

# SECTION ONE

*Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning*



# Complex Contexts: Women and community-higher-education in Ireland

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## **Abstract**

*Education is not a neutral process, it can be used to establish and maintain conformity or be part of a process of liberation and social change (Freire, 1979; hooks, 1994). The Irish State's failure to acknowledge this lack of neutrality has characterised the formal education system in Ireland since its inception. From the introduction of the National School System of education in 1831 to the present day, the ruling force of the Catholic Church within education is evidenced in the gendered and conformist nature of this formal education landscape. Systems of privilege have been maintained and reproduced through education, in which power is exercised by means of exclusion, coercion and control. However, simultaneously individuals and groups of women have challenged this formal, religiously infused conformist education system. Their demands for full and equal access to mainstream education at all levels, including within the academy, served to challenge this hegemonic force. They also pioneered the development of innovative and radical forms of adult and community education as a means toward individual and community empowerment. This paper seeks to highlight women's educational interventions historically and socially through an explicit gendered lens and with a particular focus on community-higher-education.*

**Key words:** community-higher-education, historical context, gender, women, access, widening participation, societal inequality, feminism

## **Introduction**

Education is not a neutral process, it can be used to establish and maintain conformity or be part of a process of liberation and social change (Freire, 1979; hooks, 1994). The Irish State's failure to acknowledge this lack of neutrality has characterised the formal education system since its inception. From the

introduction of the National School system of education in 1831 to the present day, the ruling force of the Catholic Church within education is evidenced in the conformist nature of this formal education landscape. Maintained through systems of privilege, it exercises power through exclusion, coercion and control. However, simultaneously individuals and groups of women have challenged this formal, religiously infused conformist education system at all levels. Their demands for full and equal access to mainstream education, including within the academy, served to challenge this hegemonic force. Focusing on education's liberatory and transformational potential, women's demands provoked challenges to established knowledge hierarchies, pedagogic processes and power relations. In addition to challenging this formal education system, they also pioneered the development of innovative and radical forms of adult and community education as a means towards individual and community empowerment (Connolly *et al.*, 2007; AONTAS, 2010). Over time this level of provision has developed to include in/non-formal education in addition to accredited learning at further and higher levels, spanning levels one to eight in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This paper seeks to highlight women's educational interventions historically and socially with an emphasis on the particular context of community higher education in Ireland, women's role in forging this important educational space and in challenging systemic inequities and exclusions within higher education.

### **Complex Historical Contexts**

The National School system of education was introduced to Ireland in 1831, and although planned to 'unite in one system children of different creeds', it soon took on a denominational character. Under pressure from the various churches 'Government concessions ... ensured that by mid-century over ninety per cent of national schools in Ireland were under denominational management' (INTO, 1991). From the beginning this national system did provide a rudimentary education for girls from a working class or poor background. However, as attendance was not made compulsory until the Irish Education Act of 1892 illiteracy among girls, most particularly, working class girls continued to be high. Even where they did attend school, the education provided was focused on training them for the type of life they were expected to have. They 'were unlikely to learn more than the basic arithmetic, they were taught to read and write but since domestic service was the expected fate of most girls, great emphasis was placed on the learning of the domestic arts and sewing' (Luddy, 1995, p.89). Middle class philanthropists and educationalists, ideologically driven by both religious and Victorian ideas of the 'deserving and undeserving

poor', believed that training girls in the virtues of domesticity combined with lessons in sobriety, moral restraint, hard work, and thrift were vital in terms of social improvement. A well-trained girl it was assumed would be a moral and pure wife and mother, a credit to her husband and an example to her family and community.

Education, therefore, became a necessity in training a 'deserving' 'respectable', 'moral' working class. Such gender and class divisions continued well into the twentieth century, although for all classes of women education was restricted to reflect the proper place of women in society, which was within the domestic sphere. For middle class women, and most particularly for middle class feminists, these constraints on female education became more obvious with the opening of secondary education to women. As it was mainly middle class women who accessed secondary education, it is these women who received a more comprehensive vocational education from the 1860's onwards. This expansion of education for middle class girls was also influenced by both the expanding conventual<sup>1</sup> movement, which saw the opening of many convent secondary schools for girls, and by the campaigns of Irish suffrage women in the educational arena in the latter half of the 19th century. Women such as Isabella Tod (founder of the Ladies' Institute, Belfast) and Anne Jellicoe (founder of Alexandra College in Dublin) were vocal advocates of expanding education for women and were also supporters of the campaigns of the right for women to the vote. Indeed along with the vote, education was the second of four main issues which engaged 19th century female activists, which also included campaigns to secure married women's property, education, and to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860's.

These campaigns were long and hard fought. As Henrietta White, Principal of Alexandra College noted the 'cult of ignorance in woman did not lack adherents even in the latter half of the nineteenth-century' and the campaign to extend and enhance female education was resisted (Ó hÓgartaigh, 2009, p.37). Despite this, some breakthroughs were achieved by Irish suffragists when they succeeded in having the provisions of the 1878 Intermediate Education Act (which opened the Intermediate public examinations to girls as well as boys) and the 1879 University Act extended to girls and women students. Because of these breakthroughs by 1908 all universities had opened their degree courses

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1 Through the 19th century the numbers of women joining Orders of Religious Sisters increased, by 1910 census, being a religious sister is one of the main occupations for women outside of the domestic.

to women. Although illiteracy levels among all classes and genders continued to fall towards the end of the 19th century, the successes of feminist activists in the educational area mainly affected the lives of middle class women. However, educated women were not necessarily gaining access to the professions, many had no option but to become teachers which Martha Vicinus in her study of educated women in Britain noted was 'a narrow staircase leading to more education as an ill-paid – but respected – teacher' (Ó hÓgartaigh, 2009, p.37).

Literacy was also rising among working class girls but a gendered curriculum continued to educate these women for domestic service. The new generation of more militant, radical feminists, active from 1900, viewed better education as a powerful tool for the transformation of Irish society and culture. The growth in cultural nationalism led to a belief in the importance of education to the creation of an Irish identity, and women were seen as particularly central to this cultural education. One example was Inghinidhe na hÉireann, a women-only, militant, separatist and feminist organisation, established by Maud Gonne in 1900.

The editor, Helena Molony, was concerned that feminists and nationalists should educate the children of Ireland about the language, history and culture of Ireland and inculcate in them a sense of Irish identity. Inghinidhe women recognised the importance of direct action in achieving this and ran classes for poor children in Dublin's tenement inner city. They would have been aware of the inferior vocational education available to young women, however they were concerned that all children received a nationalist education. Although radical in their demands for national rights, militancy, the vote and working women's rights, in the area of education, especially among poor children, it was instilling a sense of Irish identity in Irish children, rather than opposition to a gendered education system, which framed their activism.

For most, the Catholic education system, which was by the early 1900's firmly established as the main area where poor children were educated, was seen to deliver the type of education which was deemed desirable and acceptable. For religious women their approach to education was informed by the ideals that 'children entrusted to our care should be instructed in every branch of secular education... but all this instruction should be founded on religious enlightenment and animated by religious spirit' (Rafferty, p.310). Many radical feminists, some of whom had become rebels in 1916, were concerned with the importance of education for girls. Some like Margaret Skinnider were themselves teachers,

however, as with the Inghinidhe women, their concern focused mainly on giving children a sense of Irishness through education, rather than seeing education as space for feminist activism. Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, in a country where 95% of the population identified as Catholic, education for girls retained that gendered, Catholic-influenced ethos until late into the 20th century. First wave feminist activism had achieved the goal of access to a certain level of education for girls and women. They had also succeeded in gaining access for some women to professional and vocational education, allowing more women to enter the professions. Indeed, women trade unionists campaigned through the early decades of the Irish State for better treatment and pay for women teachers (a profession in which they had begun to dominate) but transformation of the gendered nature of all educational sectors, especially for working class girls, would have to wait until the latter part of the twentieth century.

### **Complex Social Policy Contexts**

Historically, the formal education system formed part of what may be argued was a definite strategy on the part of the Catholic Church to maintain key sites of social control in a rapidly changing socio-political context. A dual strategy was systematically pursued through the 20th Century, one of exclusion (of women and those with disabilities) and one of control. Inglis notes:

The Catholic Church's primary vehicle for executing its control was by educating and caring for children, in order to ensure the socialisation of young people. As a result, the Catholic Church fought a long battle to ensure its control of education during the nineteenth century, control it maintains to this day (Inglis, 1998, pp.102-103).

Conroy (1975) extends this analysis of Catholic domination into the realm of welfare. She argues that both welfare and education were dominated by ideologies of family welfare and charity and that concepts of rights and justice only entered these discourses to any great degree during the late sixties and seventies in Ireland. However, while enormous changes took place across the welfare system (including the establishment of key welfare payments to 'unmarried' mothers, 'deserted' wives, prisoners' wives, widows' pension) the grip of the Catholic Church over education hardly yielded. While there has been much debate around whether single sex schools benefit girls (AAUW, 1998; Smyth, 2010), in the sex-segregated schooling system in Ireland harsh ideologies around guilt, shame and sin particularly targeted girls and women, their

sexual identities and reproductive selves. The embedded nature of this particular relationship between the Catholic Church and education in Ireland persists. Currently 96 per cent of primary schools are owned and under the patronage of religious denominations with approximately 90 per cent of these state sanctioned schools owned under the patronage of the Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup>

Systems of social mobility in Ireland historically were primarily based on the gendered ownership of land and property but recent history has seen education play an increasingly central role in determining levels and rates of social mobility across social class, gender and ethnic groups. In 1967 'free' education was introduced and immediately a class-based system of fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools emerged. These grafted onto an earlier system of inequality in relation to vocational training and academic schooling, the first one linked to craft and trade and the latter to a distinctly privileged third level system. Research has indicated that mainstream education has facilitated the creation and reproduction of class inequalities in Ireland, over many decades (Clancy, 1995; HEA, 2015).

Policies adopted to respond to this inequity and to develop greater equality of access for example, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme, recognised first level education as a central part of an integrated approach to disadvantage, linked to local and community planning. This approach was systematically undermined by the fundamental unequal structure underlying formal education in Ireland. As MacRuairc argues:

Nowhere are the manifestations of socio-economic class more evident than in the field of education, where despite a successive range of policies, initiatives and investment, significant inequalities with respect to educational outcomes continue to prevail between socio-economic groups (2009, p.118).

As the concept of social class extended to encompass socio-economic and cultural capital, this cultural class struggle is played out to a large extent in education. Harford argues that the Catholic Church was 'one of the most powerful and strident opponents of access to higher education [by women]....resisting the possibility of reform at every turn' (2008). However, women's agency and capacity to resist and challenge this regime by forging educational entry points and pathways at second and third level is also highlighted by Harford. She

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2 <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Diversity-of-Patronage/Diversity-of-Patronage-Survey-of-Parents.html>

argues that the impact of this increased participation by women in education shifted the gendered balance between private and public domains.

Although only a minority of middle-class women were in the social, cultural and economic position to benefit from early higher educational reform, their participation in higher education had far wider social implications. It helped to move women's role beyond the private sphere of the home and into the professions and public life (Harford, 2008).

As women sought to maximise the opportunities to participate in all areas and levels of education, afforded to them through these legal and socio-political developments, their participation rates increased dramatically. Women are much more likely to complete second level education, make up a clear majority of those in the third level system and comprise the majority of those in the adult education sector.

Education has become a leveller for women to an important extent. While half of all university undergraduate students are women, fifty-four per cent of postgraduate students are women. The percentage of women aged 15-64 attaining third level educational qualifications in Ireland has increased to a high level reaching 40% in 2014, higher than the average rate across the twenty-eight European Union countries (EU-28) which was 26%. Among women in the 30-34 age group the percentage is particularly high at 59% for women, again way above the EU-28 average of 42% (Barry, 2015). But discrimination and material inequalities resulting from a lack of care provision, undervaluing of care work and under-representation in decision-making, combined with the penalising of women in paid work for having and rearing children, means that women are constantly fighting for access and equality. Where innovative programmes facilitate such access, the outcomes are dramatic in both educational and social terms. Educational programmes that effectively respond to the ways that women learn and that respond to women's needs (particularly care needs), and social circumstances indicates that 'women learn best in relational and relaxed environments, where the challenge comes from a setting that affirms and honours their experience and nurtures their desire to know and to use that knowledge in a diversity of ways' (NWCi Millennium Project, 1999). Community education has been one of most proactive environments in which women's learner needs and desires have been responded to in particular ways.

### **Complex Community-Higher-Education Contexts**

Community-based education has over many decades carved out a centrally important offering on the Irish educational landscape. The growth, significance and innovation of the community education movement were acknowledged almost two decades ago in the White Paper on Adult Education in which it was posited ideologically as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level (2000, pp.111-2). It was from the outset radical and political in intent. This reflected a global backdrop in which new left social movements of the 1970s and 1980s set out to interrogate, destabilise and challenge limiting identity-naming categories, and in so doing challenged their inclusions and exclusions, their power bases, and their spaces of discrimination. The emergence of community education also reflected a class-based and conservative socio-cultural context and Irish demographic especially in terms of race and sexuality. Connolly has observed that while 'community education may have had a clear, concise definition at one time...that definition has been reworked by the dynamic interpretations that have imbued it as a result of the community education movement, over two decades' (Connolly, 2003, p.9). It is currently defined by Ireland's national adult education agency, AONTAS, as:

...a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness. It is community-led reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals and their community...Community education is grounded on principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness (<http://www.aontas.com/commed/>).

As it has evolved, community education has spanned a combination of non/in/formal education programmes, both non-accredited and accredited across a range of socio-spatial contexts. The attraction of community education for women located within isolated, disadvantaged and socio-economically excluded contexts is clear. The development of a particular Women's Community Education movement provided a participatory woman-focused and women-friendly context which attracted low-income working class women, back to education. Research by the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) estimated that 80% of the 14,000 people participating in community-based education in the late 1980s and 1990s were women (Johnston, 1998, in NWCI, 1999). Currently, taking just one example, the National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks (NCCWN), represent a total of seventeen Women's Projects countrywide involving thousands of women learners and participants.

