to the identities ascribed to us by the social positions into which we were born. (ibid.:173).

Without such a premise, it will not be possible to explain the transformation of the learners in this study, through changes in their learner and social identities, as we shall see in Chapter 6.

According to Williamson, this has implications for the ways we understand lifelong learning. In contrast to the dominant perspective of lifelong learning as continuous development of skills, it also enables self knowledge which covers both thoughts and feeling and includes knowledge of how people can explore their own self understanding. (ibid.) He suggests that behind all the masks of social conformity people search for authenticity and meaning (ibid.:174). He also emphasises the role of social

relationships in supporting learning. (ibid.:198)

West (1996) is another writer who suggests that people overcome their inauthenticity through education. In his study of thirty adult learners who had begun an Access or Foundation programme, West (1996) criticises the dominant tradition in the United States, where most research into adult motivation has been conducted, for being psychological to the neglect or exclusion of social and cultural perspectives and hence ignoring history and society. After critically analysing the four main psychologically based approaches to adult motivation, he decided to use a psychoanalytical/ sociological/ feminist frame of reference, in Bruner's words (Bruner 1990 cited in West 1996:xi). His approach involved talking to his participants in depth and at length, over a period of more than three years to understand their motives for participating in adult learning.

He suggests that human motives in choosing pathways are more complex than is often suggested in findings based on survey research. If, for example, people were asked to make a choice between vocational or personal motives, most will tend to give vocational justifications for their actions rather than anything more 'personal' as it appears more respectable and acceptable. However, when the people in his study were given space and encouragement to reflect on motives and tell their stories, "concepts of economic rationality seem crude in the light of these reflections". (West 1996:4) Referring to one interviewee, he says, "Understanding the imprints of class, gender and the effects of a broken and vulnerable family became central to understanding her psychology, her life history and the roots of her present motives." (ibid.:5) This is found to be true of almost all the participants in my study.

West concludes that higher education is potentially a space for people to manage and transcend feelings of marginalisation, meaninglessness and inauthenticity. He stresses the importance of support and encouragement from significant others in helping these people compose a new life, a different story and a more cohesive self. (West 1996:10)

Other writers who hold the same view about the importance of interactions with significant others in supporting learning are McCombs 1991, Courtney 1992, Gallacher et al. 2002, Gorard et al. (1997, 1998b, 1999a) and Smith and Spurling (2001). McCombs claims that "self-esteem and motivation are heightened when individuals are in respectful, caring relationships with others who see their potentials, genuinely appreciate their unique talents, and unconditionally accept them as individuals". (McCombs 1991:119) This will be an important factor found in my research too.

Mills et al's (1988) research concludes that "positive environments must include adult caring and interest; validation of individuals' worth and significance; and opportunities to build relationships, see models, and experience mentoring relationships in an atmosphere of mutual caring and support." Harter (1986. 1989, 1990) and Glenn and Nelson (1988) say that a socially supportive environment can lead to a sense of belonging and significance. (cited in McCombs 1991:121) The importance of social relationships in enabling lifelong learning will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

The next study that will be reviewed is similar to my study in that it also studied non-traditional/non-mainstream learners, people who left school and then subsequently rejoined the education system again. However, there are major differences in that they studied adults who engaged in university education after having left school early

whereas the sample in my study consists of a very diverse group. Initially, a few had only primary education, some had secondary education, and even after having engaged in many years of learning, just a handful have or are pursuing university degree courses. Yet, they have all been chosen by the public as lifelong learners as they have been engaging in learning continuously for many years.

In their study of early school leavers, Davey and Jamieson (2003) compare two separate studies, both of which were carried out in 2000, one in New Zealand and another in the UK. As the statistical odds are against the unqualified early school leavers entering the formal education system at a later stage, they belong to a minority who "buck the trend" to engage in learning "against the odds". (Davey and Jamieson 2003:266)

Using the life course framework to focus on individual change and social context, they focus their analysis on circumstances and motivations around the time of school leaving, subsequent experiences, and the processes whereby the decision to re-enter education was taken. They search for clues in the educational, family and work experiences of the early school leavers, as well as their personal outlooks, life ambitions and motivations.

The findings from both these settings reveal remarkable similarities in a number of ways, as both show that internal motivation and contextual factors are important. Using qualitative interview results, a typology is developed of different early school leavers, which links circumstances around school leaving with the processes of re-entry to education. They conclude that focusing on those who 'succeed' against the odds is a fruitful way to develop understanding of what motivates adults to study. Their study

finds that the need for encouragement from others is highlighted far more by the women interviewed than by the men. On the other hand, both the male and female participants in my study have testified to the need for support and encouragement from people that they interact with.

Davey and Jamieson (2003) also find that, particularly for women, both timing and motivation to study are often associated with family circumstances, such as divorce, widowhood and children growing up and studying themselves. For men, however, the incentive and motivation to engage in higher education often originates from the work place. As will be seen later in the analysis of the findings of this study, the learners in this study participated in post-school learning as a result of a wide assortment of reasons. However, utilitarian reasons, many of which are work-related, usually accounted for initial participation for both male and female learners. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, gender is found to be an important factor accounting for differences in reasons and timing of exit or re-entry in one's learning journey. All the women in this study re-engaged in learning only after having made arrangements for childcare or when their children are in school. All of them had also experienced temporary exits from their learning journeys because of family commitments. Most of the men, however, cited work commitments rather than family commitments as obstacles to their learning. A few men had to exit from their learning journeys temporarily because of work commitments.

A large-scale study of patterns of adult participation on education and training undertaken by Gorard, Rees and their associates in Wales between 1997 and 1999 as part of the ESRC's "Learning Society" programme has spawned many subsequent studies and a book entitled *Creating a learning society: Learning careers and*

*politics for lifelong learning* (Gorard and Rees 2002). The findings indicate that the general determinants of lifetime learning patterns include gender, family background, individual schooling, occupation and motivation. The most significant factors, categorised as time and place, are found to affect the opportunities available to people.

I will focus on the book by Gorard and Rees (2002) and two other articles here, including the one by Rees, Fevre, Furlong and Gorard (1997) and Gorard, Rees Fevre and Welland (2001) because of their relevance to the topic discussed here although I will be referring to the other articles later in the analysis in Section II.

Rees, Fevre, Furlong and Gorard (1997) criticise human capital theory as involving "an unwarranted abstraction of economic behaviour from social relations widely". (Rees et al. 1997:487) They believe that participation in lifelong learning "cannot be understood in terms of the narrow calculation of utility maximization". They cite Polanyi (1957) who asserts that "behaviour in economic markets is 'embedded' in systems of social relations, particularly networks of interpersonal relations". (ibid.) Hence, it is possible for individuals to pursue ends which are different from maximization of material well-being.

One example they give is of an employee who undertakes a programme of training because he or she prizes the intrinsic pleasure obtained from the programme or from the enhanced capacity for a job, even where the material benefits to be derived are negligible. This action is considered 'rational' even though the ends deviate from those assumed in the conventional economic model of preference. They suggest that there are "alternative rationalities which are socially constituted". (ibid.:488) Preferences, for example, may be shaped – whether through socialisation or more directly - by the

reality of feasible alternative actions and choice is structured by wider social relations.

They suggest that it is possible to identify regularities in individuals' educational experiences as they proceed through the life-course. They use the concept of 'trajectories" or "pathways" to describe the regular patterns of participation observed among people. They suggest that there are two elements involved. Firstly, the 'trajectory' which people join is largely determined by the resources which they derive from their social backgrounds. Secondly, an individual's capacity to take up whatever learning opportunities are available is constrained by his or her previous history. For example, "if someone leaves school at 16 with no qualifications, this itself restricts subsequent access to further or higher education, and anything other than very limited vocational training." (ibid.:490)

Furthermore, characteristic trajectories are themselves also transformed over time. Hence, the kinds of trajectories which are typical currently are significantly different from those of earlier epochs. They cite changes in state education policies, in employers' strategies with respect to training provision, or in community-based programmes of informal learning as examples of ways in which characteristic trajectories may be restructured over time, through expanding or contracting learning opportunities which are available. Noting that structure of learning opportunities to which individuals have access is not uniform from place to place, they assert that there are complex interactions between people's locations within the social structure, their spatial locations and their access to learning opportunities.

They also suggest 'learner identity' as a key concept that enables understanding of individual choices which are made over courses of action to be followed. They

suggest that compulsory schooling is a powerful source of learner identity. Those who have had a successful experience of learning at school are more likely to have developed learner identity and hence are more ready to engage in post-school learning. However, they add that learner identities are not simply the product of formal education as they can also emerge in relation to informal learning opportunities. They cite Weil (1986) who suggests that for older learners, political and community organisations can have a similar effect of developing learner identities. Besides community-based learning, they suggest the workplace as one key arena within which learner identities forged through the formal educational system may be renegotiated (or alternatively, reinforced). (ibid.: 494)

They find that family life is a key vehicle through which intergenerational transmission of educational and training cultures occurs. For example, some young people have grown up in families where continuing education and training is part of the routine cycle of employment life for family members, while for others (currently, the majority) the opposite is true. Their findings suggest "a much more nuanced social theory of lifetime learning than that offered by the dominant discourse of human capital theory". (ibid.) They conclude that "choices with respect to participation in learning opportunities may be rational, without conforming to the preferences presumed in human capital theory". (ibid.:495)

Gorard et al. (2001) discuss results from the same study. This paper, however, discusses and examines the 'determinants' of adult participation in learning, such as family background or gender, as individual stories, and compare them with theoretical models derived from earlier phases of the project. They conclude that "the notion that the desperate need is for vocational training, the emphasis on the economy,

the over-emphasis on qualifications, and the attempts to make current provision more open to all may be taking attention away from other major unmet needs for education and training." (ibid.:185) For example, the long-term unemployed in their study, as well as those who at the end of their working lives, do not want vocational training or qualifications. They suggest that economic inequality in society may not be lessened significantly by training people, or more of them. Instead of that, ameliorating economic inequalities in society directly, by redistributive taxation, may perhaps make alternative learning trajectories available to wider participation.

Gorard and Rees (2002) also argue against establishing a learning society based on the economic imperative and criticise previous analyses of adult participation in education and training for isolating individuals from the social and economic contexts in which participation in learning takes place. The dominant policy consensus based on human capital theory theorises that individuals participate in lifelong learning according to their calculation of the net economic benefits to be derived from education and training (Becker 1975 cited in Gorard and Rees 2002). Based on this view, government policy needs only to ensure the removal of the 'barriers' that prevent people from participating in education and training. Gorard and Rees, however, argue that policy initiatives based on this view fail to address the fundamental determinants of patterns of participation in adult learning. They assert that that "there is ample evidence for the existence of regular patterns of participation [trajectories] whose determinants are largely grounded in early life". (Gorard and Rees 2002:89) The trajectory/pathway that people join is determined mainly by the resources that they derive from their social backgrounds. For example, family background assessed in terms of income, parents' education, or parents' occupation, is a key predictor of lifelong participation in

education or training, as it is of success at school (Gorard and Rees 2002:65)

Relating this to the concept of 'learner identity', they say, "Experience of family and early school life along with age, place and gender appear to create a relatively stable attitude to further learning opportunities – a learner identity." (Gorard and Rees 2002:84) They cite Weil (1986) who defines 'learner identities' as:

> the ways in which adults come to understand the conditions under which they experience learning as 'facilitating' or 'inhibiting', 'constructive' or 'destructive'. Learner identity suggests the emergence of affirmation of values and beliefs about learning, schooling and knowledge. The construct incorporates personal, social, sociological, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning, as integrated over time. (cited in Gorard and Rees 2002:24)

To them, 'learner identity' "encapsulates how individuals come to view the process of learning and, accordingly, provides the framework through which alternative courses of action are evaluated". (ibid.:25) They thus conclude that 'learner identities' that are created through early social experience have powerful impacts on subsequent learning. (ibid.:144) They suggest that the model that currently underpins official versions of the learning society in Britain is not compatible with the realities of the actual patterns of participation in lifelong learning and their determinants. Instead, they suggest that since an individual's social and family background at birth has such an impact on their later life, policy makers should concentrate on reducing inequalities in society, rather than simply trying to increase the opportunities for everyone to learn. (ibid.:148)

While I agree with most of the findings in this book and in their other writings, I find some of the statements to be too deterministic. For example,

> ...all of the factors that we uncovered reflect characteristics of respondents that are *determined relatively early during the life course*....It provides empirical support for the utility of the concept of 'trajectory' in analysing participation in lifelong learning. Not only is there a clear pattern of typical 'trajectories' that effectively encapsulates the complexity of individual education and training biographies, but also *which 'trajectory' an individual takes can be accurately predicted on the basis of characteristics that are known by the time an individual reaches school-leaving age.* (Gorard and Rees 2002:64)

Even the term 'trajectory' is rather deterministic. A learning 'trajectory' is defined as "an *overall lifetime* pattern of participation which is *predictable* to a large degree from the educational and socioeconomic background of the respondent. (Gorard et al. 1997, 2001) I have added my own italics to show the deterministic elements of the definition.

Hence, I prefer to use the term 'learning career' used by Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000a, 2000b), Gallacher et al. (2002) and Crossan et al. (2004). In fact, I find it puzzling that although the title of Gorard and Rees' book is *Creating A Learning Society? Learning careers and policies for lifelong learning*, the term "learning career" is not found within the text.

In the light of the above findings, it is important that studies be carried out on those who managed to break away from these so-called lifetime trajectories/careers to understand how it is possible to encourage lifelong learning among people who are

socially, economically or educationally disadvantaged.

The studies of Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000a, 2000b, 2001), Gallacher, Crossan, Field and Merrill (2002) provide a framework for analysing and explaining the results of my study and hence will be discussed throughout Section II where the findings are analysed and in Chapter 8 where the findings are summarised and research questions answered. Hence, I will provide just the background of the framework here.

Arguing that it is inadequate to model learning around notions of fixed personal styles, traits or schemata, Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000a; 2000b) develop the concept of learning career in their study of young people within the formal education system. They find firstly, that over the four-year period of their study, many of the young people displayed significant changes in their values, attitudes and interest. Secondly, changes in young people's educational careers and attitudes to learning were frequently linked to their lives outside formal learning institutions, and particularly to their personal and social lives. Thirdly, friendship groups, illnesses, student-parent relationships and personal relationships were found to have a bearing upon changes in young people's educational values and attitudes to learning. Lastly, the research findings did not indicate the existence of 'types' of learner. (Bloomer 2001:434)

Hence, they look to symbolic interactionism and certain aspects of Bourdieuan sociology and sociocultural theory for the illumination of their data. The concept of 'career' draws on symbolic interactionist theory and the work of the Chicago School of sociologists. It studies the processes through which social identity is shaped and reshaped through interaction with others. After citing Goffman (1968) who describes career as "any social strand of any person's course through life", they define learning

career as "the development of dispositions to learning over time" (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000b:590)

They also draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus which consists of a portfolio of dispositions to all aspects of life. The habitus is influenced by who the person is and where in society the person is positioned and the person's interaction with others. It is embodied in such structured instruments as social class, gender and ethnicity and the person's genetic inheritance. (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000b:589)

The concept of learning career also relates to Lave and Wenger's (1991) presentation of learning as both socially constructed and context-specific and therefore influential in exposing learners to new influences and situations that change dispositions. "One way to think of learning is as the historical production, transformation, and change of persons." (Lave and Wenger 1991 cited in Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000b:590)

While Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000a, 2000b) study young people within the further education system, Gallacher et al. (2002) use the concept of "learning career" to explain the processes through which adults return to further education. "The concept of 'career' here refers to the processes through which people's self-perception changes and their involvement in certain areas of activity develops as a consequence of this interaction." (Crossan and Osborne in Osborne et al. 2004:145)

Gallacher et al. (2002) find that the concept can be used to explain the ways in which adults from groups who are at risk of social exclusion develop identities that enable them to engage with learning. They study people from socially-excluded

backgrounds who, as a result of their backgrounds, are very uncertain about engaging in formal learning. Their previous life experiences have caused them to have little confidence in engaging in learning. In some cases, there is even hostility towards educational institutions.

As these people encountered many initial problems, they have very few formal qualifications and are still plagued by many problems like alcoholism, drug abuse or health related problems. Hence, the structural position for many of them is one which makes the development of a learning career difficult and unlikely. Yet, many of them become increasingly engaged in more formal learning. The initial process is tentative and uneven. The learning careers emerge only through a process of interaction between learners and their families, friends and others with whom they interact, and the educational institutions.

Although symbolic interactionists also take into account structural factors, they usually focus more on the social interactions of people. Gallacher et al., however, recognise the importance of structures associated with class, gender and ethnicity in creating the frameworks within which interaction takes place, and social identities are constructed and reconstructed. Hence, they also study the educational institutions that structure the process of engagement with learning.

They find that an individual's learning career is often an uneven process which can be fragmented, and broken, not linear or 'upwards'. Personal factors and social relationships – including status passages through which people pass – play a significant role. For example, critical incidents such as divorce or bereavement can be time for reflection and re-engagement with learning. Similarly, participation in informal

learning may act as a stepping stone to more formalised learning events.

My study involves tracing the learning journeys of people, who overcame their social, economic and/or educational disadvantages to become lifelong learners. There is, however, no mention of present social problems in the lives of my participants, such as are found in Galacher et al.'s study. I will be comparing the findings of their study with mine in Chapters 7 and 8 as the findings of both studies are quite similar.

The results of my study show the usefulness of "learning career" as a framework to explain the process of the participants' transformation from learners with uncertain, tentative learner identities initially to become learners who are recognised by society as lifelong learners. I believe that I have also extended previous works on learning career by adding another dimension to the analysis, through the introduction of a model that explains the process in a visual manner. (See Figure 6 in Chapter 7)

Moreover, while Gallacher et al. focus on educational institutions, the findings of my study show that besides educational institutions, all the other different institutions such as family, work, community, economy and government can facilitate the development of the learning careers of individuals through the provision of positive and supportive environments for learning. Hence, the concept of lifelong learning in this study encompasses almost all spheres of influences that need to be taken into consideration. The next chapter deals with the methodology used in this particular study.

# 3 CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the background and reasons for the choice of research methodology. It explains the rationale for adopting a qualitative design, involving the use of a combination of in-depth interview and narrative approach in data collection and the use of grounded theory methodology for data analysis. It identifies the participants and explains the procedures involved in gaining access to the participants. (The term 'participants' rather than 'informants' or 'respondents' is used because I believe that adopting a participatory paradigm where I research "with" rather than research "on" the people I study will allow their voices to be heard.) This chapter also gives examples of ethical issues involved during the data collection and analytical stages and elaborates on the procedures for data collection and data analysis.

## 3.2 Background to choice of study and design

LeCompte and Preissle observe that "the research process is composed of interactive decisions and tasks. Some investigators stumble upon an interesting group or event and formulate their designs to match this fortuitous occurrence." (1984:156) Serendipity definitely played a part in the choice of the participants for this present study.

It was quite coincidental that Singapore's first Lifelong Learner Award Campaign was organised by Mediacorp Radio Singapore soon after I had just submitted a proposal to study motivation for lifelong learning in Singapore.

### 3.2.1 Research Design

The purpose of the study was to investigate the learning experiences of thirteen people who were awarded the Lifelong Learner Award by Mediacorp Radio Singapore in 2002. This study focused on the stories of participants (a narrative study) using the techniques of in-depth interviews. This allows me to understand their lifelong experiences in relation to culture, context and other aspects of their social world.

I used a grounded or inductive approach to understand the participants' stories rather than imposing my theoretical pre-conceptions. This grounded theory methodology allows for theory building because theory relating to the motivation to participate in lifelong learning is lacking. I conducted this study in the following spirit:

> naturalistic, interpretive approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) within their social worlds. (Snape and Spencer in Ritchie and Lewis 2003:3)

The chosen methodology allows for the understanding of 1) how and why individuals overcome odds to engage in lifelong learning; 2) the informants' beliefs, motivation, context, and experiences as described with their own words and from their perspective rather than those of the researcher. Qualitative methods take the "emic" perspective, and allow for rich details that are suitable for theory building (see e.g. Strauss and Corbin 1998).

### 3.2.2 Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded theory, which was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss, means theory that is derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through

the research process. Grounded theory involves grounding of theory in data through the generation of analytical categories, and the identification of relationships among them so as to derive a theory or model to explain the topic under focus. From the analysis of these categories and their relationship with one another, the researcher builds a theory of the phenomenon for later testing with deductive methodology.

### 3.2.3  Narrative Studies

This study is also in the spirit of narrative research - an "interpretive science in search of meaning, not an experimental science in search of laws." (Geertz 1973:5)

The fundamental interest is in making sense of experience, and in constructing and communicating meaning. (Chase in Josselson and Lieblich 1995:1) The narrative approach allows the researcher to "come in contact with participants as people engaged in the process of interpreting themselves". (Josselson & Lieblich 1995:ix)  This approach allows the agenda to be open to development and change, depending on the narrator's experiences.  (Holloway and Jefferson 2000:31)  In this study, I explore deeply ingrained motives, some of which could have been cultivated through childhood socialisation processes, by examining the life stories of the participants.

### 3.2.4  In-depth Interviews

As the aim is to understand the unique experience of each of the participants and let his/her voice be heard, I decided on using in-depth interviews to elicit data so as to conduct narrative studies on the participants' learning experiences. The technique of in-depth interview is often described as a "conversation with a purpose". (Webb and Webb

1932:130) Legard et al. (2003) list four key features of the in-depth interview:

Firstly, it is intended to combine structure with flexibility based on a topic guide that sets out the key topics and issues to be covered. The guide, however, has to be flexible enough to allow the interviewee to cover the topics in an order he/she finds most suitable and, at the same time, give flexibility to enable the researcher to probe and explore responses during the interview. An interview schedule with a list of questions covering different topics was therefore prepared beforehand to provide some structure to the interview (see Appendix 4). There was, however, not much need to make use of this interview schedule as almost all the participants were very enthusiastic and focused in narrating their life stories. This was partly because, prior to the interviews, I had sent them some guidelines of the possible areas that they could reflect upon (see Appendix 3). However, I made it very clear that they could tell their life stories in whichever way they found most suitable.

Secondly, the interview is interactive in nature. There is interaction between researcher and interviewee throughout the interview. The researcher's role is to ask questions that lead the interviewee to talk freely about the topic under discussion and ask further questions in response to the answers of the interviewee. Hence, although it was not necessary to follow the interview schedule very strictly, I did ensure that the common topics were covered by all the participants, by asking relevant questions at appropriate junctures.

Thirdly, the researcher uses a range of probes and other techniques to achieve greater depth of answer. Legard et al. say, "The in-depth format also permits the researcher to explore fully all the factors that underpin participants' answers: reasons,

feelings, opinions and beliefs. This furnishes the explanatory evidence that is an important element of qualitative research." (2003:141) Hence, a list of verbal prompts was included in the interview schedule for this purpose (Appendix 4).

Fourthly, the interview is also generative as new knowledge or thoughts are likely to be created. The participants are directed to explore areas that they may not have explored before. They may be asked for suggestions or to propose solutions to problems raised during the interview.

## 3.3  Procedure

### 3.3.1  Access and Entry

Immediately after the announcement about Singapore's first Lifelong Learner Award Contest, I contacted the winners through the organisers. I drafted an invitation letter (Appendix 1) and an information sheet (Appendix 2), which the organisers then sent out to the winners. The invitation letter and information sheet included: 1) an introduction of myself; 2) an explanation of the study; 3) the time for involvement; 4) an explanation of the rights of the participants. Of the twenty-three award winners, only thirteen told the organisers that they agreed to participate in my study. I then contacted the thirteen volunteers by phone and made arrangements to meet them at a time and place convenient to them. At the same time, I also sent out another letter giving some guidelines about the topics they could consider covering in narrating their life stories (see Appendix 3). The guidelines for reflection were adapted from Atkinson's *The Life Story Interview* (Atkinson 1998) and hence included 1) family of origin and cultural background; 2) social and historical incidents that affected their life stories; 3) educational background; 4) present family; 5) work; 6) past and present

learning activities; 7) advice that they would like to offer other learners. However, in this letter and when I subsequently met them for the interview, I emphasised that they could tell their life stories in whichever way that they found to be most suitable. Sufficient time was also given to the participants to enable them to reflect on the topics concerned before they were interviewed.

### 3.3.2 Profile of Participants

The first Lifelong Learner Award Contest in Singapore was organised in 2002 by Mediacorp Radio Singapore, the national broadcaster in Singapore, with support from the Community Development Councils of the People's Association of Singapore, the Ministry of Manpower and Mediacorp's Today newspaper.

In their press release, Mediacorp Radio described the campaign as a campaign "to recognise and celebrate the commitment of adult learners in Singapore who have overcome personal obstacles and shown perseverance in improving their lives and those of others through lifelong learning" (Mediacorp website).

Out of a total of three hundred nominations from the public, twenty-three were judged by a panel of judges to be winners of the lifelong learner awards based on the stories of their learning experiences. A list of the evaluation criteria for judging the final winners is included in Appendix 5.

By virtue of the fact that they were nominated from the whole of Singapore after much publicity in the local mass media, and had gone through a stringent process of selection, their selection, which is based on fixed criteria, is equivalent to purposeful or

selective sampling from the whole population. (Strauss 1973)

The participants of this study consist of people from different ethnic groups. They included two Indians, one Malay and ten Chinese.  One was widowed; another divorced while the rest are married.  Most of them either had very little initial education or did not consider themselves to be successful in their initial education.  They came mainly from lower income groups.  The participants' own descriptions of their family backgrounds included "very deprived", "very poor", "hard life", "big family with many siblings" and "humble", and, in one case, "broken family".  Hence, this group of learners would fit into the description of the usual non-participants of adult and lifelong learning.  Adults who come from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds and those who left school early (National Adult Learning Survey 2002; NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2004; Gorard and Selwyn 2005) are found to be under-represented as participants in education later in life.  Of the thirteen volunteers, there were four women and nine men.

Continuous learning has resulted in vast changes in their working careers over the years.  While recollecting his past occupations, WD who is now a very successful and prominent estate agent said, "I worked for my father, in the canteen...as an office boy in the Parliament House...sold flowers...[at a] Shell station, a lot of jobs lah...delivery clerk and all that lah." (WD pg 1)  As a result of his low initial education, he could not qualify for admission into many formal courses that he was interested in attending.  He is a very good example of a person who relies on informal and non-formal learning.  He says that that he learns by scouring through books, tapes, compact discs, videos or through attending seminars.  He constantly imparts his knowledge to

others by training his staff and opening his office to the public for free seminars twice a week.

Both HKK and H now work as lecturers in commercial institutes. Besides encountering some turning points in his life, HKK who had experienced failure academically when he was younger was motivated by a particular polytechnic lecturer. He is trying to do the same by motivating others now. He has written two books on motivation and conducts motivational talks occasionally. Another participant, H, also did badly in his initial education and was once a construction worker, ship-builder, deep-sea diver and driver (H pg 2-3). He now hosts a Tamil programme on national radio through which he aims to encourage and inspire the local Indian community to participate in learning for self-improvement and is currently pursuing a doctorate degree. Besides being a very active trade union leader and a full-time storekeeper, CR is also a part-time photographer and a photography instructor because of his interest in photography.

Both LD and LWM fared badly in school. LD, who used to work as a labourer, was promoted to the post of supervisor and subsequently became sales manager after he received his degree in Construction Management and Economics which he did through a part-time distance-learning programme. LWM attributed his promotion from car mechanic to senior supervisor to continuous learning, undertaken both formally and informally. Besides enrolling in WISE (Work Improvement through Secondary Education) classes to improve his English (refer to descriptions of Singapore lifelong learning initiatives mentioned in Chapter 1), he also picked up skills from formal and non-formal courses and through studying manuals of machinery.

