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The Adult Learner

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Editorial comment

In the past decade, there has been a growing focus on the issue of quality and its management across the broad field of adult learning. Concern stems partly from the need to increase competitiveness in a global economy, but also from the demand for public services to demonstrate accountability and ability to achieve results. The relative importance of quality is demonstrated by the place it is given in policy documents such as the European Community report on *Quality Indicators of Lifelong Learning* (2002). The report represented the work of representatives from thirty-five European countries, the OECD and UNESCO and outlined specific quantitative and qualitative data which might be used as indicators to evaluate, promote and support planning in the field of lifelong learning. This report and the ongoing focus on quality reflects the breadth and complexity of the lifelong learning process itself and the need to have mechanisms for quality assurance, evaluation and monitoring to ensure constant progression towards quality improvement and striving for excellence.

The emergence of quality as a key issue in education has also led to the development of a plethora of custodians legitimised by policies that are handed down from politicians, policy-makers, administrators and heads of institutions to teachers, learning support staff, learners etc. In a short space of time, a quality industry has grown up creating an ever-increasing bureaucratic load on those responsible for the actual delivery of education and training.

The 2017 call for contributions for the *Adult Learner* welcomed articles with a focus on quality in adult learning and we are delighted to be able to publish articles which focus directly or indirectly on this theme. The articles are divided into two sections. In section 1, there are six articles which present different perspectives on critical debates in adult learning and in section 2, there are a further two articles which are case studies of practice.

The first two opening articles focus overtly on quality as an issue in adult learning. In *Rhetoric and reality: The Irish Experience of Quality Assurance*, Camilla Fitzsimons traces the growth and development of quality management in Ireland, venturing to define what quality might mean. She examines the tensions which exist around the quality debate noting the inconsistent moderation and incongruence between the wider values of quality and a government-led employability discourse. The article reports on a study of educators who participated in an on-line, anonymous survey noting that adult educators do care about quality whatever that means to them. The survey uncovers philosophical tensions in how quality assurance should be approached. Finally, she returns to the question of whether our understanding and measurement of quality is really linked to a neoliberal, market-oriented, utilitarian agenda?

In the second article, *Towards a Quality Framework for Adult Learners in Recovery: Ensuring quality with equity*, Patricia Doyle describes a participative approach to curriculum development for adults in addiction recovery across the European Union and efforts to conceive of a quality-learning programme with equity for adult learners in recovery. This links the question of quality to the concept of inequality and raises the question of whether indeed discussions on quality can be had in isolation from discussion on inequality and the need for our practices to take this into account.

A third article in Section 2, offered by Eimer Cadogan, Liam McCarthy and Mary Mangan takes a look at what quality might actually mean in a community family communication course. The writers examine how participants benefitted from a course, both on a personal and interpersonal level. They note that the measurement of quality may go beyond dominant discourses related to quality through developing ways of measuring quality which are consistent with andragogy and the principles which underpin the concept.

Other articles while not overtly focusing on quality as an issue, do raise issues which are inevitably linked to the broad framework of quality management. Lynn Russell's article on leadership looks at the pedagogical leadership within the further education Vocational Education and Training (VET) context while Jerry O'Neill and Susan Cullinane remind us of the need for critical professional development for adult and community educators, also a key issue in promoting quality in across the field of lifelong learning. Alex McKillican's contribution raises questions about the need to embrace radical dialogue in Freirean adult

literacy practice and inevitably questions arise about how we include radical approaches to adult learning in an all-embracing quality framework. Finally, Sarah Coss reminds us of the importance of informal learning both in and outside the classroom with Freda McCormick, touching on a post-retirement perspective, raises questions about how the needs of older learners might be included in a quality framework for adult learning which works.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the contributors for their thought-provoking contributions. I would also like to thank the members of the Editorial Board and all those who gave up their time freely to review and comment on articles submitted. We are very grateful to our funders SOLAS and the AONTAS Management Board for their ongoing support for the journal. The journal is published yearly in the autumn and our open access policy means it can be read widely in every country. We do hope you enjoy reading the journal and that you find something with special meaning. We also welcome any feedback that you would like to make.

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SECTION ONE

Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning

Rhetoric and reality: The Irish experience of Quality Assurance

CAMILLA FITZSIMONS

Abstract

This paper shares the Irish adult educator's experiences of Quality Assurance (QA). Educators are found to be largely supportive of QA but contradictions emerge. These include philosophical tensions, inconsistent moderation and incongruence between the stated values of QA and a more powerful government-led employability discourse.

Keywords: Quality, quality assurance (QA), accreditation, government policy, evaluation, retrospective and prospective QA, managerialism, neoliberalism.

Introduction

Unless I am mistaken, most adult educators are spending more and more time talking about quality. This hasn't happened in isolation as, since the 1990s, there has been momentous political interest in quality in education. Many countries have created state agencies, each of which are legally responsible for guaranteeing quality or, to use dominant terminology, for 'Quality Assurance' (QA). Across Europe, the Irish regulatory authority, *Quality and Qualifications Ireland* (QQI), link with the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education,* and the *European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training* (EQAVET) network. These relationships form part of wider policy convergence through the *Bologna* (1999) and the lesser known *Copenhagen* (2002) Declarations. Both agreements commit participants to transferable, comparable and measurable programmes throughout and to QA cooperation (European Higher Education Area, 1999; European Commission, 2002). To comply with these agreements, many nations have implemented national QA policies, each of which conform to European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) that were first published in 2005 (EGS, 2015). State involvement in quality in education has become so taken-for-granted, it is often rarely questioned.

Most adult educators also care about quality. One could argue adult education's rootedness in a critique of traditional education (Dewey, 1997; Freire 1972) and its emphasis on practitioner self-reflection (Brookfield, 1987; McCormack; 2015) ensure the pursuit of quality forms a cornerstone of practice. Over the years, a number of practitioner-conceived guidance tools have emerged such as the National Adult Learning Agency (NALA) *Guidelines for Adult Literacy Work*, first published in 1985 and the *Women's Community Education Quality Assurance Framework* published by AONTAS in 2005. These guidelines support democratically-oriented principles of practice and help document a longstanding tradition of collaborative evaluation between educators and participants/learners. It isn't only adult educators who care about quality. Self-conceived peer-evaluations in universities have an equally long history as academics sought fresh perspectives to enhance their teaching practice (Harvey, 2004). Although less documented, developments in Irish Further Education (FE) usually follow British practice (Geaney, 2008) where practitioner guides have long advocated collaborative evaluation to enhance quality (for example in Walkin, 1990).

Given this longstanding interest in quality, one would be forgiven for assuming educators would welcome the recent, top-down, flood of legislative and policy developments. International literature suggests this isn't the case revealing at best indifference, at worst hostility, towards top-down imposed QA frameworks (Newton; 2000; Anderson, 2006; Cartwright, 2007; Coffield and Edward, 2009; Seema *et al.*, 2016).

This contribution addresses a gap in Irish literature by uncovering both benefits and frustrations gathered via an anonymised on-line survey about QA which was completed by 136 adult educators in early 2017. As well as reporting on survey findings, this paper reviews some literature, policy and legislation. Working as a critical researcher (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005), the hypothesis I bring is that, instead of being politically neutral, QA cannot be separated from a wider neoliberalisation of society. This is where the market is considered sacrosanct, where privatisation is revered and where citizens are transformed into consumers (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010). This socio-political model has profoundly affected adult and community education as, for the neoliberal state, activities beyond employability are at best seen as an indulgence, at worst seen as pointless.

The elusive nature of quality

So what does quality actually mean? Everyday use of the word mostly indicates the superiority of one item/occurrence over another. Take for example the quality of a coat. This is likely to be decided on by comparing the fabric or the fineness of the stitching. Difficulties arise when we realise that quality often means different things to different people depending on each person's values, subjective judgment and cultural context. Let's think about that coat again. Where one person may prefer wool, another's idea of quality could be animal fur, an abhorrence to many. When discussing quality in education, such relativity is equally present. Commonly used terms such as 'standards', 'best practice' or whether something is 'fit for purpose' are open to scrutiny. What criteria are used to set standards? Who decides which practice is best? Whose purpose should education be fit for? Given these debates, it isn't surprising that attempts to define quality in education are largely ineffective (Green, 1994; Stubbs, 1994; Newton, 2000; Coffield and Edward, 2009; Anderson, 2006; Cartwright, 2007; Doherty, 2008; Elassey, 2015).

Despite this ambiguity, an "enhanced model" of QA has emerged which focuses on improvement, especially in student-learning, effective evaluation and clear lines of management and accountability (Boyle and Boden, 1997). In everyday practice, QA generally describes two processes: ongoing programme reviews, mostly of course-work, which culminates in internal and external approval; and lengthier less frequent, in-depth reviews that examine all aspects of an education provider, again with an internal and external dimension. Biggs (2001) differentiates two approaches to QA the first of which is a bottom-up *prospective* model that is forward-looking, holistic, qualitative, educational and centred on reflective self-assessment. He contrasts this with a more dominant *retrospective* approach that is backward-looking, quantitative, concerned with measuring quality against externally imposed standards and frequently includes a value for money perspective.

The growth of QA

Up to the 1980s and 1990s, education was mostly conceived as a collective responsibility and as a citizen's right so people could realise their social, intellectual and occupational potential. European policies on lifelong learning altered this perspective through a powerful, utilitarian discourse that reinterpreted its principle function as to support economic growth (Grummell, 2014; Hurley, 2014). Governments no longer created employment but created *employability* (Browne *et al.*, 2003) where each person became accountable

for their own up-skilling as demanded by a global labour-market. A process of *new public managerialism* facilitated neoliberalism's macro-economic vision through substantial policy reform (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Fitzsimons, 2017). This managerialism infused an ideology of commerce and measurability into the public realm where services once funded on the basis of need, were resourced on their capacity to offer value for money and to satisfy market demands. One consequence was an influx of industry models of QA; representations where standardisation, uniformity and measurability against internationally agreed benchmarks were already well established (Cartwright, 2007; Doherty, 2008; Elassey, 2015).