The vast range of services they provide are based on community development principles and values which have been central to engaging with disadvantaged women to address the structural barriers that impact negatively on their lives (NCCWN, 2016).

Feminist scholars since the 'second wave', along with critical adult educators including Freire and hooks, understood the importance of listening to women's socially situated narratives and of co-constructing knowledges with them as a way to challenge their invisibility not just within academia, but within the processes of the very construction of knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This methodological process is captured by Barr who, drawing on the seminal work of Haraway (1991), states:

Women's education as it developed in adult education thus challenged, in concrete, practical ways, the notion of disembodied knowledge, recognising that knowledge, is not neutral but always socially situated: there is no 'God's eye view, no 'knowledge from nowhere' (1999, p.40).

In this sense, knowledge is 'not simply out there waiting to be collected and processed, but rather is made by actors that are situated within particular contexts (Hubbard *et al.*, 2005, p.8). Starting with the reality of the women's own lives, feminist pedagogy acknowledges that such education not only models feminist principles but demonstrates a core principle of all adult education activity with marginalised groups. Linda Connolly (1996) sees a clear link between the women's community education groups and earlier radical feminist groups, particularly as they resemble the small-group, consciousness-raising approach of the radical women's sector which emerged in the 1970s. It would, however, be facile to assume that women's community education is always feminist in outcome (Dolphin & Mulvey, 1997). Adopting an explicitly feminist agenda, mirroring radical adult education, involves both a politicisation of consciousness and action for change. These are deliberate acts that get played out in particular ways:

So that has meant working with groups in neighbourhoods, in local communities, to try to develop the kinds of structures that enable them to decide first what it is they want and need to know; why they need to know it; how best they think they can learn it and fourthly what it is they are going to do with that knowledge (Smyth, 2002, p.7).

We could view this pedagogic position as one which challenges the notion that 'ruling groups are able to exercise control over what is taught and how it is taught, maintaining hegemonic control (Jackson, 2011, p.5). This radical re-positioning of knowledge making, ownership and purpose highlights the capacity of critical adult and community education to remake as liberatory the power relations endemic in any educational provision, including within Higher Education (Connolly, 2006; Quilty, 2003). It is significant that the White Paper also highlighted the pivotal role feminist, women's education had, not only in pioneering and driving community education in Ireland, but also in challenging persistent under-representations within higher education. The emergence of a particular form of community-based higher education is what is considered in the remainder of this article.

It remains the case that the academy is one of the most valorised and legitimised locations of knowledge generation. Massey calls us to scrutinise such locations, 'to ponder the elitist, exclusivist, enclosures within so much of the production of what is defined as legitimate knowledge still goes on' (2006, p.75). There is much to guide us in this work. Feminist scholars and activists, who over many decades worked to counter their invisibility and exclusion from masculinist knowledge-making arenas and to articulate their situation in the world, strove to give women a central place within philosophising and theorising. They sought to destabilise the knowledge-making machine (Foucault, 2007) by challenging the spaces of knowledge production within the academy. Simultaneously, and in partnership with community and feminist activists located outside the academy, they worked to challenge exclusions of women (Macdonald, 2001) and persistently underrepresented groups (HEA, 2015) within the range of higher education institutions.

This persistent under-representation of some social groups in higher education can be read as part of the 'powerful cultures of exclusion which operate within contested social spaces as universities' (Puwar, 2004, p.51). Reflecting the Irish HE (Higher Education) landscape, Kathleen Lynch makes a strong statement about the spatialised university, one of boundaries and procedures, impacting not only on who enters but on what is valued:

They practised exclusion, not only through their selection procedures for students and staff, but also by maintaining rigorous boundary maintenance procedures within and between disciplines, and between what is defined as legitimate and what is not (2006, p.73).

The women's community education movement had a significant role in challenging these exclusions. They sought to widen participation within higher education, but to do so on their terms. Community sector groups and organisations set about partnership building within the crevices, nooks and crannies of the elitist academy (de Lauretis, 1987) to develop and deliver in innovative ways programmes that mattered, that had relevance for people's lived lives (WERRC, 2004). The emphasis was on principles of partnership, empowerment and participation (Hart *et al.*, 2013; Scull & Cuthill, 2010).

There is evidence to suggest that the Irish higher education policy arena is finally beginning to take seriously this relatively small, though politically and strategically significant, community higher educational presence. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011) recommends improved levels of engagement between higher education institutions and local communities in which 'higher education institutions need to become more firmly embedded in the social and economic contexts of the communities they live in and serve' (Hunt, 2011, pp.77-78). They advocate for more community-based approaches so as to challenge systemic inequity through widening participation. Importantly, within an Irish context, the communities in which this form of higher education provision has greatest impact and demand are those most characterised by systemic, inter-generational disadvantage and social exclusion.

What this highlights is that the vagaries of location have become an important consideration in how educational equity plays out across the island of Ireland. Kearns, drawing on the seminal work of Smith (1994) notes in this regard that 'spatial justice starts from the recognition that access to foods and social services can depend on where one lives or works, the question of who gets what where' (Kearns, 2014, p.3). In fact, the demographic disparity in relation to higher education access in Ireland is alarming. In Dublin, the participation rate spans the lowest 15% within Dublin 17 to the highest rate of 99% within Dublin 6 (HEA, 2015). The identified areas of significant and persistent underrepresentation have effectively been described as 'deep reservoirs of educational disadvantage, mirroring in large part economic disadvantage' (HEA, 2014, p.3), that continue to be an uncomfortable and sobering part of the Irish higher education story.

The literature has comprehensively documented the persistent barriers to educational participation for adults, and particularly women, living within these 'designated areas of disadvantage' which include child/elder care, finance, time and transport (Morris & McMahon, 1998; OECD, 2014). Adopting a dynamic,

solution-seeking approach to addressing these barriers, AONTAS (2009) identified three significant changes that need to be made to the higher education system if adults were to be fully welcomed and included. First, they identified the need for more flexible learning opportunities for adult learners taking into account their work and caring responsibilities. This point was recently reinforced by a governmentally appointed Expert HE Funding Group who observed that ‘embracing a greater share of mature students entails greater provision of flexible and tailored staff contact times that work around their work, household and other commitments’ (2015, p.39). Second, AONTAS identified the need for a change in the culture and attitude of higher education institutions. As Lynch has argued ‘they come, but they are not fully expected; very often they are not fully accommodated’ (2006, p.89). Third, and finally, they identified the need for better financial supports for adult learners in higher education including revising the eligibility for maintenance grants for part time mature students. The literature also reinforces the important link between parental education levels, especially that of the mother’s, and children’s educational achievement (Doyle & Timmins, 2007; Currie & Moretti, 2003).

Evidently, the call by the HEA (Higher Education Authority) for increased university-community engagement exists against a backdrop of persistent inequity in higher education vis-à-vis the continued exclusion of people from particular geographic communities, including women. Within an Irish context, it is clear that despite the rapid expansion of higher education and the removal of ‘formal’ tuition fees the ‘most glaring inequities in access, namely, the under-representation of the lower socio-economic groups and the small share of mature students, have not been significantly improved (Expert HE Funding Group, 2015, p.22). The persistence of such educational inequity ‘highlights what a great deal of work we have to do in terms of exploring and decoding the deep movements and multiple dimensions and spaces of exclusionary forces’ (Armstrong, 2010, p.108). This persistent reality also reinforces the importance of acknowledging and recognising those movements, including women’s community education, that have succeeded in offering a way forward, not least in relation to their influence on curriculum and pedagogic development within the elitist academy.

## Conclusion

Significant advancements across the educational spectrum have been realised since the 1800s in Ireland. These advancements were especially hard fought, given women's unequal position in society and particularly within education. Political and social developments driven mainly by women led to the emergence of a society less mired in the legacy of our Catholic manacled state, a legacy that placed women in subservient roles and which penalised them at every opportunity. The central role played by women, and by countless communities and development projects, in advancing a more radical, equal, inclusive society, cannot be overstated. In addition to political activism and social change, these groups and organisations drove a vision for social justice within education drawing on the liberatory, as opposed to conformist, capacity of education. In gender and class terms these gains have been impressive in opening up access to education for previously excluded cohorts. However, more recently the reality of austerity policies (Barry & Conroy, 2014) coupled with systemic under-representation within higher education of certain student cohorts (HEA, 2015), poses a serious challenge to the proposed vision for equity of access to higher education as articulated by the HEA. This laudable vision references a 'fully inclusive system' that would enable more citizens irrespective of age, socio-economic background, disability or other factors to access, participate and complete higher education to achieve their full potential (HEA, 2015). Nevertheless, the persistence of structural barriers resulting in socio-spatial exclusions of the level experienced in Dublin, especially, highlight the urgent need for all educational actors within the university and community to imagine a new educational landscape.

Such a landscape should span multiple entrance and progression pathways, inclusive pedagogies and attractive, inclusive physical and social environments. Women's community education has provided a template and rich legacy that could play a key role in reinvigorating such a community higher education landscape. It is not time for reinvention, rather perhaps time to recall and recover the legacy of feminist and women's education to continue to inform a way forward. A higher education system that attends to persistent structural barriers, and simultaneously places lived lives and experiences at the centre of the learning process, is surely worthy of even greater acknowledgement and recognition from the HEA and related bodies.

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# The Future is Unwritten: Democratic adult education against and beyond neoliberalism

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## **Abstract**

*The paper discusses the value of imagination in educational debate and makes an argument for Irish adult educators making space and time to envisage a range of possible futures for the field beyond the terms offered in current policy. It explores this topic in relation to neoliberal educational reform and the broader social context. The second half outlines one possible future- adult education for a participatory democracy and sketches out some of what this might entail both in principle and in practice.*

**Keywords:** imagination, learning theory, neoliberalism, democracy, critical realism, critical pedagogy

## **Introduction**

The cultural critic Said (1994, p. 401) once remarked that education needed to be transformed in order to match “the new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence”. Developing new forms of education which can adequately meet the challenges of a rapidly changing, fragile and interdependent world is no small task and achieving this will require a sustained collective effort of both the imagination and the intellect. Yet the impact of crisis, austerity and recent shifts in policy is making this type of effort, which depends on imagining a *range* of possible futures, very difficult in Irish adult education. Important and necessary debates surrounding policy are already taking place but we also need to open up a related but distinct discussion which explicitly moves beyond the terms offered in policy to explore alternative futures for adult education. The first half of the article explains why I think that imaginative and ambitious proposals are needed in the current socio-political conjuncture. In the second part

I will sketch out one possible future, albeit in a very provisional and incomplete way, and argue that adult education can help build and sustain a genuinely participatory democracy from a perspective based on a synthesis of critical realist ideas, cultural studies and critical pedagogy (Bhaskar, 1978; Engestrom, 1987; Freire, 1998; Wainwright, 2009; Williams, 1961; Wright, 2010).

### **Imagining a range of educational futures**

I want to begin with the argument articulated in a recent book (Barnett, 2013) in which he makes a compelling and persuasive case for exercising our imaginations in a bolder and more sustained fashion in thinking about education. Barnett is especially interested in how we can encourage each other, both as individual educators and as a field as a whole, to “leap beyond the familiar” (2013, p. 15). Doing this, he argues, allows us “to see into things, to feel into things, to be at one with things anew to produce a new understanding of the object of imagination” (2013, p. 25). It is important to note that Barnett is not inviting educators to indulge in pointless daydreaming or idle speculation. On the contrary he argues we need to look at the field with careful attention but that in doing this we should also give ourselves license to go beyond the given and the ‘self-evident’ to ask ourselves what we think education has the potential to do. In other words Barnett is saying that we need to think imaginatively about what the education system might develop into in the future as well as what it is already doing or meant to be achieving.

Calling for a greater degree of openness in educational debate may seem a rather vague suggestion but Barnett is alerting us to something very important which is all too easily overlooked in the current political and cultural climate. In common with other educational thinkers (Freire, 1998; Greene, 1995) he is making a claim that open, imaginative exploration is an integral element of critical thinking and is crucial to pedagogical innovation and institutional reform.

According to Barnett renewing a sense of possibility is doubly important because so much of contemporary educational thinking displays a distinct “imaginative reticence” (2013, p.17). What lies behind this winnowing of the educational imagination? One explanation, offered by Barnett is that the growth of an audit culture which is obsessed with measurement that encourages educators to hold tightly to the familiar and cleave to the immediately applicable. Biesta (2010) concurs with this diagnosis and discerns a major discursive shift in recent years. The overwhelming focus is now on the *how* of education – pedagogical tips and techniques, progression routes, models of assessment and

so forth – and this has crowded out thinking in any depth about *why* we educate and what we hope to achieve through education. Questions about the purpose of education are being ignored and we have become preoccupied by “technical and managerial questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of processes, not what these processes are for” (Biesta, 2010, p. 2). This has diminished our sense of how educational work relates to broader social issues and also skates over the complex, multi-layered reality of how adults actually learn. Above all it closes down an exploration of what sort of new knowledge and practices might emerge in and through education.

### **The narrow horizon of the neoliberal imagination**

There are a range of reasons why this has happened but it is hardly coincidental that this narrowing of the educational imagination has occurred in a period in which there has been a remarkable drive to marketize education across the globe (Ball, 2007). This is part of a much larger neoliberal project (Harvey, 2005). The main features of the free market gospel are now very familiar indeed; competitiveness and flexibility must be maintained whatever the social cost and that extending the reach of markets in *all* areas of social life will create wealth and maximize individual choice and we should allow markets to regulate society as a whole. The idea that market exchange between individuals is the basic building block of human interaction and that such exchanges somehow organically coalesce into complex forms of social organisation is remarkably simplistic and not at all credible in either historical or anthropological terms. As Polanyi (2001) argues there has been enormous variation in how markets are organised and embedded within broader society through history.