PNY came from a "broken family" as her mother abandoned her family when she was quite young. She started work at a factory at the age of 13 but has since established a name for herself as a good cook due to her keen interest in cookery. Besides hosting a regular cookery programme on national radio, PNY, a former full-time homemaker, is also a cookery instructress at community centres and shopping malls.

Both V and LYM were also forced to quit school early as a result of adverse family circumstances, at the age of 13 and 14 respectively. Both became single parents, V after her divorce and LYM after her husband passed away. V, a production operator in a factory, did not even complete her primary two education initially. She was prompted to re-engage in post-school learning when she observed that her older colleagues could communicate better than herself as a result of their engagement in post-school learning. Although she had great difficulty balancing work, family and studies, she managed to complete her secondary education after many years of working on the night shift permanently. V has since been promoted from production operator to supervisor. LYM, who went back to school at the age of 47 after her daughters graduated from university, is currently working as an administrative officer.

LAS and OK did quite well in their secondary education but were also forced to start work early because of adverse family circumstances and lack of encouragement (OK pg 9). Both started their working careers as teachers. LAS subsequently changed his career and went into estate valuation and management. He retired as a property director and was actively pursuing a course in traditional Chinese medicine at the time of the interview. OK enrolled in the Open University at the age of 48 and received a

degree at the age of 52. She is now the deputy principal of a primary school.

WW was a police inspector in Hong Kong. He considered the Hong Kong handover in 1997 to be a turning point in his life as it made him reflect on his future. He obtained his "A" Level qualifications at the age of 30 and proceeded to pursue an external law degree after that. He later migrated to Singapore where he continued to take up many formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities. Z, an administrative officer, was not keen in studying when he was young. He left school with 2 "O" Level passes. However, he began to reflect on the harsh realities of life when he started work at a factory and subsequently at a construction site. He later re-sat for his "O" Level examinations and passed. He has since completed his "A" Levels and added an Advanced Diploma in Business Administration and a Business degree to his credentials by attending night classes. He now plans to take up a Graduate Diploma in Human Resource Management and then complete his Master's degree.

### 3.3.3 Ethical Issues

Josselson claims, "Our knowing or writing about our participants' lives may expose them to consequences that neither we nor they could have foreseen". (Josselson 1996:xiii) She stresses the need for researchers to recognise the dangers and pitfalls of narrative research. Hence, before embarking on the research, ethical issues such as ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality were considered. Interviews were carried out after approval by the Ethics Committee of Durham University.

To ensure *voluntary participation and informed consent*, I included only those who agreed to be contacted after they have received detailed information of

the research (Tolich and Davidson 1999:72). Every effort was made to ensure *anonymity and confidentiality* throughout the research process. Pseudonyms were used right from the beginning of the research, in the labelling of tapes and transcripts and in attribution of quotes to participants. Sections of interviews that I consider to contain information that is too sensitive for public perusal or harmful to the participants were omitted. (See discussion on ethical considerations below.) As I had the help of some undergraduates to transcribe the interviews, I explained the importance of maintaining confidentiality to all the transcribers. After the transcription work was done, I asked the transcribers to erase all traces of the taped interviews that were given to them. As a way of *ensuring participants' protection,* they were informed about *the rights of withdrawal* from the beginning. (Seidman 1991)

### 3.3.4 Ethical considerations during study

From the outset, I was aware that a study which involves in-depth interviews of participants to elicit rich, deep data for an understanding of the motivational factors behind lifelong learners' participation in learning could require special ethical considerations. Birch and Miller, for example, mention that where the type of research relationship is characterised by sharing personal and private experiences over a long period of time, it "may involve acts of self disclosure, where personal, private experiences are revealed to the researcher in a relationship of closeness and trust" (Birch and Miller, 2000 cited in Mauthner, 2002 et al. 2002:92).

My fears were proven to be true when, during a particular interview, one female participant started sobbing and narrating a very sensitive incident. As a former teacher who was also trained in counselling, I was tempted to take on the role of a counsellor

but decided that it would then lead to a conflict of roles. For I agree with Lewis who stresses that "the researcher's role should not be confused with that of adviser or counsellor. It is not appropriate to give advice, nor to comment favourably or unfavourably on participant's decisions or circumstances beyond expressions of empathy." (Lewis 2003:69)

Not wanting to interrupt her, I allowed the tape to run while she continued with her narration. I believe that, by allowing her to finish her narration, I have given her an opportunity to be relieved of an emotional burden. Yet, I was able to ensure that the relationship does not become so close as to cause awkwardness in continuing with the interview, by refraining from giving advice.

At the end of the interview, I told her that I appreciated her sharing something so personal with me, but I assured her that this part of the interview would be omitted from the transcript so as to ensure confidentiality. She seemed quite relieved to hear about my decision as she felt that she got carried away while telling her life story.

## 3.4  Data Collection

I used a combination of in-depth interviews and narrative theory due to practical considerations. The rationale and methods for data collection are elaborated below.

### 3.4.1  Methods of Data Collection

#### 3.4.1.1  *Use of in-depth interviews to collect data for narrative studies*

Throughout the whole process of data collection, I was guided by the principle of inviting stories from the participants rather than eliciting data from the

participants based on my own preconceived ideas. (Polanyi 1985) One technique which I learnt previously in my sociological studies, but had to relearn, was to listen more, talk less and ask questions without interrupting the participants' trend of thought. I have to admit that when I examined the transcripts of the earlier interviews, there were occasions when I was so excited by the topics brought up by the participants that I was guilty of interrupting to try and probe for more information which could lead to something I considered useful.

I also had to constantly remind myself not to ask leading questions. Again, despite having learnt this before, I found that happening a few times in the initial interviews. Charmaz (in Gubrium and Holstein 2002) cautions against forcing interview data into preconceived categories by asking the wrong questions and suggests that researchers need to be constantly reflexive about the nature of their questions and whether they work for the specific participants.

I agree with some writers who maintain that "interviewing is both a research methodology and a social relationship that must be nurtured, sustained, and then ended gracefully (Dexter 1970; Hyman et al. 1954; Mishler 1986 cited in Seidman 1991:72). Seidman also cites Hyman (1954) who emphasises that the interviewer must build a rapport that is controlled. "Too much or too little rapport can lead to distortion of what the participant reconstructs in the interview." He lists some of the characteristics of the interviewing relationship as including respect, interest, attention and good manners on the part of the interviewer. (Seidman 1991:74)

I had the advantage of being considered as an insider rather than an outsider by virtue of the fact that I am also engaging in some studies. Some of the participants were

curious about my studies. By sharing a little of my own learning experiences, I think it has helped to build rapport and encourage further sharing from the participants.

### 3.4.1.2 Recording

Although the information sheets that were sent out before the interviews specified that the interviews would be audio-recorded, I made it a point to explain the reasons and procedures for recording when I met each participant at the interview. I also reiterated the focus of the study, which is on lifelong learning in Singapore and emphasised their rights as participants. Only after the participants had fully understood the research procedures and their rights as participants did I seek their written consent.

As most of the interviews were conducted in air-conditioned, sound-proof rooms, the recording was clear for all the interviews. I also ensured that no data would be lost through technical faults by using two audio-recorders (a conventional tape-recorder and a digital recorder) simultaneously to record the interviews. This proved to be the right measure as there were a few occasions when data at the end of the interviews were lost as a result of my lack of familiarity with use of the digital recorder. Having a backup in the form of a conventional tape recorder means that no information was lost. The use of a digital recorder has certain advantages, however, such as the ease with which the voice recording could be transferred to the computer and played back for subsequent transcription and analysis.

While I was initially quite concerned about distractions due to the presence of the audio-recorders, my fears proved to be unfounded as all the participants seemed to be undeterred by the presence of the audio-recorders.

### 3.4.1.3 Transcription

Since I was able to transfer the interviews into my computer from my digital recorder, initially, I explored the possibility of using voice-recognition software to transcribe the interviews. However, as the participants included people from different ethnic groups who spoke with slightly differently accents, it was impossible to find software that could recognise the voices of all the participants. I finally gave up and decided to transcribe the data manually.

I recruited a few university undergraduates to help me with the transcription work. All were briefed about the necessity to produce accurate transcriptions. They were also told about the importance of having verbatim accounts and warned against "tidying up" the transcripts to make them "sound better". Each of them was also issued with a set of prescribed instructions specifying the notation system for pauses, laughing, coughing, interruptions, overlapping speech, garbled speech, emphasis, mimicking and other likely occurrences so as to ensure consistency of all data. A copy of the instructions explaining the notation system (extracted from Poland in Gubrium and Holstein 2002:641) that was issued to the transcribers is included in Appendix 6. .

At the briefing, each transcriber was given a compact disc with a recorded interview in it. He/she was instructed to erase the interview from the disc and computer once they have finished with the transcription and to return the compact disc with the completed transcription.

Later as I was analysing and coding the interviews, I went through the transcripts line-by-line. Despite thoroughly briefing the transcribers beforehand, I still found one transcript that was not in verbatim form. The transcriber had taken

liberty to "tidy up" the transcript. As a result, I had to recruit another student to review all the transcripts.

As advocated by Mertens (1998:182), the transcripts were also sent to the participants for member checking to ensure accuracy of data and credibility of research. Subsequently, I also made arrangements to meet with the participants again to clarify any doubts arising from transcripts and interpretation of data. Excerpts of the transcripts of 3 participants, WW, OK and H, are included in this thesis [see Appendices 7(a), 7(b) and 7(c)].

## 3.5 Data analysis

### 3.5.1 Qualitative data – 'an attractive nuisance'

The choice of the qualitative method of research involves the handling of huge amounts of data which have to be painstakingly analysed line-by-line. Qualitative data are usually voluminous, messy, unwieldy and discursive – 'an attractive nuisance' (Miles 1979 cited in Spencer, Ritchie and O' Connor 2003:202). I found this description to be apt once I started analysing the data that I have collected. While I dread the messiness, I realised also that it is precisely because there is such a voluminous amount of rich data that I am able to confidently draw conclusions from this data.

### 3.5.2 'Hallmarks' of a good system for analysing data

Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor (2003) point out the importance of choosing a system or method that will help rather than distract during analytical searches. They list

the following criteria as the 'hallmarks' of a good system for analysing data:

- remains grounded in the data

  It provides a structure that allows emergent ideas, concepts and patterns to be captured and revisited. It provides quick and easy access to the original data at any stage of the analytic process.

- permits captured synthesis

  While data need to be reduced to enable the researcher to make sense of evidence, the synthesis of data has to be captured so that original terms, thoughts and views of participants are not lost.

- facilitates and displays ordering

  The system must allow the data to be organised and sorted so that they can be inspected in largely related blocks of subject matter.

- permits within and between case searches

  The system should facilitate searches for *thematic* categories and patterns across different *cases, associations* of phenomena *within one case* and *associations* in phenomena *between groups of cases.*

Using the above criteria, I chose to use grounded theory methodology for data analysis but combined it with my own adaptations of Miles and Huberman (1994) and a framework developed at the National Centre for Social Research. (Ritchie et al.

2003:219-262) to display the analysed data in a matrix form for easy access and comparisons within and across cases. Due to the size of the spreadsheet, instead of analysing a printed copy, I found it more convenient to analyse the data on the computer screen. A portion of the spreadsheet displaying the analysed data for 5 participants is, however, included in this thesis as Appendix 8.

### 3.5.3 Using Grounded theory

I decided that grounded theory method best serves my purpose as it provides a systematic way of constructing theories that illuminate human behaviour. Before the first interview, I issued a guide (see Appendix 3) to help the participants reflect on their lives chronologically, starting from the time they spent with their parents and siblings, then going on to their lives in school, after leaving school, after marriage if they are married and at their place of work. However, I emphasised that I am interested in hearing their life stories and hence they could tell their life stories in whichever way they wanted.

The analysis, which began soon after the completion of the first interview and did not stop until writing was completed, involved reading and re-reading of the transcripts line-by-line to identify common themes within and among cases. As it is my purpose to portray the participants' subjective experience, I made it a point to use 'in vivo' concepts based on the language and terms they used. A conscious effort was made during the data analysis stage to search for emergent emic concepts.

However, I am also aware of the criticisms levied against being journalistic rather than research-oriented, by remaining at the descriptive level where data are merely summarised under broad themes. Hence, besides the reduction of data

through coding (by comparing within each case for common themes, concepts or categories) the thematic categories so derived were also compared constantly across the thirteen cases to enable the detection of common patterns among the cases. Such a process allows for the emerging of theory from the data. Since the common themes and patterns identified emerged from the analysis of the data, I was able to derive a theoretical model which reflects the realities of the experiences of these thirteen lifelong learners in Singapore.

Another step in the grounded theory method of analysis is that of bringing process into the analysis. (Strauss and Corbin 1998:163) Strauss and Corbin describe process as "a series of evolving sequences of action/interaction that occur over time and space, changing or sometimes remaining the same in response to the situation or context". (ibid.:165) and advocate that the researcher look out for action/interaction and trace it over time to note how and if it changes or what enables it to remain the same with changes in structural conditions. (ibid.:163)

By looking out consciously for movement, sequence, and change under different contexts and conditions, I was able to identify distinct stages in the learning journey of each participant. I then synthesised the thirteen learning journeys into a lifelong learning model that describes the learning journeys of all the thirteen participants.

## 3.6 Alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative research

The standards or canons by which quantitative studies are evaluated are considered by many writers as being inappropriate for evaluating qualitative studies (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Altheide and Johnson in Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Lincoln and Guba in Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Originating

from the natural sciences, the concepts of reliability and validity cannot be used in the same way for qualitative research.

### 3.6.1 Alternative Criteria of Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Guba and Lincoln (1994:2000) suggest using two different sets of criteria: the *trustworthiness* criteria of credibility (paralleling internal validity), transferability (paralleling external validity), dependability (paralleling reliability), and confirmability (paralleling objectivity) and the *authenticity* criteria of fairness, ontological authenticity (enlarges personal constructions), educative authenticity (leads to improved understanding of constructions of others), catalytic authenticity (stimulates to action), and tactical authenticity (empowers action). I have consciously adopted some of these criteria as guidelines for this study:

### 3.6.2 Credibility

Guba and Lincoln identify credibility as the criterion in qualitative research that parallels internal validity in post-positivist research. (Guba & Lincoln in Denzin & Lincoln 1994:114) In qualitative research the researcher tests credibility by asking whether there is a correspondence between the way the participants view the constructs and the way the researcher portrays the viewpoints.

Guba and Lincoln (in Keeves and Lakomski 1999) suggest member checking as one of the most important criteria in establishing credibility. They argue that the standard for qualitative work is reached if participants' interpretations of their perceptions, experiences, or whatever it is that is being investigated, are credible. Woods refers to member checking or respondent validation as 'insiders confirming the

correctness of data." (cited in Goodson and Sikes 2001:36) This is the opposite of "a journalistic inquiry" where subjects are not fed the conclusions that journalists are coming to (Reason and Rowan 1981:288).

To ensure credibility, after the transcripts of the interviews were thoroughly checked, I sent copies of transcripts of the participants' interviews to them so that they could go through them and raise any objections or make any alterations if the need arises. Subsequently, I met them again to discuss the model of lifelong participation with them.

### 3.6.3 Transferability

Transferability is identified by Guba and Lincoln as the qualitative parallel to external validity in post-positivist research. While external validity refers to the degree to which one can generalise the results to other situations, it is suggested that the qualitative researcher's responsibility is to provide sufficient detail to enable the reader to make a judgment about transferability. Extensive and careful description of the time, place, context and culture is known as "thick description".

For this particular study, descriptions of the participants and their backgrounds are provided to ensure that readers understand as much as possible the contextual and cultural factors that affect the feelings and decisions of the participants. Extensive use of quotes which provide information about the contextual and cultural backgrounds of the participants should also help readers to make a judgment about "fittingness" and "transferability". I aim at achieving transferability by providing a thorough description of research procedures and rationales for adopting the chosen design.

### 3.6.4 Dependability

Guba and Lincoln (1989 cited in Guba and Lincoln 1994) identify dependability as the qualitative parallel to reliability. In post-positive research, reliability refers to stability over time. Guba and Lincoln suggest that although dependability in qualitative research means that change can be tracked and publicly inspected, it also makes allowances for emergent designs, developing theory and other factors that induce changes but which cannot be taken as "error". They recommend conducting a dependability audit to attest to the quality and appropriateness of the inquiry process. Yin (1994) describes this process in case study research as maintaining a case study protocol that details each step in the research process. (cited in Mertens 1998:184) The research design section of this thesis documents each step in the research process.

### 3.6.5 Confirmability

Guba and Lincoln (1989) identify confirmability as the qualitative parallel to objectivity. Objectivity means that the influence of the researcher's judgment is minimised. Confirmability is achieved if data can be tracked to its source. The logic used to interpret the data should also be made explicit. Guba and Lincoln recommend the use of a confirmability audit to show that the data can be traced to their original sources. The process of synthesising to reach conclusions must also be confirmed. Yin (1994) refers to this as providing a "chain of evidence". (cited in Mertens 1998:184)

Audio-recording of interviews in both tape and digital formats, hard and soft copies of transcripts, analytical tables and charts have been preserved so that an inquiry audit can be conducted if necessary. The only thing that is missing is a set of field notes

which was stolen at Geneva Airport, together with my brand new laptop, while I was on my way to Durham University for supervision in June 2003.

As discussed earlier, the rationale for using the grounded theory methodology lies in its ability to ground theory in data. Strauss and Corbin claim that the difference between this methodology and other approaches to qualitative research is its emphasis on theory development and *conceptual density*. "*Conceptual density* refers to richness of concept development and relationships – which rest on familiarity with associated data and are checked out systematically with data." (Strauss and Corbin in Denzin and Lincoln 1994:274)  Hence, in this thesis, data and theory development are linked throughout the whole research process, through constant comparative analysis.  By choosing to display and analyse data using the framework method that was developed by the National Centre for Social Research of Britain, I also ensured that data can be checked with the original sources at ease (see Appendix 8).

As part of the process of peer debriefing, I discussed the thesis procedures, findings and conclusions with another post-graduate research student regularly. After writing up the analysis of the findings, I also discussed the results with two other friends who are currently teaching and doing research in two local universities.

### 3.6.6 Authenticity

Lincoln and Guba also developed another set of criteria, of fairness, ontological authenticity (enlarges personal constructions), educative authenticity (leads to improved understanding of constructions of others), catalytic authenticity (stimulates to action), and tactical authenticity (empowers action). (Lincoln and Guba 1994:114; 2000)  To ensure fairness, "all stakeholder views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and

voices should be apparent in the text". (Lincoln & Guba 2000:180) Ontological authenticity traces the degree to which the individual or group's conscious experience of the world become more informed or sophisticated. According to Mertens, this can be determined based on member checks with respondents or by means of an audit trail that documents changes in individuals' constructions throughout the process.

Lincoln and Guba further emphasise the importance of creating the capacity in research participants for positive social change and emancipatory community action. "Catalytic and tactical authenticities refer to the ability of a given inquiry to prompt, first, action on the part of research participants, and second, the involvement of the researcher/evaluator in training participants in specific forms of social and political action if participants desire training." (ibid.:180)

As will be seen in the findings, the lifelong learning that the participants underwent had already "empowered" them and caused many of them to be actively involved in community work of helping the less privileged in society. Winning the lifelong learning award and participation in this study caused them to reflect further on their lives and prompted planning for further action, whether in terms of their own future participation or in encouraging others to do likewise.

## 3.7    Voice and Reflexivity

### 3.7.1    Voice

Lincoln and Guba maintain:

As researchers become more conscious of the abstracted realities their texts created, they became simultaneously more conscious of having readers "hear" their

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informants – permitting readers to hear the exact words (and, occasionally, the paralinguistic cues, the lapses, pauses, stops, starts, reformulations) of the informants. (ibid.:183)

To ensure that meanings and voices of participants are fully captured, I use verbatim quotes throughout this thesis. As many people in Singapore speak Singlish, which is English combined with some local dialects, this may pose a problem for readers who are not familiar with the local culture. For example, in Stage 2 of the learning journey (the reflection stage), instead of using the word "reflection", many of the participants used the word "self-reflection" which is the colloquial way of referring to "reflection". In a society where the majority of the population are Chinese, the way the local people speak English is sometimes influenced by the Chinese translation of the word. Since the Chinese translation of "reflection" includes the word "self", this may account for the common usage of "self-reflection". This point will be further illustrated when stage 2 is discussed in Chapter 4.

I tried to capture the feelings and moods of the participants during the interviews by including notations for lapses, stops, restarts, reformulation and even coughs, sighs, laughs and emphases in the transcripts. Appendix 6 shows the instructions given to transcribers regarding the notations to be used for such purposes. I have also avoided tidying up the quotations. Hence, grammar mistakes and common local expressions like "lah" or "ya" are left intact most of the time.

## 3.7.2 Reflexivity

Lincoln and Guba define reflexivity as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the 'human instrument'…It is a conscious experiencing of

the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself." (Lincoln and Guba 2000:183) They cite Alcoff and Potter 1993:

> Reflexivity forces us to come to terms not only with our choice of research problem and with those with whom we engage in the research process, but with our selves and with the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting. (ibid.)

By critically reflecting on my multiple roles as a former economics teacher, school counsellor and librarian, post-graduate student doing research on lifelong learning, wife and mother, I ensure that I can overcome some of the biases that I bring into the research field and remain sensitive to new theoretical insight. At the same time, I believe that the participants' perception of me as an insider (somebody who is also engaged in adult learning) has helped to open doors for me in my research process. The rapport that I experienced throughout the research process has definitely helped me to gain insight into their inner feelings and meanings. Yet, by deliberately choosing not to interview people I know, such as other post-graduate students within the same course, I am able to keep a reasonable distance from my study participants so that there is sufficient objectivity.

## 3.8    Limitations of Study

There are a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, due to the small cohort size, the findings may not be generalisable for the rest of the population but this is not the purpose either, for as argued earlier a model developed from this study will provide a starting point for surveys and other types of generalisable research. Secondly, as the study involved only thirteen volunteers from the twenty-three lifelong learner

award winners, the participants of this study are in a sense self-selected. As I had to rely on Mediacorp Radio Singapore to initiate contact with the award winners, I was not in a position to explore the reasons for the other ten winners' reluctance to participate in this study. There may be differences in the characteristics and motivational factors between those who volunteered to participate in this study and those who declined to participate which I will never find out.

# SECTION II – RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Section II of the thesis presents and analyses the research findings. Due to the complexity of data, this section is further divided into chapters 4-7. The chapter divisions are based on the two central themes that emerged from the analysis of data using grounded theory methodology.

## Two Central Themes

The first central theme that emerged from the comparison for similarities of the participants' verbatim accounts was *the experience of learning as a process or journey with different stages/phases*. Each stage/phase was, in turn, found to be influenced by a number of factors which can either motivate or hinder learning.

Another central theme that emerged was *the instrumental role played by contextual factors*, such as positive environments and relationships with significant and influential others, in motivating learning. For people who come from disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds, positive environments and supportive relationships provide the enabling context for motivating learning.

### Learning as a journey or process

The notion of "learning journey" first emerged from data, in the words of HKK.

So I came out and worked, and then reality strikes. DIPLOMA is a diploma. No degree. So there's discrimination...But I said: 'Alright this is the start of a *journey*' because I fell behind so far my peers in A levels. So that's where I started my lifelong

learning... (HKK pg 5-6) (My emphasis in italics)

Descriptors used by other participants include *"process", "stages"* and *"steps"*, all of which imply progression from one sequence to another over time, and hence fit in with HKK's depiction of a learning journey.

...it's a, it's a, it's a process since after my NS so er, there's a few stages of learning...(CR pg 6) (NS refers to National Service which is the compulsory military service which all male Singapore citizens have to undergo.)

But actually the stages keep me like, learning and learning uh...Stages by stages and I (was) just learning and learning. (CR pg 24)

...*learning process* (cough) I believe that, it's a- the first *step* is the hardest...(Z pg 33)

So that is where the *learning process* comes in.(WD pg 29)

Viewing learning as a process or a journey with different stages helps to uncover the factors that cause the participants to develop from tentative learners to lifelong learners.

Different stages within the Learning Journey

Analysis of data using grounded theory methodology shows that each journey can be divided into eight stages. The lifelong learning journeys of the thirteen learners were then synthesised into a common model of lifelong learning. This model, consisting of categories grounded in data collected from the learners' narratives, shows an emic/insider perspective of lifelong learning. It represents the learners' theory of
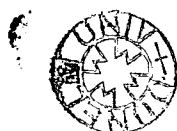
what causes them to become lifelong learners (see Figure 7 of Chapter 7).

The different stages are:

1. **Triggering factor/s and turning point/s in life**

2. **Reflection**

3. **Evaluation of reasons for learning**

4. **Weighing learning opportunities against obstacles/barriers to learning**

5. **Participation in learning**

6. **Learning outcomes**

   **- higher pay, promotion and better job prospects**

   **- access to higher learning**

   **- sense of joy, satisfaction and achievement**

   **- development of confidence, learning dispositions and learner identities**

   **- recovery of one's voice**

   **- transformation and empowerment**

   **- broadening of roles and identities**

7. **Temporary Exit**

8. **Another turning point leading to re-entry**

Organisation of Section II (Chapters 4-7)

While tracing each stage, the results are analysed and compared with relevant literature so as to enable illumination of practice with theory. To understand the process

of becoming lifelong learners, relevant verbatim quotes from selected participants are included in the discussion of each stage so that readers can experience the different stages of the learners' learning journeys vicariously.

Chapter 4 describes the factors influencing Stages 1-3, while Chapter 5 deals with Stages 4-5. Chapter 6 discusses Stages 6-8 and presents a partial model of lifelong learning participation. (Refer to Figure 6.) This model helps to illustrate the factors that influence learning during the 8 stages discussed in Chapters 4-6.

Chapter 7 discusses the role of positive environments and supportive relationships in the learners' learning journeys. The results discussed in this chapter are then incorporated into the earlier model (Figure 6) to derive a more complete model. (Refer to Figure 7 which displays all the findings in the form of a diagram.) Chapter 7 ends with a brief comparison of Cross's Chain of Response (COR) Model of Adult Participation and the model of lifelong learning participation derived in this study.

# 4 CHAPTER FOUR – STAGES 1, 2 AND 3

## 4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the findings and analyses the data that influence the first three stages of the learners' learning journeys. They are:

Stage 1: Major triggering factor/s and turning point in life

Stage 2: Reflection

Stage 3: Evaluation of reasons for learning

It shows the factors that trigger learning, explains how reflection leads to perspective transformation and examines the reasons that the learners give for participating in post-school learning.

## 4.2 Stage 1: Triggering factor/s and turning points in life

All the participants in this study re-engaged in learning as a result of one or more triggering factors which were usually related to life transitions/turning points.

H, for example, identified the experience of being "ostracised by society" (H pg 3), relatives and friends as "a turning point" and "the most critical part of (his) life":

It was a turning point, it was a turning point. That was I think, er, the most critical part...er...of my life. (pg 4).

The finding is consistent with Gallacher et al.'s (2002:501). They suggest that

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"critical incidents" such as divorce, bereavement or redundancy may act as turning points which lead people to reappraise their lives and consider the need for some form of change which includes a re-engagement with learning in a number of cases.

Knox (1977) also observes that there are "triggering events" that cause adults to change existing roles or engage in new ones, and that these events motivate a person to change, adopt a new lifestyle, seek additional training or education and accommodate new life roles.