Ireland's QA managerialist trajectory

The first significant Irish QA policy intervention was within *Education for a Changing World* (Government of Ireland, 1992). Its foreword argued for radical reforms to bring Ireland in line with European employability paradigms. Although much focus within *Education for a Changing World* (1992) was on access, it also advocated for an enterprise culture, an ethos of work-readiness and a standardised, modular approach to education with considerable emphasis on QA. *Education for a Changing World* acknowledged the immeasurable nature of quality and supported holistic review but contradictorily encouraged measurable outputs, a value for money paradigm, performance indicators and external monitoring (Government of Ireland, 1992, p. 190-191).

Around the same time, key adult education policies namely the green paper *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 117) and the white paper *Learning for Life, White Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 163) supported the introduction of QA. Both endorsed external monitoring believing in the benefits of external perspectives. Whilst much weight is placed on these two policy documents, they are only as powerful as accompanying legislative change and in the same year as the release of the green paper, *The Education Act, 1998* provided the first statutory framework for Irish education since the Vocational Education Committee (VEC) Act in 1930 initiating a legal focus on QA at all levels (Government of Ireland, 1998). One year later the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act* (Government of Ireland, 1999), created a qualifications' authority which launched the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), a framework that lists 'quality' as a foundational value (NFQ, 2003, p. 6). The Irish NFQ standardised outputs, and binately divided achievements across Further Education (levels 1 – 6) and Higher Education (levels 7 – 10).

Ireland's tiered framework of qualifications formed part of an international trend in qualifications' frameworks and their omnipresence is important in terms of QA. For the first time, quality could be numerically measured through fixed learning outcomes across the domains of 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'competencies'. Qualifications' frameworks have become ubiquitous in education. This is despite little evidence to support their usefulness (Allias, 2014) and much criticism of their reductionist approach to intricate and elusive concepts (Harvey, 2004; Hussey and Smith, 2008, Fitzsimons and Dorman, 2013; Fitzsimons, 2017, pp. 171-173).

In 2012, the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act* was passed into law. This established QQI and solidified government responsibility to ensure each provider creates QA policies (section 28[1]). QQI's core statutory guidelines (2016) promote a holistic approach to QA and recognise multiple educational contexts. However, it also supports measurability and accountability, especially through its guidelines for documenting QA (section 2) and through learner assessment by measuring achievements (section 6).

The contradictory nature of QA

This hybrid approach to QA has created a rhetoric of support but a reality that is rife with contradictions. Although many descriptions of QA support multidimensional approaches to appraisals, organisational reviews, governance, values, teaching practice and learner outcomes (Harvey and Green, 1993; Green, 1994; Doherty, 2008, p. 260), state-imposed policies such as the ESG (2015) and QQI (2016) are equally peppered with the language of accountability and measurability with quality benchmarks largely unsympathetic to contextual and ideological differences. Consider for example the difference between quality determinations within politically-oriented, often non-accredited, community education that seeks egalitarian change (Crowther *et al.*, 1999; Connolly, 2003), and with skills-based, behaviourist-oriented, programmes that support low-paid, work-readiness. Philosophical dichotomisations such as these raise questions about the nature of knowledge; itself an elusive and slippery concept. When learning is limited to dominant ideas about knowledge this frequently excludes women's histories and epistemologies (De Beauvoir; 1949/2009; hooks, 1994), is deeply west-centric (Alvers and Farqui, 2011) and privileges a middle-class experience (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). It also ignores the role of traditional education in perpetuating rather than alleviating inequality (Lynch and Baker, 2005).

Proponents of QA frequently argue there is space for all philosophical approaches signposting policy-support for provider choice around ethos and practices. However, it is impossible to guarantee this autonomy when it is contextualised amidst a policy-led employability paradigm that interprets education as little more than a stimulant to economic growth; a perspective reflected in Ireland's current *Further Education and Training Strategy* (SOLAS, 2014) and its *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

Some may also argue that ongoing consultation ensured educators themselves were central to the design of QA policies. Such shared decision-making is not unique to Ireland but is an integral feature of neoliberal policy-development that promises to transform citizenship into an active over passive pursuit (Swyngedouw, 2005). Again this process is contradictory as, rather than deepen democracy, consultation has created an illusion of shared decision-making with power largely retained by the state. When educators seek to contribute, they frequently meet a fortified neoliberal outlook that is difficult to penetrate. Consultation is also hampered by considerable mistrust in Janus-faced governments who simultaneously undermine practice through harsh funding cuts that, in Ireland, have eroded a once vibrant Community Sector (Harvey, 2012; Bissett, 2015).

The sheer volume of policies to consult with also creates a culture of consultation fatigue. For many working within public Education and Training Boards (ETBs), the precarious nature of their employment further complicates their capacity to truly engage. As precarity undermines occupational identity (O'Neill, 2015), actions outside of the classroom are overshadowed by job insecurity and are often unpaid.

Given these shaky foundations it isn't surprising that the supportive potential of external examination can get lost amidst an international culture of bureaucratisation, monitoring and surveillance where significant cultural power is awarded to external aspects of QA. Research reveals a negative power-dynamic where relationships between external examiners and providers can be distanced and with a common misunderstanding of contexts (Biggs, 2001, p. 230) and where student-educator relationships can be under-appreciated (Cartwright, 2007, p. 297). Coffield and Edwards (2009) argue persistent continuous improvement paradigms contribute to demands for unobtainable objectives which instil a fear of external monitoring, whilst, in another study

external monitoring is described as a stressful time during which educators feel controlled (Seema *et al.*, 2016, p. 121).

Rhetoric and reality – the Irish experience

This research gathers experiences from n136 educators who participated in an on-line, mixed-methods, anonymous survey-questionnaire which was designed and distributed using the Bristol Online Survey (BOS) software package. The survey-link was circulated via gatekeepers to the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN), the Further Education Network (FEN) and chosen Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The survey-link was also sent to providers listed by QQI. The survey contained three quantitative questions: 1) asking if educators were working within FE or HE Quality Assurance, 2) identifying which model best describes their experiences, and 3) measuring the perceived impact on teaching. Each question also invited qualitative comments. Additionally, there were two open-ended questions: 1) seeking stories from the field, and 2) inviting educators to leave further comments. Data was organised through open-coding allowing dominant themes to emerge and ensuring each finding is named. Given the volume of responses, this paper is limited in that each individual contribution cannot be included. A second limitation is that those who contribute are likely to be those with the strongest feelings, both positive and negative, about QA.

Dominant QA models

Ninety percent of survey respondents work within QQI levels 1 – 6. Eight percent use HE models of QA and 2% cite "other". This confirms a shift from historically close relationships with university accreditation to newer associations with the overseers of FE accreditation, a shift that occurred because of the accessibility, rather than suitability, of these awards (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 175).

When asked to decide if their experiences of QA are 'prospective' or 'retrospective' (Biggs, 2001), two-thirds of respondents identify with a managerialist, retrospective model of QA.

Table 1 –Retrospective versus prospective QA

Please indicate which of these models most accurately describes the model of QA you experience in your work	
"Retrospective – this is a top-down model of QA where external examination/ authentication reviews previously completed work to make sure it meets externally imposed standards. Often this approach is quantitative and closed."	64%
"Prospective - this is a bottom up model of QA where standards are set internally and with a focus on the present and the future. External examination/ authentication is qualitative and sets out to determine if self-evaluation methods are fit for purpose."	36%

Twenty-seven educators commented further with the strongest sentiment being a desire for prospective over retrospective models. Typical comments are, "I feel that we should be working towards a prospective model", and "I long for a prospective model!" Another relays, "we are hopeful that the FET system is moving towards a prospective model of QA within the next year to 18 months".

Multiple contributors claim a retrospective model is imposed by external forces with some adhering to an alternative, prospective approach within their organisation as captured below.

> We follow QQI requirements which are best described in the retrospective model. However, in actual practice we carry out the prospective model and the retrospective model is then applied by QQI.

One voice suggests a prospective model is used but without dissemination throughout the organisation. Finally, a minority support retrospective approaches believing they are most suitable for some programmes.

Impact on teaching practice

A central principle within QA is the desire to improve teaching standards (QQI, 2016). Respondents were thus asked to react to the statement *"my experience is that quality assurance has enhanced the quality of my teaching practice"*. A majority of 65% (n87) answer "yes", 27% (n36) answer "no" and 8% (n11) answer "don't know". Forty-seven (36%) comment further. From the yes camp, the principal reasons are 1) QA's perceived role in preventing complacency and 2) the benefits of feedback from moderators. However, the majority of comments are from the 35% of contributors (n47) who answer "no" or "don't know". One respondent states "quite the opposite" continuing "the amount of time and energy that has

to be spent on QA considerably constrains the amount of time I have to spend planning my teaching". This is echoed elsewhere,

> I have less time to focus on pedagogical research and lesson preparation as I am filling in repeated forms. QA has become an exercise in paperwork as opposed to an instructive quality resource.

Some voices offer a more paradoxical perspective,

> An outright 'no' is probably not quite right as QA processes have caused me, in the past, to get quite critical about forms of evaluation – so, by accident, QA has helped me become a more critically reflective educator of assumptions behind managerialist approaches to QA. If you follow.

And,

> I wouldn't say it has enhanced it but I also wouldn't say it has reduced it either. It does impose restrictions but it also provides a standard to reach/ adhere to. It stops complacency creeping in.