Nevertheless, market fundamentalism has had an enormous influence on politics, culture and society including in education which is now often treated as a frontier of the market society, another area of human activity which needs to be made manageable in order to follow “the calculating and objectifying logic of economy” (Vandergehe, 2014, p. 285). Consequently markets and quasi-markets have been created in many parts of the education system but perhaps more important than this are the changes in how policy describes what education does and is supposed to do (Ball, 2007). Students are increasingly viewed as customers and educational institutions are expected, especially in Further Education and Training (FET) and HE, to justify what they do in marketised terms.

It is worth considering how this shift is linked to particular modes of assessment in adult education. In a fascinating study Allais (2014) does exactly that

and traces how free market ideas have begun to shape how policymakers choose to describe knowledge, learning and qualifications across the world. Allais goes on to describe the four major characteristics of these policies: 1) remarkably high expectations of education and what might be achieved through market driven educational reform, 2) a strong focus on tightening links between labour markets and education, 3) a belief that the quality and the quantity of education can be rapidly improved through such reforms and 4) that this reform agenda can be most effectively pursued by changes in curriculum and assessment. This has led to what she believes is an 'extraordinary development': namely that in the past 20 years the number of countries involved in developing outcomes based qualifications systems has mushroomed from 20 to 120 (Allais, 2014, p.2). The aim of these reforms is to make education more 'responsive' to business and significantly this is presented and justified as being more 'learner centred' (Allais, 2014).

I want to foreground two things in particular. First of all that the adoption of the new(ish) watchwords in education of competition, employability, mobility, flexibility and the creation of vast complex machinery to measure competences and outcomes is bound to a wider neoliberal project. Secondly, these changes in policy priorities and frameworks of assessment have had an impact and reconfigured, at least partially, how we imagine society and education. Thin, brittle and highly instrumental conceptions of education have become remarkably influential and we appear, to paraphrase the poet Lorca (2001), to have become mired in a world of laws and figures in which learning and knowledge are treated simply as static, commodifiable goods. We are encouraged to think of education in terms of credentials possessed by individuals that are primarily, or solely, a means to an end (Allais, 2014). This highly utilitarian and intensely ideological approach to education impoverishes our capacity to discuss the complex and multidimensional nature of learning and offers no language for exploring how education might be used to create higher levels of social equality.

But I want to go beyond a critique of the limitations of market orientated conceptions of education and the sort of commentary which treat neoliberalism as a completed, successful and uncontested project. In the wake of the financial crisis and the austerity that followed, the cracks in what Polanyi (2001) has termed the 'stark utopia' of a market-led society, are now very evident (Graeber, 2013; Mellor, 2011; Sayer, 2015). After forty years of neoliberal governments we can also say something about the long term impact of neoliberalism on economy, politics and culture.

- Neoliberalism has not delivered the ‘rising tide’ that market reforms were supposed to deliver (Harvey, 2005). Globally “seven out ten people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last 30 years” and where “46% of the world’s wealth is owned by just 1%” (Sayer, 2015, p. 7).
- The deregulation of markets has led to the explosive growth of new forms of financial speculation over which there is very little democratic oversight or control (Mellor, 2011).
- Transnational corporations (TNCs) have become far more powerful entities in the global economy part of which stems from an increased nobility of capital (Harvey, 2010). Again there are clear limits in making these bodies socially accountable.
- International bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have extended the reach of neoliberalism through trade agreements and demanding free market reform in nation states even when the majority of the population oppose this (Harvey, 2005, 2010).
- Attacks on collectivist organisations such as trade unions and the promotion of competitive individualism in all social spheres have weakened social solidarity (Harvey, 2005).

The cumulative effect has been a remarkable consolidation in elite power in terms of wealth and the capacity to influence decision making (Sayer, 2015) and this has created a global ‘democratic deficit’. But as Wainwright (2009, p. xx) notes when ‘old institutions fail, people invent’ and new forms of democratic political engagement are being developed across the world in response to the social and ecological crises caused by capitalism. “Something new is happening –something new in content depth, breadth and global consistency” as millions have taken to the streets to demand a reimagining of democracy (Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014, p. 5). The best known example is the Occupy movement but this is only one example of a much wider trend observable in Europe, Africa and especially Latin America (Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014; Zibechi, 2012). And while there is a lot of overheated rhetoric about new technologies, the capacity for grassroots organisation and communicative exchange across local, national, transnational, continental and global fora is now much enhanced (Castells, 2009). Significantly these movements for democracy and against neoliberalism have also led to experiments in forms of democratic education (Apple, 2013; Tett, 2002; Zibechi, 2012).

So when one looks at trends in adult education policy and one casts an eye across a global landscape marked by neoliberal crisis and a ferment of grass-roots activity much of which is explicitly linked to experiments in democratic education, the need for extended debate on a range of possible futures for adult education becomes clearer and more concrete.

### **Irish adult education in a time of austerity and change**

This global picture is directly relevant to where we now stand in Irish adult education. The Irish state has vigorously courted international corporate investment and over the past twenty five years we have seen market deregulation, financialisation, the commodification of public services and goods and to a lesser extent the privatisation of state companies (Kirby, 2010; McCabe, 2011). But it should be noted Irish neoliberalism also had quite specific characteristics not least that during the 1990s there was a rise in average income (Kirby, 2010). The nature of social partnership in Ireland also meant that government policies were consensual in tone and combined progressive rhetoric about eradicating poverty with concerns about flexibility and competitive economic advantage (for example in the *National Development Plans*). While the boom lasted, inequalities in power and wealth could be presented as a marginal or even a residual social phenomenon of little concern to a busy, consumer society in which we were culturally reinventing the meaning of being Irish (Kirby *et al.* 2002).

In line with international policy imperatives, education was tasked with tackling these 'residual' inequalities as well as improving the stock of human capital. The adoption of lifelong learning policies (DES, 2000) made it seem as if adult education, long 'the poor cousin' of the education system, might turn out to be Cinderella. But now we know that Cinderella never went to the ball and the expansion of education did very little to tackle enduring social inequalities. Crisis and austerity policies led to the decimation of the community sector (Harvey, 2012) and there has been a major reorganisation and reorientation of adult education through the creation of SOLAS. Adult education is now firmly orientated to employability based on the proposition that enhancing human capital will create jobs and strengthen social inclusion. Recent changes have given rise to very serious concerns about the narrowing of educational focus based on a highly instrumental approach to outcomes and competences (Murray *et al.* 2014). I would argue that these policy shifts are clearly in line with the trends outlined by Allais (2014) and it appears that in the Irish context, a crisis in neoliberalism has intensified the reach of neoliberal ideas. Notably it

has also seen the fading away of a minor, but significant, theme in earlier adult education policy, i.e. democratic citizenship (DES, 2000). Thus the conditions for a further narrowing educational imagination are quite advanced.

A number of people have responded by offering a critical analysis of the influence of neoliberalism on educational policy (Finnegan, 2008; Grummell, 2007; Murray *et al.* 2014). There is also a good deal of other research, much of which has been disseminated through this Journal that documents the value of a broad non-instrumental version of adult education through case studies and historical reviews. But there is a comparatively small amount of material which stands back from policy debates and sketches out what we might hope for in the future (e.g. Fleming, 1998; Connolly & Hussey, 2013 etc.). For intellectual, practical and political reasons I think it is important that we outline possible lines of development in the field and offer clear explanations of the principles that underpin this. It is only through a *future orientated debate* in which we discuss the adequacy, scope and depth of various proposals that we can really begin “to develop a coherent and credible theory of alternatives to existing institutions and social structures” (Wright, 2010, p.20). It is in that spirit that I want to now briefly outline one such suggestion.

### **One possible future: education in a participatory and egalitarian democracy**

I think one possibility open to adult education, which to my mind is both desirable and feasible, is that it focuses on how to build and sustain a participatory democracy animated by a broad and substantive notion of human flourishing. I am especially interested in how vibrant, dynamic spaces of learning can provide people with opportunities for personal and social development and produce knowledge and foster practices which can deepen democracy.

This is not an idiosyncratic or an original proposition and has been voiced before in *The Adult Learner* (see especially the 2005 special edition, Fleming, 1998; Connolly & Hussey, 2013). More generally if we take a historical perspective on the evolution and development of adult education we discover the *desire* for a genuinely democratic education runs like a golden thread right through the history of the field (Rose, 2001; Tett, 2002; Williams, 1961). Moreover, democratic *practice* has been a constitutive feature of adult education and it is one of the things that unifies a seemingly disparate field across continents and through time. Both desire and practice are bound to an *ideal* and the hope that education can play a part in creating societies which provide people with the conditions and resources necessary to live dignified and flourishing lives. In fact in a very

profound sense most of what we know as adult education today is the product of several centuries of democratic ferment (Williams, 1961). It is often forgotten that democracy was not a gift but was struggled for by social movements – such as the workers movement, feminists and civil rights organisations – who have demanded that society be run on more equal terms (Eley, 2002). The history of adult education is inextricably bound up with these sorts of movements and it can be argued that the great achievement of adult education “is that it kept this ambition to be something other than the consequence of change and to become part of its process” (Williams, 1990, p. 157).

History can only offer clues about what adult education might become though. To move forward we need to be precise about our core principles today especially as democracy as a word can mean so many things (Held, 1996). Typically, we most readily associate the word with what we know about representative democracies and the institutions, bodies of law and procedures in modern states but, as Graeber (2013, p. 186) notes, participatory democracy means something more than this and “is not necessarily defined by majority vote: it is, rather, the process of collective deliberation on the principle of full and equal participation”. This dual focus on collective deliberation and equality is absolutely crucial. This form of cooperation depends on reasoned argument *and* solidarity and as Dewey argued “democracy is more than government; it is primarily a form of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1916, p. 68). Just as importantly, Dewey and other commentators (Honneth & Farrell, 1998; Wainwright, 2009) insist that democracy should ideally involve deliberation across a *wide variety of public spheres*. This ‘thick’ version of democracy thus seeks the participation of citizens in decision making well outside the bounded and tidily defined arenas of traditional politics such as council chambers, TV studios and parliaments. In its most complete form, participatory democracy would involve citizens deliberating on issues in local communities, educational institutions and workplaces as well as having some sort of say in national and transnational institutions. The ultimate goal is to move towards a society in which citizens have “equal, effective possibility of participating in legislating, governing, and judging, and in the last analysis, in instituting society” (Castoriadis, 2010, p. 3).

Democracy is therefore seen as an ethical, political and practical project. It is perhaps useful to think of this form of democracy as open-ended and as a set of practices and ideas that call for “perpetual work of self-correction” (Ranciere, 2007, p 42). As Dewey (1916) suggests this means democracy is above all an

experimental form of social cooperation in which institutions evolve and change. Within the terms I have outlined here an integral part of this work of deliberation and self-correction is to seek out and break down social, cultural and economic barriers to citizens' full participation. A major task for any participatory democracy then is to "identify the ways in which existing social institutions and social structures impose harms on people" (Wright, 2010, p. 11). This also requires careful deliberation on how, with finite resources, a society can allow for 'the expansion of the "capabilities" of persons to lead the lives they value- and have reason to value' (Sen, 1999, p. 18). This work, I believe, is impossible without a multidimensional conception of equality which explores how access to cultural and economic resources and valued social practices contribute to human development (Baker *et al.*, 2009). As feminists have long argued this means fully acknowledging the centrality of love, solidarity and care for social well-being and seeking to identify and foster the social and institutional arrangements that support and enhance these things (Kittay, 1999; Lynch *et al.*, 2009). One other point should be noted: establishing equality and democracy as mutually dependent principles does not mean effacing difference or always seeking consensus. Rather an open, experimental, dialogical form of social organisation needs a high level of "disagreement and conflict" (Douzinas, 2013, p.114).

### **The role of learning in a participatory democracy**

As the adult educator and cultural critic Raymond Williams (1961) notes creating a 'thick' form of democracy is a formidable and even a daunting task. But he also argues that if we believe humans are "essentially [...] learning, creating and communicating" beings, this may well be the only adequate form of social organisation available (Williams, 1961, p.118). According to Williams in participatory democracy learning, the fundamental human capacity for self-monitoring, adaptation and change, should become far more central and "human learning [should be approached] in a genuinely open way, as the most valuable resource we have and therefore as something which we should have to produce a special argument to limit rather than a special argument to extend" (Williams, 1961, p.168). For Williams a democratic society is by definition a learning society where the *collective* capacity for cultural invention is more fully utilised. It is only by marshalling critical, highly reflexive forms of learning that we can reorganise social practices in a way that contribute to human flourishing (Engestrom, 1987).

Clearly what is being suggested here is that a 'thick' version of democracy *requires* innovative and participatory forms of education (Dewey, 1916; Wainwright,

2009). A learning society is above all a problem posing society which knows how to organise and encourage highly reflexive learning. Democracy – based on full participation and meaningful deliberation – has to be learnt and relearnt, practiced and questioned, tested and redefined on a variety of different scales and settings. This means creating space in which new practices and novel forms of knowledge and understanding can emerge. From this perspective adult education is not a defined sector but a set of practices that encourage participation and critical reflection and that help create connective tissue of dialogical learning across various social spaces. For this to occur in a systematic way participants need to take ownership over how learning occurs in a given situation and explore the contradictions that any learning process inevitably produces. The Finnish learning theorist Engestrom (2001, p.2) calls this ‘expansive learning’ and argues that very rich forms of reflexive learning “begins with individual subjects questioning the accepted practice” and the tools, concepts and practices are there which allow it to “gradually expands into a collective movement or institution”. This emphasis on learning in a non-linear way through a group is completely distinct from the focus on predictable outcomes and shifts emphatically away from the individualistic version of ‘learner centredness’ adult education. It also implies that experiential learning is only one single, albeit crucial, element of rich learning.

What is being imagined is adult education conducted in egalitarian, caring, experimental, interdisciplinary spaces where experiential, disciplinary, technical and emancipatory knowledges are recombined in novel forms in a highly reflexive way. This also involves looking for ways to ensure educators and institutions are genuinely accountable to students and broader civil society including grassroots democratic campaigns. Ultimately that means giving people, on local, regional and national levels, real control – including budgetary powers – over education (Apple, 2013).