### 4.2.1 "Trigger", "sparkling point", "catalyst", "slap", "wake up call" and "spur"

WW used the words *"catalyst"* and *"triggered"*:

It [the imminent takeover of Hong Kong by China] is a sort of a *catalyst* so to speak...I have some sort of self-reflection and I said to myself: "Oh my goodness, China is going to take over Hong Kong and the police area was the only career I can, you know...continue without which I went outside, I won't have the knowledge and skill to do anything." So I decided to do something about it lah. To improve my educational background so as to basically equip myself to have more options lah. (WW pg 7-8) (my emphasis)

Because in the early 80s, the British and China....already entered into an agreement to hand over Hong Kong back to China in 1997. Although the actual changeover took place in '97, way before that everybody was already expecting that to happen...this *triggered* off my learning. (WW pg 8-9)

Z who has experienced the triggering factor as a painful experience used stronger

terms like *"wake-up call"* and *"slap"* to describe triggering events in his life. As a construction worker working under adverse circumstances, he suddenly "woke up" to the fact that he could "be better" than the foreign professionals who were his bosses then, if he re-engaged in learning:

> While I was in Suntec City, that is where...*wake me up*. Ah...I realised the harsh reality of life ah... you look around. It's actually the papers that matters... here I am, in my own country, have to work, like a labourer, is due to my lack of paper qualification. That actually *wakes me up* lah. Ah...I sit down. I give it a thought. And I don't want to continue...working [in] this kind of situation with limited er...avenues of movement due to limitation of paper. Er...and I think I can be better (laughing) than some of those overseas people [foreign professionals] who are here. So I decided. "Why not, I go back to school again?" (Z pg 7-8)

> All you need is *a big slap*. Just like me ah. Work hard (laughs)...work hard, *big tight slap* on your face, then- then *wake you up*. And those who are retrenched...*it's a big slap*...(Z pg 94)

However, others experienced the triggering point as an enlightening event. H, for instance, described the triggering factor as "the sparkling point in my life":

> Because with one 'O' level, I was not able to find any job. Wherever I went, you need four 'O' levels, five 'O' levels, but I only had one, finally I ended up as a driver. Er, I think that was *the sparkling point in my life*. Because when I became a driver, I found that I was ostracised by society - my relatives, friends and everything. That angered me a lot. Then I wanted to see for myself what would be best for me to do. That's where I embarked on education again. That education has brought me to what I am today. (H pg

3)

Coming from a Chinese speaking environment, LAS felt handicapped in an English-speaking environment. Hence, he was "spurred" to embark on his learning journey:

> I suppose it's the environment...that, er, that we were...in a way handicapped by the language...that *spurred* me to have some desire to upgrade myself...especially using...using English language...And at that time we were asked to teach the English classes...So...o...that...that also mainly...*spurred* us to...to better upgrade ourselves lah. (LAS pg 22-25)

Courtney (1992) perceives adult learning as a means of managing change, particularly in times of major crisis when questions about self and identity are strongest and when the normal business of getting through the day, at home or work, collapses or becomes unacceptable. (cited in West 1996:9)

A number of other writers have referred to the concepts of triggering factors and life transitions. (Aslanian and Brickwell 1980; Knox 1977; Merriam and Clark 1991; Merriam and Yang 1996; Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman 1995; Tennant and Pogson 1995; Wolf and Leahy 1998 cited in Merriam and Caffarella 1999:107) Cross (1981) notes that "the necessity to adapt to changing circumstances of life...constitutes a powerful motivating force for learning. " (Cross 1981:144)

However, since everyone in his/her life-cycle experiences life events and transitions, why do some people engage in learning to cope with life events and transitions while others do not?

*The presence of significant and influential others* during such periods of transition appear to have an effect on the participants' decisions to participate in learning. The participants attribute their decision to learn to past and present relationships with mentors, role models, encouragers, disciplinarians and supporters. Only two examples are given here as this topic will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7, under role of positive environments and significant and influential others.

## 4.2.2 Turning points linked to positive and negative role models

V experienced *several turning points* and had both *positive and negative role models*. Initially, she said:

> When I started to work in XXX...I see people talk in English...they all...they have a lot of confidence...and for myself, I got nothing. And my Tamil just OK and my Malay not so good, Chinese...I learn all the bad words (laughs)...didn't learn any good ones. (V pg 3) (The notation XXX is used here to ensure anonymity.)

Halfway through the interview, as rapport between interviewer and interviewee began to build up, she started to volunteer more personal information which she did not divulge earlier on:

> ...*after five years (of marriage), separated.* I went and apply for separation because I can't take it anymore. Every now and then get beating from him and...I see my children suffering...my mum say that you're not allowed to divorce, separation because Indian, they feel that, if this kind of things happen, the society will look down on you. I feel that all this is rubbish which I have to do something. (V pg 23)

Family abuse, separation from her husband and her subsequent work in a factory

to support herself and her children were all turning points in her life. However, V's decision to re-engage in learning was also due to the presence of positive role models, in the form of her older colleagues who were participating in post-school learning, and a negative role model, namely, that of her sister who committed suicide because of marital problems. She decided to take control of her life so that she would not follow in her sister's footsteps. She said that all these helped to "push" her to "go and study" (V pg 4).

### 4.2.3 Turning points also linked to supportive relationships

Besides positive and negative role models, V also had mentors and supporters who helped her in her learning journey. Later in the interview, she disclosed that she had a network of friends and colleagues from whom she could get advice and information about learning.

And er, they [friends and colleagues] advise me [about] so many things. Then I was only twenty two, twenty three- (V pg 24)

She also relied on an elderly neighbour to help look after her two young daughters while she was out working or attending courses. (V pg 26)

OK, who is now a teacher and vice-principal, considers having a good mathematics teacher as a turning point in her life:

...in primary school, *I had this very wonderful Maths teacher.* He was very skilful. I was not doing too well in primary 3 and 4. But when he took over in primary 5 or 6, there was a change. My Mathematics became very good...one of my stronger subjects. So I felt that I was very, 1 very lucky to have him. Otherwise I don't think I

would have got as far as I'm now. Because *that was a turning point."* (OK pg 68-69)

Other studies have found that, for non-traditional adult learners, re-engaging in education entails considerable risks and uncertainty. Besides financial and other costs, they also experience great risks to their self-identities due to the greater possibility of failure and the resultant exposure to humiliation. The presence of significant and influential others, therefore, is an important impetus that can help encourage initial participation and sustain further engagement in learning. (West 1996, Archer & Hutchings 2000, Crossan et al. 2003, Gallacher et al. 2002) This will be further elaborated in the discussion about increase in confidence, development of learning dispositions and learner identities in Chapter 6 and in Chapter 7 under role of positive environments and significant and influential others.

## 4.3   Stage 2: Reflection

After the triggering events, the participants engaged in a process of reflection. According to Gallacher et al., "in individual biographies, critical incidents such as divorce or bereavement can be a time for reflection and an engagement with learning". (Gallacher et al. 2002:507 )

Dewey (1933) defines reflection as "assessing the grounds (justification) of one's beliefs," the process of rationally examining the assumptions by which we have been justifying our convictions (cited in Mezirow 1990:5)

Mezirow explains the meaning of reflective action:

*Reflective action,* understood as action predicated on critical assessment of assumptions,

may also be an integral part of decision making...Reflection in thoughtful action involves a pause to reassess by asking, What am I doing wrong? The pause may be only a split second in the decision-making process...[ Mezirow 1990:6 (Original emphasis)]

According to Mezirow, critical reflection challenges the validity of *presuppositions* in prior learning. Critical reflection involves challenging our established and habitual patterns of expectation, the meaning perspectives with which we have made sense out of our encounters with the world, others, and ourselves. The participants of this study experienced moments of critical reflection that challenged established patterns of expectation and meaning perspectives before embarking on their learning journeys.

As the learners decided to pause and reassess their former beliefs, there was a change in perspectives. They began to set new goals for their future. The very decision to take action to improve one's life is itself a learning experience:

*It's a reflection... you reflect* that to...work hard for some other *goals* because *for me is degree is one goal.* I want to have it because I really want to have it to have a better job. I don't want to be a technician for the rest of my life...(Z pg 38)

[I] have some sort of self-reflection...So I decided to do something about it lah. To improve my educational background so as to basically equip myself to have more options lah. (WW pg 7, 8)

After some reflection, V too decided that she "cannot carry on like that". She then declared "I better go and study". (V pg 4)

Mezirow explains that transformation of a *meaning perspective* is likely to involve one's sense of self and always involves critical reflection upon the distorted premises sustaining structure of expectation. One becomes critically aware of how and why one's assumptions constrain the way one perceives, understands and feels about one's world. (Mezirow 1991:167)

When faced with a crisis precipitated by a transition in life, the participants in this study critically reflected upon their previously distorted premises and experienced a transformation of a meaning perspective. They questioned previous presuppositions about inability to engage in learning and decided to take the first steps to embark on their learning journeys.

After having critically examined himself, H made the decision to embark on his learning journey.

> *I asked myself* what are the things I needed to do. And the only thing that came to me was if I were to raise my educational level, things will change. And that even urged me to do things much better. (H pg 19)

### 4.3.1 Reflection at regular intervals

Even after the learners have embarked on their learning journeys, they continue to reflect and reassess their goals at regular intervals before taking actions to achieve new goals. In other words, the learning journey is one that is continuous, moving from reflection to action, over and over again. See Figure 7 in Chapter 7 for the complete model of lifelong learning participation.

Every 5 years, I change my *goal...*I have got directions. I have got directions. *I do a lot of er...self-reflective memory...*(H pg 75)

The Chinese translation for "reflect" includes the word "self". Hence, it is quite common for the word "self-reflection" to be used in place of "reflection" by people from all the ethnic groups in Singapore. The opinion of a linguistic lecturer whom I consulted is that "self-reflection" is a form of Singlish for "reflection".

Similarly, some of the participants were also quoted as saying, "I asked myself" (H pg 19), "I told myself" (WD pg 6), "I said" (OK pg 12, 23, 42), or "I said to myself" instead of "I reflected". These are variations of the colloquial way of referring to "I reflected". Being Chinese-educated and choosing to be interviewed in English, CR said, "I talk to myself" (CR pg 28, 29, 35) instead of saying "I reflect..." Similarly, WD also said, "I talked to myself...(pg 6) when he actually meant "I reflected..."

## 4.4 Stage 3: Evaluation of reasons for learning

Besides the initial stages of encountering triggering factors and critical reflection, the participants went through another stage where they mulled over other reasons for learning before they participated in post-school learning. While the initial reasons given during the interview were instrumental or utilitarian, in accordance with the official pragmatic discourse on lifelong learning, other reasons surfaced later in the interview.

### 4.4.1 Instrumental/utilitarian reasons

Pont observes that "adult learning is strongly mediated by the labour market. The majority of learners in most countries learn for professional purpose (continuing vocational training, initial education or training to acquire skills for a job and training measures)." (Pont 2004:32)

Initially, most participants mentioned triggering factors that fit the official and dominant discourse of economic rationality. CR, who is very active in his trade union referred to the need to "polish your...skill" to remain "relevant" and "not be left out":

... if you really...didn't go for... *polishing your own- your new skill* uh, you really- *you will be left out*, and...it become, very soon *you become like not relevant*...(CR pg 49)

All the participants initially engaged in learning for pragmatic and utilitarian reasons, such as for survival, to get a better job or a higher pay.

### 4.4.1.1  To "survive", "to support family", "fear of retrenchment"

LWM laments:

Because if you don't have education it's very hard *to survive* in Singapore (LWM pg 6)

He added:

As a guy, eventually *have to support the family*. (LWM pg 6)

V's learning was also economically driven. The *fear of retrenchment* caused her to re-engage in learning of a different kind. She decided to learn how to ride a motorcycle and to get a motorcycle licence so that she could take on a delivery job if

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she should be retrenched.

V spoke about her fears of losing her job:

> [the company] started to retrench people...I quite scared already...these two girls [her daughters] were studying...if anything were to happen to me...I have to survive...then I went to take my motorbike licence...If they retrench, I need a job. At the same time, I have to spend time with my girls. If I take a motorbike (licence), I can do some delivery job...(V pg 39)

### 4.4.1.2 More career options

Z's reason for re-engaging in learning was "to have a better job". He said, "...I don't want to be a technician for the rest of my life" (pg 38).

WW was concerned about the stability of his *career* as a police officer after the takeover of Hong Kong by China. He decided to learn so as to *"equip" himself "to have more options"(pg 7)*

As CR was contemplating an accounting *career*, it seemed logical to take up accounting courses. The demands involved in working as an executive in an insurance company were also instrumental in his decision to embark on learning.

### 4.4.1.3 Higher remuneration, "to get promotion" and "vocational certification"

Others learnt so as to have a higher salary.

> ...they were giving *incentives* to people who can do their 'O' levels if they can get a distinction. *They get some kind of increment or something...So I said, 'Ok*

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*why not?'* So then I did my English and I think I got a distinction for English, then I did my Maths 'O' Level. (OK pg 13)

See when you got an 'O' level and you got a NTC3, the salary scale [is] different by $100, $150. (LWM pg 62-63)

The need for *vocational certification* caused LD to take up a course:

...because the construction industry...they require...that *whoever supervise a construction site... need to be certified.* So they set up this...study called national certificate in construction supervision, NCSS. *I take up this study...for this purpose*

### 4.4.1.4 Advancement in society and "better life"

Again typical of the Singaporean rhetoric, LD spoke of learning, or "study", as he called it, in instrumental terms initially, that is *to "gain something or move up in society"* and to ensure that his family will have *"a better life"*.

...study, I might gain something or move up in society. It's actually better for the whole family in terms of say a better life... (LD pg 21)

Likewise, WW also spoke about lifelong learning in utilitarian terms, as a means towards an end - to *"become successful"* and to make his *"family happy"*.

...lifelong learning...to make you become successful...benefit in life lah. Life. To make my family happy lah. To make people happy...(WW pg 37)

The participants' learning was thus initially instrumentally driven, and their motives can be explained by human capital theory, as we saw in Chapter 1. As a

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migrant society composed of people whose ancestors migrated from China, Peninsular Malaya, Indonesia, India and other neighbouring countries under extremely difficult conditions, it is not surprising that many of the people interviewed reflect the official dominant discourse of lifelong learning as a means towards an instrumental end.

## 4.4.2 Other more personal reasons for learning

The use of the narrative approach, however, enables the learners to further reflect on other motives for re-engaging in learning. Coming from disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds, it was not surprising that many of them lacked confidence and saw learning as a way to "upgrade", or "to prove to others" and themselves that they are capable of achieving their new goals.

### *4.4.2.1 To upgrade oneself due to sense of inadequacy*

WW was "prompted" to improve himself professionally because he experienced "a sense of inadequacy" at work. He compared himself to other police inspectors in Hong Kong. He felt that he was "not quite up to the standard". He asked himself, "How come so bad?" (WW pg 10) While narrating his experience of working in a multinational corporation in Singapore, he said, "...a lot of things popped up again. Again, the *sense of inadequacy* you know..." (WW pg 12)

LWM felt the need to "polish up" his knowledge because his job involved training professionals to use his company's products. He said that he attended night classes *"to build confidence"*. (LWM pg 7)

The more CR learnt, the more he realised that he "lacked a LOT of things". (CR

LAS, a "Chinese-educated" technical teacher who was forced to conduct lessons in English, felt *"handicapped by the language"*. That "spurred" him to *"upgrade"* himself (LAS pg 49).

Coming from disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds, many of them expressed a lack of confidence in their ability before they participated in post-school learning. Hence, learning is a way to overcome the "sense of inadequacy" or "handicap".

### 4.4.2.2   To prove abilities to oneself and others

OK's reason also emanated from a sense of inadequacy. She said getting her first degree was "like a challenge" to herself:

> Because to get my first degree, was like a challenge to me. To see whether I can do it, or I can't do it. So my first degree shows me I can. (OK pg 45)

Achieving her goal of getting her first degree gave her confidence for future learning. She said, *"So my first degree shows me I can."* As initial success is very vital for the cultivation of a positive learner identity, this is an example of the beginning of the development of a learner identity. This will be discussed in Chapter 6 under "Learning Outcomes".

After the painful experience of being ostracised by his own friends and family members, H said, "I wanted to show that it's not actually that I'm stupid, but I had not

put in enough effort." (H pg 4)

He added:

> I wanted to change my own pattern of life. Er...I wanted to prove to a lot of people that
> I am not what I am. (H pg 36)

PNY came from a broken family and experienced discrimination from young. She wanted to prove that "poor education or illiteracy does not mean uselessness".

> *Want to prove*...I was thinking that not everyone could have a good environment and
> suffer no defeat...*poor education or illiteracy does not mean uselessness. I have been
> looked down ever since I was very little*...I had been thinking why I should be like
> this...(PNYpg 86-87)

LYM had a difficult relationship with her traditional Chinese mother-in-law. At work, she experienced discrimination due to her low initial education. She learnt "so that people will not bully" her.

> Actually, my reason for studying is to get myself more knowledge so that people will
> not bully me... and then people will not look down on those that are not educated.
> (LYM pg 58)

The above quotations show that people from disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds can sometimes experience discrimination and hence see participation in post-school learning as a way to overcome marginalisation. As one of the characteristics of marginalisation is loss of voice, one of the motives for engaging in post-school learning could be to gain a voice.

### 4.4.2.3 To gain a voice

LWM *felt out of place* at Shenton Way (within the central business district of Singapore) where "everybody" spoke very good English. He described the impact on him. He shared with me the *"hurt"* that he felt when he was *"not able to join (in) a conversation"* because of his poor command of English and lack of market knowledge.

> People talk about market, what's- what's going on, shares, what happen, industry and so on, er...we just say nothing, *er I find that it's really er, so-called hurt loh when we are not able to join a conversation.* So in order to do so, I think you have to read and learn, learn more lah, you know, from night class. (LWM pg 63)

V was another example of somebody who *learnt so that her voice could be heard.*

> Last time, before I...I taking these courses, *I feel like when I speak anything, when I say English, people might laugh at me...* but after I went to these courses, BEST programme, I feel that...WHY NOT? ...I feel that kind of confidence in me. (V pg 11)

### 4.4.2.4 To be like others (role models)

LD aspired to be like his supervisor "sitting in the site office, telling people what to do, planning all the schedules and all that." (pg 39) WW felt "inadequate" when he compared himself with fellow inspectors and officers. "I find myself, in terms of analytical power...not quite up to standard". Therefore, he decided to improve himself. (LD pg 10)

V wished that that she could be like the "aunties" (older female colleagues) who

went back to study and could speak English.

The presence of a positive role model caused WW to decide to take action to improve his station in life through learning:

I told myself that if this guy can do it, so can I lah." (WW pg 41)

Emphasising the important role played by social relationships, Gallacher et al. suggest that "often what is important is not just knowing about provision but knowing someone who has experienced learning, and experienced this in a positive way". (Gallacher et al. 2002:503)

West notes that those who successfully struggle against difficulty and oppression express elements of personality which, if admired and desired by others, can act as a spur and an inspiration for them to take similar risks. (West 1996:53)

The importance of social relationships and a supportive environment will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

### 4.4.2.5 To set an example for others

Other more altruistic reasons emerge as rapport between researcher and participants is built. A few of the participants mentioned that they participated in learning because they wanted to set an example for others.

LAS wanted to "...*set an example for them (children)*, to show them that nothing is impossible if one has the determination and perseverance." (LAS pg 30)

LD said, "I want to show the children...prove (to) the children, there is always a way." (LD pg 46)

As head of department, OK felt that she was expected to apply for the course so that she could perform better. (pg 16) Later, as vice-principal, she felt that she "cannot be so laid back...*must show an example*". (OK pg 36)

#### *4.4.2.6    Other reasons, such as "to make up for lost opportunities"*

LYM testified about the therapeutic effect of learning a craft.  She decided to learn to make handicrafts because such activities help *relieve her stress* (LWM pg 36). WW, on the other hand, felt that he was *"making amends...making up" for the lack of opportunities when he was young.* (WW pg 15)

### 4.4.3    Reasons for learning vary during life course

LAS says that, now that he has retired, his motive for learning is quite different from when he was younger:

> ...*now* that I'm retired, er, *remuneration is out of the question* (laughing).  (LAS pg 8)

He summarises his reasons for learning Chinese traditional medicine into learning "for knowledge", learning "to help others" by doing voluntary work in Chinese medicine, and learning so as to "bring back" (refresh) his Chinese:

> more for knowledge, as well as maybe...I would be very happy if I can do voluntary...to help others.  So, so it's a different motivation. Of course...as I said earlier...partly the motivation was also to- to- to...BRING BACK my Chinese, because I've given up Chinese for 30...30, 40 years. (laughing) When, when I go to

work, I've- I've forgotten all the Chinese. So now it's to bring back my Chinese. As well as, as some, some theory in er...TCM. (LAS pg 9)

OK, too, has decided to pursue her interests in music and cookery now that she has received a degree. She has joined a Chinese orchestra and hopes to take up piano lessons when she retires. (OK pg 23-26)

This shows that the reasons for learning vary over a person's life-course. After retirement, utilitarian reasons become less important. The participants in Withnall's study (2006) used the phrase 'indulgent learning' to illustrate how learning activity in later life which is usually self chosen differs from the 'compulsory learning' undertaken earlier in life. The time to pursue their own interests resulted from being freed from the substantial demands of earning a living and raising a family or, in some cases, through no longer caring for a loved one who had now died.

Davey and Jamieson note that ageing of populations adds to the challenge of policy-makers and educationists. They cite Schuller (1993), Withnall (1994), Walker (1996) and Midwinter (1998) and suggest:

> For people approaching or in retirement – a rapidly growing population group in many countries – education is recommended to assist in adjustment to ageing, to provide mental stimulation and to provide resources for new roles, e.g. community volunteers, grandparents and carers. (Davey and Jamieson 2003:267)

If a society is serious about lifelong learning for all, there should be courses to cater to older adults and retirees. Recently, with the setting up of Singapore's new university, SIM University (UniSIM), the university has taken one big step forward

when its president, Professor Cheong, declared that besides offering new and more flexible degree courses to cater to working adults, it is also keen to attract more retirees as students. He said, "We hope to have more of them taking up our courses for the sheer fun of learning something new." (The Straits Times, 4.9.05, H4)

However, more can be achieved if other more traditional universities also widen access to their institutions to non-traditional and older learners.

## 4.5    Summary and discussion

Chapter 4 examines the first three stages of the participants' learning journeys for factors that influence their decisions to participate in learning. The results of the findings are represented in Figure 2 below.

## Figure 2: STAGES 1-3

| STAGE 1: Triggering factor/s and turning point/s in life | STAGE 2: Reflection | STAGE 3: Evaluation of Reasons for Learning | |
|---|---|---|---|
| • "Trigger", "Sparkling point", "Catalyst", "Slap", "Wake-up call", "Spur"<br><br>• Linked to positive and negative role models<br><br>• Linked to supportive relationships | Challenges the validity of presuppositions | **Instrumental / Utilitarian reasons**<br><br>• To "survive", "support family", "fear of retrenchment"<br><br>• More career options<br><br>• Higher remuneration, "to get promotion", "vocational certification"<br><br>• Advancement in society and "better life" | **Personal reasons**<br><br>• To upgrade oneself due to sense of inadequacy<br><br>• To prove abilities to oneself and others<br><br>• To gain a voice<br><br>• To be like others (Role models)<br><br>• To set an example for others<br><br>• To make amends for lost opportunities |

The narratives of interviewees offer an emic (insider) perspective of lifelong learning which encompasses more than the economic perspective that is often portrayed in the official and dominant discourse where learning is often equated with training to ensure survival in a globalised and constantly changing world. The analysis provided by the emic (insider) perspective of the lifelong learners is richer than one which only identifies instrumental reasons.

The findings of this study confirm the suggestion by Rees, Fevre, Furlong and Gorard for "a much more nuanced social theory of lifetime learning than is offered by the dominant discourse of human capital theory" (1997:495). The role of cultural and contextual factors in influencing learning decisions cannot be underestimated also.

For this group of learners, learning was initially triggered by changes in life events. The triggering events led to reflection where the participants became critically aware of how their previous assumptions constrained the way they viewed, understood and felt their world. This caused a transformation in meaning perspective.

The learners also began to evaluate reasons for learning. When narrating this stage of their learning journeys, many of them initially gave instrumental reasons such as learning for survival, higher pay, promotions and fear or experience of retrenchment. However, other more personal reasons surfaced later in the narratives of the learners and in later periods of their lives. Coming from disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds, learning is seen by many as a pathway to overcome marginalisation. Many of them lacked confidence or felt inadequate at the beginning of their learning journeys. They took up post-school learning to prove their abilities to themselves and others, or to gain a voice lost through marginalisation. The presence of role models and supportive relationships help motivate them to take "the first step" to participate in post-school learning.

Thus, motives for adult learning are often more complex than depicted in the dominant discourse. The motives for learning can also be very different at different stages of a person's life-course. Utilitarian reasons become less important close to and after retirement. Hence, the learning needs of retirees and other older members of society may be neglected in the dominant economic discourse of lifelong learning. Gorard and Rees suggest that creators of a learning society should consider enhancing "leisure learning' ("indulgent learning" in Withnall 2004) since it is a characteristic of later-life learners (2002:119).

Williamson argues that in the discourses of public policy, there is "a rather narrow, instrumental understanding of what lifelong learning is and of what it could be." Hence, lifelong learning is often seen as "returning to learning and education in adulthood and promoting training in the workplace" (Williamson 2002:173).

The above examples testify to the need for a more holistic approach to lifelong learning. People learn as a result of a wide variety of reasons. To emphasise learning just for economic gain, as is suggested by human capital theory, would limit the efficacy of policy measures.

# 5 CHAPTER FIVE – STAGES 4 AND 5

## 5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 showed how the learners progressed from the stage of experiencing a triggering event (Stage 1) to reflection (Stage 2) and evaluation of reasons for learning (Stage 3). Chapter 5 discusses the factors that influence stages 4-5. The stages are:

Stage 4: Weighing learning opportunities against obstacles/barriers to learning

Stage 5: Participation in learning

One clarification, however, needs to be made at this point concerning the numbering of the stages.

### 5.1.1 Stages not always in same sequential order

Although the process of becoming lifelong learners happens in stages/phases, these stages/phases may not always be in the same sequence. Usually, a learner seeks out learning opportunities after some reflection as a result of a triggering event in life. However, there can also be occasions when the learner actually encounters a learning opportunity before engaging in reflection and evaluation of reasons for learning. Moreover, reflection does not cease after the initial triggering event as the learners usually continue to reflect throughout their lives. (Refer to H pg 75) While participating in a particular learning episode, more barriers/obstacles may appear. The presence of stronger reasons for learning may then be necessary to ensure continued participation in learning. I have chosen to number the stages in their most common

sequence as it facilitates analysis and discussion.

## 5.2 Stage 4: Weighing learning opportunities against obstacles/barriers

At this stage, the learners evaluated the feasibility of engaging in learning. They could only re-engage in learning if there is sufficient *information and access to learning opportunities*. Many of them learned about the presence of learning opportunities from their friends, colleagues within the workplace, or as are result of participation in peripheral learning in the community, such as trade unions or community centres. Hence, a strong social network seems to be a positive factor in encouraging learning. As non-traditional learners, many of the participants also encounter tremendous amounts of *obstacles and barriers* both before and during their learning journeys.

### 5.2.1 Learning Opportunities

All the learners were of the opinion that there were ample opportunities for learning in Singapore. H thinks that opportunities in Singapore are "plentiful". He said, "The Singapore government has done a lot. Opportunities are lying, but it is just people who are not seeing it." (H pg 30) He added, "I think the government has been very pro-active" (H pg 31). LD echoed H's opinion by saying, "...government...tried very hard to encourage people here to study because there is so much subsidy". (LD pg 18) He re-engaged in learning when he signed up for a course that was conducted by the government. (pg 39)

As an active union member, CR was exposed to information about learning opportunities. He said, "...in NTUC (National Trade Union Congress) there are so

many opportunities" (CR pg 35, 48). PNY agreed:

> I heard that NTUC also has sponsorship...They sponsor 100 per cent to finish the course and you are paid too...They will pay you about 1000 dollars to reward you."
> (PNY pg 49)

She attended a course on Chinese cookery and bakery sponsored by CDAC (Chinese Development Assistance Council). According to her, the courses which include hairdressing, engineering and other trades, are for people with low incomes.