Frequently, the NFQs learning outcomes approach is singled out for causing tensions between the needs of individuals and the pressures to teach to a restrictive curriculum.

Stories of QA in practice

Sixty-three educators (46%) answered the question "If there is a particularly negative story or experience, or a particularly positive story or experience you have had with QA can you share it here?" Many respondents share how contradictory experiences with both 'Internal Verifiers' (those internal to an education provider with responsibility for QA) and 'External Authenticators' (those approved by QQI and invited into an organisation to act as an external reviewer) can undermine confidence and create mistrust. One comment that captures overriding sentiment is,

> QA is beneficial if it is adopted by all with the same spirit, however EAs can differ in point of view and can sometimes feel that their view or method of achieving the LOs is the only way, this, I hope, will change with the introduction of new training for EAs and the greater cooperation between ETBs.

Differences can be profound and can contribute to both emotional and laborious dimensions of QA both of which are underpinned by hierarchical power-relationships. To give some examples,

> I had a particularly negative experience with an EA where the person did not recognise the value of the different methodologies I used in the assessment, such as role play. The EA also questioned how I dispersed the marks. As a result, the student portfolios were not submitted for certification. I had to retrospectively change the marking to fit with what the EA wanted and resubmit. Another EA evaluated my work and found nothing wrong with the original process used. This caused an enormous amount of stress and worry. The inconsistency between EAs is alarming!

From a separate interaction with an IV,

> The centre decided that the 25+ portfolios I had submitted did not have enough detail regarding the marking scheme in the assignment brief…I disagreed strongly but was overruled and subsequently spent a week of full time unpaid work writing ridiculously over-detailed marking rationales for each portfolio separately justifying the mark given in order for them not to be rejected internally. I subsequently met the person in charge of QQI in the supermarket, who apologised to me profusely and said that all my work was of course completely unnecessary but that the centre had insisted on my doing it despite her saying it was unnecessary.

This isn't the only time a marking scheme was rejected by one moderator only to be embraced by another, a situation described as both time-consuming and demoralising. Another voice raises concern about "high standards of work being constantly nit-picked for errors through EA and IV processes" and a fixation with presentation over content is revealed. One educator refers to "the obsession with student portfolios", another where "we have had externals who are more concerned with the colour of folders that the learning content!" In another contribution,

> Over the last number of years based on EA and IV reports we have had rigorous procedures and policies put in place. It has all become about the portfolio rather than the student and significant learning. Re-creation of mainstream education which has failed our students first time round.

One speaks about a loss of trust when "questioned by an IV on the extent to which I had read my student's work", a judgment determined because the educator deliberately chose not to correct a spelling mistake with pen. There was no consideration for student-educator relationships when supporting an adult-learner scarred by a negative school experience. Other concerns relate to EAs who are not experts in the field of study they are moderating, to providers reportedly not implementing QQI guidelines, to the problematic nature of cross-moderation, and repeatedly of a heavy administrative burden.

Twenty percent of experiences shared are positive with most referring to the benefits of feedback. One contribution captures sentiment sharing,

> Overall our experience with External Examiners has been very positive. Their feedback is normally constructive and helpful and generally leads to some form of course improvement for future cohorts of students.

Further thoughts shared

Fifty-two percent (n71) of contributors responded to the question "*What other thoughts do you have about quality assurance that you would like to share?*" A spectrum of responses emerge ranging from "QQI QA policy is worse than useless!!" to "QA works! but difficult to implement QA without teaching staff feeling as if QA is something to be dreaded." Three recurring themes emerge. The first of these is a re-assertion of support for QA including its focus on measurability and standardisation. Amongst these responses there is a sub-theme - that uniform standards are not currently being achieved. The locus of blame shifts with some interrogating QQI guidelines described as "not clear" and in constant flux. Others seek to mirror practices in the school system where there is a standardisation of assessments and materials. This contribution captures this perspective.

> QA is necessary and well intentioned, but unfortunately is open for misinterpretation. I think that the amount of work that goes into the whole process has become beyond a joke, and I think it would be easier and more appropriate at this stage if properly qualified people designed the assignment briefs along with the module descriptors so that the rest of us can get down to teaching and stop wasting all this time.

Others blame educators and providers for the absence of unified standards and express concern about differing provider expectations across NFQ levels.

A second, contradictory and equally strong theme opposes uniform standards believing these to be incompatible with the heterogeneity of adult education. Two chosen contributions echo this.

> We are dealing with people not industry or business. In community education we are often dealing with the most disadvantaged for most of whom school was not a good fit. QA is placing restrictions on the idea of adults setting their own agenda in education.

And,

> I agree our students are entitled to a quality service, not a Mickey Mouse. That said for the most part, in the name of QA, we have got rid of what we had; learner centred adult education based on the needs of the learner. I do believe it really depends on the ethos of management and tutors.

A third recurring theme, and one that emerges throughout the survey, is dissatisfaction with administrative demands of QA. Although QQI documentation suggests QA administration should be "integrated into normal activities" (QQI, 2016, p. 9), this isn't how educators experience it as captured in the extract below.

> Nothing more than a box ticking exercise. Is not effective or fit for purpose. The main reason for this is that there are no resources allocated to ensuring QA is effective. Lecturers and teachers are heavily burdened with a crippling amount of administration work and there is no space for serious QA.

The expression 'tick-box' that appears in the above quote is repeatedly used. To give an example,

> We are corporatizing education into a didactic, tick box approach which serves the externally imposed standards regime.

From another,

> Learner's needs should be paramount…the ticking of boxes should come next, but in this system and to my horror, I'm afraid sometimes, the learners' needs can be overlooked.

This final contribution, captures many of the power-laden experiences and emotions surrounding QA.

> I was struck how much internal QA processes [are] dictated by the structure, style and content of summative portfolios and the myriad supporting documents (often outnumbering student's work) that they contained. I tried to work holistically and with the themes that emerged from the groups – it was hard for QQI-interpreted processes to deal with this. I used to end up writing long narrative pieces at the front of folders explaining, and justifying, to IVs and EAs the sometimes untraditional composition of folders. It used to make IVs in particular a bit anxious. We never, as tutors, had any conversations with the EAs about our work (good or bad) – just vague comments and big relieved thumbs-up from coordinators. A very one-way QA process.

Findings

In other survey findings there is praise for provider flexibility in the assessment of learning, disquiet about educators teaching modules they are not subject experts in, and concern that some modules are outdated. This is illustrated through the comment "I had to ask my students to send a fax as it was on the module descriptor, the hardest part was finding a fax." QQI are criticised for being unavailable to providers, and providers are criticised for not engaging with QQI. One believes that awards at the lower rungs of the NFQ face greater scrutiny and two respondents believe quality standards have fallen since QA was formalised through QQI. Repeatedly the QA fees structure is blamed for squeezing out smaller providers. One community educator is worried about future institutional capacity sharing,

> We are very concerned about reengagement and validation of programmes …we need support / mentoring and are also very concerned about costs of developing the new QA and reengagement costs [and] validation of programmes.

Conclusion

Despite its illusive nature, adult educators do care about quality. Outside perspectives are welcomed where less entrenched perspectives can nurture reflective capacities and can enhance a person's skills-set. However, this study uncovers philosophical tensions in how QA should be approached. Some seek homogenised, standardised accreditation not dissimilar to practices common within the school system. Others resist this model viewing it as incongruent with person-centred, contextualised approaches that are fundamental to adult education. Symptomatic of these tensions, the study uncovers a variety of

experiences, both positive and negative, with internal and external moderation. Given the contested nature of quality, it also uncovers a failure to achieve standard outcomes even by those who support this approach.

If implemented, in a prospective, forward-thinking way, QA has the capacity to support divergent philosophies. This isn't the case though as, although QQI and other international regulatory authorities seek to respect provider-autonomy and to devolve policy design, they cannot extract themselves from a more powerful, employability discourse which reveals the true colours of the neoliberal state. In the shadow of a power-laden culture of surveillance, QA, perhaps unwittingly, helps monitor the implementation of neoliberalism's restrictive, market-oriented, utilitarian agenda.

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Towards a Quality Framework for Adult Learners in Recovery: Ensuring Quality with Equity

PATRICIA DOYLE

Abstract

The RECOVEU project is an effort to conceive of a quality-learning programme with equity for adult learners in recovery. It emerged in the context of European recommendations that member states support recovering users to access education in order to improve their chances of achieving social integration. However, by privileging the voices of those directly impacted by addiction/recovery and by applying the framework of recovery capital it has created a forum for adult learning that has at its core personal, social and cultural transformation.

Keywords: Global capitalism/addiction, quality, equity, recovery capital, personal, social, cultural transformation

Introduction

This paper is based on the findings of RECOVEU: a participative approach to curriculum development for adults in addiction recovery across the European Union. This is an initiative that brings together partners from the United Kingdom (UK), Cyprus (CYP), Romania (RO), Italy (ITA) and Ireland (IRL). The research project ran from January 2014 to December 2016 and was designed to support the aims of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme by improving the learning opportunities of a group, which is particularly at risk of social exclusion and marginalisation.

Context

UNESCO's 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE *111*) promotes the concepts of participation, inclusion and equity and clearly states that 'no individual should be excluded from quality learning opportunities on the basis of their social, cultural, linguistic, economic, educational and other

backgrounds' (2016, p. 151). Despite the commitment made by many countries at the sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) to implement the recommendations of the GRALE *11* Report (2009) it remains the case that in most countries, participation rates in adult education are very low. Moreover, in terms of inclusion and equity, the low skills trap highlighted in UNESCO's (2009) report is still very much in evidence, and consistently shows that those adults that are most in need of education and training are the least likely to participate in learning.