### **Conclusion or departure point?**

The article has made five intentionally broad arguments which are interlinked with each other. Firstly, the times we are living in calls for new forms of education and that an integral part of creating something new is imaginatively exploring what *might* be possible. Secondly, neoliberalism and the linked phenomenon of outcomes based assessment have narrowed the educational imagination. Thirdly, the political, economic and cultural effects of neoliberalism have led to a deep crisis in democracy. Fourthly, across the globe a wave of social movements against neoliberalism have emerged which have been animated by a

concern with democracy and democratic education and this fact is directly pertinent to imagining alternative futures for adult education. Fifthly, if we want democracy to be at the heart of adult education we have to be clear what we mean and to open up a debate on what is denoted when we use this somewhat slippery term. As a contribution to this I have outlined one way of viewing participatory democracy and adult education.

My aim here is to shift the primary focus, however temporarily, from the limitations and obstacles we face and anticipate how adult education could contribute to creative and expansive forms of learning. In a period of cuts and insecurity as well as major policy changes this may seem hard to envisage. But democratic and participatory adult education has, and is, taking place in various settings and on various scales. We have at our disposal a deep reservoir of collective knowledge on how to build educational relationships which are democratic and egalitarian and considerable expertise in creating curricula in a dialogical way so that people can find their voice and name their world (Connolly & Hussey, 2013; Freire, 1998; Tett, 2002). Adult educators already know how to combine political and contextual analysis and to synthesise the various types of learning and knowledges in a participatory manner. To bring these resources into the future depends on vibrant practitioner networks, active trade unions, community groups and others meeting in open fora to discuss and debate what might be possible. The article is intended as an invitation to other practitioners to discuss and debate this and other future orientated proposals.

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# Men's Sheds – Sharing knowledge and learning in the company of men

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## **Abstract**

*Despite evidence of the benefits of learning for well-being across diverse groups, little is known about older men's experiences of learning, the factors that influence whether they choose to engage in learning activities and what role learning plays in their lives as they grow older. The present study examines the attitudes and learning behaviours of older men participating in Men's Sheds in Ireland. Our findings point to the importance of Men's Sheds as sites of informal learning that encourage the sharing of skills, knowledge and wisdom between older men. We conclude that Men's Sheds facilitate sensitive conversations between older men as they actively engage in constructing masculine behaviours and identities in later life.*

**Keywords:** older men, informal learning, masculinities, Men's Sheds

## **Introduction**

Ireland has a rapidly ageing population, having grown at a rate of between 17 and 20 per cent since 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Within this, older men constitute one of the fastest growing cohorts in the population. In 2011 the Census of the Population recorded a total of 763,557 men aged 45 and over living in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2016). In 2015, this was estimated to have risen to 829,500 (ibid.), a trend that is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

In the past, education and learning beyond the age of 50 was considered of little or no value to the individual or society, given the lower life expectancy at the time. Today, rising longevity has increased the value and importance of learning throughout life. The concept of lifelong learning is now considered the means by which economies can prosper, employment can grow and citizens

can be actively engaged and feel included. As the Commission of the European Communities (2011) argues, the challenge for Member States is to provide learning opportunities for adults throughout their life. To this end, Ireland is aiming to achieve the 15 per cent EU benchmark for participation in lifelong learning by 2020 (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2016).

While adult learning has been shown to provide resources that can help fuel important changes in individuals' lives (Field, 2011), many leave school feeling disillusioned with education. Men in particular who left school early or who left with little or no qualifications are least likely to participate in adult education. Evidence shows that men account for just 25 per cent of participants of community education programmes in Ireland (Community Education Facilitators' Association, 2014). In addition, the Statement of Activity for 2015 from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2016) confirms that 60 per cent of all lifelong learning participants are third level graduates and largely (57%) female. Similar gender patterns have been identified elsewhere, including in the United Kingdom (McGivney, 2004a) and Australia (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson, 2007).

The present study is set against the backdrop of a steady growth of community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland in which a growing number of men are readily coming together to share skills and to learn new skills in spaces that are largely but not exclusively for men. Using data from the first study of community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland, we examine attitudes to learning among older men (aged 50+ years) and the factors that have influenced the decisions of older men to engage in shed-based learning activities in such large numbers and the outcomes from participation.

## **Literature Review**

### *What are Men's Sheds?*

Men's Sheds are defined as community based non-commercial organisations that provide "a safe, friendly and healing environment where men are able to work on meaningful projects at their own pace in their own time in the company of other men" (AMSA, nd.). This Australian phenomenon first emerged in Ireland in 2009 when the first Men's Shed opened in Tipperary. Since then, the number of sheds registered with the Irish Men's Shed Association (IMSA) has increased steadily and now stands at 308, a similar density per head of population to that found in Australia (B. Golding, pers. comm.). Men's Sheds typically have a workshop space with tools and equipment as well as a social space for "tea

and a chat” (Carragher & Golding, 2015). The most common activity in sheds is woodwork but some have activities such as painting and cooking. Activities are decided by the men and largely provided by them through the sharing of their skills, unless a particular skill-set is not available in which case an outside tutor is sourced (Carragher, 2013).

The present study represents the first attempt to examine Men’s Sheds as sites for learning, including informal learning by older men in Ireland. Informal learning is said to come from daily activities related to work, family and or leisure and is usually non-intentional (European Commission, 2001) as opposed to non-formal learning which is intentional learning from the learner’s perspective and is structured in terms of its learning objectives and outcomes (European Commission, 2006). To date, little is known about older men’s experiences of learning, the factors that influence whether or not they choose to engage in learning activities and what role informal learning plays in their lives as they grow older.

#### *Older men and formalised systems of education and training*

In responding to calls to widen participation in learning, evidence has shown how formalised systems of education and training based on assessment and examinations often fail to attract those disillusioned by previous, negative learning experiences (Barton, Ivani, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007; McGivney, 1999; Smith, Hamblett, & Holden, 2001).

In the UK, McGivney (1999, 2004a, 2004b) drew attention to the role played by a dominant male culture which perceives learning as effeminate, particularly by men living in working class areas (McGivney, 1999, 2004a, 2004b). Men aged 50+ were found to be among the least likely group to participate in learning outside of training associated with the enhancement of skills and employment prospects (McGivney, 1999). In Australia, Golding *et al.* (2007) identify male underrepresentation in community education programmes for much the same reasons as those found by McGivney among men in the UK. Entrenched gender differences have also been found in community education in Ireland, with some commentators drawing attention to the feminisation of education (Owens, 2000; O’Connor, 2007; Department of Education & Skills, 2009), arguably with some justification given the low participation of men in community education programmes. A study of isolation and exclusion amongst men between 35 and 65 years of age living in North Leitrim, Ireland, draws attention to the lack of interest in pursuing further education among men with no qualifications

(North Leitrim Men's Group, 2001). One reason put forward for their lack of interest was the low levels of self-confidence, which many of the men felt about continuing in education.

This draws attention to the importance of non-cognitive or “soft skills”, which in addition to self-confidence also includes attitudes, learning behaviours, and learning strategies. Such attributes have been found to play an important role in learning outcomes (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001; Gutman & Schoon, 2013). Evidence shows that students who are motivated have confidence in their capabilities and feel a sense of belonging to their class or desired social group (Ryan & Patrick, 2001) and are more likely to be high achievers than those who possess lower self-perceptions about their capabilities and have lower motivation (McCoach, & Siegle, 2001; Pintrich, 2003). We contend that older learners are no different; they must be motivated to participate in learning in the first instance and maintain their motivation if they are to persist with their learning until the learning activity is completed (McGivney, 2004b). In particular, we argue the provision of meaningful learning activities represents an important prerequisite for the participation of older men in learning. This paper draws on data from a survey of community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland to consider older men's readiness to engage in learning in Men's Sheds and the attributes which have brought them to learning in such large numbers.

### **Method**

A mixed methods design was adopted, with both questionnaires and focus groups used to overcome the limitations of a single method alone (Ponterotto, Mathew, & Raughley, 2013). Mixed methods give voice to study participants (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013) ensuring findings are grounded in participants' experiences, their involvement in Men's Sheds and barriers to and motivation for participation. Our survey design and research protocol were informed by a study of Men's Sheds in Australia (Golding *et al.* 2007; Golding, Foley, Brown, & Harvey 2009). This included two survey instruments, the first of which was designed to elicit information about sheds. As this is the first survey of Men's Sheds in Ireland, we were interested to ascertain key features, such as where sheds are located, how they are funded, how they are managed etc. The second survey was designed to elicit information about participants. Specifically, we were interested to know who are the participants in Men's Sheds, what are the reasons for participation and what are the outcomes from participation.

Questions for both surveys were adapted where necessary for an Irish context. Demographic questions focussed on age and educational background as well as participants' personal life and relationships. We were concerned to profile the characteristics of those who typically attend Men's Sheds, their marital and cohabitation status, their family make-up (e.g. father, grandfather) and key life events experienced in the past five years (e.g. separation, unemployment, retirement, a significant loss, a major health crisis, a new personal relationship, a new child or grandchild). Closed-ended questions were used to examine learning in Men's Sheds (e.g. "If more learning opportunities were available through this shed, would you be interested in taking part?" "Yes/No"). Follow-up multiple choice questions were used to determine preferences for learning (e.g. "If yes, which type of learning would you be interested in?": "a course to get a qualification; special interest courses; in a small group; field days or demonstrations; in a class; through the Internet; by taking on responsibility; through preparation for further study; where I can meet other people; [and] individual tuition").

Other questions were posed as statements, with respondents invited to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. These statements, which were not mutually exclusive, were designed to identify reasons for participation in Men's Sheds (e.g. "I am doing what I really enjoy; to be with other men; to get out of the house; to learn new skills" etc.) and outcomes from participation (e.g. "a place where I belong; I get access to men's health information" etc.). Multiple choice questions were also used to examine learning in Men's Sheds (e.g. "there is too much emphasis on learning things I can already do; "my skills are already good enough for me to be able to take an active part in this organisation; "there is too much importance placed on formal learning" etc.).

In line with an 'interpretive and naturalistic approach', which holds that researchers need to study things in their natural settings to make sense of phenomena and the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000 p. 3), a series of five focus groups were conducted on completion of survey analyses. Visits to sheds provided valuable opportunities for the researchers to observe what happens in sheds and how men engage with each other and learning activities. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and collectively involved 40 consenting adults. Conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with field notes used to aid transcription, particularly where it was difficult to understand what was said when more than one person spoke at a time. Ethical clearance was granted for this research before fieldwork commenced. Although

the fieldwork was largely completed in late 2012, returned questionnaires were accepted until early 2013. All sheds registered with the IMSA were invited to participate, with the actual number of surveys distributed to sheds determined by coordinators of sheds in line with their membership. In all, 445 questionnaires were distributed.

## **Results**

### *Participant Demographics*

A total of 347 questionnaires were returned, including 50 incomplete ones, which were subsequently excluded, giving a sample size of 297 and a response rate of 65.2 per cent. All respondents were male and the majority were aged 50+ (71%, n = 210). Seventy per cent (n = 207) were married or had previously been married and 58 per cent (n = 172) were currently living with their wife or partner. Nearly three quarters (72%) were fathers and nearly half (45%) were also grandfathers. Most respondents were retired from paid work and in receipt of some type of pension (53%), with just 15 per cent currently in paid work. Just over half (51%) had no formal qualifications and were educated to primary or secondary school level only. Forty-five per cent identified themselves as a current or former tradesman. However, as our findings suggest, this may well be a status earned through life experience rather than through formal education since just 20 per cent actually held a technical or vocational qualification.

### *Motivation and Persistence in Learning*

Respondents were motivated to participate in Men's Sheds by a need for peer support and to be doing something that they considered meaningful. This was expressed as a need "to get out of the house" (95%), "to be with other men" (95%) and a preference for "hands-on learning" (71%), as opposed to "learning in classroom situations" (29%). There was an eagerness to access "more learning in sheds" (97%) and to "improve skills" (94%).

Financial issues were not found to motivate participation, although one third (34%) said that they hoped to get more paid work through participation in sheds. Similarly, support from family and friends was not a motivating factor for participation. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case, with men choosing to join the shed due to limited support, reflected in the range of recent, major life events experienced by respondents, including a significant loss (24%), a financial crisis (23%), unemployment (41%) and depression (23%).

### *The Social Environment and Attitudes to Learning*

The importance of the shed environment was expressed by respondents as “I enjoy the social aspect” (100%), “I enjoy being able to participate when I want to” (99%), “I am doing what I really enjoy” (98%), “I have some say over how the shed is run” (91%) and “being part of this shed helps me to learn” (95%). In contrast, we found little enthusiasm for learning within formal adult education settings, with just 19 per cent indicating that they had attended a formal learning programme in the past year. Our findings confirm older men’s previous detachment from formal learning, with just one in three (33%) reporting a positive educational experience at school. The shed’s small size was seen as particularly important to respondents (92%) and within this space, experience and involvement in learning informally created a desire to carry on learning. They expressed this as “members of this shed need more opportunities to learn” (89%), “I am keen to learn more” (97%) and “I would like to improve my skills” (94%).

### *A Sense of Belonging*

Respondents related positively to learning in Men’s Sheds, and expressed this as “I feel at home in this shed” (98%) and “I have made good friends in this shed” (98%). Their participation made them feel productive and valuable to their community and they expressed this as “I feel better about myself” (97%), “I feel happier at home” (74%), “I can give back to the community” (97%), “I feel more accepted in the community” (86%) and “I have a place where I belong” (95%). We found a remarkable willingness among older men to regularly participate in shed-based activities, with the majority (91%) taking an active part in the learning opportunities available, sometimes on a *daily basis* (12%), sometimes *several times a week* (29%) or *at least once a week* (50%).