Z also thinks that the opportunities are "tremendous'. OK said, "...MOE (Ministry of Education) spends lots of money to send teachers to learn...I did learn from there how to surf the net." (OK pg 43) She singled out a course for a Diploma for English Studies which was sponsored by MOE. (OK pg 12)

In Singapore, learning opportunities are often associated with government support and subsidies because of the strong presence of the government in almost all areas of life. As discussed earlier in the introduction, the government plays a very active role in encouraging lifelong learning in Singapore, based on the human capital theory model. Hence, lifelong learning is usually seen from the perspective of improvement of skills and provision of training opportunities. While the participants in this study acknowledged the abundance of learning opportunities, they also mentioned that not all are keen to take up such opportunities.

This is reflected in the dismal training participation rate of only 15% among those with lower secondary education in Singapore over the 12-month period ending June 2004. (Ministry of Manpower, Singapore 2005:7) Worse still, "among

the non-learners in 2004, 17% indicated they had no motivation to go for any training, unchanged from 2003". 48% of the non-learners were 50-64 years of age while 65% of them had less than secondary education (ibid.:11). This confirms other studies about the lack of learning participation among the older and less educated people. (National Adult Learning Survey 2002:19, 24)

Coffield (2002a; 2002b) mentioned growing evidence that provision of learning opportunities does not, of itself, create participants who want to engage in education. Davey and Jamieson (2003:266) cite evidence that adults who left school early are generally under-represented as participants in education later in life. Rees et al. observe that "opportunities provided by the state or by employers may well not be construed as such by potential trainees or employers". (1997:495)

It is, therefore, important to examine the obstacles/barriers that prevent people from engaging in lifelong learning. In some cases where dispositional barriers are present, people may not be aware of their existence initially or are too embarrassed to admit that they exist. This is why a narrative study using in-depth interview techniques would be more effective in eliciting information in an exploratory study of motivators and barriers to learning, as compared to a nation-wide survey by questionnaire.

### 5.2.2 Obstacles/barriers

The participants cited a wide range of barriers and obstacles that stood in their way as they embarked on their learning journeys. As in most other studies, commonly-cited obstacles are practical ones which include *time, money, conflict between family, work and learning commitments such as childcare arrangements, and transport*

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*arrangements.*

Cross (1981) and McGivney (1993, 1997) classify barriers into three categories –
*situational, institutional and dispositional.*

### 5.2.2.1 Situational Barriers

Cross defines situational barriers as those arising from one's situation in life at a
given time. Lack of time, childcare, money and transportation problems are commonly
cited reasons for not participating in learning.

*(a)    Time, nature of job, transportation and childcare problems*

Many of the participants mentioned lack of time as the main obstacle although
conflict between family, work and learning commitments, such as childcare
arrangements and transport arrangements, also indirectly lead to time management
problems.

As WW had problem juggling between his *work and learning commitments*, he
had to exit temporarily from his learning journey on two occasions (WW pg 12-13).
This will be discussed later under temporary exit.

LWM chose to persevere but had to resign from his job in order to continue on
his learning journey. He tried to apply for one month's unpaid leave to study for his 'N'
(normal) level examinations (LWM pg 3) but had to tender his resignation eventually
when his leave was not approved. After this, he enrolled to sit his 'O' (ordinary) level
examinations. Again he had to resign because he had to "work through (the) night" in

the new job. He ended up "job-hopping" in order to continue with his learning endeavour (LWM pg 4).

CR also had difficulty finding *time to study for his examinations* and recalled how he had to bring along his notes when he had to travel overseas for work purposes. *Distance and transportation problems* led to time management problems for Z as he had to travel from one end of Singapore to the other end in order to attend night classes (Z pg 15).

The *nature of Z's job* also meant that he was too tired physically at the end of the day to be able to have the energy to concentrate during night class.

...because construction (line) you come out, go to class, your battery already flat, because it's a lot of physical job, the sweat, the *hard work*, sometimes you fall asleep in class and *you don't have time to do your own work*...(Z pg 11, 12, 43)

LD found *shift work* to be a deterrent:

...want to study is very, very tough. I was working in XXX (a hotel), you want to study, but then practically you are working in shifts, very hard to...(Z pg 60)

On the other hand, V, a divorcee with two young children, made the decision to work in the night-shift permanently so that she could leave her young children at a neighbour's home while she was out working. Her narrative is one that is filled with constant juggling between work, family and study (V pg 26-27). Like V, OK also had young children. She too had to constantly cope with time management problems to ensure that she could complete her teaching duties and finish her assignments on time

(OK pg 18).

H, who is currently pursuing a doctorate degree, gave a very succinct summary of the need for good time management skills:

> You see, so I had to manage my work, manage my studies, I had to manage my family. So, it was three different things where a lot of time management had to come in. And you got to put your priorities right. (H pg 40)

> I do my thesis in the morning [from] 3am to 6am…That's the only time I have. (H pg 54)

Although LAS also had to juggle between work and study, he and his other teaching colleagues were fortunate to have an understanding boss who allowed them to report to work early so that they could leave earlier for their classes.

Other studies (National Adult Learning Survey [NALS] 2001; NALS 2002; MOM 2004:11) also found that lack of time is the most common reason for non-participation in learning. 50% of non-participants in Singapore indicate that they would consider participating if they had more time. The NALS 2002 found that 32% of respondents preferred to spend their time doing other things than learning. Lack of time due to work was mentioned by 29%. 19% said it was hard to get time off work while 21% said family commitments were a constraint and 14% mentioned childcare responsibilities. Obstacles to learning have changed little since NALS 2001 with similar proportions mentioning the problems explored in the two NALS surveys. (NALS 2002:38)

*(b)      Costs*

In the NALS 2001, 25% of people cite *financial obstacles* as reasons for not

learning (NALS 2001 cited in NALS 2002:38).  49% of non-learners in Singapore said

that they would consider training if course fees were more affordable. (MOM 2004:11)

While most of the participants in my study tried to take advantage of

government and company sponsored training programmes, they still spoke extensively

of financial and other costs that they had to bear.  For example, Z had to take on many

jobs to save enough money to finance his courses (Z pg 19).  Likewise, LYM, a widow

with young daughters, also took many years to save up for the course fees (pg 26) and

had to further delay her plans to re-engage in post-school learning because she wanted

to see her daughters through university first (LYM pg 32-33).

Besides financial costs, there are *other costs* that have to be borne.  The most

often cited cost seems to be time that could have been spent with their families:

You've got to sacrifice your personal leisure, social activities, sleep, your annual leave,

your money. (H pg 54)

I suppose it's your own, it's your own leisure, of course your...family gets affected...to

a certain extent lah.   So you must get er...supportive, er...family members to

compensate that. (LAS pg 36)

Many of the participants of this study have or are still participating in

government, union or company sponsored learning programmes.  CR said that as an

NTUC (National Trade Union Congress) member, he could attend courses which "were

very cheap" (CR pg 243).   OK attended some courses "with MOE's

(Ministry of Education's) support...because MOE spends lots of money to send teachers to learn". (OK pg 43)   V also mentions that her computer course was "very cheap" because it was subsidised by her company and SINDA (Singapore Indians' Association). (V pg 244)   While these learners seem to be taking advantage of subsidised learning programmes, it is interesting to note that they also mentioned that many Singaporeans are not taking up these opportunities despite the wide publicity of learning opportunities in the media.

### 5.2.2.2 Dispositional Barriers

McGivney (1993:21; 1997:133) suggests that people do not respond to offers of learning opportunities because of their attitudes, perceptions and expectations.   She believes that lack of confidence plays a significant role in limiting participation in learning". (McGivney 1997:133)   She also suggests that "this problem may have been underestimated, partly because research instruments tend to have a bias towards situational and institutional barriers; partly because respondents may not recognise, or wish to admit to, negative feelings towards education." (McGivney 1993:21)

Unless given sufficient time to reflect, respondents are unlikely to disclose their fears of risk-taking.   Even in the case of qualitative research, dispositional factors can prove elusive to discover.   Initial coding of data yielded many examples of situational and institutional barriers but hardly any examples of dispositional barriers.   However, as I continued to compare the data within and among cases and became more sensitive and immersed in the data, the dispositional barriers became more obvious.   Many of the

participants expressed doubts about their own abilities to re-engage in learning.

LWM, for example, asked, "Can I study or cannot study? Maybe...too long...never concentrate." (pg 34) Like the participants in Gallacher et al.'s studies (2002), her initial attitude towards learning was tentative and uncertain. She cultivated a learner identity only after having experienced some success in post-school learning. This will be further discussed in Chapter 6 under Learning Outcomes.

After leaving school for 25 years, CR found going "back to a classroom" to be "a great challenge", especially since many of the classmates were much younger. When approached by some union officials to take a diploma course, he said he had "no confidence" that he could "achieve" (pg 9). During the admission interview, he said, "Look, if you want me- if you want me to tell you...how much confidence I have, I will tell you I don't have." (pg 9) However, he told them he was prepared to work hard.

With very little education, PNY had problem coping with the theory part of her cookery lessons and felt that she was "too old to learn things fast":

The theory was what I worried most, because I had to write...As we had not received much education and too old to learn things fast, it was rather difficult."(PNY pg 45-46)

H thinks that people shy away from taking up learning opportunities because of the strong stigma attached to failure in Singapore:

... if somebody fails in Singapore it's like a stigma. You cannot fail, you only succeed. (pg 17)

Thus, there is coincidence here with what Gallacher et al. note: "the risk to self-identity is one of exposure to humiliation. Education is firmly associated with testing and selection in front of an unfamiliar group of peers..." (2002:504).

*(a)     Fear of "face loss" as a cultural factor deterring learning*

H, an Indian lecturer, added a cultural dimension in his analysis of the problem, that of the fear of "losing face" for oneself and one's family, in case of failure. His narrative of his youth included conflicts with his father because of his poor academic results in school. His father was embarrassed by his poor academic results but was always boasting about his brother's good results in front of relatives.

He thinks that in the Singapore context, people are sometimes unwilling to take up learning opportunities as they fear "losing face" if they do not succeed. As a result, "lame excuses" are sometimes given to mask the real reason of a lack of confidence in oneself.

> Er some people are saying that they are not er...er cut for education. You are not tested you wouldn't know who you are, so end of the day I think a lot of reasons are *just lame excuses.* But nobody really wants to go and *of course in Singapore I think you've got "face", and they dare not go into a classroom and then drop out.* (H pg 31-32) (my emphasis)

The concept of "face" (mien-tzu) is well documented in Chinese learning literature (Cribbin & Kennedy 2002:73, Bond 1996:134). Bond says:

> Just as success enhances the family's status, the consequences of poor performance include not only loss of status and prestige for the individual, but a far more

critical loss of family "face". The student seeks to avoid at all costs the stigma and shame that would accompany a loss of face. (Stigler, Smith and Mao 1985 cited in Bond 1996:134)

When H brought up the concept of "face", I decided to probe if he believes that besides the Chinese, the other ethnic groups in Singapore also have this concept of "face". He thinks that it is true of the other ethnic groups as well. This is not surprising as the term "lose face" is used regularly in everyday conversation among all the ethnic groups in Singapore. Living within such close proximity, the different ethnic groups often share common values and even common vocabulary. Just as people are motivated to learn for fear of losing "face", they can also be deterred from learning for the same reason.

Merriam and Muhamad studied a sample of 10 Malays, 5 Chinese and 4 Indians in Malaysia, which is Singapore's closest neighbour with almost similar culture. They identify the concept of "face" as one of five values common to all ethnic groups in Malaysia. Their study confirms "the importance of considering cultural context and cultural values in mapping the learning activities of any particular group of adults". (2002:56)

The above findings also fit in with symbolic interactionist theory that Bloomer and Hodkinson use to illuminate their concept of career which was discussed in the literature analysis in Chapter 2. Citing Goffman (1968) who describes career as "any social strand of any person's course through life", Bloomer and Hodkinson define learning career as "the development of dispositions to learning over time" (2000b:590). Although Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) did not mention the concept of "face",

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Goffman had propounded on the concept of face in his explanation of social interactionist theory. He suggests that we learn to have feelings attached to the selves that we present to others. We come to care how others see us, and care about the positive social value we effectively claim through our performances, or what Goffman (1967:5-45) called "face". (cited in Cahill 1998:197)

Cahill says,

Goffman (1967:8) suggests that *this emotional attachment to projected selves and face is the most fundamental mechanism of social control leading us to regulate our own conduct...*our emotional attachment to face leads us to avoid situations where we would be "out of face" and where others would refuse to recognise and respect the self we present...(Cahill in Charon 1998:197) (original emphasis).

Goffman says that a person knows his (sic) place in life and stays away from the places, topics and times where he is not wanted and where he might be disparaged for going. He co-operates to save his face, finding that there is much to be gained from venturing nothing. (ibid.)

Hence, the concept of face which is often considered a motivator for learning (Bond 1996:134) may, in fact, also deter people from taking up learning opportunities as they may be fearful of losing face in case they fail in their learning endeavours. People who are disadvantaged either socially or educationally are especially vulnerable as they often feel that post-school learning is not for people like them. Archer and Hutchings (2000:557), for example, cite Reay et al.'s work (2001) which points to the role of both 'race' and class within familial expectations of what is normal and acceptable 'for people like us' (Bourdieu 1990:64-65) to explain why

working class young people are under-represented in higher education. "Most respondents positioned themselves as at a greater risk of failing due to occupying a disadvantaged position with regard to higher education." (Archer and Hutchings 2000:562) Using the same argument, people who are socially or educationally disadvantaged may shy away from lifelong learning for fear of losing face as many of them may not have the confidence that they can succeed, as we have seen in the cases discussed here.

### 5.2.2.3 Institutional Barriers

An unresponsive and inflexible education system is often blamed for non-participation in post-school education. Cross claims that institutional barriers, usually subconsciously erected by providers of educational services, rank second in importance to situational barriers, affecting between 10 per cent to 25 per cent of potential learners in most surveys. (Cross 1981:104) Claiming that further and higher education institutions have traditionally catered for a young, white, middle-class and predominantly male section of the population, McGivney claims that "non-traditional" students who do succeed in gaining entry to such institutions often experience a range of problems. (McGivney 1993)

Citing Shea and Corrigan who maintain that some people hold back not because of low motivation but because of powerful constraints arising from cultural and social class divisions, McGivney claims that "the education system traditionally rejects or excludes large numbers of the population, many of whom subsequently consider themselves as educational failures" (ibid.:19). She suggests that post-school education perpetuates the values and status patterns embedded in the school system. Lack of

information and access to learning are important examples of institutional barriers.

Besides going through the process of evaluating opportunities against obstacles and barriers, the decision to embark on learning is also very much dependent on information about opportunities and ease of access to learning.

*(a)     Information and access*

McGivney identifies lack of information about educational opportunities available as a common reason for non-participation. (ibid.:17)  Although most of the participants of this study think that there is sufficient information about learning opportunities in the local media, 45% of non-learners surveyed in Singapore indicate that they would be motivated to participate in training if there was more information on useful courses. (MOM 2004:11)  Many of the respondents of this study had access to information about learning as a result of their network of friends or due to their previous learning experiences, which first-time learners may not have access to.

V said that she got to know about the courses through her older colleagues: "The aunties (colloquial expression for older ladies) read newspaper, Chinese newspaper." She felt that there was sufficient publicity but people were not interested and hence did not notice.  (V pg 45-46, 49)

CR said that he was aware of the learning opportunities because he was an NTUC member (pg 35).  This confirms McGivney's observation that "people involved in social and cultural activities are in information networks, and are therefore more likely to be aware of existing educational opportunities".  However, she also notes that "there is little evidence that simply knowing what is on offer leads to

participation" and concludes that "the reasons for participation and non-participation are numerous, complex and much debated". (McGivney 1993:17)

Lack of access was definitely a problem for some of the participants. WD and LWM could not enrol in the courses that they were interested in because of inability to meet the admission criteria.

WD repeated the same message several times, showing his frustration concerning his lack of access to higher education as he has only secondary two qualifications:

...SOME courses ah...ah, they don't want me to attend because I don't have the...I don't have the GCE O-levels, I only have secondary two. So I don't- I don't have 'O' levels. In fact I tried [to] attend...course...all cannot because- because I got no 'O' levels, they don't allow me. (WD pg 12)

[I] tried to attend other courses. They said, "Oh, sorry! No O-level." I got rejected a few times. (WD pg 53)

... if people want to LEARN, why should there be a barrier? (WD pg 13)

As LWM could not gain admission into the local universities after graduating from a polytechnic, he considered enrolling in a distance learning programme with a foreign university instead:

...after my poly finish lah, I went to enrol in XXX and XXX but I can't get in, so sad (laughing). (LWM pg 56)

Pont's article that analyses trends in adult participation among selected OECD countries concludes that adult learning tends to concentrate on specific population groups, whilst other groups have fewer opportunities of access and participation in adult learning. Generally, it is mostly those with low skills, those with low wages, and those who are far away from the labour market or elderly people who do not have as many learning opportunities, or do not take advantage of the existing ones (Pont 2004:33).

The experiences of WD and LWM support O'Shea and Corrigan's conclusion that "post-school education can all too easily reinforce inequalities that commenced early in childhood" as people are "ranked or excluded according to their ability to reach imposed sets of standards." (cited in McGivney 1993:19) Their experiences also reinforce the words of a local researcher:

> In a society such as Singapore, which is built on meritocracy Darwinian natural selection manifests itself in a rather ruthless educational system of essentially one-try learning, streaming on the basis of examination scores which may or may not accommodate individual aptitude and interest, and great pressure to perform and to demand. Formal educational qualifications loom large and certification by examination is crucial. (Pan 1997:41)

Some of the participants were, however, grateful for a second chance to learn as a result of the flexibility of certain educational institutions. WW was one of them. He commented on a foreign university's flexibility:

> So...they have some sort of concession because of my background, my background, police training and all that, so...they have some sort of concession, not a full 'A' level

but one 'A' level in subject. So I opt for 'A' level in law. (WW pg 6)

LD was also thankful for the flexibility of a local polytechnic which took him in because of his experience:

Well, they had given us... I mean people like us opportunity to further our study." (LD pg 11)

Recently, however, some positive changes have been introduced in the local educational system to provide easier access for people like WD and LWM who have difficulties in accessing learning opportunities because of their lack of initial education. One of the measures, for example, involves relaxation of entry requirements by the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) to allow access for workers who did not complete their secondary school education. Refer to The Straits Times article on 6.10.06 entitled "ITE to take in workers without O and N levels" in Appendix 9 and another article on 7.10.06 entitled "New skills test opens doors to better jobs" in Appendix 10. The titles of the two Straits Times articles, however, show evidence that such initiatives are again economically driven. Another article in the Straits Times on 28.10.06 features another government initiative to help those who have low initial education improve themselves. Several training institutions that will be set up in the near future will take in workers without the appropriate qualifications as long as they have the relevant practical experience. See Appendix 11.

Although instrumentally defined in terms of manpower needs, such recent changes should help widen participation, by including non-traditional students who were previously excluded from some formal programmes of learning because they

could not meet the entry criteria.

In the tertiary sector, the recent establishment of the Singapore Institute of Management University that caters to adults, and the opening up of the private educational sector, would definitely help meet pent-up demand in certain sectors of the population. Calling adult learners in English higher education "the invisible majority", McNair has "argued that the advent of lifelong learning and an adult majority in higher education called for a radical rethinking of the nature and purposes of higher education". (McNair 1998:162) This is also what is needed in the Singapore context. A restructuring of the whole tertiary sector may prove more effective than a piece-meal approach that leaves demand to be met by supply through the market mechanism.

## 5.3    Stage 5: Participation in learning

Having overcome the various barriers explained in the earlier section, the learner then participates in learning which can be formal, non-formal or informal (see definitions in Chapter 2). A closer analysis at the types of learning that the learners in this study participate in will show the need for a more holistic concept of learning than is currently advocated in the official discourse.

### 5.3.1  Strong reliance on informal and non-formal learning

Many writers have noted the strong reliance by non-traditional learners on informal and non-formal learning. (Gorard et al. 1999, 2001, Gallacher 2002, Conlon 2003 and Pont 2004) One reason given by respondents in a recent European survey for not participating in adult learning is the fact that people thought they learned best in 'informal settings, through involvement of activities at home, getting together with

others or leisure activities, or at work'. (Pont 2004:36) This seems to be the case with many of the learners in this study.

Most of the participants did not do well in their secondary education. Some had only primary education. After experiencing one or more triggering factors, many of them sought to improve themselves by taking courses in private institutions and community organisations after leaving school. However, due to their inability to meet admissions criteria set by some institutions, some of them have encountered problems assessing certain formal learning opportunities and hence have relied heavily on non-formal and informal learning. Moreover, due to lack of self-confidence, many lifelong learners started their learning journeys tentatively. Hence, it is not surprising that many of them mentioned episodes of informal and non-formal learning which preceded their formal learning episodes.

All the participants in this study experienced some forms of informal or non-formal learning. Although not all of them used the terms "informal" and "non-formal learning", quite a few of them acknowledged the important role played by informal and non-formal learning in their lives.

H spoke about the virtues of informal learning philosophically:

Everyday, sub-consciously we are learning. It's only that we don't agree that we are learning. Is it because maybe of our age, we don't want to tell people that you know we are still learning? Or maybe the social system is like that, we just don't want to accept that actually we are learning. But I think everyday we are going through...I think...informal learning I think gives you a better climate, to organise yourself and to reflect yourself. It must be in everyone...So sometimes again, you do not

know when is informal learning. Not necessary it must be in a class, structured programme, not necessary. While you are walking also, I think informal learning helps you a lot. It's whether you are ready to accept. (H pg 76-78)

Z also stressed the importance of informal and non-formal learning:

I believe in anything, any talk you attend...there's always something to learn if we are there to learn. (Z pg 35,114)

WD encountered problems in accessing certain courses because he did not have 'O' levels. As a result, he relied on a number of non-formal courses:

That's why I attended a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, of, of courses to learn about sales, to learn about life, to learn about ANYTHING...to learn a bit..real estate law lah, to learn about...so many things lah, to improve my, my, myself...That's how I got started learning all over again. (WD pg 9-10)

Besides attending talks and seminars on motivation, sales, grooming and public speaking, he also learns from audio and video cassettes.

PNY also relied heavily on informal and non-formal learning. She learned to speak fluent Mandarin by listening to Mandarin programmes on radio:

I did not take any of these courses. I just listen to some radio broadcasting, and listen [to] how they speak. Gradually I correct myself and learn myself. (PNY pg 2)

Besides attending cookery classes conducted at private homes and community centres, she also picked up cookery skills through observation. She now hosts her own

cookery programme on radio. At the same time, she also participates in leisure activities such as opera singing.

OK and H recruited their respective children to help them with their computer work while PNY and V learned to speak English from their children. This testifies to the importance of *'inverse socialisation'*. Field emphasises the role of family and friendship networks in lifelong learning. He gives the example of "the new information and communications technologies, where from a comparatively early stage, competence appears to decline with age" and hence the possibility of 'inverse socialisation' where "children are occasionally able to induct adults into the mysterious ways of modern existence." (2000:55)

WW learned public speaking through the toastmasters' movement. In fact, he finds participation in the toastmasters' movement so "enjoyable" that he now considers it his "lifelong hobby". OK, a school principal, learned how to design Webpages from the technical assistant in her school. Like H and Z, she depended on books for other types of learning. She went to the public libraries to "read and read and read" recipe books so that she could improve her culinary skills (OK pg 25).

Besides attending many computer and photography courses, CR also subscribes to lots of photography magazines and borrows books regularly from public libraries to improve his photography skills. He now uses his photography skills professionally. He earns extra income by working as a photography instructor and photographer.

Tosey and McNair assert that "learning in the arena of work is a theme of particular contemporary significance" (Tossey and McNair 2001:96). A lot of informal

learning can also take place at work in the form of *on-the-job training*. A study by Marsick and Watkins (1990) conclude that only 20 percent of what employees learn comes from more formalised, structured training. Personal strategies are most frequently used, with employees taking time to question, listen, observe, read and reflect on their work environment. Sorohan (1993) claims that closer to 90 percent of workplace learning takes place through informal means (cited in Conlon 2004:283).

On-the-job training seems to be the norm for many of the other learners. WD first learned to sell houses by observing others. Both PNY and V started work at 13. They learned how to sew clothes, by observing others, when they were working in small home-based factories.

There was one person who said, "You begin from here." Then she would sew one piece for us. (PNY pg 20)

LD, who used to work as a labourer, said:

...we followed...the skilled workers...then you just learn from them. (LD pg 4)

...I was with this company...learning to repair doors...learn to repair lock...how to do all the defects...everything. (LD pg 4)

Similarly, LWM, a former mechanic, also relied on informal learning at work:

...they [his employers] only give you manual, and you have to read the manual and try to figure out how the thing [machine] works, how the thing er function...(LWM pg 74)

The above findings support the observations made by Gorard et al. about the

prevalence and importance of informal learning. They note that although 31 per cent of the respondents in an earlier survey reported no formal learning of any kind and were therefore classified as "non-participants", yet the analysis of interview data of this same group of people found that many of them "have undergone transformations in their lives that would involve significant learning" and hence "this group, by their own definition, are informal learners". (1999:439)

They suggest that wider inclusion in a learning society may come more easily from greater recognition of tacit knowledge than from more participation. They also recommend that the creators of a learning society should seek to enhance *leisure learning* because of its importance to later-life learners.

As mentioned above, LAS acknowledged that his motive for learning is very different, now that he has retired. While, in the past, he was motivated to learn for professional reasons, now he attends courses and reads up about traditional medicine because he is interested in revising his Chinese and also because he wants to help others. Likewise, OK is interested in music and cookery now that she has achieved her ambition of getting her first degree while WW enjoys practising public speaking skills with the toastmasters' movement.

Gorard et al. note that this recognition of the value of informal learning and of individual autonomy (Strain, 1998), with its tradition of self-reliance, does not fit well with the economic imperative and its human capital approach to systems of education and training. (ibid.:451) As a result, lifelong learning policies have mostly emphasised increasing formal learning opportunities and "government funding tends to go to that

which is seen as useful to the economy". (Brownhill in Jarvis 2001:70)

The experiences of the participants testify to the need to include both non-formal and informal options for learning as they are the options most frequently chosen by those who have very little initial education. Even after they have returned to learning formally, many of the participants continued to learn in non-formal and informal ways, as they felt more comfortable with such arrangements.

## 5.4    Summary and discussion

Figure 3 below summarises the findings of this chapter.