RECOVEU was conceived in the context of European recommendations that member states support recovering drug users to access education in order to improve their chances of social integration. While initially one of the key aims of the project was to assess the impact of participation on self-efficacy and sustained participation in learning, their continuous prioritisation of *recovery* as pre-requisite, resulted in research participants changing the research focus. This shifted to include the contributions that these learning activities might make to sustained participation in both *recovery* and *learning*. Crucially, by reconceptualising the concept of human capital and by incorporating other forms of interlinking capital, collectively referred to as Recovery Capital (Burns and Marks, 2013) in the learning programme, RECOVEU acknowledges that a quality access to learning programme with equity for people in recovery, cannot simply focus on the individual learner but will of necessity, have as its goal personal, social, cultural and political transformation. Anything less would be, to use the colloquial phrasing that is part and parcel of the folk wisdom of recovery groups, the definition of insanity that is, repeating the same failures over and over expecting a different result (McAleenan, 2016).

The 'Quality' of the Market Model

RECOVEU emerged in the immediate aftermath of the most severe economic crisis the world has seen since the Great Depression. In the name of recovery, banks, financial institutions and bondholders were saved from the repercussions of their addictive forms of excess, an enabling process that has left a great deal of the world suffering post traumatic stress. In human terms, this has had a devastating effect on the conditions in which people are forced to live and has had a further debilitating effect on historically disempowered communities across the globe. These are the same communities that White claims are in urgent need of cultural revitalization, meaning to describe the damage that is inflicted on them by the abuse of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) (2009).

A Focus Group research phase underpinned the project as partners gathered qualitative data with two target populations: *service users* and *service providers* (Table 1). Cross-cultural data in the form of Focus Group Partner Summaries were then analysed. This paper is based on the findings of this research.

Table 1. Groups delivered and numbers of participants

Partner	Groups with service users	Groups with service providers	Pilot groups	Total service users	Total service providers	Total participants per partner
P1 – Staffordshire University – UK	1	2		5	10	15
P2 – CARDET – Cyprus	2	1		6	6	12
P3 – SDP – Romania	2	2	1	9	14	23
P4 – SASNSAT – Italy	2	2		8	10	18
P5 – Soilse – Ireland	2	2	1	16	8	24
Total project	9	9	2	44	48	92

Focus Group Overview. Full version available at www.recoveu.org

Quality Education – Looking at the Bigger Picture

The focus of the current United Nations Human Development Report (2016) is on universal development. While an earlier report highlighted the negative impact of globalisation indicating that at that time, 'the gap between rich and poor had reached grotesque proportions' (1992, p. 2) the current report acknowledges that the process of globalisation cannot be rolled back, therefore the future challenge is to ensure that no one gets left behind in the process (2016). Furthermore, the World Bank's Education Strategy 2020 (2011) does not illuminate the way for the implementation of education as a human right nor does it set out the mechanisms whereby quality education for all can be

achieved in places where it is most needed (Klees *et al.*, 2012). Rather, this key global player in the field of education continues to operate on the limiting assumption that people are poor because they lack education rather than that they lack education because they are kept in poverty (Hickley-Hudson, 2002).

On the other hand, the negative effects of globalisation have been well documented. For example, it has been argued that the most recent global economic crisis has led to an increased economization of education, creating a value for money approach to the notion of quality, while focusing on the outputs of education rather than on the learning process and its conditions (European Youth Forum, 2013). Furthermore, the argument is made that education has been 'incorporated into an agenda of wealth production at nation state level via discourses related to the knowledge economy, the knowledge society and more recently the enterprise society' (Patrick, 2013, p. 2) and that employability is the primary goal of educational policies and reforms the impact of which is that the person comes to view him/herself as a commodity, to be bought and sold in the marketplace. In addition, the pervasive influence of human capital theory has been felt globally. As Hurley points out, in the Irish case:

> There is little critique in the public policy area of the extent to which it has come to colonise the entire spectrum of lifelong learning – including adult education – so much of what passes as best practice can be seen to spring from human capital theory (2015, p. 25).

The RECOVEU project offers one such critique.

RECOVEU – Adult Learning for Recovery and Social Change

Despite its repeated failure, Watkins notes that 'the application of the neo-liberal economic model to all spheres of life including education has not been seriously re-examined' (2010, p. 31). However, when applied to the globalised phenomenon of drug abuse we see that it has come under increased scrutiny. Indeed, the field of addiction/recovery has undergone a transformative change that involves a shift in focus from the pathology of addiction towards an exploration of the internal and external resources that can be drawn on to initiate and sustain recovery from severe alcohol and other drugs (AOD) problems (White and Cloud, 2008). The aim of this now global movement is to organise and mobilise people to promote the rights *of* and resources *for* recovery while simultaneously highlighting the barriers *to* and supports *for* participation in an educational programme designed *by* and *for* people in recovery.

Working with partners across five countries, the RECOVEU Project developed open access resources to reflect these values and approaches, including five e-learning modules on the themes of: Digital Literacy; Recovery and Resilience; Learning to Learn; Recovery and Community; Recovery and Employability.

Women and Quality Learning with Equity

The RECOVEU project does not exclusively target women. However, the findings indicate that just as in recovery, women often need additional supports to access adult learning programmes. A review of the international literature on quality in education notes that any framework used to conceptualise educational quality is necessarily value-based (Barrett *et al.*, 2006). The RECOVEU project is an approach to adult learning that is fundamentally learner centred, in that the beneficiaries of a programme of learning that they themselves have created set the learning aims. It is democratic, and in terms of access, promotes equality in the sense that just as addiction does not discriminate, this programme of learning for people in recovery does not discriminate on the basis of age, class and socio-economic circumstances, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion or any form of social prejudice. However, it is also an equitable programme and in the interest of fairness, recognises that people who participated in this research are not all on a level playing field either in terms of the additional resources and supports that are required for recovery, or that are required for participation in a programme of adult learning. We can see both these processes at work in the data.

For example, when the RECOVEU data calls for society to minimise stigma and to remove discrimination, we are cognisant of the fact that 'the socio-cultural taboos against women having problems with alcohol and other drugs produce more shame and guilt for them than for their male counterparts and can create barriers for seeking help' (Cloud and Granfield, 2008, p. 1978). Moreover, women in recovery often have to face practical barriers to participation, in recovery (meetings, aftercare) educational programmes and work opportunities that do not always apply to men. Childcare is one obvious example.

The Irish data is unique in the sense that Ireland is the only partner to have conducted a women's focus group.

In terms of participation in education, some of the women express a deep unease when invading the world of education, a sphere that they view as not belonging to them. As one woman points out:

> Em, ingrained beliefs…because I was over in the TAP programme in Trinity College1 yesterday…it's like…I wouldn't fit in here (IRL).

Another woman puts it this way:

> Yeah like built in…it's a kind of thing that happens so quick…I mean in a couple of seconds it can be like…you don't belong here…this is not going to work…and it will stop you dead in your tracks (IRL).

On another level and in relation to addiction/recovery, many of the women express feelings of deep hurt and anger as a result of having been confined to methadone maintenance programmes for years on end. As one woman explained:

> My GP kept writing scripts...you know…and he said I would be too sick to come off it…I can't believe it…I could have been getting well (IRL).

Another woman who is now successfully pursuing a university degree points out:

> I had to drop out of college the first time…yeah…cos…I couldn't concentrate…and I knew…I knew I wasn't you know well…at the end of day I needed the stuff to function (IRL).

These women highlight some of the structural barriers faced by people in recovery in Ireland at the present time. Moreover, when one of the Irish research participants makes the following claim:

> I think it was Mark Twain who said I never let my education interfere with my learning (IRL).

In this statement, she privileges the learning that is required for long term recovery over that which is currently on offer in the education system. While there is some disquiet regarding the harm reduction response to addiction treatment in Ireland, there is a preference for a quality system of lifelong learning – including adult education – in order to maximise the chances of women initiating and sustaining personal and social change in their own and in the lives of others in their community.

Education – a Lived Experience

Despite the advances made by Education For All (EFA), a movement that adopts a humanist stance to its interpretation of quality in education, which is based on promoting human development and human rights, it would appear that these aspirations have not been realised for many of the research participants. For example, in relation to the breach of human rights, Irish service providers claim that those in recovery have been consistently:

> Physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally brutalised by the educational system (IRL).

Furthermore the current practice of the Department of Social Protection to 'force participation' in accredited educational programmes is having a particularly debilitating effect on those in recovery. As one single parent explains:

> I was on a Community Employment (CE) that did FETAC levels 2…I was doing alright. I got suspended for a week…me Ma died. I relapsed…well I didn't go in…and they gave me chances… I got sacked…but I have no course now…and I am in and out (IRL).

As a result of Irish governmental policy and practice, this woman has been doubly disempowered on the basis of lost educational as well as recovery opportunities. Moreover, having internalised the personal deficit model of failure implicit in an education system that is underpinned by human capital theory in addition to personal deficit models of addiction, she is guaranteed to assume exclusive responsibility for her potential failure in either area in the future. Crucially, RECOVEU recognises that these involve structural and socio-cultural factors and are not exclusively personal deficit issues.

Conclusion: Take back your labour power (structural and cultural change)

People in recovery and women in particular would appear to fulfil the criteria set out by Friere when he referred to those in need of liberation (1979). Indeed, 'in its earliest usage the concept *addiction* was held to refer indiscriminately to a person's enslavement by someone or something' (Weinberg, 2002, p. 2). In human terms, there is no doubt that the people who participated in this research feel let down or in psychological terms, feel abandoned by an education system that has groomed them to become 'low knowledge-skilled learners' (Grummel,

2007, p. 4) in order to sell them in a market place where they are finding it increasingly difficult to find buyers. Affecting personal transformation by constructing new systems of meaning that are compatible with recovery does not mean that those in recovery adopt an unquestioning acceptance of the dominant culture. On the contrary, the values that underpin the recovery culture include unity, recovery and service and the educational programme privileges cooperative, experiential, collaborative and participatory learning. In short, this is a value system that is the very antithesis of a neoliberal culture that corrupts the field of education, commodifies the learner/worker, breeds addictive type behaviour and has the capacity to threaten our very humanity. Moreover, this new *recovery culture* has the capacity to transform the communities across the globe that are under siege and are battling the twin threats of addiction and the ravages inflicted by global capitalism.