### *Older Men’s Beliefs about their Capabilities*

Previous research confirms that school plays a key part in shaping male identities and patterns of learning behaviour (Mark & Golding, 2012). Many of the men consulted for this research left school with no formal qualifications and harboured negative attitudes towards formal education, despite the intervening years. They complained that opportunities for learning elsewhere in their community were limited (70%), that there was no place locally that they considered a good place to learn (79%), that there were not enough learning situations where men were encouraged (68%), that there were not enough male tutors available locally (57%) and that there was nothing that they really wanted to learn (91%). Yet as our findings show, these same men exuded a confidence

in learning in Men's Sheds and in their role in learning activities. They expressed this as "my skills are already good enough for me to be able to take an active part in this organization" (82%), "I get a chance to mentor others" (84%) and "being part of this organisation helps me to learn" (95%). This self-confidence was expressed by one man as:

"I could take an engine out, pull it apart and throw it over there and come back next week...and put it back together again. And I learnt all of that myself. I never went to school to learn any of that. I never read a book about it or anything."

Our research confirms that learning activities in Men's Sheds are largely provided by members through the sharing of skills. Accordingly, older men actively construct their own understanding and benefit of learning, not only in initiating and regulating learning activities but in their interactions with other men. This was expressed as "I regard this shed as a place...to be with other men" (94%), "to meet new friends" (99%), "to get out of the house" (95%), "to help me keep healthy" (95%), "to learn new skills" (97%) and "to give back to the community" (95%).

#### *Learning and Well-Being*

Traditional gender differences between men and women hold that women share more with each other than men do and tend to reveal more about their private lives, while men are widely perceived as preferring not to talk about personal issues and to be more competitive than women (Coates, 1986). Our findings do not support this claim. Rather, they point to the health-promoting effect of belonging to a social network that encourages empathy, openness, and all-round healthier life styles, fostering better coping mechanisms for older men to deal with the stresses and strains of life and life transitions in particular. Thus we found a spill-over effect from sheds to the private sphere of men's lives, reaching areas of personal relationships and men's sense of self-identity. In the words of one man:

"You'll get a man who'll say "I'm taking a tablet [medication]," and you say, I'm taking the same and he'll say, "What are you taking it for? Once one starts ..."

Men's sensitivity in social interactions in Men's Sheds is captured in the comments of this man:

“I got diagnosed with a health condition...so I told [the men] individually and I found people very helpful and without being intrusive they look out for me, but at the same time they don’t go overboard or aren’t overbearing. I found it easy to tell [the men], but I found it hard to reach the stage where I could tell them and I hope I didn’t over-tell it.”

### *Limitations of the Study*

Given that Men’s Sheds are a recent phenomena in Ireland, sheds that have been open longest may have been more motivated to respond to the survey than sheds that opened more recently. Even though this is the first study of Men’s Sheds in Ireland, it nonetheless provides important information on shed-based learning by older men, paving the way for future research including more qualitative cases studies.

### **Discussion**

As in Australia, we found that Men’s Sheds in Ireland are largely frequented by older men who are retired from paid work or have lost their jobs. They come to sheds to get out of the house and to do something which they consider meaningful in the company of other men. We have included “the company of men” in our paper title not only because of its critical importance in terms of our own study findings, but also because this was the name a group of older men gave to themselves as self-managers of the very first Men’s Shed in the world, which opened in rural Tongala, Australia in July 1998 (Golding, 2015).

Historically older men have been one of the most difficult groups to engage in learning. Yet, as our research confirms, older men are readily engaging in a wide range of hands-on learning in Men’s Sheds and are eager for more learning opportunities. It is our contention that the male learning space plays an important role in this. Our findings reveal the reasons why older men come to Men’s Sheds. In addition to being in the company of other men, these reasons are related to participating in activities they enjoy, to having a degree of control over determining what activities take place and to making learning apply to their lives. We conclude that older men view learning as most desirable when it is relevant and can be used by them.

While the prevailing negative health and medical discourse on male pathologies conceptualise men as largely not interested in their health (Brown, 2014), we found older men are accessing health information in different ways in Men’s Sheds. One important way in which they are doing this is through conversations

with their peers; conversations which reveal their sensitivity as they actively engage in constructing masculine behaviours and identities for later life.

### **Conclusions**

Our evidence confirms the importance of meaningful learning activities, reflected in an eagerness among participants of Men's Sheds to carry on learning. This has important lessons for educators and policy makers in terms of the development of interventions that address the different needs and situations of hard-to-reach groups. As Leadbeater (2000, pp. 111-112) argues, "the most important capability and the one which traditional education is worst at creating is the ability and yearning to carry on learning...more learning needs to be done...in the contexts where knowledge is deployed to solve problems and add value to people's lives." We argue that Men's Sheds are conducive to men's learning and, as such, can also provide the context for future targeted interventions to improve the quality of life of older men. One obvious way in which this could happen would be through targeted grassroots interventions which support better health and wellbeing outcomes for older men.

Providers need to recognise how older men learn and the importance of non-cognitive attributes in learning outcomes. They must be sensitive to previous negative experiences of many older men to formal systems of education and how this requires a different approach to learning, one that is informal, self-directed and hands-on. Crucially for older men, this needs to be in group settings made up of people not just of a similar age but also of the same gender.

Finally, given the dearth of literature on the nature of masculinities in later life, we conclude that Men's Sheds provide important sites for future studies to advance our understanding of the impact on men of changes resulting from altered roles and relationships in later life, and more broadly of life and learning beyond men's paid work.

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# Photovoice: Facilitating fathers' narratives of care

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## **Abstract**

*This paper critically explores the power of photographic images and photovoice research methodology to support the emergence of narratives of care amongst twenty Irish fathers. In the context of economic recession, the breadwinner role for these men was exchanged with one of at-home father. Men's daily care of children included language and literacy development, a role traditionally construed as feminine. Reflections on the feminist, adult education methodological approach used to discuss men's role in family literacy suggest that photovoice contributed to the disruption of patriarchal norms. It supported men to talk fluently and empathetically to one another about masculinity, care and fatherhood thereby freeing them to engage in counter hegemonic narratives of masculinity.*

**Key words:** Adult Education, Masculinities, Photovoice, Family literacy, Care

## **Snapshot of photovoice workshop**

*Six men, sitting in a circle around a central table, myself amongst them. We all are dressed in similar clothing, jeans, sweatshirts or tracksuits. Tea and sandwiches are on a side table. Camera bags and cameras are on tables around the room. A projector and screen is to the side of the circle. Some of the men are sitting back in their chairs, balancing on two legs, chatting to one another. Others are leaning forward, focused on the screen where one man's photograph of three children has just been projected. The colour photograph shows children sitting with their heads close together. A boy is in the centre flanked by his two sisters. They are seated at a kitchen table, which is strewn with colouring pencils, sheets of drawing paper and a pile of newspapers. In the research session the father of the children presents their image to the rest of the group. The discussion begins. The first question is posed: Why did you take that photo?*

**Source:** Research fieldnotes

## Introduction

This paper draws on an empirical study into the relationship between ideals of hegemonic masculinities and fathers' involvement in family literacy learning care work. Whilst the wider study is in the context of family literacy, this paper focuses on the adult education methodology employed to engage educationally disadvantaged men in the research. Situated within a Freirian pedagogical approach and feminist critical adult education context, relationships, individual and collective dialogue, critical reflection and praxis were all central to the research process (Connolly, 2008; Freire, 1972). Photovoice, a methodology conducive to supporting vulnerable men to speak fluently about their lives (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007; Slutskaya *et al.*, 2012) was a core methodological strategy in this enquiry. Critical reflections on the use of photovoice, are discussed below.

The global economic crisis has resulted in some disruption and restructuring of patriarchal, socially constructed, gendered parenting roles and such changes bring both challenges and opportunities. In Ireland, as the recession deepened, high levels of unemployment spread across the male-dominated construction industry (Barry & Conroy, 2012). The one-time breadwinner now finds himself in the unfamiliar role of fulltime family carer whilst his partner, often in poorly paid and part-time employment, provides financially for the family. These at-home fathers are the focus of the study reflected upon below.

*The State of the World's Fathers Report* (Levtov *et al.*, 2015) found that whilst men may want to be more involved in the lives of their children, the demands of a neo-liberal marketplace and inflexible workplaces preclude many from involved fathering. This institutionalised view of men as carefree actors consequently leaves women doing most of the caregiving. Women now make up 40 percent of the global workforce yet they also continue to do ten times more caregiving and domestic work than men (Ibid.). The marketplace, and in turn nation states, gain exponentially from the largely un-resourced, uncompensated caretaking work of women (Fineman, 2004). As such, they are 'free riders' on the backs of female care labour and this unpaid care work underwrites male power (Hanlon & Lynch, 2011, p.47).

Literacy and literate activities have been construed by ideals of hegemonic masculinities as of little value (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Renold, 2001). They are viewed as passive and belonging in the feminine, therefore subordinate, domain (Martino & Berril, 2003). By association, the relationship some men have with

literacy effects their involvement in family literacy learning care work (Karther, 2002; Hegarty & Feeley, 2010; Nichols 2002).

### **Study background**

The research aimed to address unequal gendered care constructs and to explore the relationship between constructs of hegemonic masculinities and fathers' involvement in family literacy care work. A primary goal was to surface and discuss issues relating to men's gendered identities as fathers. Embedded within disparaging discourses about working-class parents, fathers are depicted as uncaring, absent and 'feckless' (Hewett, 2015). Unlike their middle-class neighbours, stigmatised disadvantaged parents may not have the resources or capitals to do this learning support work. Furthermore, deficit views of parents from poor communities are compounded through media portrayals of them as uninterested in their children's education (Bauman & Wasserman, 2010). Yet research shows that all parents value literacy skills and regardless of parents' own literacy levels, they report that they want their children to do well and to support their learning in school (Ortiz, 2004; Hegarty & Feeley, 2010).

### **Research participants**

Existing networks within the adult literacy and community education sector in and around Dublin were used to recruit fathers to the project. Following meetings with adult education and community based project co-ordinators, information meetings with prospective groups were undertaken which resulted in four groups agreeing to participate. Each group committed to three research workshops over a period of three weeks and these were located within familiar community learning settings.

In all, twenty men contributed to the research. Between them they had 56 children ranging in age from twelve months to 41 years. The youngest research participant was 27 years old whilst the oldest was 65. Eighteen of the men were born in Ireland and the remaining two were from Morocco. Together they had a wealth and diversity of experience to draw from.

The men lived in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the city. These areas are characterised by multiple inequalities and state neglect that is evidenced by high levels of poor housing, long-term unemployment, educational disadvantage and ill health. Research participants had first hand experience of social harm, including drug and alcohol addiction, sexual and physical abuse, imprisonment and damaging experience of institutional care, homelessness and depression.

### **Photovoice: rationale and process**

The arts have the power to reveal our richly inhabited imagination and the visual image can connect with deeper levels of consciousness than is the case with words alone (Harper, 2002). For those who have unmet literacy needs and experience a lack of confidence around the written and spoken word, arts based methodologies, like photovoice, have been found to offer empowering, inclusive ways to access individual and collective stories (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007; Slutskaya *et al.*, 2012). Mobile technologies have opened up the photography medium to many and photographs are a familiar visual medium providing an unthreatening tool in participatory research (Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010).

Research has highlighted the challenge of encouraging men to fully participate in enquiries where they express their emotional selves (Sattel, 1976; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001) yet photovoice has been shown to support men to discuss their intimate emotions, giving rise to open talk and deep levels of reflective thinking (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007).

Within the context of an adult education facilitative group research practice photovoice enquiries provide cameras to research participants who are free to construct images relating to the research topic. The prompt for participants in this case was to take photos of family literacy. These photographs were then the basis of individual and group conversations with the researcher and photographs and discussion both formed the data to be coded and analysed. In photovoice there are no 'wrong' interpretations of a research participant's photograph. The one they offer is valid as they are the experts in their own lives (Freire, 1972). The viewing of the photograph and its interpretation gives rise to the co-construction of knowledge. As such, photovoice is congruent both with feminist adult education and with ideals of hegemonic masculinities, which construe men as active and knowledgeable.

### **Viewing photographs: building connection**

Collier (1957) described the compelling effect of photographs on research participants and this is verified in the research data. Men were heard in the audio recordings to be excited to show the photographs of their family's literacy work. They were curious about one another's photographs and eager to comment. The men interpreted one another's images. They participated. There was laughter. Some expressed worries about having taken the 'right photo'. Others described their pleasure at having 'mastered' the cameras. Participants were asked to choose three photographs to share with the group, and in so doing they

set the agenda for what was to be discussed. The photographs were displayed on a large screen. They showed children involved in many activities: reading books, playing football, working on computers and iPads, smelling flowers, banging drums, attending Tae Kwando. Some children were alone; siblings surrounded others. Partners and wives were present, sitting beside children doing homework, hugging children and doing their own studies. Home settings included kitchens, sitting rooms, bathrooms and children's bedrooms. External and community settings showed a boxing club, a park, a garden, and a local streetscape. The images provided a window into the lives of the men and uniquely helped to bridge the gap between the lifeworld of the researcher and the research participants (Harper, 2002). Photos were pored over, discussed, interrogated and served to act as a spark for wide ranging discussions which revealed intimate, hands-on knowledge of children's lives; concerns about children's diets; whether they were regularly washing their teeth; the demands of consumer society on fathers who were struggling financially; the men's desires to be good fathers; to 'do it right'; concerns about whether the levels and intensity of housework the men were involved in was 'normal'; all were voiced alongside collaborative interrogations of the meaning of family literacy. These stories expanded outwards. The photographs acted as a springboard for conversations, for reminiscence and these conversations yielded fascinating data as well as empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible (Hurworth, 2003).