## FIGURE 3: STAGES 1-5
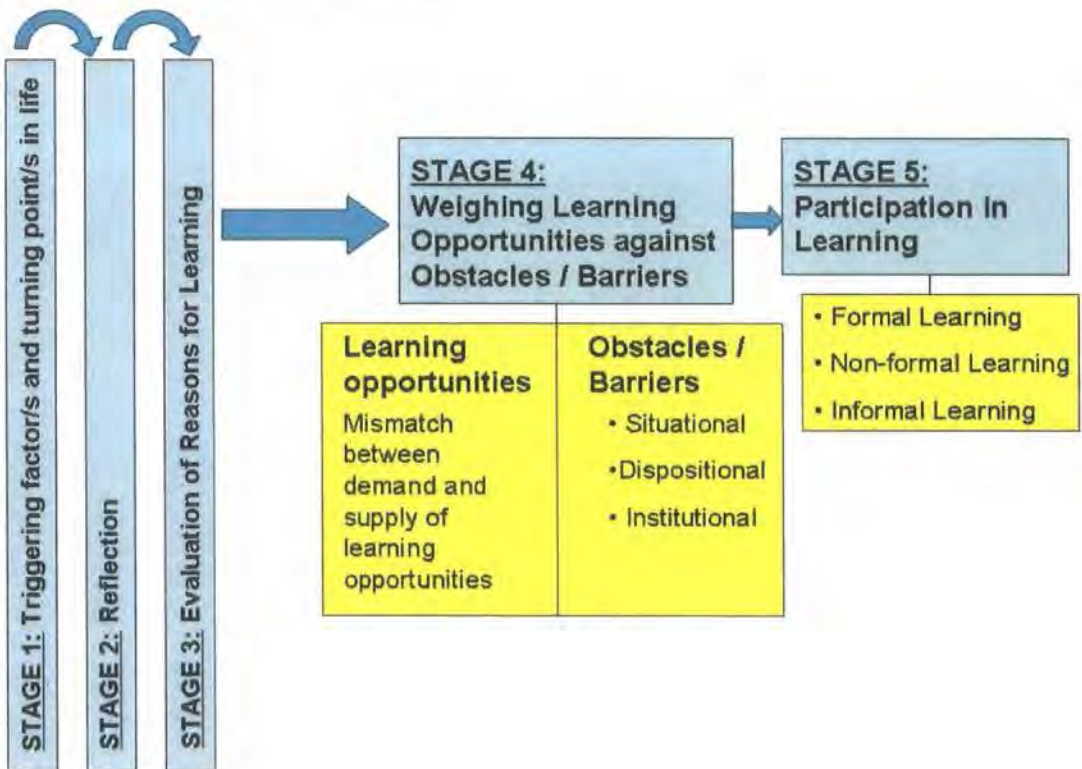


The participants in this study encountered many obstacles and barriers to engage

in post-school learning as a result of their disadvantaged social and educational backgrounds. Although many structural barriers have been reduced with recent policy changes, especially after the opening up and privatisation of the adult educational sector, more can still be done.

However, consistent with findings by McGivney (1993, 1997), dispositional barriers and lack of confidence prove to be more difficult to overcome. The learners claim that although there are many learning opportunities, people are reluctant to take up the opportunities for various reasons, including the fear of failure. The Asian concept of 'face' was brought up as a barrier. People are sometimes deterred from participating in post-school learning because they feared 'losing face' in front of others if they failed.

In the area of informal and non-formal learning, the findings of this study parallel those of Gorard et al. (1999, 2001), Field (2000), Evans (2003) and Gallacher et al. (2002). This supports the argument for incorporating a life-wide dimension to the concept of lifelong learning. Such a dimension will include formal learning that takes place in traditional educational and training institutions, non-formal learning that takes place at the workplace and during sports, music or other leisure activities, as well as informal learning that takes place in everyday life. The system of higher learning should also be restructured to cater for more non-traditional learners, including retirees.

Most people do not recognise the informal learning that they are doing as learning. Field says, "Informal learning permeates the lifeworld, often absorbed so fully into daily routines and habits that people do not think of it separately as learning but just as a relatively unquestioned activity that they choose to pursue." (Field 2000:44-45)

In discussing the British context, Evans suggests that there is a mismatch between the government's intentions and the reality of day-to day living for millions of people (Evans 2003:2) While the government seeks to promote lifelong learning through formal institutions, the potential for learning today has expanded exponentially through television, radio, Web access and self-help books. (ibid.:13-14) Claiming that informal learning generates enthusiasm and motivation, Evans argues that "so long as the prime emphasis is on the economic rationale for lifelong learning, whatever the needs for training and retraining, motivation is bound to be patchy. As long as informal learning is seen as a poor relation to formal learning...motivation is unlikely to be tapped." (Evans 2003:15)

Participation in informal learning may also act as a stepping stone to more formalised learning events. Gallacher et al observe that participation in local family centres, tenants' groups, women's groups, community resource centres or youth projects—which often involves a considerable amount of informal learning—is also important in facilitating the return to more formal learning for many adults. This is because such involvement can improve self-confidence, extend social networks and increase knowledge about provision with regard to FE education in a local area. (Gallacher et al. 2002:501-502)

Similarly, CR, Z and PNY's involvement, initially as learners and subsequently, as teachers and leaders in community centres, CR's union work and WW's participation in the toastmasters' movement are just some of the examples of the importance of peripheral learning in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger (1991) cited in Gallacher et al. 2002:499), which can eventually lead to the development of a learning career through changes in learner identity (Bloomer & Hodkinson 2000;

Bloomer 2001; Gallacher et al. 2002; Crossan et al. 2003). Refer to Chapter 2 for the literature analysis and discussion of "learning career" and chapter 8 for a summary of the findings about the development of learning career through change in learner identities among the participants.

The next chapter, which discusses the learning outcomes, shows that after the learners have experienced success in their non-formal and informal learning activities, their confidence increased and they started to develop learning dispositions and learner identities, which caused them to take up more challenging learning opportunities.

# 6 CHAPTER SIX – STAGES 6, 7 AND 8

## 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined learning opportunities, learning obstacles and learning episodes. It showed the learners' strong reliance on informal and non-formal learning because of the barriers they faced in assessing formal learning and their weak learning dispositions. This chapter discusses the factors that influence Stages 6-8.

The stages are:

Stage 6: Learning outcomes

Stage 7: Temporary exit

Stage 8: Another triggering factor leading to re-entry

It lists and examines the different learning outcomes and relates the outcomes to the learners' decision whether to participate in further learning. While most of them repeated the cycle to participate in another episode of learning, a few of them had to disrupt their journeys. Again, common patterns emerged when the narratives were examined for reasons for not continuing. However, all those who disrupted their journeys rejoined their journeys at a later stage.

## 6.2 Stage 6: Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes are further classified as follows:

- higher pay, promotion and better job prospects

- access to higher learning

- sense of joy, satisfaction and achievement

- development of confidence, learning dispositions and learner identities

- recovery of one's voice

- transformation and empowerment

- broadening of roles and identities

As mentioned earlier, initially, utilitarian reasons were most frequently given by the participants for re-engaging in learning. Hence, it is not surprising that many of them mentioned higher pay and better job prospects when asked about the outcomes of their learning activities.

## 6.2.1 Higher pay, promotion, and better job prospects

The profile of the participants that was given in Chapter 3 showed vast changes in their working careers as a result of their continuous engagement in learning. Besides career changes, there were other utilitarian outcomes of learning. A few of them are highlighted in this section. LWM, for example, was promoted from assistant technician to technician when he passed his N-level examinations. After he passed his O-level examinations, he was again promoted, this time to the post of senior technician. Subsequently, he was promoted to a supervisory post when he received his diploma

from a local polytechnic. That led him to conclude, "…on the whole, education helped me a lot." (LWM pg 5)

CR uses the photography skills that he has acquired over the years to great advantage. Not only does he conduct courses on photography, he also works as a freelance photographer for "big events". He said, "So, I also start…receiving income through my learning you know, and I benefit from there." (CR pg 16)

Z summarised the benefits of his learning this way: "I get a better job…better pay…better opportunity." (pg 130) V also attributed her promotion to her learning experience. (Z pg 8)

LD was employed as a manager after receiving his degree:

So with the degree, then the boss employed me straightaway as a sales manager." (LD pg 27)

## 6.2.2  Access to higher learning

Some of the participants found that they were able to gain access to higher learning as a result of their post-school learning. Z said that he was "dead happy" when he qualified for advanced standing (that is direct access into the second year) in most of the universities. (Z pg 16)

LD left school with only one 'O' level pass and had to work as a labourer initially. However, he joined the construction industry and went for training before

receiving the Advanced Builder's Certificate. Subsequently, he was able to apply for admission to a diploma course in one of the local polytechnics. With the diploma, he could then gain admission to a distance learning programme with a foreign university.

Despite leaving school with not much qualification, H is now doing a doctoral course after completing a number of courses at private institutions.

## 6.2.3   Sense of joy, satisfaction and achievement

As they continued to narrate the stories of their learning journeys, many of them touched on the sense of joy, satisfaction and achievement that came with the completion of each learning episode. WW believes that "intrinsic satisfaction...is another motivating factor":

> When...when initially you don't know the stuff, after a while, put some effort, some learning, discuss with people, then you acquire a new, new knowledge. That kind of *intrinsic satisfaction...maybe that is another motivating factor.* I find it *quite fun* ...(WW pg 22)

H also talked about "the real satisfaction" of having "done it" [act of graduating]:

> But end of the day, the relief is to graduate. You *have done it.* I think that is what gives you *the real satisfaction.* (H pg 59)

OK described her feelings of happiness on completing each learning episode successfully:

...my daughter and I got a one (for ) O-level Maths, *so happy. Boost my ego lah.* (OK pg 15)

Ya, so it was *really a wonderful feeling lah.* I completed this course. (OK pg 19)

So when I finally got my driving licence, the licence, *I was so happy...it was so great...* like a pair of wings...(OK pg 20)

Z said he was "dead happy" after receiving his diploma which allowed him to qualify for a university course:

Wah! I was er...wah dead happy lah. Wah! Very glad, happy...(Z pg 16)

After experiencing success, H started to see lifelong learning as part of growing and wanted "to enjoy it". He said, "You see, I want to enjoy life, I want to take this lifelong learning as part of growing, and enjoy it." (H pg 51)

According to Smith and Spurling, although emotions like joy and happiness are not themselves directly motivating, they are evidence of the net value (Smith and Spurling 2001:33). Gasper and Bramesfeld cite Csikzentmihalyi's research (1990) as one of the best examples of recent research that emphasises the joy that accompanies doing something. According to Csikzentmihalyi, people experience pleasure from doing when they obtain a state of flow, "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer joy of doing it" (cited in Gasper and Bramesfeld 2006:1020).

Besides joy and satisfaction, there was also an increase in the learners' self-esteem and confidence which caused them to take up more challenging learning opportunities.

## 6.2.4 Development of confidence, learning dispositions and learner identities

In her review of literature on participation and non-participation, McGivney suggests that reluctance to engage in learning may have more to do with dispositional factors such as attitudes, perceptions and expectations than with any practical barriers. She cites previous studies which identified barriers to learning to include negative attitudes and perceptions like inappropriateness and lack of relevance; no awareness of learning needs; hostility towards school; the belief that one is too old to learn (McGivney 1993:21). We have seen in Chapter 5 (in 5.2.2.2) how this phenomenon was also found among the participants in this study.

Many of the above factors are, in turn, related to lack of confidence in one's ability, which most people may not be aware of, or are reluctant to admit initially. Norman and Hyland (2003:269) suggest that there is a need for research to uncover learners' confidence/lack of confidence in specific situations—for example, in basic skills, work-based learning and access to higher education programmes—in order to develop ways to overcome the barriers which learners' lack of confidence can create.

In a report on a research study between 2003 and 2004 involving 93 learners from different geographical areas of England, NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) concludes:

This research provided powerful evidence that there is a strong connection between learning and confidence…Confidence was an outcome of learning which had wide ranging benefits; an important one was that it enhanced ability to learn and inclination to take up further learning opportunities. (NIACE 2004:2)

The presence or development of confidence in one's ability acts to motivate learning (Wlodkowski 1999; Little 2003). Most of the participants in this study started their learning journeys tentatively due to lack of confidence in themselves, (as a result of previous experiences with failure in initial education) low aspirations or a combination of both.

Z believes that "the very first step" he took to start his post-school learning journey was the "most important". After taking the first step to attend night classes, he passed the 'O' level examinations. That spurred him to continue on his learning journey:

passing of a 'O' level, it is- it is actually- all you need is just the first step lah. I think the- the very first step is most important lah…once you start you just continue. (Z pg 9)

Z's words echo those of a participant in Gallacher et al.'s study. They quoted a woman in their study who reported wide changes in her self-perception and social identity as a result of her learning experiences:

I think people have to realise how hard the first two steps of coming in the door can be. But as you keep coming your confidence just builds right up…Now I do lots of things…Things I had never thought I would or could do. (Gallacher et al. 2002:501)

OK's father was uneducated and worked as a labourer before becoming a sailor while her mother worked as a domestic helper. Due to her "poor family" background (OK pg 1), learning English did not come naturally initially. She said that getting a distinction in her 'O' level mathematics paper boosted her "ego" (OK pg 15). She shared about her initial "struggle" with English but believes that it makes her "a better teacher":

> ...it was so-o-o tough! It was so difficult that we had to use the dictionary almost for every word. That was horrid...I suppose that makes me a better teacher. I knew how difficult it was to struggle like that. (OK pg 69)

She decided to study for her first degree much later in life. Even then, her ambivalent attitude towards learning is obvious here:

> ...to get my first degree, was like a challenge to me itself. To see whether I can do it, or I can't do it. So my first degree shows me I can. (OK pg 45)

After experiencing success, she developed a learning disposition and her learner identity was very much strengthened. As "the studying kind of mood came in" (pg 18), she embarked on one learning endeavour after another. She now talks about the "appeal" of study (OK pg 16) as she begins to have confidence in her own ability to learn.

LYM was forced to start work at fourteen by her mother, a conservative Chinese woman who believed that girls should not have too much education. She too had a tentative learner identity initially when she first embarked on her post-school learning journey:

Then I was thinking, "Can I study or cannot study? Maybe...too long...never concentrate. (LYM pg 34)

However, success in her post-school learning caused a change in LYM's learning disposition and she began to build a stronger learner identity after that. As the risk of failure is reduced, she decided to "carry on" with one course after another. The following excerpts show the transformation in LYM's learner identity:

Then I passed you know?...I took the cert. I carry on another one...executive certificate in supervisory management...Ah...so I go and register there and then I go and STUDY. Ah, this time I do very well, you know. (LYM pg 34)

Ah...I study very well, you know? I don't know how come suddenly get so good, you know? (laughs) So shocked that I get so good. Then I was thinking, 'Aiyah! Now I get this...executive cert, not enough you know? Carry on again in PSB' (laughs) Ah...then from there..."(LYM pg 35)

The transformation in her learner identity caused her to become increasingly more engaged in learning. Now that she finds that she "enjoys studying", she decides to "carry on and carry on":

After you pass, you get a cert, you get very happy. And then after that, you not satisfied with it, you still want to carry on. And you carry on and carry on until today I still studying (LYM pg 52)

WW also came from a "very poor, very deprived family environment" (WW pg 1). He had bad memories about his initial school experience. He said that he hated

going to school because of his lack of confidence:

> ...essentially is the lack of confidence and not up to par...being looked down you know. (WW pg 32)

His poor relationship with his abusive father made things worse:

> [He kept] on sort of eroding my confidence by saying "Hey, why you so stupid?" You know like a pig, or something. (WW pg 3)

WW's learning disposition also changed as he began to experience success from post-school learning. As he began to experience the "intrinsic satisfaction" of learning, he started to find learning "very enjoyable" and "fun" (WW pg 39). He began treating it as "an entertainment" (pg 40).

When CR was approached by the committee members in his trade union to attend a training course, he told them that he had no confidence. In fact, he made plans to repeat the course in case he could not cope. He confessed that while he was in school he did not have a strong learner identity and did not have any ambition of furthering his studies. However, post-school learning helped him to develop such a "strong" learner identity that he just "kept on learning...for the last thirty years" (CR pg 20):

After taking the first step to attend night classes, HKK described learning as an "addiction" (HKK pg 6). He said, "I realised that the more you learn the more you want to learn." (HKK pg 11) Z echoed the other participants' words by saying, "once you [started to] learn, you keep on learning". (Z pg 33)

The learning journeys of the participants in this study mirror that of Elsbeth in Davey and Jamieson's study (2003:275) who gained enough confidence after attending a "Going back to Study" course to embark on a full-time BA.

The above examples show that success in post-school learning generates confidence in one's ability which, in turn, helps to develop a learning disposition and a strong learner identity. (See 2.6 in the literature analyisis for definition and discussion of learner identity.) Although many of the participants started off with tentative learner identities, their learner identities were strengthened through experiences of success followed by an increase in confidence. They became increasingly engaged in learning as they started to take greater risks by attempting more challenging learning endeavours. While their learning journeys may have been triggered by utilitarian reasons related to some life transitions, their journeys were sustained as a result of changes in their learner identities and learning dispositions as their self-confidence increased. (See section below on recovery of one's voice for examples of increased confidence.)

### 6.2.4.1 *Virtuous circle of learning*

Just as failure at school can lead to loss of self-confidence, poor learner identity and fear of taking further risk in future learning, ultimately resulting in a vicious circle of learning, the converse is also true. Success in learning proves one's competence, helps one to develop self-confidence and a strong learner identity, which in turn, motivate future learning.

The important role that confidence plays in motivating learning is well-documented. Wlodkowski notes the mutually enhancing relationship between competence and self-confidence. Competence causes a person to become

more confident. Confidence, in turn, prompts the same person to attempt acquiring new skills and knowledge. Competent achievement of this new learning builds confidence, which again supports and motivates more extensive learning. Wlodkowski believes that "this can result in a spiralling dynamic of competence and confidence growing in continued support of each other. To feel assured that one's talents and effort can lead to new learning and achievement is a powerful and lasting motivational resource." (Wlodkowski 1999:79)

As we have seen above, as the participants in this study became adept at what they were learning, they felt confident to attempt more challenging learning tasks, such as attempting a formal diploma or degree course. Little says, "The process of learning generates motivation for continued learning." (Little 2003:446) This is known as the "avalanche effect" (Suchodolski 1979 cited in Titmus 1989:10) or "snowballing effect as one course led to another" (Gallacher et al. 2002:501). Learning becomes "an addiction" in the words of HKK (pg 6). He said, "So that is my motivation...for lifelong learning...I realised that the more you learn the more you want to learn..." (pg 12)

Referring to this feeling as a flow, Smith and Spurling compare this feeling to that experienced by athletes, mountaineers, scientists, inventors, dancers and musicians who become transformed into such a high state of consciousness where actions seem to flow along. According to them, it is "an exhilarating almost dreamlike state of intense absorption in an activity...The feeling has great value for people who experience it, and can be motivating to the point of being almost addictive" (2001:27-28). Using the term "self-efficacy" interchangeably with "confidence", they say "Success bolsters self-

efficacy, so that motivation for repeat learning grows" (ibid:25).

The diagram below (Figure 4) depicts a virtuous circle of learning and shows how lifelong learning can be motivated through the experience of successful participation in learning. Success in learning leads to the development of self-confidence. An increase in self-confidence enables the learner to develop a stronger learner identity and learning disposition. This, in turn, leads to further attempts to take up more learning opportunities in future.

# FIGURE 4: VIRTUOUS CIRCLE OF LEARNING

```
      ┌──────────────┐          ┌──────────────┐
      │  Competence  │          │ Builds self- │
      │ (Success in  │          │  confidence  │
      │  Learning)   │          │              │
      └──────────────┘          └──────────────┘

      ┌──────────────┐          ┌──────────────────┐
      │  Motivates   │          │ Develops stronger│
      │ further      │          │ learner identity │
      │ learning     │          │ and learning     │
      │              │          │ disposition      │
      └──────────────┘          └──────────────────┘
```
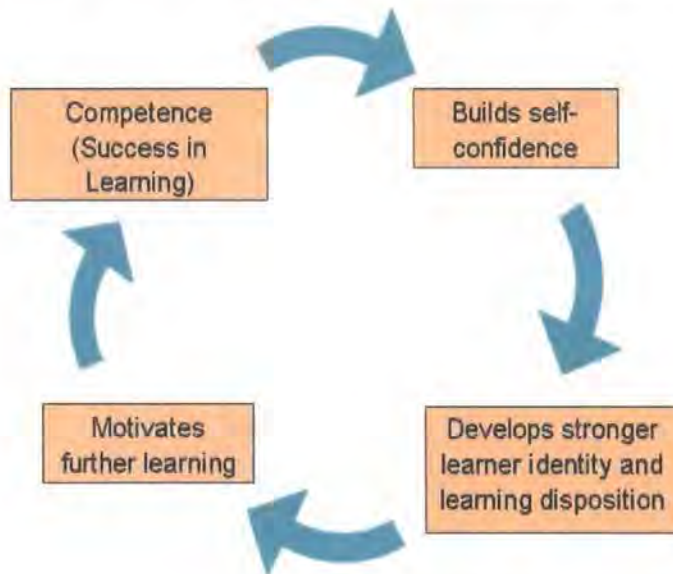
## 6.2.5 Recovery of one's voice

Confidence in one's ability can lead to the recovery of one's voice, previously lost through marginalisation. This is, first, a literal sense of being able to use the voice but then also a metaphorical sense of 'having a voice', of having power, and having one's presence acknowledged    CR is glad that learning helps him to "gain some

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confidence" and enables him to conduct meetings during his union work (CR pg 63).

LWM explained how learning helped him to recover his voice:

*I learn how to speak lah.* I didn't really speak very well. Because the company I joined is a German firm, the only way to communicate is English, all right. So I need to er polish up. Through studying [in] WISE programme, *it really helps a lot,* because you learn some grammar...( LWM pg 6)

He described his past feelings of "hurt" when he was "not able to join [in] a conversation":

People talked about market, what's- what's going on, shares, what happen, industry and so on, er know, we just say nothing, er *I find that it's really er, so-called hurt lah when we are not able to join a conversation.* So in order to do so, I think you have to read and learn, learn more lah, you know, from night class. (LWM pg 63)

The strengthening of LWM's voice is quite similar to the case of Alan in West's study. Alan described his initial hurt: "Even the things I have said, I've not been listened to. People just totally ignore them." (West 1996:80-81) West depicts Alan as one who re-engaged in learning to find more of a voice because nobody had ever really listened. After engaging in learning again, Alan "felt that he had been noticed for the first time as a man with interesting ideas." (ibid.)

For LWM, the technical knowledge that he gained from his post-school learning gave him confidence to "even have a discussion with the bosses or engineer or a supervisor" (LWM pg 6-7).

But at least right now, at LEAST I have got a diploma. I don't feel so bad. Then at least I feel more confident in terms of technical point of view, *I feel more confident. Confident to tell them. Sometimes I even tell them off. (laughing)* (LWM pg 50)

Having a degree gave LD confidence to talk to people and to "tackle all issues" (LD pg 30). Many of the participants who were previously uncomfortable in voicing their opinions in small groups are now transformed into people who are vocal in public. PNY, for example, hosts a Chinese programme while H hosts Tamil programmes on national radio with the intention of motivating others to learn. WW has written two books with the same aim.

Learning emboldens the learners to voice opposing opinions to people in authority, when in the past, they would have kept quiet. Antikainen lists this as one of the indicators of empowerment. (Antikainen 1998:219) The increase in confidence that comes from learning enables V to speak up, not only for herself, but for others as well:

...what the supervisor did was not really fair for the operator so I raised up this thing...I feel that what they are doing is not right...I'm willing to stand in front of them (her supervisors) and talk to them (her supervisors)...*that kind of confidence in myself.* (V pg 10, 11)

Last time, before I...I taking these courses, I feel like when I speak anything, when I say English, people might laugh at me...but after I went to these courses, BEST programme, I feel that... WHY NOT?... *I feel that kind of confidence in me.* (V pg 12)

### 6.2.6 Transformation and Empowerment

In his study which deals with lifelong learning in the Finnish context,

Antikainen uses three factors as indicators of empowerment:

- The expansion of an interviewee's world-view or cultural understanding

- The strengthening of a person's voice so that he she has the courage to participate in dialogue or even break down the dominant discursive forms

- The broadening of the field of social identities or roles (Antikainen 1998:219)

We have seen in the earlier section, how the learners were able to recover their voices through post-school learning. Besides that, the learners' perspectives also changed. Z, who used to see himself as an unsuccessful learner, now considers himself to be a successful learner and aims to be a lecturer. Thus, success in post-school learning has given confidence to the learners and changed their perspectives. OK declared: "So my first degree shows me I can." (OK pg 45) Similarly, H says, "It [learning] helps me to see things from a *very different perspective*." (H pg 51) The change in perspectives empowered the learners to explore the possibility of attempting challenges which they considered to be previously unachievable.

Moreover, their newly acquired learner identities also caused them to develop positive learning dispositions and to seek out new learning opportunities. The concept of learning career which was discussed in the literature analysis (Chapter 2) can be used as a framework to explain the process of developing from tentative, uncertain learners to committed and successful lifelong learners. Hence, the concept will be elaborated

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further in the next chapter (Chapter 8) while answering the question concerning sustainment of learning.

Significant transformations of self and identity were noted in all the participants as a result of learning. The strengthening of their self-concepts and the widening of their perspectives enable them to broaden the field of their roles and identities.

## 6.2.7 Broadening of roles and identities

As their identities broaden, they also began to adopt different roles in society. Most of them are now actively involved in serving the community. H is trying to encourage others to learn through his radio programmes. V does voluntary work with the handicapped and at old folks' homes while Z is involved in a national feedback unit. OK, WW, LD and LWM are trying to help youth who experience learning and other social problems. LAS is currently learning traditional Chinese medicine with the intention of volunteering his service at a free clinic.

The transformative power of learning is also evident in their self-definitions and in others' perceptions of them. HKK observed that others could not recognise him and were surprised at his transformation from being "shy and timid" to an outspoken writer, lecturer and public speaker after he embarked on his learning "journey":

"You [I] have been branded from primary three that you are [I am] shy and timid, but now they see me, they say they don't recognise me...*they were quite surprised at the transformation...*" (HKK pg 22)

H also declared that the learning has "changed" him:

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*I think this education has changed me.* It has made me think very analytically. And I think it has got an impact." (H pg 37)

As his self-concept strengthens, he adopts a new identity. He now sees himself as a lecturer who seeks to help his students overcome problems of learning and a radio host who uses his radio programmes to encourage others to experience the same transformative power of learning.

Using Antikainen's yardstick of empowerment cited above, we can conclude that all the participants have experienced some empowerment as well as transformation of their identities. This parallels West's observation that although people are scripted by history, gender and class, their narratives can change and personal history can be revised to constitute as well as represent a vibrant self as a result of further learning. (West 1996:14) This is in sharp contrast to a "dangerous but popular myth" that the development process begins to slow down in the mid-teens to a fixed learning identity, which once formed, cannot be undone or shifted. (cited in Smith and Spurling 2001:53)

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Williamson asserts that in modern societies, identities are "open". Instead of being trapped in ascriptive images of themselves like past generations, people today can choose the identities they wish to have. (Williamson 1998:173) The transformative power of learning is based on the premise that it is possible for identities to change because learning can take place in adulthood, which is what Williamson emphasises.

Thus, Williamson emphasises that lifelong learning should embrace "much more than continuous development of skills and understanding in particular areas of human knowledge and practice. It enables too self knowledge and this covers both

thoughts and feelings and includes knowledge of how people can explore their own self understanding." (Williamson 1998:172) This is the kind of learning that has taken place in the participants' lives. When given the opportunity to reflect on their learning journeys, they found that they have "changed" and that, itself, is learning.

The learners in this study demonstrated that they need not be confined to the identities ascribed to them as a result of their disadvantaged social and/or educational backgrounds. Through post-school continuous learning, they were able to overcome the odds associated with their former backgrounds to assume new identities and they also become empowered in the process. As a result of the strengthening of their learner identities, the learners continued to look out for learning opportunities so as to participate in other learning episodes with or without another triggering factor or turning point.

## 6.3   Stage 7: Temporary Exit

However, not all the learners have smooth, linear learning journeys. Just like the participants in Gallacher et al.'s (2002) study, some of them experienced disruptions in their learning journeys because of contextual and cultural influences. Their disruptions were temporary since they ultimately went back to rejoin their learning journeys. Hence, the exits are classified here as temporary exits.

When the temporary exits were examined for influencing factors, gender emerged as an important differentiating factor in accounting for presence or absence of temporary exits. Dowswell et al. (2000) note that within the literature on the factors associated with participation in education and training, domestic responsibilities,

especially childcare responsibilities, have been identified as factors inhibiting participation in education and training.