Notes

1 TAP (Trinity Access Programme) This is an access course that prepares mature students, both personally and academically, to go on and study for a degree. The course was set up in 1997 to tackle educational disadvantage. It offers another way to third-level education for mature students whose social, economic and cultural experiences have prevented them from going to college www.tcd.ie

2 The Community Employment (CE) programme is designed to help the long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged people get back to work by offering temporary placements in community jobs with a view to using acquired skills to find permanent jobs.

FETAC is a former statutory awarding body for further education in Ireland established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. It was dissolved and its functions passed to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in 2012.

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Pedagogical Leadership of VET within a confused FET Context

LYNN RUSSELL

Abstract

This case study investigates the pedagogical leadership role of the Adult Education Officer (AEO) in the area of Vocational Education and Training (VET) to meet the requirements of the Bruges Communiqué (2010).

The study found that the AEOs interviewed are working to implement a confused system imported from other countries that has yet to be properly defined and named, to fit smoothly within the Irish education context. Their pedagogical leadership role is impeded by bureaucracy which has seen the introduction of policies and practices prioritising productivity over quality of service.

This paper seeks to highlight the need for policy makers to clearly define the context within which the AEOs operate. This should recognise and acknowledge the potential pedagogical leadership role of the AEO to ensure a quality VET service, as proposed under the Bruges Communiqué (2010).

Key words: Bruges Communiqué (2010), pedagogical leadership, Adult Education Officer, vocational education and training, further education and training

Introduction

To promote prosperity in Europe, the Bruges Communiqué (2010) stressed the need to transform Vocational Education and Training (VET). This study set out to investigate the Vocational Education and Training (VET) context and the pedagogical leadership role of the middle manager within this context. The study then looked at whether the role reflects the 2013 Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council's conclusion on effective pedagogical leadership

in education to meet the Bruges Communiqué (2010) and ensure quality provision. This was done by examining the pedagogical leadership role of the Adult Education Officer within the VET context.

The Context

"Without doubt, successful leaders are sensitive to context" (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008, p. 31). However, Leithwood *et al.* (2008) and Hallinger (2003), stress that successful leaders should only be responsive to, not dictated to by the context within which they operate, applying "contextually sensitive combinations" (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008, p. 31) of leadership practices. Callan *et al.* (2007) would go further by suggesting that leaders in VET should not simply respond to context, but should be proactive in designing the future context.

The context within which leaders lead makes a difference to how they lead (Lumby *et al.*, 2009, p. 164). Any attempt to decontextualize leadership practice destroys that which it attempts to explain (Eacott, 2013). It is the context that gives the behaviours meaning and significance (Eacott, 2013). The lack of attention to this leads to "an under-problematised engagement with the political workings of education in general and specifically the administration of schooling" (Eacot, 2013, p. 179). Coates *et al.* (2010) state that VET leaders have always had to contend with commercial pressures but leaders "now face new pressures arising from the elevation of VET as a key vehicle for national workforce development and productivity" (p. 7). It is planning and leading change in this increasingly commercial context "that is the focus of VET leadership, rather than education-specific matters" (Coates *et al.*, 2010, p. 12). This commercial context has led to the creation of policies and legislation in Europe and Ireland influencing the administration of VET and in turn the practice of pedagogical leadership.

European Policies on Adult Education

According to Egan (2012) it is unambiguous that the OECD, UNESCO and the European Commission have had a strong influence in shaping Ireland's adult education policy up to the present time. It is well documented that there is a neo-liberal agenda in the pursuit of education (Lynch, 2009, Sugrue, 2008, Finnegan, 2008). Lynch (2009) states that neo-liberalism defines the person to be educated in economic terms as "homo economicus", a worker whose life and purposes are determined by their economic status.

The Maastricht Treaty (1992) (Article 126), marked for the first time the partial jurisdiction of the European Commission over education matters. However, the European Commission has "long been exerting a massive influence on education policies of the member states via guidelines, resolutions, recommendations and reports" (Heinemann 1991, p. 71). In 2000, the Lisbon Strategy focused on growth and jobs in the light of increasing global competition with the aim of achieving the most "competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (2000, p. 3). Access to lifelong learning was seen as having a vital role in the achievement of the Lisbon goals (Keogh, 2004). According to Keogh, this strategy is "the compass and the journey, driving developments in education and training systems in the EU member states" (2004, p. 1).

Since 2002, European policy specifically devoted to this VET journey has been part of the Copenhagen Declaration (Council of the European Union, 2002). However, VET leadership was not addressed until the Helsinki Communiqué (2006) which stated that "more emphasis should be placed on good governance of VET systems and providers…stronger leadership of institutions and/or training providers within national strategies" (European Commission, 2006, p. 6). The European Commission did not focus again on leadership in VET until the Bruges Communiqué (2010) which stressed the need for "flexible, high quality education and training systems which respond to the needs of today and tomorrow" (p. 1). This Communiqué (2010) recognised the crucial role of leadership in achieving this aim (Cedefop, 2011).

The 2013 Council conclusions on effective leadership in education, state that educational leadership calls for a range of competences in order to meet the Bruges Communiqué (2010). One of the competences is the need for a leader in education to display the pedagogical skills required to "regularly review occupational and education/training standards which define what is to be expected from the holder of a certificate or a diploma" (Bruges Communiqué, 2010, p. 2) in order to ensure quality provision. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (2011), however, would dispute this requirement claiming that the need for pedagogical leadership has diminished as more onus needs to be paid to legal, financial, administrative and quality assurance issues.

Irish Policies on Adult Education

In Ireland, in 1992, the Green Paper on education stated that the education system "must seek to interact with the world of work to promote the employability of its students and in playing its part in the country's economic development" (p. 35). Fleming (1992) rejected this Green Paper on the basis of the absence throughout of references to the humanities and social studies, which he views as confirming "the conviction that the economy is king" (p. 9).

In 1993, the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment (1993) described the role that the system of vocational training can play in improving economic growth, competitiveness and employment. That same year, the National Social Partnership submitted a national development plan to the European Commission. One of the main objectives was to re-integrate the unemployed back into society. Egan (2012) sees this as "the beginning of formally bringing economic factors directly to play within education" (p. 33).

In 1995, the White Paper on Education spoke of an "education system which is systematically linked to the economic planning process" (p. 1). The following year, the OECD saw investment in education and training as making a positive contribution to economic development, citing "a strong identifiable relationship between human capital growth and the growth not just in output but also in labour productivity" (p. 65). In 1998, the Green Paper on Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning stated that education has an important role to play in economic development. A year later, the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999), established structures for a national framework of qualifications to co-ordinate awards and promote access, transfer and progression within the VET system.

In 2000 the White Paper on Adult Education (Government of Ireland, 2000) echoed the goals of the Lisbon Agenda. Within the White Paper, Chapter 6 addressed the issue of lifelong learning and the labour market in Ireland, highlighting the need for a proactive lifelong learning policy.

Along the cycle of this learning, the Lisbon Agenda (2000) called for reflection on the concrete objectives of education systems by using "tools such as indicators and benchmarks, as well as on comparison of best practice, monitoring, evaluation and peer review" (Keogh, 2004, p. 19). The White Paper (2000) referred to career paths for those facilitating this reflection, stating "the government is concerned with providing long-term funding" (p. 116). However,

this has never been acted upon. In 2003, the McIver Report, commissioned to make suggestions on providing appropriate resourcing, staffing, structuring and development in the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) sector, highlighted poor middle management structures as a result of inadequate staffing.

Lynch (2009) argues that within the neo-liberal agenda, society is being colonised by the market driven priorities of the state. New leaders will have to function within an education system that Egan (2012) believes is in danger of becoming "essentially consumerist", focusing "especially on its role in servicing the manpower needs of the economy" (Conroy, 1998, p. 4). To meet these market driven priorities, the McIver Report (2003) recommended the establishment of a further education sector. At that time further education was being managed by local VECs and FAS training centres and owed its existence, not to any plan but "to the vagaries of history" (Mooney, 2014). Furthermore, the McIver report highlighted how the hosts of FET, namely the PLC sector, originated as part of the second level system and operated under second level conditions.

In Ireland, in 2013, the Further Education and Training Act, provided for the dissolution of FAS and the establishment of a new further education and training authority named SOLAS. In that same year, the Education and Training Boards Act (2013) provided for the legal establishment of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). As a result of both acts, the Further Education and Training (FET) strategy was drawn up to "provide a framework for the establishment and development of a strong further education and training sector" (p. 3). The strategy aims to achieve this reform in FET by "improving quality, accountability" (p. 3).

The political strategy behind the establishment of the ETBs lay in the concept of "flexicurity", developed under the revised Lisbon Strategy 2005 and endorsed by the European Council in 2007. This concept aimed at enhancing flexibility of the labour market and at the same time providing social protection for workers (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007). The flexicurity model is built around Employment Protection Legislation, Unemployment Benefits, Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP), and Lifelong Learning. To date, Ireland, like many other EU countries, has treated these four policies in isolation with minimal interaction between them (Kavanagh, 2014). Since flexicurity is expected to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, it will undoubtedly have a major influence on the design of arrangements to join-up welfare

policies, education/training policies and employment legislation within a new integrated system (Adult Education Officers' Association, 2011).