Fathers spoke of the enthusiastic participation of children in the research. Children were 'excited' to be included. They got dressed up. Wives and partners too were closely involved. Photographs were displayed on bookshelves, and on walls of participant's homes. Badboy's (participants chose pseudonyms) son loved getting his photograph taken. Batman took his son (and camera) on a day-long outing to visit his parents from whom he had been estranged. Jack and his son spent an evening together trying to compose a photograph which would show his son holding the setting sun in his hands. Messi, a father of ten, captured an image of five of his children around a kitchen table working together on their homework. Albert, a man who had grown up in institutional care took his family to the local park where his male neighbour commented on the pleasure of seeing a family spending time together. Rory planted seeds with his two-year old daughter. There was a sense of photovoice bolstering families and allowing the research activities to ripple out beyond the core conversations involving the researcher.

Loading photographs to computers from digital cameras takes some time, requires certain skills and is reliant on equipment that works well. My pains-

taking pace caused much comment from the men. Some encouraged me to join them in their computer classes; others took the role of reassuring me and encouraging me. 'Technical hitch spaces' provided an opportunity for the men to talk informally to one another about their photographs, their children and their lives. In the foreground of the audio recordings I can be heard working with cables, projectors and computers. In the background, different conversations can be heard. Men shared experiences of access arrangements to children, concerns over children watching pornography on the internet, praise for children and their sporting achievements. In these moments connections were being made, mutual understanding was growing, relationships were being formed and these all served to contribute to the collaborative, creative and affirming peer learning research environment.

### **Photovoice and adult and community learning**

The photovoice process is rooted in what Connolly (2008, p. 55) posits is the 'Golden Rule' of adult education: the process begins with participants' lived experiences. Dialogue and trust building were the foundation stone on which the research relationship was built. This supported rich reflection and often revealing stories to emerge. Participants' collaborative viewings and collective conversations about their photographs uncovered new understandings and helped to create an open dialogical culture amongst the men. Conversations and critical thinking became a conduit for reflections on the men's roles as fathers and brought to light the impact of confining constructs of hegemonic masculinities on men's lives. The borders of self-understanding shifted. Such transformation Todd (2014) argues is not only the hope of education, it is the pedagogical act of living *par excellence*. Through this critical feminist adult education process, photovoice participants came to view their individual experience as linked to a wider structural context. In so doing a new view of their social existence was articulated and their subjective realities were fortified (Freire, 1998; Harper, 2002).

Mirroring hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, the photovoice research methodology was described as highly absorbing by the men. Many talked about their involvement, their families' involvement in terms of fun, of enjoyment, of 'craic'. One father described his participation as having his 'brain on the go'. Within a context where working class experience is most often discounted and disparaged in educational settings (Giroux, 1993), participants in this research process described enhanced personal and social capital. Their experience of adult learning as a positive empowering process is of particular significance

when one considers that the majority of participants had harm-full experiences of childhood education.

The study had a material presence through photographs displayed on fridges and elsewhere in the men's homes. Furthermore, there was wide participation on a range of levels; personal, group, family, extended family and community level. Photovoice promoted a model of research in working-class communities which visibly involved adult and community learning for transformation and raised the profile of family literacy learning care work.

### **Cross gender research: performances of hegemonic masculinities**

Cameras and photographs were closely associated with pornography by the men and sexually loaded remarks, which objectified women, were sometimes exchanged. Remarks made by individual men were inflated by much group laughter, which signified group affiliation and the construction of a mutuality of masculine understanding (Grønnerød, 2004).

In the background of the workshop audio recordings, the men were often heard boasting to one another of their sexual prowess. In so doing they were engaged in affirming their heterosexuality. These ongoing references to heterosexual masculinity distanced the men from the fear of appearing gay, of being weak and feminised in the eyes of other men and signified the exaggerated masculinity referred to by Kimmel (1994). It is important to acknowledge that not all men made these remarks.

Displays of hyper masculinity (Ibid.), and robust masculine selves (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) were most often directed towards other members of the group rather than the older female researcher. They were situated in a wider context where men instinctively looked to one another for respect and recognition (Connell, 1995).

My own responses to these remarks varied greatly. As a reflexive feminist researcher I am cognisant, like Etherington (2004) and Gemignani (2011) of the rich learning to be gleaned from the researcher's personal responses. In this instance I found myself making a pragmatic decision not to challenge sexist, misogynistic remarks but to make the 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). However this decision had a cost for me. I often felt uncomfortable and vulnerable about the comments I heard and indeed some were deeply offensive to me. Casually sexist and homophobic remarks are not only heard within the

research relationship. They are part of the wider everyday patriarchal soundscape in which gender is performed. As a woman I have found many strategies to live with, to block out and to challenge this patriarchal din, as appropriate. Within the research relationship, I mostly handled such comments with humour or on occasion I appeared to ignore them whilst refocusing conversations on the research topic.

My dilemma as a feminist researcher became one of setting research participants display of 'patriarchal dividends' (Connell, 1995, p. 79) to the side whilst trying to see and relate to each man's unique subjectivity. I believed that the men's stories and experiences were of value and I wanted to honour their voices. In recognising my own humanness and vulnerabilities in the research relationship I similarly chose to recognise and relate to each man's authenticity (Etherington, 2007). I sought to understand through dialogue the underlying gendered experiences that had led to his worldview.

This approach, I argue, allowed me to continue to develop relationships with the men, and to support the emergence of 'many layered stories' (Etherington, 2004, p.23). In giving voice to their experience in a collaborative adult education setting, I hoped that participants would gain useful insights into their new realities as at-home fathers. I believed their stories would make a valuable contribution to understandings of men's gendered experiences as fathers involved in what has traditionally been viewed as women's work.

### **Alternative narratives of masculinity**

Men who told me they were unused to talking about themselves as fathers spoke fluently and tenderly of their children and of their family learning care work. The displaying of the photographs in the collaborative and collective space, the viewing of the images on the large screen, seemed to free men from fear of what Connell describes as 'the constant careful scrutiny of other men' (Connell, 1995, p.128). The photographer had full authority over his images, he owned them, and could confidently talk about them and respond to questions with assurance. Men engaged in self-revelation, they spoke of their children, of their emotions, they invited others to encounter them in new ways. Men unself-consciously demonstrated to one another an alternative masculinity, one that allowed their emotional and vulnerable selves to be glimpsed. They risked the display to one another of transformed subjectivities. It was in these moments that the strength of photovoice as a method became apparent and where the 'shield' of masculinity, as it was termed by Badboy, began to soften. Such revela-

tions, I contend, would be unlikely to emerge in response to more traditional one-to-one or focus group interviews.

### **Stars are yellow, hearts are red, and the tree would be green**

Effort toward mutual understanding, empathetic listening and supportive interjections were all features of the puzzling out of the men's images. Conversations supported the emergence of the meanings men held of family literacy work and of their changing role, from breadwinner to care giving, at-home father. The men bore witness to the dilemmas and delights they faced as fathers, as men, doing this care work. They shared strategies, they admired and praised one another's photos. They spoke of the pride they felt in their children and the hopes they had for them. They encouraged one another in their roles as fathers. These were revealing conversations, ones where the shield of hegemonic masculinities was further fractured and where caring, nurturing masculinities were tentatively displayed.

Batman spoke eloquently of the love he had for his children and of the particular attention he devoted to his seven-year-old son who had mild autism. He described his return to education as being one part of his supportive efforts. The fathers in Batman's group had experienced high levels of social harm: two were recovering drug addicts, one was an ex-prisoner, others had experienced extreme levels of violence as young men and two men left their homeland in search of economic opportunity in Ireland. These experiences had honed masculinity, which was hard and tough, where expressions of vulnerability were often decried and conceptualised as a feminine, therefore subordinate trait. The transcript, which follows, displays an alternative, reflective masculinity enabled I believe through the combination of photovoice and an engaging critical adult education process (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1984).

*Batman: Being around him all the time, see, I do loads of work with him. Constantly. That's why I'm doing this as well. It's specifically for him. Also me other daughters, but they're grand see I want him to be able to lead, like us here, a normal life... [Interrupted]*

*John S: ...that's all he wants.*

*Batman: See I don't want him to think he is hampered because he has autism. We don't bring it up to him about... [Interrupted]*

*John D: ...you don't mention it?*

Batman: *I don't. There's nothing wrong with him and it's not his fault an' anyhow. If he starts they'll all help him and they don't treat him like he is special and they never say to him whatever. They're just normal around him...* [Interrupted]

Badboy: *...so he can be himself!*

John D: *An' would you notice if he came in here?*

Batman: *It's not that you would notice it. It's just that he has a few little things that he does. Like he tenses himself like this. He does do that when he is happy, do you know what I mean? Or he would jump around for a minute. Now if he's happy he'd run around, over into the floor and run back...* [Interrupted]

John D.: *...that's good!*

Batman: *And just do a jump, that's how he shows he's...* [Interrupted]

John D.: *...happy?*

Batman: *You know enjoyment. That's just one of the things he does.*

Badboy: *That's the way he shows excitement. Like being happy?*

Batman: *Yeah. See he takes everything in. He's not like me two daughters. He has a great memory.*

John S: *He absorbs everything, yeah.*

### **Group 3**

Prompted by the viewing of his photograph, Batman's sharing of this story connected the men. A bond was formed. Their tones and listening were empathetic. They were involved in the small interactions of dialogue as espoused by Freire (1972). They were affirming Batman's efforts to be a good father. The photograph, its discussion and Batman's own willingness to share his lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) with the other members of the group, their responsive and attentive reaction, all contributed to a reflective environment where men opened up to one another (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007). Stories shared revealed intimate family lives. In speaking of themselves as involved and caring fathers

they made themselves vulnerable, they allowed others to see them (Ibid.). Showing vulnerability involves emotions and requires of men that they give up some control to others, that they open themselves up to connections, to relationships (Kimmel, 1994). In so doing they demonstrated the fluidity of masculinity (Connell, 2011; Reeser, 2012) and challenged current constructions which preclude the loving enactment of fatherhood (Morrell & Richter, 2004). The men transformed their identities (Mezirow, 2000) , at least for a time, from macho men to involved, caring fathers. Reconfiguring ones gendered identity in a group setting can be a risky business (Connolly, 2008). It can open one up to ridicule and attendant feelings of shame. In this adult education context this did not happen. The shield of hegemonic masculinities further dissolved (Connell, 1995). The discussion progressed. Batman proudly described the cards his children were making in the photograph,

*Batman: Like, am I a lovely drawer? You're all missing that! He wanted hearts and stars and a couple of bells down the bottom. Little Emma there, I done her one. Then see, when he seen them bells on that he wanted them on his and he asked me what colours to do so I told him stars are yellow, hearts are red and the tree would be green! Then I done a bigger one for him that was about that size for him, you know double pages and he had good fun colouring that one!*

### **Transcript Group 3**

Batman felt comfortable enough to give voice to a different type of talk, one which was imbued with affection, with whimsy, and where gender norms were disrupted. In other contexts this might have posed a threat to him, opened him up to ridicule and attendant feelings of shame (Sattel, 1976). In this context, photovoice and an engaging pedagogy (hooks, 1994), bridged a divide between a private and public gendered self, bringing both together, revealing the intimate lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) of a loving and involved father.

### **Conclusion: Photovoice empowering men, disrupting patriarchy**

I argue that prescriptive and confining patriarchal gender identities cannot be deconstructed if they go unnamed. Freire (1972) reminds us that naming the world is the first step in transforming it. Photovoice, the images produced and the collaborative discussions surrounding them ably supported the men in this research enquiry to name their world and challenge dominant and damaging (mis)representations of fathers from inner-city communities.

Men involved in the research were affirmed in their role as caregiving and involved fathers. They grew in status in their families and their communities. As such, on the one hand photovoice was congruent with patriarchal constructs of hegemonic masculinities and gave recognition to men's role as fathers. On the other hand, it transformed individual men's prevailing notions of masculinity which prohibit the display of men's emotions, of what one participant termed their 'soft spots' to other men. In responding to the photographic images, men retrieved the language needed to speak of their emotional and caring selves and to engage in collective reflection and self-disclosure (Freire, 1970). In so doing they opened themselves up to vulnerability with other men and the female researcher thus challenging taken for granted ideas of men as inexpressive and reticent. A counter narrative to that of hegemonic masculinities emerged, one which presented masculinity as infused with tenderness and care.

Through a Freirian, feminist pedagogical adult education approach, photovoice has illuminated the social and emotional lives of men (Barr, 1999). Furthermore it has supported men, who were poorly served by the education system, to engage in a collaborative, affirming and transformative adult learning process where their experiences were valued and their emotional and affective selves acknowledged and supported new understandings of unequal, gendered roles emerged through a process of conscientisation (Freire, 1972). A commitment to be more involved in the care of their children's language and literacy development was an articulated outcome of their participation in the research. This in turn lightens the responsibility on mothers to engage in this role and has the possibility of contributing to gender equality at a micro level. Transformation such as this is congruent with feminist and Freirean endeavour.

Connell (2009, p.137) reminds us that intimate politics underlie more public politics. Reflections on the impact of institutions such as the family and education on gender formation illuminate the influence of gender inequality in the wider social context and can expose the ways in which the patriarchal gender system can oppress both women and men. Such insights are the first steps in bringing about transformation at a macro level, strengthening individual subjectivities, critically naming the world, identifying connections between the personal and the political and planning collective actions for change in order to bring about a more socially just society.

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# ‘Really Useful Research’ for real equality and justice in adult and community education

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## Abstract

*In recent decades, adult and community education has emerged as a distinctive discipline in its own right, based on scholarship in the quest for real equality and social justice. This distinctive discipline is already characterised by ‘really useful practice’, that is, critical, creative pedagogy, heavily influenced by women’s studies and women’s community education. Further, it draws on ‘really useful knowledge’, the co-creation of knowledge for critical consciousness. I make the case that we in the field need to develop a distinctive research approach to underpin the discipline, ‘really useful research’ that is dedicated to promoting emancipation, addressing inequality and inequity, in order to counter the ways in which research has been employed in maintaining the status quo. The article argues that research is not neutral, as feminist research approaches has demonstrated so clearly. And research has been used in a reductionist and instrumental manner, to implement global agendas for private gain rather than public good. Critical adult and community educators are dedicated to real equality and social justice, and ‘really useful research’ will provide the wherewithal to works towards that end.*

**Keywords:** Emergence of the Discipline, Gender Equality, Social Justice, ‘Really Useful Knowledge’, ‘Really Useful Practice’, Emancipatory Research

## Introduction

When Thompson developed the notion of ‘really useful knowledge’ (1996) for the purpose of linking the practice of working with adults to the radical foundational ethos, she provided the kindling needed to develop the scholarly engagement with the field. At that time, in the mid-nineties in Ireland, there were comparatively few scholars in adult and community education, a mere handful at doctoral level with considerably more at masters level, while the field

itself was blossoming with ‘really useful practice’ (Connolly and Hussey, 2013). While there was a deficit in scholarly engagement, the practice was vibrant, innovative and creative. And that field was – and still is – central in transforming people’s lives and developing their capacity to participate more fully and critically in society, as it emerges as a discipline in its own right, rather than a sub-set or safety net of formal education.