### 6.3.1 Gender effects

At some points in their learning journeys, all the women in this study were forced to disrupt their learning because of some contextual factors related to family responsibility. Most of the men were able to carry on in their learning journeys without much disruption. With the exception of LD who was contemplating stopping for a year because his wife wanted him to help coach the children in their studies (LD pg 22), those who had to disrupt their learning usually did so because of job pressure, rather than because of childcare arrangements.

#### 6.3.1.1 Female Participants

Gendered forms of socialisation have been found to limit academic aspirations, self-esteem and confidence of women (Gouthro 2005). All four female participants in this study either had to make special arrangements for childcare to continue learning or were forced to make temporary exits before re-entering their learning journeys at a later stage in life when their children were older.

While V relied on her neighbours to help out, LWM, a Chinese administrative assistant waited until after her daughters have graduated before re-engaging in learning. PNY, a Chinese cookery teacher who hosts a radio programme, tried to attend cookery classes when her children were at school.

OK also had to make a few temporary exits from her learning journey because of

her children. She quit her driving lessons "when the children came". (OK pg 10) Later, she even stopped pursuing her Diploma in English Studies when she was pregnant with her third child. (OK pg 17) Even after she has received the Lifelong Learner Award, she was still mulling the possibility of stopping "for at least two years" to spend time with her teenage daughter:

> Because teenagers they need the mother actually. Growing up...So I say between the two - myself, my development and my daughter, I choose my daughter. To me *I think it is not worth it if I have all the diplomas to hang on the wall, and eventually the girl feels neglected...*So that was how I decided to stop for at least 2 years. (OK pg 23)

The findings of this study parallel those by Gallacher et al. They observe that problems with childcare were most likely to affect women, and conclude that "in many cases women could only return to study if adequate childcare was provided by the college or some similar organisation", and that "this reflects barriers to learning at a more structural level (Gallacher et al. 2002:597)

Jackson argues that despite the rhetoric that surrounds lifelong learning, barriers to participation for working-class women are too often ignored or made invisible. (Jackson 2003) Davey and Jamieson also mention gender as an important factor for low educational expectations of and by women and girls. In their study of people who engage in further education "against the odds" in UK and New Zealand, they found that "particularly for women, both timing and motivation to study are often associated with family circumstances" (2003:274). They observe that "more often than not, the constellation of factors for the women included a strong element of *family events and transitions,* both in the UK and the New Zealand samples". (ibid.)

Hayes and Flannery (2000) note that women often share common challenges and experiences in continuing their education. Rice and Meyer (1989) say that women returning to school as adults feel guilty or inadequate and blame themselves for the difficulties they experience in handling multiple roles. (cited in Hayes and Flannery 2000:74) The experiences of the women in this study concur with the above findings.

*(a)    Discrimination, childcare and guilt feelings*

OK could not conceal her feelings of guilt:

> So I will have to say, 'I'm sorry, close the door, don't let her come in. Don't let the baby come in, I want to be left alone and I have to do my assignment'...That was *guilt feeling* lah. I couldn't spend as much time as I wanted with my little baby. But we plodded on for 4 years. Finally we completed, I completed, and my friends. (OK pg 19)

Cultural values concerning what is appropriate for women of their ethnic groups also influenced their learning choices. LYM, who is Chinese, experienced sexual discrimination, both before and after marriage. She claimed that her brothers were given more food and her mother said, "Girls don't (need to) study so much because (they) are going to get married in the future." (LYM pg 5) After marriage, she stayed with her mother-in-law, a conservative and traditional Chinese lady, who protested against her wearing skirts to work and would not allow the women in the house to go out late at night. As her husband was occupied with community work at night, she said, "...every night he wouldn't be around. I'm the only one that guided the two kids along." (pg 12)

After shifting out of her mother-in-law's house, she had to stay home to look

after her daughters. Upon her husband's death, she contemplated re-engaging in learning although she was working to support her family. However, she decided to wait until after her daughters have graduated before embarking on her own learning.

> So I had to hold on, hold on for my daughter to go first. 'Let her go first,' I said. 'Never mind, she's still young,' I said. 'She can…carry on.' So…after her study then I said, 'I go. My turn to go.' (LYM pg 32-33)

Another Chinese lady, PNY, who came from a poor and broken family, also experienced sexual discrimination before and after marriage. Of her experiences before marriage, she said, "…my dad…thought…girls are useless and boys are important." (PNY pg 13) After marriage, she had to "quit" post-school learning and work because of her mother-in-law's disapproval:

> …my mother-in-law was (a) very traditional Chinese, and her family was traditional too. They thought Mother must stay home to take care of the kids. Therefore, after I gave birth to my son, I did not work in factory any more. (PNY pg 27)

> …that time, I only had my daughter, did not give birth to my son. Then, she (her mother-in-law) might be unhappy about that. Every time I came back, she would give me a long face. Then I thought not to learn any more. So I quit (PNY pg 31)

Dowswell et al.'s (2000) study revealed that women with children were less likely to perceive continuing education in a positive light compared to those without. Differences in expectations regarding childcare responsibilities between men and women seem to prevent more women than men from undertaking learning, regardless of their ethnic groups. Several of their participants experienced guilt associated with their

role as parent or guilt associated with asking 'favours' from friends or relatives in terms of childcare provision.

For V, an Indian factory supervisor, the discrimination is related to both her sex and her ethnicity. She was forced to marry early because of tradition. Her unhappy marriage forced her to take things into her own hands.

...after five years...separated. I went and apply for separation because I can't take it anymore. Every now and then get beating from him and...I see my children suffering...My mum said that you're not allowed to do divorce, separation because Indians, they feel that, if this kind of things happen, the society will look down on you. (V pg 23)

However, there is a counter-example to the general trend to be found among the participants. OK was fortunate not to experience any sexual discrimination because her mother had learnt the lesson first-hand.

...I think my mother influenced me a lot. Because when she was in China, she could see the unfairness...so she...more or less treated us...the same, equal...So when in turn, I treated my children all the same. (OK pg 64-66)

### 6.3.1.2 Male Participants

Temporary exits for males were mainly due to work commitments. As mentioned earlier, WW had to exit more than once from his learning journey because of work commitments. Regarding his first exit, he said, *"I was busy...I didn't have the time* to complete the diploma course. So, I just aborted it basically lah." (pg 12) While

he was taking another course, he again had to make the painful decision to "abort it" halfway:

> ...when I was in Boys' Home in 1999, I took up the graduate diploma...in social work in NUS. *Again half-way through, I aborted it* because [of] my transfer to this posting. WW pg 12-13)

LD was the only male who contemplated exiting from his learning journey for reasons other than work commitments. His wife suggested that he stops attending night classes so that he could spend more time with their children.

*(a)    Guilt feelings among males*

Many of the men considered lack of time spent with their family to be an opportunity cost (sacrifice) that they had to incur to engage in post-school learning. (Refer to discussion under costs of learning as a barrier to learning in Chapter 5.) Some also expressed feelings of guilt at not having spent sufficient time with their children while they continued with the pursuit of their learning activities. Like Alan in West's study, when given time to reflect on their feelings, some of the men in this study also showed conflict between academia and family life. (West 1996:82) Alan said, "...Sometimes I feel guilty about not playing with my son as much as I should do, especially leading up to the exams." (ibid.) All of them credited their wives for taking good care of the children as they themselves were not at home most of the time.

Although CR seemed very positive throughout the whole interview about his learning experience, a tinge of guilt and sadness can be detected in these words:

I find it only very sorry…I'm busy in photography…busy here and there…I find I lack

of…a lot of [time] with him [his son]…That's why I say that…when you achieve

something, you lose [sacrifice] something. (pg 173)

## 6.4    Stage 8: Another turning point leading to re-entry

All the participants, who stopped temporarily, re-engaged in learning during

another turning point or life transition. The women re-engaged in learning when the

children were older, or when they could make arrangements for childcare. For the men

who usually left their learning journeys as a result of work pressure, their re-entries

were also linked to job changes. This is of course a characteristic of this group which

may not be found elsewhere. It is also possible that an exit is final but such people

would not appear in the group for this study who had been nominated as successful

learners.

PNY decided to continue with her cookery classes when her children were older.

Even then, she had to make constant adjustments to her own schedule to fit the

children's school schedule (PNY pg 34). However, as most of the courses organised by

community centres were at night, she had to "quit" some of the courses.

..My daughter was 9 years old, about 10 years when I went back to that teacher. I only

went to learn when my kids were in afternoon class. I would be back around 4 or 5 pm

because they came back around 6 or 7 pm. If they were in morning class and came back

in the afternoon that year I did not learn anything that year. (PNY pg 34)

OK also decided to place her children's interests above her own. She enrolled in

the Open University when she was 48 and fulfilled her dream of getting a degree at the

age of 52:

> When they (the children) were sort of settled down, in Sec 1, Sec 2, that kind of thing, then I started looking around in, I said, "Ok, I better apply for some courses. (OK pg 12)

> Then the following year I had to join another group...then I completed it. (OK pg 17)

LYM had to interrupt her post-school learning because of pregnancy (LYM pg 11) and financial considerations (LYM pg 12). Later, when she wanted to go back to her studies, her husband passed away. As a result, she had to put her own learning plans on hold as she wanted to see her daughters through their university education first. Hence, she only went back to studying at the age of 47 after her daughters have graduated from university (LYM pg 32-33).

WW, who "aborted" his studies as a result of work pressure (WW pg 12-13), re-engaged in learning when he changed jobs. After he took up a civil service job, he re-engaged in learning when he was successful in his application for a government-sponsored course. (WW pg 13,16)

## 6.5   Summary

This chapter covers the last three stages of the learning journey, which include the effects of learning, temporary exit as well as re-entry by the learners. Refer to Figure 5 below.

# FIGURE 5: STAGES 1-8

**STAGE 1:** Triggering factor/s and turning point/s in life

**STAGE 2:** Reflection

**STAGE 3:** Evaluation of Reasons for Learning

**STAGE 4:** Weighing Learning Opportunities against Obstacles / Barriers

**STAGE 5:** Participation in Learning Episode

**STAGE 6: Learning Outcomes**
- Higher pay, promotion and better job prospects
- Access to higher learning
- Sense of joy, satisfaction and achievement
- Increase in confidence, development of learning dispositions and learner identities
- Recovery of one's voice
- Transformation and empowerment
- Broadening of roles and identities

**STAGE 7: Temporary Exit**

Gender effects

**STAGE 8: Re-entry**

When conditions become more conducive for learning

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The analysis uncovers a wide range of positive outcomes. The participants initially cited utilitarian outcomes like higher pay, promotion and better job prospects. However, further reflection led them to include many non-utilitarian outcomes in their narratives. The other benefits of learning include access to higher learning, sense of joy, satisfaction and achievement, increase in confidence, development of learning dispositions and learner identities, recovery of voice, change in perspectives, life transformation, broadening of roles and identities and empowerment.

While utilitarian outcomes help ensure that they are able to attain a certain standard of living as result of their learning activities, the non-utilitarian benefits are more likely to be influential in sustaining their learning. All the learners show evidence of transformative learning. They transcend their initial tentative learner

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identities to become learners with strong learner identities through these positive non-utilitarian outcomes.

Consistent with other qualitative studies about non-traditional learners (Crossan et al. 2003, Davey & Jamieson 2003) this study reveals that the journey is often not a smooth one. Besides the higher barriers that they often have to overcome because of their lower initial qualifications, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, there are also conflicts within the different areas of their lives.

Although the men spoke extensively about conflicts with work and learning commitments, many of them did mention that one of the costs (sacrifices) for learning is time that could have been spent with their families. Almost all openly acknowledged having very supportive spouses who bore the bulk of the childcare and other household responsibilities. All the women, on the other hand, mentioned conflicts among learning, work and family commitments as barriers to learning. Coming from poor and, sometimes, conservative backgrounds, the women also had to overcome traditional stereotyping of childcare roles and responsibilities. This was worsened by the presence of older family members who, because of their traditional ethnic cultural beliefs concerning education, marriage and childcare, sometimes, disapproved of women being too well-educated. Most of the time, the women succeeded in juggling among the three commitments, usually with the support of other family members, neighbours or close friends. In some cases, they were forced to disrupt their learning endeavours and rejoin their journeys at a later time.

All of these learners, however, went back to rejoin their learning journeys, when conditions became more conducive for learning. For most women, this usually occurred

when the children were older or when they could find alternative childcare arrangements. For the men, re-entry is usually work-related, as is illustrated in the case of WW above. This shows the importance of contextual and cultural factors in influencing lifelong learning participation. This topic will be covered in the next chapter.

However, before we move to the next chapter, it may be helpful to review the results of all the different stages. Figure 6 below represents the model of lifelong learning participation as discussed so far.

## 6.6    Model of lifelong learning participation so far

In Chapters 4-6, each stage was discussed and analysed separately so as to uncover the factors that influence choices of the learners during their learning journeys. In each chapter, the results are summarised in the form of a chart. Figure 6 below results from the synthesis of Figures 2, 3 and 5.

# FIGURE 6: PARTIAL MODEL OF LIFELONG LEARNING PARTICIPATION

**STAGE 1:**
Triggering factor/s and turning point/s in life (e.g. divorce, unemployment)

**STAGE 2:**
Reflection

**STAGE 3:**
Evaluation of reasons for learning (e.g. career advancement)

**STAGE 4:**
Weighing learning opportunities against barriers to learning

**STAGE 5:**
Participation in learning

**STAGE 6:** Learning outcomes utilitarian (e.g. higher remuneration) and non-utilitarian (e.g. increase in confidence)

**STAGE 7:**
Temporary exit due to circumstances

**STAGE 8:** Another turning point leading to re-entry

This lifelong learning model, grounded in data collected from the study, shows the common factors that influence learning decisions at each stage of the learning journeys of all the lifelong learners. It, therefore, represents an emic perspective of lifelong learning that emerges from the learners' narratives.

It shows how a triggering factor can lead to refection concerning one's presuppositions about learning. This, in turn, leads to the evaluation of reasons for learning and weighing of learning opportunities against obstacles to learning. If the factors for learning outweigh those against learning, the decision is then made to participate in learning. Success with post-school learning builds self

confidence and develops a learning disposition. The learner assesses the achievements in his/her last learning episode, and reflects on the possibility of taking up another learning opportunity before taking action to participate in another learning opportunity. The next stage of learning may occur, either with or without another triggering point. As the process is recursive, it leads to the development of a strong learner identity and transforms the learner from non-learner to lifelong learner. Hence, even when a learner has to make a temporary exit, he/she rejoins the learning journey, usually when conditions become more conducive.

As mentioned earlier, although this represents the usual sequence of events, the real situation may not always be as neat as is represented here. A learner may go back to a previous stage without completing the whole cycle. For example, when faced with more barriers while participating in a particular learning episode, a learner may decide to re-evaluate his/her reasons for learning before completing the learning episode. Moreover, some of the learners also mention that they practise reflection regularly. In other words, the stages may also occur simultaneously.

The model can, however, serve as a framework to explain why some non-traditional learners from disadvantaged backgrounds decide to engage in post-school learning, and why and how they may transform to become lifelong learners.

Although post-school learning is usually triggered by pragmatic, instrumental reasons, such as learning for promotion or a higher remuneration, people who experienced marginalisation because of their social and educational background also seek education for many other personal reasons. Some of them revealed that a sense of inadequacy caused them to re-engage in learning, so as to gain confidence and prove

their abilities to themselves and others. There is strong evidence that the presence of a positive and supportive environment with mentors, supportive others and role models, provides an enabling context for initial and subsequent engagement in post-school learning.

Hence, although the learners encountered many structural and dispositional barriers, all of them succeeded in overcoming these barriers to develop learning dispositions and strong learner identities, which help to sustain continued learning.

The next chapter discusses the role of positive environments and supportive relationships in influencing lifelong learning.

# 7 CHAPTER SEVEN – ROLE OF POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

## 7.1 Introduction

Chapters 4-6 examined the different stages/phases of the learners' learning journeys for factors that influence their decisions to engage in continuous learning. Throughout all the stages, it was evident that contextual factors such as positive environments and relationships with significant and influential others were instrumental in determining decisions concerning participation in post-school learning. This chapter elaborates on the role of different positive environments and supportive relationships in influencing lifelong learning, and derives a more complete model of lifelong learning participation, which is then compared with Cross's Chain of Response Model of Adult Participation.

Writers have criticised policies designed to encourage participation for their inadequate conceptualisations of the relationship between people's lives and learning (Bowman et al. 2000, Coffield 2000a, 2000b cited in Clegg and McNulty 2002:572).

Galloway et al. also assert that much of early research underestimated the range and the complexity of influences on motivation. They say that "it is necessary to locate particular psychological processes within their cultural context" (1998:112).

This point became evident while tracing the different stages of the learners' learning journeys. Examples of positive contextual factors mentioned include the creation of more learning opportunities and removal of barriers, through the relaxation of entry requirements for entry into educational institutions, as discussed in

Chapter 3. Similarly, cultural values transmitted by significant and influential others were also included by some of the participants as factors that cause them to become lifelong learners.

## 7.2 Different spheres of influence

The learners' narratives reveal that their learning choices are affected by different spheres of influence, with each one of them exercising different amounts of influence on their learning journeys at different times of their lives. I have categorised them as follows:

1.    Government

2.    Community

3.    Economy

4.    Education

5.    Work

6.    Family

The influences can be positive or negative. A supportive and encouraging family would exert a positive influence while an unsupportive family will exert a negative influence. Participation requires a net positive influence when all the different spheres of influence are taken into consideration

The first sphere of influence that will be discussed is that of the government.

## 7.2.1 Government

Believing in the importance of a well-trained labour force to counter international competition, the Singapore government takes a very active approach in promoting lifelong learning through the provision of huge funds and introduction of initiatives to encourage lifelong learning. Many of the learners drew attention to these initiatives and attributed their learning to taking advantage of opportunities that are provided and subsidised by the government, employers or community organisations. Many of these were the result of recently introduced government initiatives to create learning opportunities and remove barriers. (Refer to Introduction for role of Singapore government and list of government initiatives, Chapter 5 for learning opportunities and Appendix 9, 10 and 11 for examples of latest initiatives.)

However, as mentioned earlier, statistics confirm studies elsewhere that not everybody takes up the opportunities offered. Hence, there is a mismatch between supply and demand of learning opportunities. (Refer to Introduction and Background for discussion related to this and references.)

There is a segment of people that do not respond to the official call for lifelong learning and these are usually the ones who need it most. They are those who are older or those who come from disadvantaged family and learning environments.

## 7.2.2 Community

Learning facilities provided within the community are important sources of

informal and non-formal learning. (Refer to Chapter 5 on role of informal and non-formal learning.)

In Singapore, there are more than a hundred community centres/clubs managed by the People's Association. They are located in all the different housing estates and hence, are conveniently located for the local residents to participate in a wide variety of non-formal learning activities in a non-threatening environment.

A number of the learners (PNY, CR, LYM) started post-school learning in a non-formal way by participating in activities or courses offered by community centres/clubs and community organisations like SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association), MENDAKI and CDAC (Chinese Community Development Assistance Council). V and PNY attended courses organised by SINDA and CDAC, which are self-help non-profit organisations set up by the various ethnic groups to serve the community. Besides other community projects, they also provide affordable tuition for poor students and conduct skills training courses for lower educated workers.

Many of the participants are now contributing back to the community by volunteering to do community service or conducting classes in community organisations. PNY and CR conduct cookery and photography courses respectively, for the residents at the community centres/clubs while Z is actively involved in MENDAKI, a Malay self-help group.

There are also three regional libraries and twenty community libraries managed by the National Library Board of Singapore. With the exception of the newly re-opened central library that is located in the city, the rest of the libraries are all located in

the housing estates. As many of the learners in this study engage in informal learning by reading books loaned from these libraries, they have the effect of strengthening the learning journeys of the learners.

Similarly, the mass media, such as newspapers, television and radio, also provide avenues for learning informally. PNY, who learned to speak Mandarin by listening to radio programmes, now hosts her own Chinese cookery programme on radio. Similarly, H is also hosting a Tamil programme to encourage others to learn.

The role of the community centres/clubs in encouraging lifelong learning can be further tapped through innovative ways, such as through the opening up of more community centres/clubs for classes to be conducted by external organisations at low prices. Instead of going back to a school environment, people who have failed in their initial education usually prefer to re-engage in learning in less threatening environments. (Cross 1981:136, Gallacher et 2002:503)

The Singapore zoo, bird park, botanic gardens and museums have also been promoting themselves as places of learning. Talks, shows and exhibitions are conducted regularly in these places where non-formal and informal learning can take place. For those who had memories of painful experiences of failure in formal learning, these are places that provide non-threatening environments of learning. Peripheral participation in learning activities (Lave and Wenger 1991 cited in Gallecher et al. 2002:499) can help develop a stronger learning identity and ultimately lead to the forging of a learning career if the learner progresses to more challenging learning activities later (Bloomer 2000, Crossan et al. 2002).

One area that has been neglected in Singapore until recently is that of the importance of civil society in promoting lifelong learning in community settings.

Civil society is conceived as the realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, largely, self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It involves citizens acting collectively to express their interests, passions and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold the state officially accountable. By containing the power of governments, and by profoundly legitimating democracy among citizens, civil society plays a significant role in building and consolidating democracy. (Ichilov 1998:16)

A recent example of how this can be achieved is when the government responded to calls by the Disabled People's Association and the Singapore Association for the Visually Handicapped (SAVH) to make Singapore a more barrier-free place for the disabled and handicapped through removal of physical barriers such as provision of ramps and lifts at Housing Board flats and public places. More recently, the Singapore Zoo has also responded to recommendations by the above-mentioned organisations and installed new signboards in Braille, that include information and engraved drawings of the animals, to allow visually impaired visitors to 'see' through touch. In addition, it has also installed life-size animal models of 10 of its popular exhibits for the same purpose. In so doing, the Singapore Zoo has made lifelong learning accessible to the visually handicapped.

Citizens of a learning society would, by means of their continuing education and training, be able to engage in critical dialogue and action to improve the quality of life

for the whole community and to ensure social integration as well as economic success. (Coffield cited in Riddell et al. 1999: 477)

## 7.2.3 Economy

As is argued throughout this thesis, the dominant discourse of lifelong learning emphasises the economic role of lifelong learning. In most countries, including Singapore, lifelong learning is advocated on the basis of the principle of human capital theory, that is, people invest in themselves so that they and their countries can enjoy higher returns in the form of higher productivity and higher incomes, and hence enjoy higher standards of living. Proponents of the economic imperatives of lifelong learning sometimes emphasise this perspective to the exclusion of other perspectives of learning. (Refer to discussion on human capital theory in Introduction.) Hence, lifelong learning is often equated with training and skills-upgrading to ensure job protection for the individual and maintenance of comparative advantage for the nation, in the face of global competition, technological change and the challenge of the knowledge economy.

This study shows that learning is often triggered by economic factors, such as the threat of job loss due to recession, redundancy or skill obsolescence. Utilitarian reasons, such as career advancement, higher pay and working for a "better life" feature prominently in their narratives and echo the official dominant discourse of lifelong learning. (Refer to Chapter 4 on triggering factors and reasons for learning.)

However, while factors emanating from the economy often trigger learning, the factors which sustain continuous learning, and which ultimately cause the 13 learners to transform from tentative learners to lifelong learners, appear more complex than is portrayed by the dominant discourse of lifelong learning. Refer to the

discussion on the effects of learning on learning disposition and learner identity in Chapter 6.

Moreover, coming from disadvantaged social and educational backgrounds means that the learners usually encounter many barriers while engaging in post-school learning. Hence, all the learners in this study mentioned at least one significant relationship that helped them overcome these barriers to forge a successful learner identity for themselves. Significant and influential others act as enablers to facilitate learning. This is most evident in the next sphere of influence that will be discussed, that is the educational and family spheres.

## 7.2.4 Education

Studies have shown that the learning trajectory that people follow is largely determined by the resources that they derive from their social background. A person's capacity to take up available learning opportunities is constrained by his/her previous history, including success or failure at school. (Gorard et al. 2002:43) Hence, those who have not succeeded in their initial education are also least likely to take up available opportunities because of their lack of learner identity.

When asked about their experience in schools and other educational institutions, many of the participants talked about failing in school. Some mentioned that they were better at sports than in the academic field, as streaming by results often means that they mixed with friends who were equally disinterested in studies.

They were also not interested in discussing structural factors like school curriculum or educational policies, except for some who complained about

access problems, which they encountered due to their low initial education. (Refer to Chapter 5 about barriers/obstacles to learning.) Almost all of them, however, mentioned a teacher or lecturer who has influenced them positively in their learning journeys.

### 7.2.4.1 Teachers

Teachers act as their *role models, encouragers, supporters and mentors* and hence provide them with the enabling contexts for learning which some may not have in the other spheres of influence.

HKK's *role model and mentor* was one of his tutors in a polytechnic:

Ya, so...he...in a sense he's like my role model in my early days, because he was the HR person, whom I later became...he's one of the mentors lah...(pg 49)

According to Bennetts, "a mentor is that person who achieves a one-to-one developmental relationship with a learner and one *whom the learner identifies* as having enabled personal growth to take place". (1994:4)

Having experienced failure before, HKK was especially touched that his "favourite tutor" "had a lot of belief" in him. The tutor also played the role of a *supporter and encourager*:

So this is the guy [his tutor] that *had a lot belief in me*, I suppose he's trying to help because there are a few of us who didn't make it...(laughs)...so *he was very supportive of us* and he said, 'You know, you all shouldn't give up, you should fight for

yourself...(HKK pg 49)

As discussed in the section on turning point, OK believes that having a "wonderful Mathematics teacher" was "a turning point" for her. (OK pg 68)  V spoke fondly of a teacher in one of her adult classes who "took an extra interest" in her.  This teacher played an *encouraging and supportive* role in her learning motivation by telling her "You can do it". (V pg 6)  The common theme that runs throughout all the cases is the great impact that a teacher can have on a student by giving "a pat on the shoulder" (WW pg 26), some encouraging words (V pg 6), or showing belief and trust in his/her abilities. (V pg 6, WW pg 27)

> *he gave me the confidence. He motivated me...*They call it the self-fulfilling prophecy. That kind of trust: 'I know you can do it.' You know.' I know you can reach the standard.' Whenever I do something very difficult, he already move on, move in to compliment. *You know, a pat on the shoulder. It motivates a lot.* (WW pg 26, 27)

The findings of this study illustrate the important roles played by teachers.  They help to build up the self-esteem and confidence of their students by believing in their students' abilities and offering encouragement and support.  In some cases, the effect can be felt long after the students have left school.

### 7.2.4.2  *Peers*

Peer influence at school can make a difference as to whether a person continues learning or decides to leave school to take up a job.  Unlike many of the other participants, OK did well enough to further her studies, despite coming from a very poor family.  However, she chose not to continue her studies because her "closer friends did

not continue. They went into nursing and all that..." They started work after "O" levels as a result of low family incomes and low aspirations among women at that time. (OK pg 9)

This is in sharp contrast to her later decision to re-engage in learning because she later identified with another group of friends with whom she was constantly attending courses together. OK recalled "plodding on" with them to complete their course. (OK pg19)

LWM says that friends are "very, very important" as they "share", "guide", "encourage", "push" (pg 61), "correct" and act as good role models. (LWM pg 18)

So we have group study. Sometimes we just help each other. Help me a lot. (LWM pg 45)

In Stuart's recent report on research findings from first-generation entrants at university in the UK, (very aptly entitled, "'My friends made all the difference': Getting into and succeeding at university for first-generation entrants") she asserts:

The role of friendship has emerged as a significant factor in creating successes for first generation students, particularly where students cannot access other forms of cultural or economic power. Friendship groups can operate to confirm students' perceptions of learning and can drive students away from study but they can equally offer a bridge for students who do not have other resources to support their aspirations in education. (Stuart 2006:181)

## 7.2.5 Work

### 7.2.5.1 Employers

A few of the learners attributed their learning to employers who *encouraged* them to learn or who were flexible in rescheduling their work schedule to enable them to find time for learning outside of work. (OK, LAS, LD) However, most of them encountered conflicts between work and learning commitments. LWM even had to give up his job as his application for leave to study for an examination was not approved. LD said that the nature of the work in some industries, especially those that require working in shifts, discouraged participation in learning.

