



The role of adult and community education in promoting equality in education

Flexible and Friendly

For the Bray Partnership Conference on Equality and Education: Across the
Spectrum of Lifelong learning.

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First of all I would like to thank Bray Partnership for inviting me here today. The topic on which I will speak is the role of adult and community education in promoting equality- Flexible and Friendly.

The question at the heart of this workshop is- does adult and community education promote equality?

I am not going to answer this but I will contribute my opinion which is based on twenty years of working in the adult and community education sector. The discussion that follows will then enable us to have a dialogue on this question.

Adult and community education are often said in the same breath but are they the same? Adult education provision in Ireland has a long history that includes the work done not just by the VECs but by the trade unions and other voluntary groups over many years in the last century. In looking for a definition of adult education I found two

1. The definition from the Murphy Report 1973 is *the provision and utilisation of facilities whereby those who are no longer participants in the full-time school system may learn whatever they need to learn at any period of their lives*
2. The second definition comes from the first and only White Paper on Adult Education 2000 and is defined as *systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training.*

Both definitions attempt to encapsulate a broad idea of adult education that can take place in many settings and that it is about more than course provision.

In 1973 words such as equality and social justice were not mentioned but the Murphy Report did attempt to describe an adult education that *had a critical and difficult role to play in a rapidly changing society if it is to seek to provide information, knowledge, skills and attitude to change which people may need in order to cope with changing conditions of individual, social and communal living.*

The White Paper 2000 advocated *a national programme of Adult Education within an overall framework of lifelong learning* based on the following priorities:-

Consciousness Raising, Citizenship, Cohesion, Competiveness, Cultural Development, Community Building.

This policy document was underpinned by three principles one of which is equality.

Equality in education means that we must look at the barriers that arise for different people in our society; socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation that

continue to hinder people's access to adult education in Ireland. In reality our present education system does little to remove these barriers. We have just seen the case of the school being set up in Nth Dublin- an Educate Together School set up in an emergency because our present primary school system gives preference to one religion. This barrier has come to the forefront because of overcrowding and lack of school buildings to cope with the growing diverse population in that area. In this particular area one community came together to address the problem and came up with their solution – but has it solved the inequality that existed and still exists? Not really but a broader solution is the one where DES is sanctioning a pilot community primary school to be set up under the VEC system. However any solution for this problem has to take into account the original issue of lack of facilities in new communities, it is more than an education issue, it is a planning and social exclusion issue. So now we have a much more complex problem.

Today in this paper I would like to explore how I think adult education and in particular community education works promotes equality and social justice.

A Theoretical Framework for Equality and Community Education

In the case of community education equality is a complex concept to define and it is challenging to understand how inequality works in practice. Let's start with looking at community education.

Community education is defined by two meanings

1. The Irish Government's first ever White Paper on Adult Education (2002) proposes two views on Community education "as an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community" (DES, 2000 pg110)
2. The second view sees community education in a more ideological sense "as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level...it is as an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes". (DES 2000 pg110)

In its policy document on community Education AONTAS describes community education.

Community education is a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community, and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within the community (AONTAS, 2004, pg6)

This definition reflects the capacity of community education to support participants in their struggle to understand the multiplicity of issues that they as individuals and as members of communities face. The document also states that

“Community Education has a two- fold, interconnected aim for participants

- the personal acquisition of skills, knowledge and development of potential
- Social and community empowerment and advancement” (AONTAS, 2000 pg7)

Clearly there is a range of approaches in relation to how community education is understood and defined. It is important as providers and educators that we understand the various definitions and reflect on our own thinking and understanding of community education. The first definition which sees community education as an extension of the service is quite functional whereas the second definition sees community education as a tool for change at personal and communal levels.

It is these elements that make community education distinct from traditional adult education and provides an equality lens through which to view education. Connolly (2003) shows that learning and education are not just psychological processes. The social relationships that make up society are hugely important to community education, and while it does respond to individual learning needs, it also develops with the individual a sense of community and social justice leading to collective action. While outcomes from community education may include acquisition of skills and knowledge, it is critical reflection on issues that sets the community education learner apart. Here lies the most important outcome – the ability to critically reflect- to understand issues of concern and power is crucial to community education. Community education not only meets the needs of individual learners in their own education development, but also addresses the needs of the community by ensuring the learners can analyse the society in which they live and at times engage in strategies for change (Connolly, 2003, pg16)

AONTAS Community Education Policy document 2004 clearly outlines how this can happen.

“Community Education has as its intention the empowerment of participants with the skills, knowledge and collective analysis to challenge oppression and to engage in action to bring about change” (AONTAS, 2004, pg19)

Community Education as defined above is intrinsically linked to community development and equality.

“The process of Community Development stresses the need to develop community awareness, engender group cohesiveness, and to promote self-reliance and collective action. This logically leads communities to seek changes at

policy and institutional levels, often highlighting the need for the redistribution of society's resources. (Kelleher and Whelan, 1992)

Community education attempts to provide learners with the tools to develop their own power and resources needed to address the problems in their communities. The principles of community development and community education are ones of inclusion, participation and diversity.

All these point to a type of education that respects people and values their experiences. Theories that I believe underpin this type of community education come from

- ✚ Adult development theory
- ✚ Feminist thinking on education for transformation
- ✚ Critical Theory

Theorists such as Paulo Freire, Jack Mezirow and Stephen Brookfield believed that it is important for people to understand the context of the society in which they live, know what has shaped how they view the world and ask critical questions about why and who controls resources and power. bell hooks and Carol Gilligan look at relationship and the learning environment as central to critical education. bell hooks in particular focuses on the role of the educator/tutor and how they must value conversation and storytelling of learners.