In the intervening twenty years, the scholarly landscape has changed fundamentally. There is a distinct movement in scholarly reflection on that practice, theorising it and contributing to the development of the distinctive discipline of adult and community education. However, this is not without a bit of a tussle. We’re in the middle of a territorial struggle for the hearts and minds of learners. I maintain that a powerful research agenda has been used to influence social policy to quell critical development and education. This arguably aims to promote a specific economic and political agenda. This agenda bears all the hallmarks of the neo-liberal project, and its key objectives are market-led privatisation, individualism and freedom from oversight. The outcomes of this agenda are the diminution of the responsibility of the state towards the public good and wellbeing of the population. This means that state-sponsored or supported initiatives are under threat as an unnecessary draw on public finances, and simultaneously, the response to social needs are pushed towards market led solutions. Macrine holds that the incursion of private gain into the public good of education means that the focus has shifted from the well-being and development of humanity and society to a reduction of human worth to the economic value of labour of individuals in the neo-liberal context (Macrine, 2009).

In Ireland, Hurley finds that this prevails in the enactment of adult and community education, particularly as it finds itself trammelled into labour activation together with narrow learning outcomes, tremendously out of step with broad social outcomes (Hurley, 2015).

In this article, I’m making the case for a deeper development of ‘really useful research’ in order to create a stronger, more secure base to ensure the future of the field of adult and community education. I want to address, in particular, the implications of the territorial struggle between critical social development agenda of scholar-practitioners in the field against the state-sponsored, but market-led labour activation agenda. To this end, I will endeavour to review the nexus between ‘really useful knowledge’ and ‘really useful practice’ through the lens of ‘really useful research’, in order to reflect on the value of that schol-

arly engagement to Irish society. And I argue that this nexus needs to include an explicit gender and intersectional dimensions. If it ignores gender, it will overlook the fundamental power structures at work in society, that is, patriarchal power.

### **'Really Useful Knowledge'**

#### *Interrogation of Patriarchal Power*

When we consider our assumptions about the nature and scope of knowledge that persisted until the 1960s, it seems as if we, as ordinary citizens, were at the mercy of pronouncements handed down from on high, with no status or value given to our subjective experience or reflection. The scholars and elites who made those pronouncements drew from disciplines that relied on rational argument, documentation, hypotheses and empirical testing and proof, such as theology, philosophy, history and science. And they created the foundations for the way society was organised. Thus, the belief that women were inferior, irrational, second class citizens or incomplete men was based on the theology of the Christian sects, which in turn was shaped by western philosophy. This was practically unchallenged until the second wave women's movement, in the 1960s. These assumptions prevailed in spite of the work of Weber and Marx on class stratification. Women's studies were – and arguably still are – the most revolutionary field of academic pursuit, under various names and designations, including gender and feminist studies and women's community education. Women's studies are also responsible for creating the model for other areas interested in equality, such as, of course, intersectionality, equality studies, Men's Studies, LGBTQI studies, community education, equality and social activism studies. These other areas import and adapt models from women's studies into these arenas, including starting where people are at; critical, feminist pedagogy; non-traditional content; and the central process, consciousness raising.

Crucially, without women's studies, there would be little or no interrogation of patriarchy. Patriarchy, the system of rule based on the power, authority and control of a dominating figure, whether by birth, race, ethnicity, fatherhood, conquest, election, selection, corruption or by any means, has to be recognised as being responsible for the sub-ordination and oppression of women (Walby, 1990), and all other sub-ordinate groups and categories. While Walby focuses on the role of patriarchy in the subjugation of women, Weber framed it in male, generational terms, the authority of the traditional head of the household, that is, the stronger male patriarch rules over weaker men and boys (Weber, 1964), which is extrapolated to understand the role it plays in perpetuating class stratification, imperialism, colonisation and all the other situations where a

dominant male rules all others. Nevertheless, it is the feminist interrogation of patriarchy has been taken up by pro-feminist masculinities theorists, such as Raewyn Connell and Jeff Hearn. The impact of the dominant male leads to the emasculation of so-called weaker, that is, less dominant males, to perpetuate his own power, in addition to the oppression of all women and children.

Significantly, Connell maintains that this construction of hegemonic masculinities is *entirely* responsible for the crises among so many young men, with disastrous suicide levels, self-destruction and alienation, in spite of anti-feminist claims that it is due to the loss of place and identity brought about by the women's movement. Connell acknowledges that the interrogation of masculinities and the relationship of hegemonic masculinities with patriarchy is due to the focus on gender-based inequality raised by women's studies (2005) and she and her colleague have continued to explore the concept (Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005). Hearn frames the proliferation of hegemonic masculinities in global capitalism as an extension of – not in competition with – the women's studies focus on the analysis of power (Hearn, 2015). That is, this interrogation of patriarchal power opens the door to examine basic structures in society, not just gender relations, but also the organisation of society as it impacts on everyone, benefitting some groups and disadvantaging others. 'Really useful knowledge', created and exposed by women's studies, provides the tools for the interrogation of basic systems of power and control, alongside wider discussions about inequality and inequity in society. In order to understand where 'really useful knowledge' stems from, it is necessary to go back to the basics, that of subjective experience and reflection. The next section will explore that in more detail in order to lay the foundations for my contention for 'really useful research'.

### **Life Experience and Reflection: Freire and Feminism**

Rational objectivity still holds a powerful place in our understanding of society. The citations of numbers and statistics are the most common way for research to be reported. Measurability and calculations are considered the most accurate gauge of human condition and predictability and it is based on the idea that some people can stand apart and uncover or discover truth and facts about the social world. This has a higher status in the hierarchy of knowledge than subjectivity. However, objectivity has been challenged fundamentally by women's studies, by listening to otherwise silenced voices (Connolly, 2003). But, firstly, it is vital to contextualise this within the practice of adult and community education.

Freire has been central to the emergence of adult and community education as a distinct discipline. His work on literacy education made an immeasurable impact on the philosophy of education, challenging fundamentally epistemology as handed down by the elites, by re-positioning the place of lived experience and practice. In Ireland, in the 1980s, Steiner-Scott clearly recognised the place of experience and reflection involved in the questioning the norms within women's lives, with her contention that we, women, gain insight into our own condition by sharing the insights with other women (1985). While feminist scholarship was beginning to blossom, it was confined behind the walls of the academy, while most people's lives were lived in the harsh reality of everyday life. Mary Cullen, with her invaluable edited collection *Girls Don't Do Honours*, highlighted the absence of women in higher education and the constraints visited upon girls in mainstream education but also the absence of women in the sciences at that time (Cullen, 1987). And while women's history and women's literature in particular, was emerging with a stronger voice, the insights from everyday life was not granted the value or status that might render it fit subjects for research, until the birth of women's studies as an interdisciplinary endeavour.

The insights garnered from the experience of oppression and subjugation were hardly researched in the academy, but appeared more readily in literature and popular culture. For example, *The Feminine Mystique*, (Friedan, 1963) *The Female Eunuch*, (Greer, 1970) and *The Women's Room* (French, 1977), were bestselling books, and probably had much more impact on the women's movement than academic research. Literature has the power to immerse the readers in people's lived lives, in ways that academic research fails, or perhaps does inadequately, at least until the innovation of women's studies.

Thus, the development of women's studies was the educational response to the women's liberation movement, that is, adult education for liberation (Connolly, *et al*, 1996). Not simply an academic engagement with rational argument, observable phenomena and traditional justifications, but rather the experiential, reflexive, immersion within a consciousness-raising environment. These consciousness-raising groups characterised the second wave women's liberation movement, in parallel to the process that Freire termed *conscientization*. Indeed, it is striking the extent that those early Freirean literacy based pedagogical thoughts (1972) echo and share ground with the early women's studies, in the 1960s. Freire subsequently owned up to the androcentrism of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, though, while women's studies put a gender analysis at the heart of the field. That is, women's studies challenged the androcentrism and

so-called rationality of canonical knowledge, with the intention of creating new knowledge for the emancipation of women as well as men, what Johnson called 'really useful knowledge' (1988) and developed over time by Jane Thompson in many places (1980, 1983, 1996, 2006).

Crucially, the knowledge-base stems from the life experience of women in society, as an oppressed and unequal population. Moreover, while women's studies acknowledge the validity and authority of personal experience, it transforms this individual perspective into a social perspective, from the 'I' to the collective group or perhaps more accurately, the loose, heterogeneous category. It makes the connections between the personal and the political as the AONTAS Women's Education Group contended in 1992. Further, it also interrogates existing knowledge through a feminist lens, as well as validating new topics and new ways of knowing. This living, vibrant example of 'really useful knowledge' is entirely relevant today, not just for the liberation of women but also for the acknowledgment of the humanity of children as well as the rest of the population. Indeed, women's studies provide the model for many social movements dealing with everything from climate change to the recent Marriage Equality Referendum. Adult education owes so much to so many women and men whose rights were acknowledged and vindicated in this referendum, a revolution which kicked off in the 1960s, with the revolution in knowledge creation. In the next section, I want to consider the role of civil and human rights, participative democracy and the ways in which people engage with radical knowledge, that is, through what I call 'Really Useful Practice'.

### **'Really Useful Practice'**

#### *Participative democracy in action*

Practitioners in the field of adult and community education are guided by a democratic and participative ethos. In this, they have developed ways of working that confronts traditional educator-learner relationships. But it confronts also the wider structures and practices in education, not just that dyad of the teacher-student. That dyad is a reductive construction of education, which frames education almost entirely within the skills and competences of individual teachers rather than the social institution that is shaped and controlled by much wider discourses in society. A principle concern of professional teachers is discipline within the classroom, while the principle concern of students (and their parents, in the case of schooling) is good or bad teachers and their role in enabling students to achieve 'good' results. When we think of this dynamic in any other context, for example, in the family, in the community or the work-

place, it is clear that we don't reduce the social institutions to the behaviour of the individuals involved. We see them in much more complex terms, in terms of culture, socialisation, norms and values, rather than conduct isolated from the wider social conditions.

'Really useful practice' is part of that discussion (Connolly, Hussey, 2013; Connolly, 2008). That is, it sees the interaction in the learning environment in those wider social terms, from power and control to internalised cultural and traditional norms and values. It includes the welcome into the space, the fun and respect that ensures that prospective learners feel at home and at ease, overcoming the imposter syndrome that many people report in unfamiliar surroundings. The imposter syndrome is often seen as the problem of the person experiencing the unease, but that it has more to do with the surroundings, rather than the individual. AONTAS identifies a number of elements that are essential in the practice of women's community education in *Flower Power* (2009) and these elements form a fundamental part of 'really useful practice', including supportive environments, accessible, holistic and intercultural provision. While these elements could be framed as individualistic participant-centred, they are contextualised within the wider 'really useful knowledge', with the ultimate aim to bring about emancipatory change in Ireland.

#### *Civil and Human Rights Social Movements*

While the *Flower Power* guide to practice is specifically oriented towards women's community education, it is also an exemplar for wider adult and community education practice. As Peter Hussey and I discussed in our article in 2013, critical educators work with learners at all levels, and in very diverse groups. It is the responsibility of the educators to pay attention to these human rights issues. But further, 'really useful practice' also includes micro details which ensures that democracy and participation is part of the learning process, such as the use of group work, discussion and an active interrogation of the teacher-learner dynamic. While educators such as myself were quite gormless to start with, nevertheless, our practice was shaped by an equality agenda, new ideas that emerged again in the 1960s, with the civil and human rights revolution.

Any review of the civil and human rights movement indicates that it is still a work in progress. While social movements are counter to traditional politics as they developed in Ireland after the foundation of the state, nevertheless, the movements have been very influential in equality legislation, albeit in a limited way, when we consider the inequality that persists in spite of the legislation.

However, while limited, that influence has been underpinned by research that aims to bring about emancipatory change, that is, ‘really useful research’.

### **‘Really Useful Research’**

*Do you believe in equality?*

Hesse-Biber recounts an opening activity that she used in her classroom of undergraduate students. As she introduces herself, she asks the students:

*‘Do you believe in equality?’ Response: Everyone’s hand goes up.*

*‘Do you believe in justice?’ Response: All eagerly raise hands.*

*‘Are you a feminist?’ Response: Stark silence ensues, as some students slowly begin to raise their hands. (2014:1)*

This demonstrates the fundamental struggle in the fight for equality. When this struggle touches on controversial points – controversial in terms of discourses in mainstream society – there is almost involuntary recoiling, a contention that some struggles go ‘too far’. This reaction applies right across the board, from Travellers rights, to the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.

This has practically always applied to women’s liberation. For example, the ICA (The Irish Countrywomen’s Association) has been at the forefront of adult education with purpose-built facilities and programmes aimed at meeting the learners’ needs. This sounds like the perfect set-up, but the ICA has expressed distaste and disdain for women’s liberation, claiming that it goes too far, (TG4, 2016). Of course, I acknowledge the huge benefit that the ICA has opened to the women of Ireland, and I am not demonising the organisation but it is important to differentiate between real equality and reformation of the status quo.