However, this new strategy, developed and endorsed by the EU, must be implemented within an Irish context. This context differs in many respects to other EU countries. For example, unlike the rest of the EU, in Ireland and the UK-Scotland, no difference is drawn between initial VET and continuous VET (Ginsberg, 2013). Unlike Ireland however, the UK-Scotland provision is delivered through specifically designated colleges of further education with a remit that is broader than VET, to also prioritise social inclusion. In Ireland, provision to a large extent, is currently being delivered through PLC colleges repackaged as further education colleges and focusing on a narrower area of VET (McGuinness *et al.*, 2014).

Caution therefore must be exercised in assuming VET is the same across different countries (Raffe, 2011). Instead of borrowing and attempting to transplant international best practice into a local context, best practice should instead be used to inform thinking on policy development (Raffe, 2011). Applying a universal discourse of leadership will fail to address crucial historically and culturally determined dysfunctionalities within each country's educational context (Ngcobo and Tikly, 2010), obstructing leadership and leadership capacity (Mertkan, 2014).

The Capacity of Leadership to Influence Classroom Teaching

Leithwood *et al.* (2008) believe that "leadership acts as a catalyst without which other good things are unlikely to happen" (p. 28). They further state that "this catalyst [unleashes] the potential capacities that already exist in the organisation" (2008, p. 29). Hallinger and Heck (2010), based on a review of fifty years of theory and research, claim that "leadership contributes to learning through the development of a set of structural and sociocultural processes that define the organisation's capacity for academic improvement" (p. 95). Leithwood *et al.* (2008) believe that successful leadership will improve employee, particularly teacher performance and that this performance is central to pupil learning.

Given that "teaching and learning is the core business" of educational institutions (Coates *et al.*, 2010, p. 6), the idea that leadership should be inextricably linked to learning appears sound (Robinson *et al.*, 2009; Dinham, 2007). Bush and Glover (2012) contend that effective leadership and management takes the strain by creating structures and processes that allow teachers to engage as

fully as possible in their key task. The Council (2013) agree by concluding that effective educational leadership calls for a range of competences, one of which is the ability to create an "effective and attractive" work environment. Leithwood *et al.* (2008) concur, stating that teacher performance is related to "the conditions in which they work" (p. 29).

However, based on a national study on leadership in Australia's VET sector, Coates *et al.* (2010) found that with the exception of leaders who are directly involved in teaching and learning, "teaching and learning was flagged by all other leaders as the least important facet of their work" (p. 6). Coates *et al.* (2010) considered this finding to be concerning. Furthermore, based on their research on the pressures shaping the work of VET leaders, Coates *et al.* (2010) found that most leaders questioned placed low emphasis on pressures related to students, with most emphasis placed on increasing productivity and institutional reform.

While a review of the literature regularly identifies learning improvements in terms of academic improvement, in more recent discussions concepts such as student well-being and belonging have become more apparent (Dimmock, 2012). Duignan (2012) argues for the need to view the influence of leadership on student learning as something greater than merely supporting mathematics or science scores. In highlighting the importance of considering diverse perspectives, Duignan (2012) reinforces the complex, dynamic, and relational nature of schooling. Based on their study of adult education in Limerick city, Power *et al.* (2011) would agree, stating that while labour market activation is top of the agenda, personal and social outcomes must also be prioritised.

Methodology – Qualitative Research

This case study sought to explore the reality of the pedagogical leadership role of the AEO as interpreted by the AEOs themselves within the VET context. Qualitative methods were viewed as "particularly helpful in the generation of an intensive, detailed examination of the case" (Cohen *et al.*, 2007 p. 253). In total 43% of the AEOs registered with the Adult Education Officers Association (AEOA) took part, representing a nationwide geographical spread.

The pilot interviews were conducted with policy experts who were "handpicked" as "knowledgeable people" (Ball, 1990) based on their professional roles within organisations with direct influence on the work of the AEOs in FET.

Bowen (2008) states that the sample size is justified when theoretical saturation is achieved. For the purposes of this study, it was the author's view that theoretical saturation was achieved after carrying out three pilot interviews, six semi-structured interviews and one focus group session.

Irish Context – The Reality

All AEOs interviewed referred to FET rather than VET. This is understandable as the context for much of the work that they carry out has been set by the FET Strategy 2014-2019. Furthermore, FET encompasses community education, which is something all the AEOs felt strongly about. However, what is perhaps most interesting is the fact pointed out by a policy expert that neither acronym is completely suitable for use within the Irish context. This Irish context is situated within the remit of the ETBs. The ETBs are a combined legacy of the VECs and FAS, developed under an EU concept of "flexicurity". Despite the concept behind the establishment of the ETBs, the legacy ensures that the European system, where VET has a very specific meaning in terms of initial VET and continuous VET, is different to the Irish system which makes no distinction. Furthermore, in terms of FET, the legacy also ensures that this system, which was adopted from systems such as those operating in UK-Scotland is not directly transferrable to the Irish context. As another policy expert explained, further education in the UK is broad in scope and takes place in further education colleges as opposed to further education programmes in Ireland, which are much narrower in scope and take place in PLC colleges calling themselves further education colleges.

The AEOs were not aware of specific European VET policy documents. However, they were all very familiar with, although often dubious about, the Irish FET policies and strategy. While they were all actively involved in improving the quality and comparability of data for EU policy making in VET, through their work with databases such as PLSS and FARR, they were also very conscious of the fact that the focus of these policies was labour market activation, driving other policies, such as community education and social inclusion, underground. Policy experts concurred, stating that while there is lip service to social inclusion, all action is being focused on the economy.

Furthermore, the policy experts cautioned against presuming all EU policies were applicable within an Irish context. In this respect, the AEOs showed themselves to be leaders who, rather than being dictated to by these policies, queried their appropriateness at local, national and international level, in terms of efficiency, educational effectiveness and current viability.

The disquiet shown by AEOs regarding VET policy could also be seen as a reflection of the disconnect between the policy makers and the providers, as pointed out by the policy experts. This has resulted in a lack of belief on the part of the providers in the viability of the policies and the ethos behind them.

The shift in education policies, under a universal FET strategy, towards marketisation and performativity, has restructured and recultured AEO leadership (Mertkan, 2014). However, the AEOs, rather than applying a universal discourse of leadership to achieve the aims of the strategy, are querying the strategy and attempting to display a leadership style which tries to be culturally sensitive to context (Ngcobo and Tikly, 2010).

AEO Pedagogical Leadership within this Context

The AEOs do not have a direct influence on teaching and learning. In fact one AEO, reflecting the Coates *et al.* (2010) research, flagged it as the least important aspect of their job. However, unlike Coates *et al.* (2010), this AEO did not consider this to be a concern, instead believing that this has led to a more effective work environment, based on the needs of the students as opposed to the personal preferences of the AEO.

Reflecting the findings of Cedefop (2011), while most AEOs perform a pedagogical leadership role to varying degrees, this role is diminishing. Further reflecting the 2011 report, many would cite an increase in the level of bureaucracy as one of the main reasons. Europe 2020 stresses an outcomes-based, value for money delivery of VET. As a result, institutional reform is taking the onus away from pedagogy and placing it on productivity (Coates *et al.*, 2010), with one policy expert stating that the onus had shifted from pedagogical leadership skills to managerial skills. Since the creation of SOLAS, reporting expectations have increased dramatically (Coates *et al.*, 2010). As leaders, the AEOs queried the effectiveness of how the data is gathered and thus how it is subsequently reflected in new policies aimed at improving the quality of VET provision.

However, according to one policy expert, more emphasis should be placed on trying to assess the quality of learning. This policy expert sees a very important role for the AEOs in this area as pedagogically qualified leaders delivering quality VET programmes. AEO leadership delivers quality VET programmes by developing structures and processes (Bush, 2011), which include hiring tutors and setting up teams to administer and report on performance. While

their direct pedagogical leadership influence on the classroom is diminishing, the Council (2013) sees a very definite role for them in terms of reviewing tutor qualifications. The AEOs would agree. However, due to the legal requirement that tutors after a certain number of years be awarded CID contracts (Contracts of Indefinite Duration), if or when their qualifications become obsolete, there is no onus on them, or funding available for them, to retrain. As a result, many AEOs, instead of placing suitably qualified tutors in classes set up to meet student needs, often have to place students in classes matching teacher qualifications, rendering the service not fit for purpose.

With no Continuing Professional Development model or policy incentive to enable and encourage staff to train up in other areas, AEOs face a leadership dilemma as to how to actively encourage staff to continually develop their expertise (Muijs and Harris, 2003) to meet the goals of the FET strategy requiring students to attain certain QQI qualifications. Policy experts identify this as a weakness that was not identified in the policy provision before the SOLAS roll-out.

It is important for policy makers to recognise and acknowledge the AEO expertise in pedagogy as a means of maintaining high standards in terms of quality of learning. However, AEO pedagogical leadership in this area is also being impeded by policy or rather lack of policy. This study highlighted the need for policymakers to review and introduce new policies regarding teacher qualifications, to ensure they are fit for the purpose of meeting student requirements.

This leadership dilemma in terms of delivering quality VET programmes is further exacerbated by the increasing influence of Department of Social Protection and other inter-government agencies on classroom activities as part of the flexicurity policy. Both the leadership activities of the AEOs and flexicurity policies are aimed at achieving the objectives of the Bruges Communiqué (2010). The study revealed the AEOs to be a group within the ETB with extensive experience and pedagogical qualifications to lead learning. However, the study would suggest that the AEO leadership role, rather than working in tandem with flexicurity policies to achieve a common aim, is being impeded by these policies. In particular, labour market activation policies which see DSP placing students in and out of classes and querying progress – the non-pedagogically qualified impeding the role of the pedagogically qualified. This would point to an area of FET policy that is working at odds within itself and

not to the ultimate benefit of the student. This lack of cohesion can only have negative consequences for labour market activation and for the organisation as a whole.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the Vocational Education and Training (VET) context and the pedagogical leadership role of the middle manager within this context to ensure quality provision. This was done by examining the role of the Adult Education Officer (AEO).