Most of the participants, however, had employers who were *supportive* of their learning. Many of them started post-school learning by attending company sponsored courses. In some cases, they were even allowed to attend classes during office hours. OK, a teacher, made the decision to enrol for a particular course because the course was conducted during school hours and she was offered an incentive, in the form of a raise, after she passes the examinations. Besides supportive employers, peer influence at work, is equally, if not more important in influencing post-school learning.

### 7.2.5.2 Peers

Peers within the work environment can provide information about learning opportunities and also encourage each other to participate in learning activities. LD first embarked on learning because one of his colleagues was taking a course and had encouraged LD to join him. Later, he was motivated to continue learning because he identified with a group that was supportive of his learning.

Model similarity affects observers' self-efficacy. A person's self-efficacy is raised and he/she is motivated when he/she observes similar others succeed. They believe that if others can succeed, they too should be able to succeed. (Pintrich and Schunk 2002:382) After observing a friend participate in learning, WD said, "I told myself that if this guy can do it, so can I lah!" V attributed her learning to having *encouraging and supportive* colleagues and neighbours who offered advice and tangible support by providing childcare assistance when she was working or attending lessons. (V pg 24-25)

The converse is also true. Observing others fail can lead learners to believe that they lack competence to succeed. They will then avoid taking up learning opportunities. (Pintrich and Schunk 2002:382)

While a positive work environment and supportive relationships can encourage learning, having discouraging friends, employers or kin can be disruptive to one's learning journey. WD was discouraged by others who "laughed at" him.

...people will laugh at you. When people laugh at you ah... my, my learning just went down you know. (WD pg 10)

These different factors and examples confirm Norman and Hyland's finding about the importance of social interaction as a factor in increasing confidence. Harkin et al. also observe that "effective learning is facilitated by social interaction". (cited in Norman & Hyland 2003:269).

## 7.2.6 Family

The role of the family in influencing lifelong learning is well documented. (Gorard et al. 1998; Smith and Spurling 2001; OECD 2000; Schuller et al. 2004) Although the participants in this study consider themselves to have come from disadvantaged families because of poverty or broken families, most of them pointed to family members who had influenced them in their learning.

For some who did not have good relationships with parents, their relationships with other members of the extended family compensated for the initial disadvantage. H, who had a very poor relationship with his father, was close to his grandmother from whom he learnt the value of discipline and diligence. Z, on the other hand, had a very good relationship with his father.

### 7.2.6.1 Parents

Z's father was his *hero, mentor and role model*. Z used to observe him from young:

> "Er...I draw my strength, my...if who's *my hero, my mentor*, that's him lah. He's someone, a simple man who works for his family and at the same time try to upgrade himself...That is er...a person that I look up to. So from young I have been observing him. This is something, a strength ah." (Z pg 4, 31)

> ...he (father) alone supporting eight of us and those in Malacca...yet he still had time to read, to learn things and even nowadays...sitting down to him, we talk politics...economics. (Z pg 78, 79)

He admitted that he was not very keen in his studies when he was young. However, when adverse circumstances later in life triggered him to re-engage in learning, he attributed his perseverance to his father, whom he considered to be his *role model*. One of his early impressions of his father was of a man who was constantly upgrading himself, despite having a large young family to look after. He also said that he "consistently looks out for *role models*". (Z pg 124)

OK attributed her love for learning to her mother who was her *role model*. Besides being interested in learning herself, OK's mother constantly emphasised the importance of education and effort:

> ...she (my mother) always drove home the point that we - our educations were important. Ah, education is a must and we must try very hard...she was herself like showing that reading was really good. She said, "If you don't want to read, you'll be a blind person." So I think that indirectly influenced me lah. (OK pg 5)

Z and OK's examples show that parents are the best *role models* for their children. A lifelong learning habit can be inculcated from young if parents themselves model learning for their children to emulate.

Many of the participants also attributed their success to the *encouragement and support* of other family members. Besides saying that her mother "was very supportive" (OK pg 67), OK also attributed her success to her husband's support.

### 7.2.6.2 Spouses

OK's husband also played a *supportive role* in her learning journeys. She

confessed that she would not have been able to achieve her goal without the support of her husband.

> If he had not been *supportive*, I don't think I would be able to...because here is the young baby needing my attention. And if he was not *supportive*, it would be so difficult for me...torn between the two...Occasionally he has to help out and I was left alone to do my studies. (OK pg 29)

The male participants, like LAS and LD, were also appreciative of their wives' *support*. Their wives looked after the children so that they could concentrate on their learning. H was especially grateful to his wife for her support:

> And of course during my years of part-time learning, she has been er wonderful, very *supportive*, never troubled me, let me be what I am. Er whole family things were being taken care. She was a Home Affairs Minister, Finance Minister, Foreign- Foreign Minister, mother, wife, e-v-erthing, she took. Now I think that was the most beautiful gift for me I think in my life (pg 19)

### 7.2.6.3 Grandmothers

In Asian societies, where extended families sometimes still live together, the role of grandparents cannot be underestimated. Some grandparents played the role of *disciplinarians* and helped to inculcate the values of diligence and discipline, required for later learning. H's mother passed away when he was nine years old and he was looked after by his grandmother after that. His strong and disciplined character was "shaped" by his staunch Hindu grandmother whom he described as a very "regimental woman" and a "staunch Hindu" who forced him to get up at 4 am every morning to pray

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(pg 12):

> She was a very regimental woman, er staunch Hindu, er believed in God more than anybody else, but that I think shaped me up to what I am today. (H pg 12,14,73)

> during...my earlier days in school, we had to wake up [in the] morning [at] 4 am to pray, whether it is school holidays or whether school is on. Er she believed that a person who sleeps a lot is a useless person...And er those days of course I was er not very happy. Being young, you wanted to sleep a lot. Er but looking back at my life today where I got to work day and night and sleeping less helps me to do so much of things, where others can't do. (H pg 13)

H now tries to teach his children the values that he learned from her:

> I'm today imparting it to my children...I'm passing it down slowly things like er spiritual, taking them to temple, I'm making them believe that there's one almighty power above us. (H pg 15)

V was looked after by her grandmother since she was two weeks old as her mother had "no time to take care" of her since V was her seventh child. Her grandmother was the person who influenced her most in her life. She recalled how her grandmother imparted values about religion and discipline:

> Ok, Indian old people said, 'When you started something, make sure that you finish it. You will never want to leave halfway, so you will never succeed in life if you give up halfway.'"...my grandmum used to say. (H pg 55)

> ...when I young time...when I do something...when I leave and I want to go and play, she will call me back, come finish it, you finish that, then you go and do

whatever you want, you never do then you will never come up in life. (H pg 56)

Like H, V is also trying to teach her children what she has learnt from her grandmother:

...whatever my grandmother teach me...then after that I have my own home, have my own girls, I teach them everything, what I learn from my grandmother...all these things I tell them, and the good things that I learn from my grandmother, I tell them. (V pg 59)

The above examples show that the cultural or religious values internalised from young can resurface later in life to help the individual cope with life situations. In the Asian context of extended families, the socialising role of grandparents cannot be underestimated.

### 7.2.6.4 Children

Children, too, can provide *encouragement and support* to parents who return to learning later in life. LYM described her eldest daughter as being "very encouraging". Even when she failed, her daughter would remind her not to give up (LYM pg 82).

OK's children "cheered [her] on" (OK pg 29). They helped her when she needed some help with her computer work.

H acknowledged that he received "a lot of help" from his children in the preparation of his teaching material, such as with the use of Power Point and graphics. In fact, he believes that this helps to create bonding between him and his children:

PNY and LYM also received help from their children with the spelling and

pronunciation of English words. This testifies to the importance of 'inverse socialisation' (Field 2000:55).

## 7.3 Summary and discussion

### 7.3.1 Importance of contextual factors

Weiner (1996) argues that, traditionally, motivation research has produced limited findings due to the failure to integrate social contexts. West also criticises the dominant tradition in the United States (where most research into adult motivation has been conducted) as being "psychological to the neglect or exclusion of social and cultural perspectives". (1996:6)

In the case of this study, the use of narrative studies together with grounded theory methodology led to the emergence of a number of contextual factors which were later categorised as different spheres of influence in the learners' lives. The findings of this study are consistent with other findings about the need for positive environments and interactions with significant others to support lifelong learning. (McCombs 1991, Smith and Spurling 2001)

Other writers like Gallacher et al. (2002), West (1996), Williamson (1981), Gorard et al. (1997, 1998, 1999) and Crossan et al. (2003) have also emphasised the importance of social relationships for lifelong learning motivation. Gallacher et al. found a positive correlation between positive social relationships and the development of learning careers. Participating in informal learning like family centres, community resource centres, women's groups or youth projects can lead to the development of learning careers when there are social relationships supportive of learning. (Gallacher et

al. 2002:503) Courtney (1992) explains learning in social terms by stressing the important role of significant others, as a supportive culture in learning and educational participation. The significant and influential others can take on different roles, as mentors, role models, encouragers, disciplinarians and supporters.

As people are basically social beings, the decision to continue or not to continue in one's learning journey is very dependent on the people around them. The examples given by the participants show how some encouragement and support from family members, teachers and peers can help strengthen the learner identities of the learners.

Among the various spheres of influence, significant and influential others from families, schools and other educational institutions seem to exert the most influence. The participants acknowledge that they would not have been able to engage in lifelong learning if not for the support and encouragement of immediate family members.

This study also confirms Dohmen's assertion that "the foundation for active lifelong learning should be laid during childhood and adolescence" (Dohmen 1996:100). In Asia, where extended families sometimes still stay together, grandparents and other close relatives often help to inculcate in the young the norms and values of their social groups. Some of the participants learned values like perseverance, diligence and discipline, which they consider to be valuable when they later re-engaged in learning.

Smith and Spurling list a number of ways by which family members can motivate each other in lifelong learning. They say, "There is no shortage of ways to apply influence, and overall the potential for motivational influence within the family is

very strong." (Smith and Spurling 2001:65-66) For example, OK's mother and Z's father were their role models for lifelong learning.

Many of the learners also attribute their learning to teachers that have taught them. The roles that teachers play include acting as role models, encouragers, supporters and mentors. This study also shows that students appreciate teachers who pay special attention to them. For students who lack self-confidence, having a teacher who looks out for them gives them confidence and causes them to want to do well. This is consistent with McCombs' claims that "self-esteem and motivation are heightened when individuals are in respectful, caring relationships with others who see their potentials, genuinely appreciate their unique talents, and unconditionally accept them as individuals". (McCombs 1991:119)

Smith and Spurling say that teachers and parents reinforce each other when their influence aligns on common bases, providing clear boundaries and developmental paths. (Smith and Spurling 2001:80) Hence, parents, grandparents and teachers can encourage lifelong learning among young people if they stress the same values concerning the need for diligence, perseverance and discipline, and at the same time, also model lifelong learning for those under their care.

Peer influence is also a force to be reckoned in lifelong learning motivation. OK shows that peers can make the difference between whether a person continues learning formally or decides to leave school to work. Noting that research evidence bears out the strong influence of peer groups on young people's learning motivation, Smith and Spurling say that when young peer-group identity becomes salient, very strong group

motivation attaches to it, much as group identity can do within families (ibid.)

The various spheres of influence thus overlap each other and exert different degrees of influence on the learners at different times. Figure 7 below incorporates the different spheres of influence and the role of significant and influential others into Figure 6 to show the complete model of lifelong learning participation for the thirteen participants. It synthesises all thirteen learners' learning journeys and shows lifelong learning as an ongoing process. People go through a series of stages/phases before being transformed from learners with tentative to strong learner identities. The cycles repeat themselves, although in real life, things may not be as neat, and stages may not always occur in the same sequence as depicted in the model, as discussed in the previous chapter.



FIGURE 7: COMPLETE MODEL OF LIFELONG LEARNING PARTICIPATION
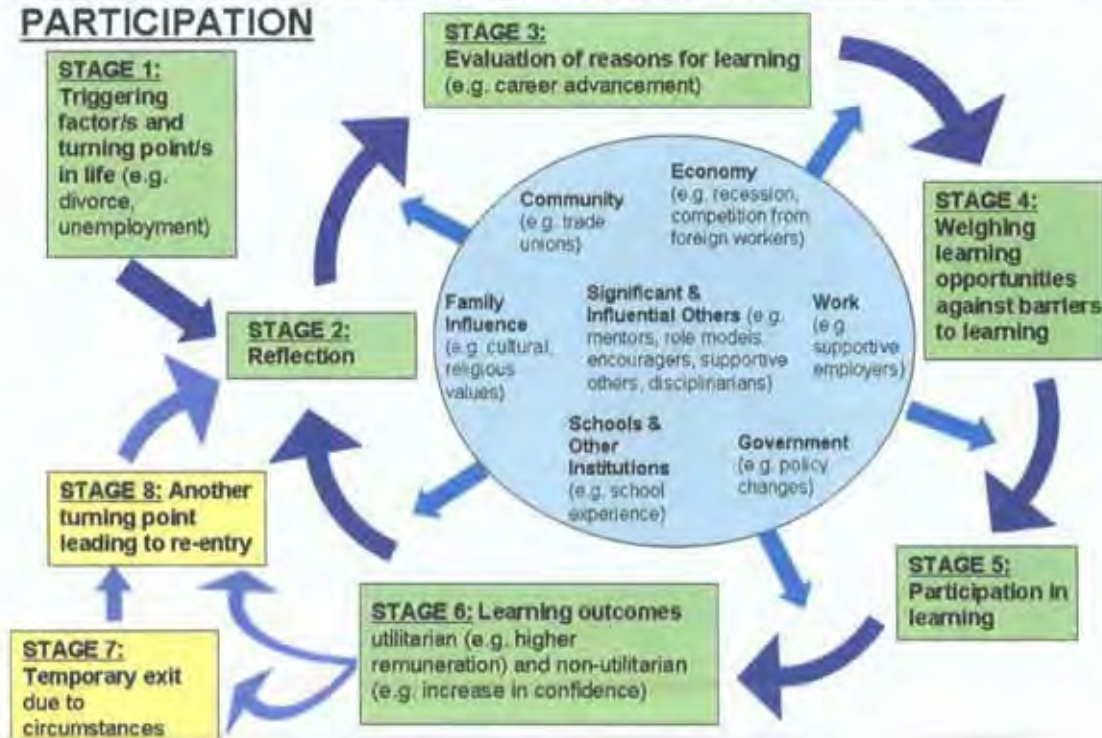
## 7.3.2 Using learning career as a framework to understand lifelong learning

Since the progress from Stage 1 to Stage 8 of the model is depicted in Figure 6, and has been discussed in detail in the previous chapter, it will not be covered here. I will focus, instead, on using learning career as a framework to understand how the learners become lifelong learners. The concept is used to analyse engagement in learning as a process which takes place over time. It shows how learners who initially re-engaged in learning with doubts about their learning ability can slowly, over time, develop into learners with strong learner identities and learning disposition. To understand this, we have to first understand the influences of the various environments on the learner before he/she started on his/her learning journey.

The influence from the various environments does not start only at the beginning of the learning journey. A person's learning disposition and attitude towards learning are influenced by the various environments shown in the circle at the centre of the model. In their studies on entry into higher education of non-traditional learners, Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) and Gallacher et al. (2000) draw on the theories of Bourdieu, especially with regards to the concept of habitus. Habitus is defined as a set of dispositions which "can refer to the norms and practices of particular social classes or groups. Although habitus can transform, change is slow, and therefore habitus both produces and confines action as the possibilities open to certain social groups may be limited." (Thomas 2000 cited in Osborne et al. 2004:146) Bourdieu explains habitus as 'internalised', 'embodied', 'social structures' which are acquired primarily through family and schooling. (Bourdieu 1984:468)

Gorard et al. suggest that experience of family and early school life along with

age, place and gender appear to create a relatively stable attitude to further learning opportunities – a learner identity (2002:84). They say, "'Success' or 'failure' at school lays the foundation for what appears to be an enduring 'learner identity.'" (ibid.:83)

Students from lower socio-economic groups, for example, seem to be guided from an earlier age, by reason of habit, culture and professional or peer expectation, to anticipate initial entry to the labour market rather than higher education. (Archer and Hutchings 2000:556) For example, two of the learners who completed secondary education could qualify for entry to university but decided against it because they wanted to work and earn money, as is expected of people from their social background. (ibid.:557)

Thus, each learner starts his/her post-school learning journey with a combination of values, dispositions and habits acquired from the various spheres of influence. Our earlier analysis has shown that post-school learning did not come naturally for this group of learners because of their disadvantaged social and/or educational background.

Since their motivation towards engaging in post-school learning is usually not very strong, their post-school learning journeys were triggered by different triggering factors/turning points, such as loss of job, divorce or change in political environment. This represents a "status passage" through which people make the transition from one social role to another, which is one of the key ideas of the Chicago School's analysis of career (Glaser and Strauss 1971; Hart 1976; Gallacher et al. 2002:501).

Even after they have re-engaged in learning, their learner identity was rather tentative. Some asked whether they could really engage in learning again because they

were older than others. Some were prepared to even repeat a course if necessary, while others stopped when faced with some obstacles. Many of them started off by engaging in learning activities which involved lower risk of failure, such as speech training classes, photography and cookery classes at community centres/clubs or private schools. Gallacher et al. refer to participation in community resource centres (which can be compared to the community centres/clubs in Singapore), and which usually involves mainly informal and non-formal learning, as a stepping stone to formal learning (2002:507).

Gallacher et al. suggest that if these status passages are to lead to people developing their learning careers, one key factor is whether they have social relationships that are supportive of learning. The concept of learning career draws on symbolic interactionist theory which traditionally focuses on the processes through which social identity is shaped and reshaped through social interactions. (ibid.:501; Glaser and Strauss 1971:151)

Thus, having a supportive and encouraging spouse or a mentor at work or in a community club, union or an institution of higher learning may help overcome previous feelings of inadequacy, acquired from the family of origin or from initial education. Even children can provide emotional and practical support to parents in their continuous learning endeavours. A learner may have very negative attitudes towards learning and low self-esteem because of experiences with failure in initial education and, therefore, need more encouragement and support from significant others before considering participation in post-school learning.

Gallacher et al. recognise the importance also of structures in creating the

frameworks within which interaction takes place, and social identities are constructed and reconstructed. Hence, besides social relationships, they also consider the impact of differing institutional arrangements on learning careers. They believe that these factors can shape the initial processes of re-engagement with formal education, and influence the development of learning careers in which people become increasingly committed to the social role of learner.

While they focus on educational institutions, the findings of this study show that besides educational institutions, all the other different institutions such as family, work, community, economy and government can facilitate the development of the learning careers of individuals through the provision of positive and supportive environments for learning. If the work place is structured such that it is conducive for work-related learning and employers are supportive, for example, they can also help facilitate the development of the learning careers of their workers. Similarly, participation in community-based learning, such as courses conducted by SINDA, MENDAKI and CDAC, the various non-profit organisations set up by the various ethnic groups to serve the community, have also helped to facilitate the development of the learner careers of some individuals. As the family is the institution that has the earliest and the greatest influence on people's learning careers, emphasis should be placed on strengthening the family as an institution in society so that the family can be developed as an identity-based intergenerational, learning organisation. (Smith and Spurling 2002:119)

Thus, positive environments and support from significant and influential others help strengthen people's learning journeys while negative environments and lack of support from significant and influential others weaken their learning journeys, to the

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extent of even forcing some to exit from their journeys temporarily, such as when family or work commitments hinder further learning engagements.

For the learning journeys to be continuous there must be more positive than negative influences from the various spheres of influence. Participants' learning journeys may be rough and patchy, for example, if educational institutions set rigid rules against access or if there are objections by spouses or other members of the family.

Similarly, when the government encourages the establishment of more private or government universities within the country, it will also lead to an increase in learning opportunities and easier access for non-traditional learners. Encouragement and support of family members, teachers, friends and colleagues work like lubricants to smoothen the participants' learning journeys as they help to strengthen the participants' learner identities.

The findings of this study show that learners' experience with post-school learning can increase confidence and cause so much change in their learner identity and learning disposition, that it triggers an "avalanche effect" or "snowballing effect". (Gallacher et al. 2002:502) This motivates further learning and propels the learner from one cycle of learning to another. (Refer to discussion of Stage 6 of model in Chapter 6)

I believe that by including the extra dimension of a visual model of lifelong learning participation to the learner career framework, I have added to the previous research and theory. Similarly, this study also takes into consideration a holistic concept of lifelong learning that not only covers lifelong and lifewide learning, but also accounts for influences from almost all the institutions that an individual comes into

contact with.

Having discussed the model derived from this study, I will now turn to Cross's
Chain-of-Response (COR) Model for a brief comparison of her model and the one
derived here.

### 7.3.3 Comparison of present model with Cross's COR model

The main difference concerns the origin of the models. Cross's model
synthesises past models/theories to arrive at a conceptual framework designed to
identify the relevant variables (influencing participation in adult learning) and
hypothesise their interrelationships while my model is grounded from the data collected
through in-depth interviews of the participants. Hence, my model represents the
participants' theory of lifelong learning. It is their explanation of what and how they
become motivated to learn. Moreover, Cross's model starts with self-evaluation while
mine starts with one or more triggering factors. (Compare Figure 7 above with Cross's
model in Figure 1 of Chapter 2.)

Cross's model depicts a seven-stage process of adult learning:

A. Learner's own self-evaluation

B. Learner's attitude towards education

C. Motivation to learn (goals and the expectation that these goals will be
met).

D. Life transitions

E. Opportunities and barriers

F. Information on educational opportunities

G. The decision to participate

Although Cross's model shows some environmental factors (at later points of the chain such as information, opportunities and barriers) Merriam and Caffarella consider it to be mainly a psychological model. They point out that by suggesting that adult educators start from the beginning of the model, she is implying that psychological factors are the most important:

> If adult educators wish to understand why some adults fail to participate in learning opportunities, they need to begin at the beginning of the COR model – with an understanding of attitudes toward self and education. (Cross 1989 cited in Merriam & Caffarella 1997: 68)

Moreover, Cross also says the COR model requires greater understanding of "forces generated by *internal* (original emphasis) psychological variables affecting self-evaluation and attitudes toward education." (Cross 1981:130) By linking A and B, her intention is "to suggest that there is a *relatively stable and characteristic stance toward learning* (my emphasis) that makes some people eager to seek out new experiences with a potential for growth while others avoid challenges to their accustomed ways of thinking or behaving." (ibid.:126) She likens this characteristic to Houle's (1961) learning-oriented adult, Atkinson and Feather's (1966) achievement-motivated

personality and Heath's (1964) reasonable adventurer (ibid.).

Gooderham (1993), however, draws attention to the need to consider sociological factors as antecedent sociological factors are what shape the factors in Cross's model. He suggests that one's attitude to formal learning (point B in Cross's model) is actually determined by antecedent factors of "social origin" and "degree of success at school" (cited in Merriam and Caffarella 1997:68).

My model meets this criterion because it is derived from studying a sample of people chosen on the basis of their "social origin" and/or "lack of success at school". Hence, antecedent sociological factors are taken into consideration right from the beginning of the study. The model derived in this study also shows that learning is usually triggered by life events and transitions, which usually emanate from the different environments, such as family, community, work, economy, government and educational institutions.

The discussion of the different spheres of influence above also shows that sociocultural and contextual factors account for learning at each stage of their journeys. The learners' initial attitude towards learning, such as insecurity, fear of failure and lack of confidence emanated from their social and educational backgrounds and accounted for their tentative learner identities initially. However, as they moved from one stage to another along their learning journeys, their learner identities strengthened through the process of the development of learning careers. The findings of this study, therefore, show that one's learner identity and learning disposition can be strengthened through interaction with people and contextual factors. This is very different from Cross's assertion that "there is a relatively stable characteristic stance toward learning" (Cross

1981:126).

While Cross suggests that people who have participated in adult education are more likely to do so in the future with the arrow from G to AB (ibid.:129), she also acknowledges later that there is a need for further research as most of her suggestions are "based on *assumptions*" (original emphasis) (ibid.:138). One of the researchable questions she suggests is: Does successful participation in adult learning activities (point G) raise self-esteem (point A), improve attitudes towards education (point B), and therefore result in increased likelihood of future participation? Our discussion of learning career in the above section shows that in the case of all the learners in this study, the answer is affirmative for all these questions. Furthermore, the model also offers an explanation for lifelong learning participation among people who are considered to be the most unlikely to do so.

The next chapter, Chapter 8, summarises and highlights vital points in the previous discussion by answering the first three research questions suggested in Chapter 1 and compares the model that represents the learners' perspectives of lifelong learning with the economic perspective of lifelong learning, upon which the official discourse is based. The findings are then compared with theories presented in the Literature Analysis (Chapter 2) for similarities and differences.

# SECTION III – SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Section III includes Chapter 8 and Chapter 9. Chapter 8 summarises and highlights vital points in earlier discussions and compares the model that represents the learners' perspectives of lifelong learning with the economic perspective of lifelong learning upon which the official discourse is framed. It does so by answering the research questions posed in Chapter 1. At the same time, the findings are also compared with relevant literature, mentioned throughout the thesis, in particular, those mentioned in the literature analysis chapter (Chapter 2). Chapter 9 puts forward plausible conclusions and implications of the study and suggests future research possibilities.

# 8 CHAPTER EIGHT – SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

## 8.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the findings listed in Section II (Chapters 4-7), which details the findings and the analysis of the findings. It highlights those results which help answer the research questions listed in Chapter 1. It also compares the present findings with relevant extant literature.

A quick review of the research questions listed in Chapter 1 is, therefore, appropriate at this stage. As mentioned in Chapter 1, grounded theory methodology specifies that the initial question starts out broadly, but "it becomes progressively narrowed and more focused during the research process." (Strauss and Corbin 1998:41) The initial research question was "What is the life story of each of these thirteen lifelong learners and how and why do they engage in lifelong learning? As concepts and their relationships were discovered later in the research process, the following research questions were then formulated:

Research Question 1 - What are the factors that motivate these learners to start on their learning journeys?

Research Question 2 - What are the factors that sustain their learning journeys after they have started?

Research Question 3 - When the voices of these learners are allowed to be heard, do their discourses coincide with the official discourse on lifelong learning, which is usually instrumental and economistic in nature?

Research Question 4 - In the light of the findings in this study, what are some strategies that can be recommended to encourage more lifelong learning in Singapore?

The research questions serve as a guide to ensure that the research remains focused. When the transcripts were later analysed, the main theme of a learning journey with 8 different stages emerged. As each of these 8 stages was examined more closely, the answers to the above 4 questions started to surface. The next section is a summary and discussion of the findings based on the research questions.

## 8.2    Research Question 1

## What are the factors that cause these learners to start post-school learning?

Gorard et al. (1998, 1999, 2001, 2002) find that whether or not an individual participates in learning is a lifelong pattern intrinsically related to long-term social, economic and educational factors. They also conclude that early success or failure at school lays the foundation for learner identity and participation in further education. Yet, the people in this study managed to buck the trend that Gorard et al. observed in their studies. Not only do they participate in post-school learning, they do it on such a regular basis that they were chosen by the public as lifelong learners. Hence, it is important to understand what motivated them to re-engage in learning.