*Do you believe in justice?*

The commitment to justice characterises a lot social relationships in Irish society, from civil rights to schooling to taxation; indeed, it’s inherent in many social institutions. However, the looseness of the concept and the various interpretations taken up ensures that the commitment is dissipated. But since Thompson made the call to arms in 1996, it is more straightforward to clarify the concept within the adult and community education context and scholarship in creating ‘really useful knowledge’ to achieve justice and equality in Ireland has blossomed.

This scholarship has led the way in highlighting the importance of adult education and the place of adult learners in the panoply of education as a public good. The scholarship has built on – and with – the work of national organisations including AONTAS and NALA, the work of Adult and Community Education, and the work of Adult Education Officers, Adult Literacy Officers, Community Education Facilitators along with numerous dedicated and committed adult educators and providers.

However, the validation of knowledge creation is still a site of struggle. While there is clarity about and some commitment to the place of research in changing the world as Marx posited, there is still a vibrant dialogue about the nature of that research and the conceptual world-views that underpin research for emancipation. One such debate occurs around evidence-based research. Evidence-based research has asserted itself as perhaps the only valid source of information and knowledge on which decisions and policy should be based. It is an approach that was developed for the health care disciplines, to challenge traditional practices and to create new knowledge based on data and scientific findings (Brown, Crawford and Hicks, 2003). This approach is characterised by the gathering of quantitative data that covers a lot of ground but perhaps not a lot of detail. The promotion of evidence-based research appears in many areas and it carries a lot of weight with powerful institutions, in spite of the reservations that feminist researchers have about it. Most importantly, it is prey to agendas that serve purposes other than emancipation and social justice. A recent publication, the evaluation of the *Back To Education Allowance programme*, is an example of research that has gathered evidence and concluded that the programme is not effective in enabling participants to move on to work or education (Kelly, *et al*, 2015). It is too early to tell what impact this research will have on the practice in the field, but it is fairly damning.

However, most significantly, the research did not address why people within the programme didn't progress in more impressive numbers. For practitioners working in the field, this is the most important question, and it could illuminate the kind of disadvantages and burdens that the participants have to carry with them as a result of early school leaving, learning difficulties, neglect and disadvantage that could have built up over a lifetime. It is completely unrealistic as well as lacking in compassion and understanding to expect that a lifetime of marginalisation could be redressed in a very short educational intervention, relatively speaking.

This was the case in the rationalisation of the community development programme in the years around 2008-2010. This programme was evaluated by the

Centre for Effective Services, on behalf of the Department Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, again, relying on evidence-based research. However, the CES misleadingly framed community development as the provider of services rather than a grassroots movement. While it may be difficult to synthesise the definitions of community development in a phrase, it is clearly positioned as a social process whereby people identify their needs, especially around poverty, exclusion and disadvantage, and work together to respond to those needs, rather than a service provider such as a bank or post office. Therefore, it was not surprising that evidence-based research found community development as deficient in terms of delivering services (Bamber, *et al*, 2009), because it was looking for evidence of efficient or effective service provision rather than the empowerment of local people. However, this finding provided the instrument to withdraw support for the programme as it was practiced on the ground, by depriving it of funding.

This is just one example of the frailty of a trend or style and it can apply to any new idea that sweeps in to fashion and becomes the new 'best practice'. However, the real learning from this example is to interrogate the panoply of research approaches to arrive at a conclusion, however conditional, for what would constitute 'really useful research' and the quest to bring about fair, just and equal outcomes. As Freire might say, evidence-based research is not neutral.

#### *Debates and Paradigms*

Knowledge created through 'really useful research' is critical knowledge, that which is capable of raising consciousness about the wider social contexts and which is intent on contributing towards equality. However, even within research, there are differences that help us to understand the power of research. One of the most profound is probably that of the either/or dilemma posed by the dualistic framing of qualitative in opposition to quantitative approaches, the so-called paradigm wars. While this discussion has led to an appreciation of qualitative research, quantitative research also has a place in 'really useful research'. Oakley maintains that quantitative research provides the weight of evidence that is needed to carry the wider social dimension of the data:

Women and other minority groups above all, need quantitative research, because without that it is difficult to distinguish between personal experience and collective oppression. Only large scale comparative data can determine to what extent the situation of men and women are structurally differentiated (Oakley, 1999: 251).

The implication of Oakley's position is clear. She perceives quantitative data as the route to conveying social trends and she embraces more qualitative approaches to dig deep into those social trends. That is, instead of paradigm wars, she has cleared the warzone with a more tolerant and expansive sets of approaches. Fitzsimons has also disrupted this dichotomy in her methodological decisions, using large data, which she gathered herself, and deep interviews to present a much more multi-faceted picture than either quantitative or qualitative on their own (2015). Similarly with Lynch, in her many publications over the years, but in particular, Lynch et al, shows that critical research can be derived from big numbers, depending on the standpoint of the researchers (2012). And there are reservoirs to draw on for students and beginning researchers. For example, Hurley uses quantitative data to support his argument that inequality is wider now than in the past (2014). We can cleverly use the Master's Tools to attack the Master's house (Lorde, 1984, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

If we are committed to equality and justice, the research we undertake has to reflect this. The nexus of knowledge, practice and research is the site of critical adult and community education, as it emerges more as a discipline in its own right. I have argued in this article that 'really useful research' has to embrace the learning from the 'really useful knowledge' and 'really useful practice' in order to take its place in this work. This means that it has to encompass quantitative research in addition to qualitative; it has to question new trends, such as 'evidence-based' research; it has to include a gender dimension if it is to create authentic application to social science; and, finally, it must interrogate each approach in terms of ethical positioning and emancipatory potential. That is, we make the road to 'really useful research' by walking, building on the radical foundations laid by Horton and Freire, (1990) and hooks (2003) focused on social and analyses of power, geared towards consciousness raising as a prelude to changing policy and practice.

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# A Design for Life: A consideration of the learning legacy of P.H. Pearse's *The Murder Machine*

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## **Abstract**

*In the centenary of the death of Patrick Henry Pearse – one of the leaders of Ireland's 1916 Rebellion – it is interesting to reflect on the relevance of his writing for contemporary approaches to lifelong and lifewide learning. Pearse's essay 'The Murder Machine' was forged within the tradition of progressive education movements in the early 20th century rooted in a social pedagogy that focused on the value of holistic education. He proposed that the purpose of formative educational experiences should prepare students in learning for life. Pearse, through his educational manifesto, highlighted dissonances between instrumentalism and holism in the state education of his day. His resounding argument that a just society is not just an economy reminds present-day educators and policy makers of the continuing relevance of this manifesto in its centenary year.*

**Keywords:** History of education; progressive education; holistic education; lifelong learning

This year's annual teacher conventions met amidst debates regarding a two-tiered pay scale for teachers in Irish education. Newly qualified teachers argue that they are disadvantaged as new entrants to the profession as a consequence of the government's fiscal rectitude to contain the effects of global financial crisis. Dr Marian McCarthy, Director of the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning at University College Cork, recalled Patrick Henry Pearse in her keynote address entitled 'A Teacher Affects Eternity' at the annual convention of the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) meeting in 2016 (McCarthy, 2016). McCarthy rhetorically invoked Pearse's essay entitled 'The Murder Machine' when asking how Irish society should appropriately value education. A century ago, Pearse similarly conjectured whilst critiquing

the value of education as a system based on payment by results. Alternatively, Pearse placed value on teachers fostering learning as a lifelong journey. Today, there is crucial requirement to foster learning as lifelong and lifewide from the outset of schooling precisely because of the complexity of global society.

In this article I will focus on Pearse's polemical essay 'The Murder Machine' as a manifesto that espouses the ideal of education as a lifelong and lifewide experience. Patrick Henry Pearse (1879-1916), also known by the gaelicised form of his name Pádraic or Pádraig Pearse, was an Irish teacher, barrister, poet, writer, nationalist and political activist who was one of the leaders of a rebellion during Easter Week in April 1916 against British sovereignty in Ireland. Following his execution in May 1916, Pearse came to be regarded by Irish nationalists as the embodiment of the rebellion. Pearse wrote 'The Murder Machine' as a progressive education manifesto. The decade before the First World War (1914-18) was the period, *par excellence*, of the manifesto across Europe in which futures were radically re-imagined (Danchev, 2011). Here, I invite readers to become reacquainted with themes integral to Pearse's philosophical enquiries: identity, holism, and learning as performance. His polemic argued that a just society is not just an economy that still makes his essay relevant since its initial printing a century ago.

'The Murder Machine, Pearse's most complete statement of educational philosophy, was published posthumously as a pamphlet after his execution in 1916. An early version of the essay had first appeared in the *Irish Review* in February 1913. The following year, a revision was published as 'An Ideal in Education' in the *Irish Review* in June 1914. The remainder of the pamphlet published in 1916 was composed of notes from a lecture Pearse had presented at the Dublin Mansion House in December 1912 (Pearse, 1924, p. 30). The pamphlet comprised a series of ongoing reflections on how progressive education could be applied to an Irish context. Pearse, writing in the Gaelic League's newspaper *An Claidheamh Soluis*, between 1903 and 1909, repeatedly emphasised the need for educational reform to secure the intellectual and political independence of Ireland. Rhetorically, Pearse denoted the British education in Ireland, in his day, as a "murder machine" in the sense that its rationale was to service the administration of the British Empire (Pearse, 1924, p. 3; Kiberd and Matthews, 2015, p. 225). His essay highlighted dissonances between the instrumentalism of British imperial education in Ireland and the holism of a new educational philosophy in a self-governing Ireland.

As so often during the Gaelic Revival (1891-1922), the principles discovered in the past were principles advocated for an imaginary future (Pearse, 1924, pp. 26-28). A key to enable an understanding of Patrick H. Pearse's educational philosophy was his exploration of the values of both national and personal identity formation. Pearse believed that the identity of a nation was reflected through its language. His visit to Belgium in 1904 was inspirational; there Pearse saw bilingual education in action in the schools of Flanders. Pearse, through the pages of *An Claidheamh Soluis*, between 1905 and 1907, explored the potential for a bilingual system in Ireland (Pearse, 1924, p. 41). For Pearse, language was central to national identity as he justified in 'The Murder Machine' by means of his perception of language as the self-expression of the national consciousness. The words and phrases of a language are always to some extent revelations of the mind of the race that has shaped its language. To the native Irish the teacher was *aite*, 'fosterer', the pupil was *dalta*, 'foster-child', the system was *aiteachas*, 'fosterage', words which we still retain as *oide*, *dalta* and *oideachas* (Pearse, 1924, p. 21).

The key to cultural authenticity for Pearse resided not only in a nation's language, but also by fostering a secure sense of identity for the individual learner. Patrick H. Pearse envisaged educational reform as rooted in promoting the education of the whole person as opposed to validating an externally imposed regulated educational system. Pearse, in 'The Murder Machine', expounded the fosterage metaphor to articulate his vision of holistic education. He acknowledged that the modern school was a state-controlled institution designed to produce workers for the state, and was in the same category with a dockyard or any other state-controlled institution that produced articles necessary to the progress, well being, and defence of the state. In this respect Pearse stressed parallels between education and manufacturing in the comparisons used to describe 'efficiency', 'cheapness' and the 'up-to-dateness' in the educational system (Pearse, 1924, p. 22). For Pearse, fosterage implied a foster-father or foster-mother, in essence, personhood at the heart of the educational experience, rather than an impersonal code of regulations intended to promote conformity rather than individuality as aspired to by holistic education (Pearse, 1924, p.26; Kiberd and Matthews, 2015, p. 226; McCarthy, 2016).

Internationalisation deeply influenced Pearse's thinking in the field of educational policy. He had visited Belgium in 1904 and during 1914 he visited the United States of America to raise much needed funds for his school St. Enda's established as a school for boys at Cullenswood House in Ranelagh in 1908, but moved to the Hermitage in Rathfarnham, nestled in the foothills of the

Dublin mountains, in 1910. The Hermitage is the site of the Pearse Museum <http://pearsemuseum.ie>. The school, intended to embody Pearse's educational theories with its child-centred curriculum, was in step with progressive education in Europe and the United States. Pearse had come into contact with Welsh, Belgian and other international proponents of the New Education Movement who all argued that the needs of individual children should be central to teaching and opposed the restrictions imposed by the examination-based state school system. The essence of the New Education Movement was rooted in a social pedagogy that advocated holistic educational experiences as proposed by Enlightenment philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827). The education at St Enda's was as much progressive as it was nationalistic, in parallel with innovations by educators like Dora and Bertrand Russell in England, John Dewey in America or Maria Montessori in Italy (Pearse, 1924, p. 29; Kiberd and Matthews, 2015, pp. 227-228).

Patrick Pearse's awareness of European developments in education can be seen through his promotion of learning through experience. The popularity of public pageants and dramas based on historical themes was a pan-European phenomenon before the First World War. In 1913 a public performance by the 'St Enda players' was praised in the pages of the Gaelic League newspaper for its revival of the national consciousness (Augusteijn, 2010; McCarthy, 2016). Pearse employed drama and role-play as a means to impress upon his pupils heroic values from Ireland's mythological past, values he hoped could be revived. Broadly, a legacy of 'The Murder Machine' is its conception of education as lifewide that holds the promise for a more holistic form of education in which people combine and integrate their learning (both formal and informal), their personal or professional development and their achievements.

In her Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) address, Marian McCarthy, a pioneer of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement in Irish third-level education, reminds us that a hundred years on, Patrick H. Pearse's words have an ironic and chilling reality with the demise of the Celtic Tiger, the brunt of the global economic crash in 2008, fiscal rectitude and austerity. These pressures speak of the debasement of education, rather than to the holistic expression of education as a lifelong journey of self-empowerment (McCarthy, 2016). As an educationalist, Pearse should be historically situated within a European context. Most of his educational philosophy was either directly inspired or borrowed from outside an Irish and British context. His

ideas on educational were modern and utopian in aspiration. Patrick Pearse's educational philosophy, as outlined in 'The Murder Machine', reminds educators and policy makers that a nation's richness lies in fostering the creativity of its citizens and that a just society is not simply an economy.

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