This study sought to heighten awareness, create dialogue and help address the lack of research evidence (Creswell, 2013) on middle management pedagogical leadership within the Irish Education and Training Board (ETB) context. This was achieved by responding to a number of research questions related to how leadership is understood, performed and enacted in the everyday working practice of Adult Education Officers (AEOs) within the ETBs in Ireland. In particular, the study questioned whether the material practices within the Irish context meet the pedagogical leadership criteria, as set out by the 2013 Council to achieve the requirements of the Bruges Communiqué (2010).

The practical contribution of the present research is that it provides some empirical data on the actual leadership role of AEOs. This information is important given that no other comparable study exists.

The findings of the case study underline the need for policy makers to clearly define the context within which the AEOs operate. At present the AEOs are working to implement a system imported from other countries that has yet to be properly defined and named to fit smoothly within the context of the Irish education system.

All of those interviewed concurred that the emphasis of the VET policies is on productivity over pedagogy. The study highlighted concerns regarding the quality of learning as a result of this situation.

This clearly defined context should recognise and acknowledge the potential pedagogical leadership role of the AEO to ensure a quality VET service as proposed under the Bruges Communiqué (2010), and build capacity to ensure this quality service going forward.

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In pursuit of an authentic educational relationship: An examination of dialogue in Freirean adult literacy practice

ALEX MCKILLICAN

Abstract

This paper engages in a critical analysis of the educational theory of Paulo Freire. It is based on qualitative research which explores Irish adult literacy practice. The research harnesses the ontological aspects of Freire's theory; his interpretation of how human reality is constructed. Using this as the theoretical foundation for inquiry, research questions were developed using the theme of Freire's dialogical 'rejection of subject/object dichotomies' (Freire 1970). This element of Freire's theory is deconstructed and is used in order to examine how an authentic educational relationship, between learner and tutor/educator, can be created through dialogue. These considerations have pedagogical applications in all areas of the adult and further education sectors.

Keywords: Freirean critical pedagogy, adult literacy, critical education, ontology

Introduction

> I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and re-write my ideas (Freire, 2005).

In Ireland in recent years much research on adult literacy development has, very importantly, focussed on various types of human development (Feely, 2010; Howard and Logan, 2012; Connolly and Hussey, 2013). These socio-economic, functional, and political considerations are very valuable to the adult learner. However, this paper argues that the practice of adult literacy education has another variant of [human] development which contributes profoundly to the inner life of the adult learner; the *ontological* capital. This is a somewhat

neglected aspect in adult literacy research in Ireland. As such, this paper will examine the more essential and primordial aspects of literacy development in adulthood. One way to accomplish this is to focus on how an authentic educational relationship between adult literacy learner and adult literacy tutor/educator can bring both individuals to a closer understanding of *being*. This examination of this particular aspect of the practice of adult literacy education can be applied to all areas of adult education where there exists an educational relationship between the learner and tutor/educator. This paper aims to give a voice to radical adult literacy tutors and educators – from volunteer tutors to managers of adult literacy programmes – who view adult literacy education and provision not just in socio-economic/functional or political terms, but in metaphysical and ontological terms also.

Research context

This particular area of research was inspired by my engagement, initially as a volunteer tutor, on various adult literacy programmes with the City of Limerick VEC, and, subsequently, with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board as a contracted tutor. The data collection for the research was carried out in a number of regional VEC's. The subjects of this research were professionals who are engaged in the provision of adult literacy education – the sample was made up from both tutors and managers of adult literacy programmes. As previously mentioned, the theoretical framework for this research is based on the educational praxis of Paulo Freire. By virtue, then, of the ontological elements of that theory – i.e. how he located adult literacy development within human existence/being (Dale, 2003; McLaren, 2005; Roberts, 2002) – I have used the theory to explain and to justify my research on examining authentic dialogue in the adult literacy educational relationship. As with critical educational research of this kind, the analysis of the data here contains a reflexive element (Etherington, 2004). I have used autoethnography to accomplish this (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008). Nascent from postmodern philosophy – where the focus on scientific empiricism is debated – autoethnography provided me with a method of legitimising personal knowledge and history as it relates to my journey, thus far, as an adult educator. This was done in order to promote critical interpretation.

Literature Review: The ontology of Paulo Freire

Before assessing Freire's thoughts on authentic dialogue in the educational relationship, it is necessary to understand how he understood human reality. Freire (1970) understood the human individual as both *thinking* and *being*. His

ontological understanding – his interpretation of existence, reality and being in the human condition – is, therefore, dualistic (Roberts, 2002). Freire was concerned with examining the relationship between thinking (idealism) and being (materialism); thinking is related to consciousness and this leads to idealism, while being relates to matter and practice, and this leads to materialism (McLaren and Leonard, 1993). Idealism may be separated into subjective idealism and objective idealism. At this point Freire's ontology becomes related to the political and social world of the adult literacy learner: "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage their war of liberation, they must perceive the reality of the oppression not as a closed world, from which there is no exit, but as a limiting-situation which they can transform" (Freire 1970, p. 27). When developing his theory - Freire's justification on how human beings come to *know* the world through the senses - he did so by interpreting the world as an objective reality - a reality which is entirely independent of the existent (the subject), but, which is a world that is capable of being known (Freire, 1970, p. 72). This is key, as it is dialogue, through language, to which Freire's educational epistemology is anchored (Freire, 2005, pp. 72-74). For Freire (1970, 1972, 1974, 1996), education was a means to liberate. He asserted that liberation should come about through a uniquely human dialectical process (via dialogue); this he termed a dialogical 'rejection of subject/object dichotomies' (Freire, 1970). Freire postulated, however, that it is the opposite which is actually happening in the educational process, contending that information is not passed on but is deposited; this is his famous 'banking' concept of education (Freire, 1970).

Authentic dialogue in Freirean educational theory

Before directly examining authentic dialogue in Freirean educational theory it is necessary to clearly define what is meant by authentic as it is used in the phrase authentic dialogue. This can be accomplished by considering Freire's theory of conscientization. The basis of Freire's theory of conscientization is dialogue; "Dialogue is an encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world - dialogue is an existential necessity" (Freire, 1970, p. 69). Freire maintains that conscientization is underscored by an authentic dialogue between educator and learner. According to Freire (1974) authentic dialogue arises when human beings emerge out of their submersion and gain the faculty to intervene in reality. This happens due to *conscientizacao* (Freire 1970). *Conscientizacao*, usually referred to as 'conscientization', is the strengthening of the attitudes and awareness of all emergences:

> One of the cardinal principles in Freire's philosophy is that of a man's vocation to be more – more, that is, than what he is at any given time or place. There are thus no developed men [sic] except in a biological sense. The essence of the human is to be in a continual non-natural process. In other words, the characteristic of the human species is its repeatedly demonstrated capacity for transcending what is merely given, what is purely determined (Veiga, 1993, p. 9).

In the same way that a person's ontological and historical vocation may be hampered by particular socially manufactured constructs – that one's understanding is; "therefore, on one level, conscientization, or the process of becoming aware, provides a space in which one's perception of reality may change" (Blackburn, 2000, p. 17). Conscientization is more than a mechanically driven intellectual process – it is the essence of a dialectical process which manifests action. Conscientization leads to reflection, which leads to action, which brings us to liberation (Freire, 1970). In the same way that existential philosophy calls for an individual to rigorously assess their own lives in an attempt to come to an authentic awakening, the Freirean theory of conscientization asks the individual to become aware of social, political and economic contradictions which are present in society (Freire, 1970; 1974). In order for an authentic dialogue to happen it is necessary, therefore, for the educator to go through this same process.

As we have already discovered Freire (1970) believed that through dialogue a process of examination of the relationship between subject and object (between learner and tutor/educator) could be examined (McLaren and Leonard, 1993). He was of the opinion that the material world and consciousness are united – no dichotomy (or separation into two distinct halves) exists between the two. This is an example of the influence of existential ontology on his educational philosophy. Freire (1996) insisted that there exists a concord between method and structure, objectivity and subjectivity, ideas and being, and between the dynamic relationship between theory and praxis: "I refer to the relationship between subject and object, consciousness and reality, thought and being, theory and practice. Any attempt to treat the relationship based upon the duality of subject and object [thereby dehumanising the educational relationship, thus negating its dialectal unity] will not explain this relationship in a satisfactory manner" (Freire, pp. 13-14, cited in Torres, 1994). This is an important consideration for the radical adult literacy tutor/educator. Freire (1970, 1972, 1974, 2005) was of the opinion that educational experiences should

be co-intentional. He thought that co-*intentional* experience, as a way to critical consciousness, is the foundation to a critical pedagogy. He states that the teacher and student who are 'co-intent on reality, are both subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and there by coming to know it critically, but in the task of recreating that knowledge; as they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators' (Freire, 1970, p. 51). Freire's concept of co-intentional education illuminates the union which exists between subjects who come together, by way of dialogue, to give name to their world: the authentic educational relationship between the adult literacy learner and the adult literacy tutor/educator.