Compare these views with the equality framework put forward by UCD Equality Studies. This framework identifies five different interrelated dimensions of equality

Respect & Recognition

Love, Care & Solidarity

Resources

Power Relations

Working & Learning

I believe that the theoretical framework for community education is very well matched with the equality framework.

Community education works with local people, it involves some of the most marginalised groups in society. It is local, accessible, flexible and friendly. Why, because it is run by local people for the community so it is based on local needs. Community education puts the learner at the core of provision. In reality this means building the community education provision around the needs of the learners in that community. With the learner as the starting point, every aspect of the provision is carefully put in place such as:

The learning centre is local, in a community hall, adult education centre or health centre or school.

The environment is welcoming there may be someone there to meet the learners when they arrive. The room is clean and warm. Tea and coffee are available; learners are asked if they need anything. They are given respect and recognition- they are welcome.

The curriculum is built around the learners needs; courses can start off as getting to know each other then moving on to some more specific content. For pre-planned courses the learners are often asked previously what they would like to undertake. Building a curriculum with the learners is more time consuming and risky than providing a set menu of courses. Unfortunately a set menu of courses is a much more measurable output for providers and funders. The challenge for all of us is how to ensure that provision is really learner centred. Sometimes the learners say they would prefer to choose from a set menu but is this because there is often no alternative.

The tutor in this type of education must create the learning environment. They must have the ability to work with diverse groups and facilitate discussion on difference. The relationship between the tutor and learner is one of equality, on one side the tutor is there to bring their knowledge and on the other the learners bring their lived experiences. It is a skill to bring the knowledge and the lived experience together and build a good learning experience. In Freire's model of education for freedom learners must be empowered to voice their experiences, tutors must understand where the learners are coming from and together develop a critical awareness of the learning they are involved in. The learners must be encouraged question the learning and its relevance. I think the greatest waste is to hear someone say they learned nothing from that course. As educators we have a responsibility to ensure that each learner engages in a process of learning that enables them to be critically aware of how they view the world. (Freire 1972). As educators we must understand power relations in the learning environment. We must be able to recognise our own strengths and weaknesses and those of the learners. We must use methodologies that will shift the power balance from tutor to the group through more emphasis on conversation, dialogue than delivery of knowledge and skill.

The group is central to community education, while each learner comes as an individual the process of learning they engage in is group work. Group discussion is encouraged and facilitated; ground rules of respect, fairness, attentiveness to others, being non-judgemental and open to listening are laid down and minded. This process encourages the learners to engage with each other for learning and places the learning with each member not just the tutor. This process can be used in any learning setting be it a computer course, cookery course or communications. Working creatively will enable people to discover new skills and new knowledge and build a sense of cohesion and solidarity.

Supports such as childcare, literacy and one-to-one support are often in place.

This type of approach to education is no doubt learner friendly, flexible and fun. Many people come to community education having rejected traditional education or holding feelings of failure from past experiences. Some come with low self confidence and little self belief. Learner centred provision can enable them to overcome this and move to reach the potential they have. There are many examples of this type of provision, the Education Equality Initiative 2000-2006 supported many local projects to put in place learner centred provision based on promoting equality of opportunity. Many of these projects were successful in working with hard to reach groups such as older rural men, people with disabilities, women and Travellers and

ethnic minorities. While there was a range of processes and methodologies used by the different groups in EEI, what each project had in common was putting the learner at the centre and working out from there.

Community education delivered in this way has proved that it contributes to combating inequality. There are over 1000 community groups providing learner centred provision around Ireland. They are supported by a range of agencies but the central aim is promoting equality. This is not easy work and these groups face a range of challenges that include funding and administrative requirements that see education in a functional way. Education can work to either close down people's minds or open them up. Closing down is usually easier, cheaper and less of a challenge. The question for us today is to look at how can we really support, provide and deliver community education for equality.

How to promote equality through community education

Sample template on next page for combining the equality framework with community education. There are sample questions that you can ask of your provision included.

Using this type of approach gives a less top down approach to community education. Respect is given, relationship is valued, resources and power are distributed. This equality approach is based on inclusion and active participation and is a shift towards a bottom-up inclusive education.

Framework	Respect Recognition	Love, Care, Solidarity	Resources	Power	Working & Learning
Learning centre	What do you know about the Learner's experiences, values	Do you understand how difficult it is to return to learning	How can you make Room friendly? What can you spend?	Who controls Resources? Can you influence them?	Does centre look inviting? Is it warm? Is centre accessible?
Learning Environment	How is room set out? Is it like a school room?	Is learner made welcome? Is learner encouraged to participate?	Look at lighting, furniture, materials . Is tea/coffee available?	Who decides how room is set up?	Would like to learn here?
Curriculum	Are the experiences of the learner taken into account? Is difference looked at?	Are the learners need understood? Is emotional learning valued?	Are the materials user friendly? Are they relevant to learner? Is there one for every learner? Do they cost anything?	Who decides the content? Do the learners have a say? Who decides what type of course?	Does the course enable questioning? What type of learning is most valued?
Educator/ Tutor	Do they understand community education processes? Have they empathy with different groups?	Do they understand difference and value it?	What skills/knowledge beyond the subject skill do they have?	Do they understand power in the learning setting? Do they facilitate learning?	Are they inclusive of experience as a learning tool? Is learning related to the experiences in the group?
Supports	How is the learner targeted? Advertisement or outreach?	Are the barriers that learners face understood?	What is in place as support-childcare, learning etc	How is the decision on support made?	Do the supports work? Is evaluation used?

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