McGivney (1993) cites previous studies which identified barriers to learning to include negative attitudes and perceptions like inappropriateness and lack of relevance; no awareness of learning needs; hostility towards school; and the belief that

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one is too old to learn. For example, in their study of working class non-participants, Archer and Hutchings 2000 found that working-class respondents generally positioned themselves 'outside' of HE (higher education). They constructed HE as being for the white, and/or middle class and placed themselves as potentially able to take advantage of the benefits it can offer, but not as 'owners' of it. "Most respondents positioned themselves as at a greater risk of failing due to occupying a disadvantaged position with regard to higher education." (2000:562)

Almost all the participants in this study mentioned some degree of deprivation in their family background without any prompting.   Most did not fare well in their secondary education.  Some did not even complete their primary education.  Hence, it is not surprising that they lacked confidence in their own abilities and questioned whether they could learn after having left school for so long. (Refer to discussion on dispositional barriers in Chapter 5.)

All the learners started post-school learning tentatively, as a result of one or more *triggering factors* which were related to *life transitions/turning points*.  This shows that, unlike traditional learners, post-school learning was not something that followed naturally from initial learning.

The findings are consistent with other writers' view that the necessity to adapt to changing circumstances of life or 'critical incidents' constitutes a powerful motivating force for learning. (Cross 1981, Merriam and Caffarella 1999, Williamson 2002, Gallacher et al. 2002) Adult learning can be perceived as a means of managing change, particularly in times of major crises when one starts to question one's self and identity.

For women, family events and transitions, such as pregnancy, marriage, divorce and children entering or leaving schools, were especially important in motivating or hindering learning, confirming similar studies conducted by Davey and Jamieson (2003) in New Zealand and UK. For men, the decision to start their post-school learning was usually work-related, for example, due to retrenchment or change of jobs. This shows that contextual factors should be considered in any theory of lifelong learning participation.

However, since everybody experiences life transitions and turning points at one time or another, but not everybody decides to re-engage in post-school learning, what caused these learners to start post-school learning when others in the same situation don't?

This is related to the second central theme of this study, which is the instrumental role played by contextual factors, such as *positive environments and supportive relationships*, in motivating learning. For people who come from disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds, positive environments and supportive relationships provide the enabling contexts for motivating learning. There are different spheres of influence that affect the learners' learning journeys. They include government, community, economy, education, work and family.

For example, a family where members model learning and transmit values which emphasise learning helps to create a positive environment for learning. (Smith and Spurling 2001) For most of the participants, the presence of significant and influential others who acted as *mentors, role models, encouragers and supporters* helped them to

make the decision to make the commitment to re-engage in learning. (McCombs 1991)

The other stages within the learning journey also offer clues as to why the participants start their post-school learning. The narratives of the learners included a stage where they engaged in *reflection and evaluation of reasons for learning.* According to Mezirow (1990, 1991, 2000), critical reflection challenges the validity of presuppositions in prior learning. After pausing to reassess their former beliefs, there was a change in meaning perspective when they became critically aware of how their previous assumptions had constrained their choices. They began to set new goals for their future, which in the case of the participants meant starting post-school learning.

There must also be valid and sufficient reasons for learning. *Utilitarian reasons,* such as learning for survival or higher remuneration and promotions, were the usual reasons cited at the beginning of their narratives. This part of their narrative is in line with the official and dominant discourse of lifelong learning, where learning is advocated for economic survival and for strengthening workforce competitiveness. However, given time to further reflect, many *other more personal reasons* surfaced. Many of them saw learning as a pathway to overcome marginalisation that they had previously experienced, as a result of their disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds. They wanted to overcome their sense of inadequacy or to prove their abilities to themselves and others. This shows that the motives for adult learning are often more complex than depicted in the dominant discourse.

Reasons for learning also varied during one's life course. For people who are retired or who are close to retirement, utilitarian reasons may become less important. They may learn because they now desire to lead more significant lives, which in the

case of the learners in this study include contributing back to the community. One group that Withnall (2006) studied used the phrase "indulgent learning" to illustrate how learning activity in later life which is usually self chosen differs from the "compulsory learning" undertaken earlier in life. (Withnall 2006:40)

In recent years, many initiatives have been introduced by the government and various community organisations to widen access and provide more learning opportunities. However, the participants' adverse family and/or educational backgrounds meant that most of them had to encounter many obstacles, before, during or even after they have started post-school learning. Using the same terms used by Cross (1981), McGivney classified barriers to learning as situational, institutional and dispositional barriers. Among them, dispositional barriers seem to be the chief cause for the low take-up rate despite provision of more learning opportunities. Making learning opportunities available does not create the structurally located dispositions involved in participation (Gorard et al. 1997, 1999). Nevertheless, the learners managed to overcome most of the barriers and to embark on post-school learning with the support of significant and influential others.

**The above discussion shows that many factors contributed to their decision to start post-school learning, including the presence of one or more triggering factors, perspective change due to reflection, utilitarian and non-utilitarian reasons for learning, the offer of learning opportunities by employers and the government and the ability to overcome barriers, usually with the help of supportive relationships.**

After embarking on post-school learning, the learners in this study continued on

with other episodes, unlike others who usually stop after one or two episodes. What causes them to continue in their learning journeys and not give up like others? That brings us to the next question.

## 8.3   <u>Research Question 2</u>

## What are the factors that sustain their learning journeys after they have started?

The concept of "learning career", (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a, 2000b, Gallacher et al. 2002, Crossan et al. 2003) consisting of events, activities and interpretations that develop learning dispositions over time, helps to explain why this group of non-traditional learners was able to overcome the odds originating from their disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds to become lifelong learners.

Low initial education meant that many of the learners could not meet the minimum entry requirements for many formal learning opportunities. (Refer to section on institutional barriers in Chapter 5.) They, therefore, relied heavily on informal and non-formal leaning. A number of them participated in activities organised by community centres/clubs, trade unions, or attended courses subsidised by community self-help groups like SINDA, CDAC or MENDAKI.

Most of them have switched from informal and non-formal learning into formal learning, with one of them doing his doctorate degree. Gallacher et al. refer to participation in informal and non-formal learning as a stepping stone to more formal learning

This is further explained by the idea of 'status passages' in the Chicago School's analysis of careers, through which people make the transition from one social role to another. See for example, Glaser and Strauss's *Status* Passage (1971) and Hart's *When Marriage Ends: A study in Status Passages* (1976). Social relationships helped the people go through these status passages:

> If these status passages are to lead people to develop their learning careers, then it seems that one key factor is whether they have social relationships that are supportive of learning. These relationships may be with partners or other family members, friends or a peer group of fellow students. The influence of these relationships then becomes part of a complex process that contributes to the development of learning careers. (Gallacher et al. 2002:502)

Support from family, employers, schools and other educational institutions seem to be a vital factor at every stage of the learners' learning journeys. This, again, testifies to the importance of having positive environments and supportive relationships both before and after starting post-school learning. The significant and influential others played a whole range of roles, including acting as role models, mentors, supportive others, encouragers and disciplinarians.

Through observing the number of times learners mentioned their influence, significant and influential others from families, schools and other educational institutions seem to have the most effect in providing a positive environment that enables motivation and sustainment of learning.

— Many of the learners attributed their continued learning to teachers who had encouraged and supported them. As many of them had unhappy experiences

with initial education, they appreciated teachers who paid special attention to them and gave them confidence in their abilities.

Families are especially important as they provide socialisation of cultural and religious values that support learning. Parents, grandparents and other relatives can act as role models of lifelong learners. Supportive spouses also ensure that the learners could free themselves from some of the household responsibilities to concentrate on their learning. Even children can provide both emotional and physical support such as in helping with computer work.

Consistent with studies by Gallacher et al. (2002), Crossan et al. (2003), experience of success in post-school learning strengthened the participants' learner identity and learning disposition. Thus, they started seeking out more challenging learning opportunities and progressed from one learning episode to another along their learning journeys.

One of the outcomes of learning is confidence. Confidence, in turn leads to enhanced ability to learn and inclination to take up further learning opportunities. (NIACE 2004, Wlodkowski 1999, Little 2003) According to Little, "the process of learning generates motivation for continued learning." (Little 2003:446) This ultimately leads to an "avalanche effect" (Suchodolski 1979) or "snowballing effect" (Gallacher et al. 2002:502) (Refer to discussion of non-utilitarian learning outcomes in Chapter 6)

Similarly, as in Gallacher et al.'s (2002) study, there were also discontinuities in the learning journeys with some having to make temporary exits at some points of their journeys. Childcare was a reason given by all the women, while for men, disruptions

are usually because of conflicts with work. However, all of them went back to rejoin their journeys because of their strong learner identities and change in learning dispositions. In fact, there was also evidence of transformation of broader identities and empowerment. "Learning careers may be forged as people's dispositions to learning change, their attitudes to learning become more positive and dispositional barriers are slowly overcome. Linked to such changes are transformations of the person in terms of identity, personal relations and expectations of what is achievable." (Crossan and Osborne in Osborne et al. 2004:145)

**This shows that lifelong learning is sustained through the forging of learning careers, usually a long process, through which social identity is shaped and reshaped through interaction with others.**

## 8.4    Research Question 3

**When the voices of these learners are allowed to be heard, do their discourses coincide with the official discourse on lifelong learning, which is usually instrumental and economistic in nature?**

The narratives of interviewees offer an emic perspective of lifelong learning which is much richer than the economic perspective that is often portrayed in the official and dominant discourse, where learning is often equated with training to ensure economic survival in a globalised and constantly changing world. As can be seen from the findings, re-engaging in learning does not come naturally to people who come from disadvantaged family and/or educational backgrounds. Their post-school learning is usually activated by triggering factors which can emanate from all the different spheres

of influence, such as family, work, community, government or the economy. Hence, provision of more opportunities for learning within a mode of economistic thinking may not be met by demand to take up such opportunities, especially for those who are disadvantaged in one way or another.

On the one hand, coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, economic reasons such as higher pay, better job prospects and fear of retrenchment, usually account for most of the initial reasons for learning. Hence, this part of their discourses coincides with the official discourse. On the other hand, other more personal reasons surface later in the narratives of the learners. Because of their background, learning is seen by many as a pathway to overcome marginalisation. Many of them lacked confidence or felt inadequate at the beginning of their learning journeys. They took up post-school learning to prove their abilities to themselves and others, or to gain a voice lost through marginalisation. .

Thus, motives for adult learning are often more complex than is depicted in the dominant discourse. The motives for learning can also be very different at different stages of a person's life-course. Utilitarian reasons become less important close to and after retirement. Hence, the learning needs of retirees and other older members of society may be neglected in the dominant economic discourse of lifelong learning.

Moreover, our earlier discussion also shows that the outcomes of learning influence lifelong learning in a way that is also more complex than that suggested by the official discourse. While the official and dominant discourse emphasises the utilitarian and instrumental outcomes of learning and try to attract non-learners to engage in continuous learning by focusing on the economic perspective, the model of lifelong

learning participation derived in this study shows that lifelong learning can only be sustained through the development of learning careers and strengthening of learner identity. The learners in this study show that people can be transformed from tentative learners to committed learners through a gradual process of changes in learning disposition and learner identity if they are given a chance to attempt learning of any kind, whether informal, non-formal or formal.

**Hence, the findings of this study show that if lifelong learning is to be promoted on a long-term basis, besides focusing on utilitarian and instrumental outcomes of learning, policies must also take into consideration complex forces that are at work in the process of developing lifelong learning careers. (Refer to answer to research question 2 above.) The learners' theory of lifelong learning is more of a socio-cultural theory than an economic theory of lifelong learning. Their narratives suggest that a holistic perspective that includes individual and sociocultural factors occurring across the individual's lifespan must be incorporated into existing theory to enhance its predictive power.** That leads us to the next research question.

## 8.5 Research Question 4

**In the light of the findings in this study, what are some strategies that can be recommended to encourage more lifelong learning in Singapore?**

As question 4 deals with policy implications and strategies, it will be covered in

the next chapter which summarises the findings and discusses policy implications.

# 9    CHAPTER NINE – CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

## 9.1    Introduction

This chapter concludes the findings of this study and suggests possible implications and recommendations from this study.

## 9.2    Summary of the main findings

As discussed earlier, lifelong learning in Singapore is based on the propositions of human capital theory. People are encouraged to learn or "train continuously", which is the usual language used in the media, because the skills that they acquire are a form of human capital that can contribute to economic production. Those who undergo such learning can also hope to be rewarded through increased earnings in the labour market as a higher level of skills results in greater productivity. (Schultz 1961)

Rees, Fvre, Furlong and Gorard, however, assert that "human capital theory involves an unwarranted abstraction of economic behaviour from social relations more widely; participation in lifetime learning cannot be understood in terms of the narrow calculation of utility maximization." (Rees et al. 1997:285) They suggest analysing individual behaviour with respect to learning opportunities not in terms of some universal economic reality, but rather of alternative rationalities which are socially constituted.

A study of thirteen people from disadvantaged social and/or educational backgrounds, who were part of a group that was nominated and voted as lifelong learners in Singapore, provided the opportunity to analyse their learning behaviour from

an insider perspective. It led to the formulation of a model of lifelong learning which, I believe, helps to humanise the human capital theory. It shows that participation in lifelong learning is not as simple as suggested by human capital theory. No doubt economic factors play a key role in motivating initial learning. However, sociocultural factors are seen to be present throughout the learning journey, influencing every stage of the learning journey.

All the participants participated in learning as a result of one or more triggering factors which are usually related to a transition in their lives. This is followed by a process of reflection that involves questioning of presuppositions and further evaluation of reasons for learning. Information about learning opportunities and access to learning facilitate the decision to engage in learning while obstacles and barriers deter learning. All the participants managed to overcome situational, structural and dispositional barriers to re-engage in post-school learning. Besides situational and structural factors, social relationships are cited by all the participants as key factors which influence their learning journeys. Significant and influential others who act as mentors, role models (reference groups), encouragers and disciplinarians can either inculcate values that facilitate learning or provide tangible and intangible support.

As the learners started to experience the benefits of learning, there was a marked increase in confidence, and change in perspectives, attitudes and dispositions to learning. The resultant transformation in learner and social identities causes the learners to seek out more challenging learning opportunities. As each learner moves from one learning episode to another, each of them adopts a new identity, that of a lifelong learner. The concept of learning career explains the process of change from tentative to

certain learner identity that takes place in each learner.

At certain points, a few of the learners were forced by circumstances, such as child-caring responsibilities, in the case of all the women, or work commitments for some men, to exit their learning journeys. All of them went back to continue on their learning journeys as a result of their changed identities.

## 9.3    Policy implications: strategies to encourage more lifelong learning

The findings draw attention to the need for policies of lifelong learning to take into account resistance to learning among marginalised groups in society. While situational and institutional barriers can be removed more easily, dispositional barriers are not easily removed and may be the main reason for their reluctance to take up any learning opportunities.

Provision of more informal and non-formal learning opportunities that involve less risk of failure than skills-upgrading courses may be the solution as exposure to such learning opportunities can build self-confidence and self-esteem and lead to changes in learning dispositions and learner identities, as well as greater willingness to take up more learning opportunities, be they work or leisure related.

In short, there is a need for a more holistic approach to lifelong learning. Lifelong learning should be seen in its whole spectrum: learning across the lifespan i.e. from cradle to grave (lifelong learning), and learning that covers formal, non-formal and informal learning (lifewide learning), and not just vocational learning or training for

economic reasons.

Williamson asserts:

What prevents the full articulation of the positive agenda for lifelong learning is not people themselves, for they are learning all the time, but the quality of the vision of what it could be, among politicians, educationists and employers...(Williamson 1998:31-32)

## 9.3.1 Implications and Recommendations

As a consequence of the findings summarised above, the following implications and recommendations arise

1.    There is a need to focus on the transformative effect of lifelong learning rather than constantly focusing on the utilitarian value of lifelong learning.  One way to do this is to encourage more sharing of such life transformative experiences as the participants' life stories at other times besides during the official lifelong learning campaigns.  Instead of focusing on "training" or "skills upgrading", it may be better to stress the lifelong learning principle of "learning to learn".

2.    There is also a need to give people an opportunity to develop an awareness of the benefits of learning by creating more educational opportunities with low levels of risk and threat.  People can be encouraged to start with peripheral learning for non-utilitarian reasons, through non-formal and informal learning.

Since, in Singapore, there is already a well-organised network of community centres/clubs that have, in the past, performed a very important role of encouraging participation in non-threatening learning activities, such as cooking, dancing or computer classes, on an informal and non-formal basis, more can be done through this ready supply of facilities to cultivate a culture of lifelong learning. As people start to increase confidence in their capacity for learning through non-threatening learning experiences, they may also be more open to take greater risk and progress to more formal courses that may offer certification.

3.      The findings also show that short government or company sponsored seminars and courses are examples of learning opportunities that are more likely to be received favourably. They can help build learner identity if there is no compulsion to attend such courses, as testified by most of the participants in the study. This is one area where Singapore has done well. The amount of government and union support for training and retraining is almost exemplary. However, while many government organisations and big firms offer many courses for upgrading, many small firms would still be unable to do so. This can be a problem as many of the firms in Singapore are actually small and medium-sized enterprises.

4.      We must not underestimate the important roles played by family members, teachers, friends, colleagues and neighbours who can act as role models, encouragers, supporters and mentors. In

Singapore, we have the advantage of having a long cultural heritage consisting of beliefs and values which are pro-learning. Hindu and Chinese values both traditionally stress the importance of hard work and the perfection of oneself through seeking knowledge. While Malay cultural values may advocate cohesiveness and hence a less competitive spirit, Muslim teachings emphasise the need to seek knowledge so as to serve the community. Such cultural and religious values have in the past been transmitted successfully within families from one generation to another. Even in a post-modern era, the role of the family in transmitting such cultural beliefs and values cannot be underestimated.

Yet, one cannot help but notice that the role of the family is slowly being eroded by the emphasis on a market economy. The struggle for economic survival is slowly but surely attacking the status of the family, the very basic of all social institutions in a society. While in the past, the different members of the extended family helped in the socialisation of acceptable mores and values, the move towards living within nuclear families removes one source of socialising. As both husband and wife work long hours and leave their children to the care of domestic helpers (which is the norm in Singapore), the transmission of cultural and religious values also becomes extremely difficult.

Although in the last few years, there have been a number of public campaigns to draw attention to the important role of the family in society, the demands exerted by a society that is continually striving for economic excellence conflict with the aim to re-emphasise

the traditional roles of the family. Until and unless there is a more concerted effort by society, such as through change in work practices, for example, allowing female and male employees who have young children to work from home, or change in employers' attitude towards time taken for family purposes, the effect will not be sustained.

Other than parents and extended family members who are the immediate role models for children, the numerous examples of encouraging and supportive teachers whose influence on the participants were felt long after they left school offer proof to the important roles played by teachers and others in the educational profession. This is something that all teacher trainees should be reminded of even before they are sent out for any practical teaching experience.

The results of the study also show the importance of mentors who act as guides through the learning journeys of the participants. Some mentors appear very early in one's learning journey. Others may meet their mentors much later in their learning journeys. Besides acting as encouragers, teachers can also perform the role of mentoring their students. Some schools in Singapore have a mentorship programme where a student is mentored by a teacher. This should be made compulsory in all schools if mentoring is to achieve the effect of training moral character and inculcating positive values and attitudes that can lead to a lifelong learning habit. The introduction of pastoral care in schools is indeed timely.

5. Cross mentions that besides family, friends and co-workers who can influence the attitudes of potential learners towards learning, a very effective way to recruit learners is through membership and reference groups. (Cross 1981:140) Attendance at a union-related course is a good example of how this strategy can help a member transform from one who started learning in a tentative manner to one who ultimately builds such a strong learner identity that he/she becomes a lifelong learner.

Besides trade unions, other membership and reference groups from which learners can be recruited in the Singaporean context include informal groups formed within the workplace, private clubs, community centres/clubs and religious organisations like churches, mosques and temples.

Traditional learning activities in such organisations include swimming and dancing classes in private and community clubs, computer and other skill-related classes at workplaces and Bible and Quran studies in churches and mosques respectively. If the learning activities can be widened to include other informal and non-traditional learning activities, it would help create a learning environment where people's mindset can be changed.

6. More efforts can be concentrated on removing barriers and obstacles that prevent participation of those who are disadvantaged socially, economically or educationally. This is especially important in ensuring

that the push for lifelong learning does not cause a greater divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots". Although much progress has taken place in the last decades with the liberalisation of the educational market, especially those for further education, more can be done in facilitating access to learning where there are restrictions by professional institutions which have adopted a "closed-door" policy.

Bridging courses can be a solution if there is a fear of broadening access at the expense of sacrificing standards. This is an issue for admission policies between local and foreign universities. What we need is a more flexible educational system where people who do not have much initial education or those who are disadvantaged, either physically or mentally, are allowed to learn at their own pace and given a second chance.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, very positive steps have been taken in this direction in recent times. What is required now is for these policy measures to be further refined at the implementation level so that lifelong learning can be inclusive rather than exclusive to those who have already benefited from initial education.

7.  Providing more reliable information to prospective learners is another way to encourage more lifelong learning in any country. In the case of Singapore, we have made efforts to maintain educational standards of international providers:

Reliable information should be provided about programs offered by international providers. The fact that accreditation and evaluation schemes in developing countries are weak, even with respect to domestic institutions, suggests that monitoring international providers will be difficult. Effective grievance procedures and protections can be useful in ensuring quality and protecting against fraud...In Hong Kong (China), India, and Singapore, distance education offerings by international providers are subject to the same quality assurance procedures in their originating countries that on-campus courses in those countries face. (World Bank 2002b cited in *Lifelong Learning in the Global Knowledge Economy: Challenges for Developing Countries pg 54)*

Recent cases of fraud by some local providers however, prove that more can be done to monitor the private education provider sector.

8.   Lifelong learning should be seen in a more holistic manner, that is as learning "from cradle to grave" and not as post-school adult education, vocational training or recurrent education.   It is important to view schools as places where motivation for lifelong learning should be cultivated:

In the East, as well as the West, it is increasingly accepted that schools, from early childhood onwards, should provide learning environments where learners like to be, where they experience a sense of self-worth, excitement, or challenge in learning.   Children before leaving the formal education system, must have "learned how to learn" under self-

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motivated and self-managed conditions. (OECD 2000:22)

Referring to the British context, Evans suggests that "significant numbers of young men and women leave school thoroughly disaffected with learning as a whole, with many of them convinced that they are failures as learners (2003:10).

Similarly, we saw in our earlier discussion in Chapter 1, that in a society like Singapore, which stresses excellence in academic performance, those who are not academically inclined may also be convinced that they are failures as learners. Once they have developed such negative learning dispositions, it will be very difficult to persuade them to attempt participating in post-school learning. Hence, recent changes in the educational system that recognises alternative kinds of talents, such as talents in sports, music, art and drama, will definitely help ensure that more people will leave school with a stronger learner identity.

9.  The findings show the importance of informal and non-formal learning. Coombs (1985) and Gorard (1999) assert that since so much of adult learning takes place in the form of informal learning, "nations should attend to enriching their informal learning environments especially through the availability of print materials, radio, television, and computers." (cited in Merriam and Muhamand 2002:53)

Besides the programmes broadcast by the national television and

radio stations, cable television programmes, newspapers, books, magazines and the Internet are other popular sources of information for people who feel too threatened to engage in learning in a formal learning environment. For those who have not started formal learning, informal or non-formal learning could actually be the start of a lifelong learning habit. Besides creating more of such programmes, the public's attention must also be drawn to the existence of such programmes.

The change in focus from formal learning for pragmatic reasons to informal and non-formal learning for non-pragmatic reasons may actually succeed in changing attitude towards learning and result in the eventual cultivation of a lifelong learning culture.

10.   In conjunction with the need to view lifelong learning in a more holistic manner, we must not restrict our notion of lifelong learning to just institutionalised learning or formal learning. Such a narrow concept of lifelong learning will limit the range and effectiveness of measures that can be used to encourage lifelong learning. Hence, there is a need to consider lifewide learning too. This is especially important for those who had very little initial education and hence find themselves being confronted by all kinds of barriers to learning.

11.   Besides relying on the trade unions to stress the need to upgrade labour skills so as to meet manpower needs, it is important to emphasise the role of other organisations which can help promote formal, informal and non-formal learning. One organisation that has made great progress in the

last decade is the National Library Board of Singapore. Under its previous five-year plan, Library 2000 (L2000) plan, the number of libraries in Singapore grew from 15 in 1994 to 73 in 2004, and the libraries' collection size grew from 3.4 million items to eight million items. Among some of the strategies of its new five-year Library 2010 plan announced by its chief executive Dr Varaprasad, "it wants to target specific groups that are currently 'underserved' which range from those with disabilities and the unemployed, to parents, caregivers and professionals." It aims also to create programmes, for example through the formation of reading groups, to bring individuals together with the hope of building a well-informed society that is ready to engage in civic activity. (The Sunday Times, 24.7.04)

The role of community centres/clubs and ITEs must also not be ignored. Besides the numerous courses which are predominantly leisure and computer-related, the convenience and less threatening environment serves to attract those who may not be prepared to take on learning in a more formal environment.

12. This study also shows that women's learning ambitions are sometimes frustrated by the need to care for their children. Measures taken by the Singapore government to encourage the setting up of more childcare facilities are definitely a move in the right direction. Moreover, women from certain professions find it difficult to return to work as a result of rapid technological changes. Those who prefer to take time off from work to spend time with their young children should be given

incentives when they are ready to go back to the workforce. Bridging courses can be offered to ensure easier access to new job opportunities that may require new skills.

The model of lifelong learning participation derived here shows that provision of opportunities and removal of barriers are just a small part of a complex network of influences that affect lifelong learning. Hence, it is not surprising that governments' attempts at increasing provision of learning opportunities and removing barriers are not attracting participation by certain segments of the population. To ensure widening of participation, therefore, requires a broadening of the definition of lifelong learning and also greater utilisation of the resources that can promote lifelong learning in a society, such as those suggested above.

## 9.4 Suggestions for future research

This research has identified the complexity of forces that influence participation in lifelong learning. It shows that more research needs to be carried out in the area of researching participation by adults in lifelong learning, especially when current interests in research by governments tend to be focused on researching participation by workers in training programmes. Some suggestions for future research include:

1. As the lifelong learner awards have been given out every year since 2002, future studies can replicate this particular study of the pioneer group of lifelong learner award winners so that the model can be further refined.

2. As I did not have sufficient people in my sample to compare findings by age or ethnic groups it will be interesting for future studies, to group

the participants by different age groups or ethnic groups, so as to study whether people from the different age groups and ethnic groups are motivated or deterred by the same factors.

3. People who are identified as lifelong learners can be compared with non-learners to enable greater understanding of reasons for participation and non-participation.

4. Some of the learners in this study mention wider benefits that affect them, such as closer relationships with children due to ability to share computer knowledge and greater participation in community work. All these can be represented in the model as arrows pointing towards the different spheres of influence, to show that just as these different spheres can affect the learner, the learner can also influence the different spheres as a result of their learning. So it will be interesting to study the influences of learning on the different environments. One area that can be studied, for example, is in the area of how lifelong learning can affect family life, such as better parenting skills, greater ability to help children in their school work or ability to act as role models for children. However, the effects can also be negative such as when parents who are lifelong learners have less time for their children and other members of the family, and this too needs to be the subject of research.

5. The important role played by social relationships in supporting lifelong learning can be further explored through a study of whether people who are lifelong learners possess more social capital. That will require close examination of their social networks and whether it helps them in their

learning.

6.     There is a need for comparative studies of lifelong learning in different countries as such studies may yield useful findings about the effect of cultural and contextual factors on learning.

## 9.5   Concluding Remarks

An insider perspective of lifelong learning from thirteen lifelong learners in Singapore leads to the construction of a model of lifelong learning participation that incorporates influences from almost all the institutions within society. It shows the importance of adopting a holistic approach to lifelong learning as opposed to the usual economic perspective advocated by the dominant discourse. It also shows that for certain segments of the population where lifelong learning is not a norm, more can be done to help them develop learning careers and become lifelong learners.

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