Methodology: A qualitative method of inquiry

The data collection and analysis for this study followed an interpretive critical research paradigm; a paradigm which rejected scientific relativism and is anti-positivist in essence (Schwandt, 2001). The research design was informed by an anti-positivist paradigm because, I believe, the social world should not be subject to the same methods of investigation as the natural world. I therefore rejected empiricism and the scientific method. Rather, I focused on the interpretations that social actions have for the people who were studied for this research (Habermas, 1989). To accomplish this, I applied an interpretive paradigm to understanding the data from the in-depth interviews with the adult literacy educators (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Considering the resulting data in this way allowed for the recognition of the intersubjective validity of the different claims of the research participants (Habermas, 1989) the voice of the individual adult literacy educators. The method of data collection used to record the data was accomplished by using the semi-structured in-depth interview (Bell, 2005). I used Constant Comparison Method (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and Network Analysis (Bliss, Monk and Ogborn, 1983) in order to manage and deconstruct the data before applying discourse analysis in my attempt to develop any theory. As a qualitative researcher, I was conscious of the fact that the information given to me by the respondents is highly influenced by their immersion in the culture of adult literacy practice. As such, attitudes and convictions that the said educators had could not be alienated from their environment and experience. It was due to this construction of reality that I chose to use the semi-structured qualitative interview, as this type of data collection was more compatible to the overall qualitative paradigm of the research framework used in the research (Geary and Mannix McNamara, 2007). I considered the responses from the adult literacy professionals as being 'texts'; 'texts' which were then subject to discourse analysis. I was interested in

the 'content of the talk', rather than being interested in semiology – which is the theory investigating the relationship between knowledge and signs. These 'texts' were taken literally and not as the sign or signifier of some symbolic activity (Schwandt, 2001). I also included an element of reflexivity in the design of the research paradigm used in the study. Reflexivity was an integral element in the qualitative research process as it promoted the understanding that the researcher is inextricably linked to the social world in which he/she researches (Symon and Cassell, 2012). I can extend this understanding by viewing the social world as a world that is already 'interpreted' by the people who inhabit it; an understanding of the world to which this research adheres (Ricoeur, 1992). This idea serves as a double hermeneutic, or, double interpretation, and was important for this research (Habermas, 1989). As researcher I am in-the-world and of-the-world – this helped me to construct an analysis of the research experience which could be understood as: "a reflexive means, by which the researcher/practitioner embeds himself or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation" (McIlveen, 2008, p. 1). This type of reflexive writing served as a dialogue which was existential in nature and which has been informed by my activities as a researcher and adult literacy educator. In support of this, McCormack suggests that the researcher adopt "a paradigm of research that does not pretend scientific validity, [but] one that recognises [that] the researcher's own assumptions, experiences and subjectivity constitute the major source of colour in the canvas he or she is painting" (2007, p. 96). This kind of sensitivity in the theoretical framework of the research ties in neatly with the central argument which this paper makes: that is, that the best kind of adult literacy practice is something which is anti-dualistic in nature. This Freirean unified and anti-dualistic understanding of mind allowed me to ask the adult literacy educators questions in relation to their educational relationship with adult learners. The wording of these two questions was an attempt to represent Freire's attitude to the ideal learner/educator educational relationship. Examples of open-ended type questions which appeared on the semi-structured interview schedules were (Bell, 2005): 'How do you view your educational relationship with the adult learner?' and 'Do you think the learner can educate the tutor?'

Examination of the findings

Examples of responses from the adult literacy educators to these questions were as follows:

(**Tutor**) I view my relationship with learners as being connected to my own life. What we're doing with adults is more than teaching. It's a kind of a journey with the learner.

(**Tutor**) I think that it's OK to show a little bit of vulnerability. In other words that it is OK to show that you [as the tutor/educator] don't know everything. I think that if you can put a student-centred approach to both the practical side, the delivery of lessons and the development of materials, along with the subtle dynamics which are ever present in the class room – that is valuable.

(**Tutor**) Let me tell you that adult education, as in the immediate tutoring of adults, can be very taxing. Adults can drain you emotionally but that's part of it. You hear a lot of things, but you need to respect that. Sometimes I think I'm some kind of therapist. I respect my learners deeply as I was one of them.

(**Programme Manager**) I don't actually tutor anymore but I'm still very much aware of what learners we have coming into our centre. I miss tutoring actually. I have gotten incredible value from my time in adult basic education. So, nowadays even though I am in the background I still try to place myself in the shoes of my learners when it comes to making any decisions re. programmes, materials or any other decisions that will directly affect their learning experience here in this centre.

(**Programme Manager**) Yes, of course I am a programme manager now and in many ways it's a more challenging job – but, it is restrictive at the same time. I do miss my time as a tutor…I have to say that. As a manager there is a constant state of conflict and you learn how to adjust to that. I do miss the close tutoring relationship I have had with learners. They are still in my mind.

(**Programme Manager**) Oh yes, of course! You are always on the lookout for how your learner learns. Any tips and tricks that you can pick up from something you have done will be part of your learning as well. Students can come up with wonderful examples of "oh yeah, I learnt it through this" or "I did it like that". But the relationship also affects your life outside the service - you see things in more down to earth terms. Little things are much more fulfilling. So, yes the learner educates the tutor in many ways really.

As these comments highlight both personal and professional identity were key themes which emerged for the participants. Valuable information and

insights may be taken from this data as it demonstrates that the attitude of adult literacy educators towards their educational relationship with their learners is a complex one. I believe this highly qualitative data can have a profound impact on contemporary Irish, and, indeed, international adult literacy practice. Each tutor and programme manager interviewed emphasised the importance of a good educational relationship with their learners and they included, constantly, the learner's perspective when expressing how they view the educational relationship. In particular, it is interesting to note that one tutor considers her relationship with her learners as a "kind of a journey with [the] learner". This type of emphasis on the educational relationship can be expressed in existential terms; this journeying [with-the-learner] is a kind of *being-in-the-world-together*. It is an understanding which can be interpreted as [an] anti-dualist realisation in which, we, as human beings, journey through the world *together* – not just materially but idealistically also. As examined above, at the heart of Freire's educational theory is his anti-dualistic theory of mind (Freire, 1970). It is through our relationships with each other that we make sense of the world in which we share: "We are, therefore, the only beings capable of being both the objects and subjects of the relationships that we weave with others and with the history that we make, and that makes and remakes us. Between us and the world, relationships can be critically, naively, or magically perceived, but we are aware of these relationships to an extent that does not exist between any other being and the world" (Freire, 2005, p. 136). I believe that the respondents interviewed for this research are both unconsciously and consciously aware of this phenomenon of which Freire speaks. Through [a] *dialectic* the learning experience of the adult literacy learner is brought to its maximum potential. Thus, moving in the world *with* one another becomes praxis in the world. Developing a pedagogy which is influenced by what can now be termed *Freirean Existentialism*, allows the adult literacy tutor/educator to experience a kind of locus of being with learners in the educational relationship. This locus, I believe, comes from the relationship which inevitably builds due to the intimacy of the learning experience. As adult educators we must see adult learners, whose education we participate in, as being our equals in every way. Again Freire advises: "We [educators] must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not anti-scientific. We must dare in order to say scientifically, and not as mere blah-blah-blah, that we study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body; we do all these things with feeling, with emotions, with wishes, with fear, with doubts, with passion, and also with critical reasoning" (Freire, 2005, p. 4). I will now

include a brief autoethnographical discussion on how my perspective of the educational relationship between adult learner and adult tutor/educator has evolved, both by my continued involvement in adult literacy provision and by the conducting of research into this area.

Authentic dialogue and praxis

A key aspect in critical educational research such as this is the inclusion of an autoethnographical element (Etherington, 2004). This is valuable for me especially because of my return to education as an adult. This autoethnographical consideration allows me to mould my own norms in the social and cultural structure of adult education. This, I believe, impacts on my own capacity as an agent (as tutor/educator and researcher) in that particular social world (Archer, 2007). This takes the form of a reflexive dialogue which is written in a highly personalised style. In order for me to highlight this process I have drawn upon certain writers and literature that impact on both my personal and professional world. I believe my educational relationship with adult learners has a symbiotic quality to it. This informs – apart from any formal training or teaching experience – the *key* element in the composition of my pedagogical make up as a tutor/educator and researcher in adult education. This, I believe, helps me to bond with and communicate with adult learners in a very natural way. And here, in this social phenomenon, there exists [an] *a prioi* shared knowledge between me and the adult learner/learners. This particular kind of educational relationship has as its foundations a natural 'rejection of subject/object dichotomies' (Freire, 1970). The essence of Freire's 'rejection of subject/object dichotomies', we should remind ourselves, is that through dialogue, barriers and differences created by how power is shared in human relationships can be broken down (Freire, 1970). Quite quickly in my educational relationships with adult learners I will (not always, but usually) inform them of my return, as an adult, to education. Quite often, at that moment, a pedagogical state of grace enters the room. What we do as educators I believe is to attempt to communicate with others. It is perhaps our wish to re-create ourselves in the pursuit of – as Freire (1970) says – humanisation. However, we must be careful that the educational relationship we help to construct with adult learners does not become didactic; it is a co-communicative relationship where a social world is created in tandem with the learner. The critical or radical educator does not have to be overtly political. Being a radial educator begins in the space which is created by the educational relationship. Radical educators should craft the ontological aspect of their pedagogy. This will, I believe, result in the promotion of a *being-with* the adult learner, not, we may say, a *being-alongside*.

If radical educators immerse themselves in the ontological considerations of Freire's educational theory this will, I believe, provide for them an organic and existentially pure line of communication with adult learners.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The appreciation and understanding of the complex relationship which exists between the adult literacy tutor/educator and adult literacy learner can be a vehicle for a radical type of education. Through authentic dialogue the adult learner and tutor/educator can influence content and methodology; as a result praxis will emerge – a *co-intentionality* in the shared learning process. This will deepen the discourse on adult literacy education in Ireland at the present. According to Grummell (2007), developments in educational policy-making in the area of adult education and adult basic education are shaped by neo-liberal discourses that adapt adult education principles, such as life-long learning and emancipation, for its own economic and political logic. This is important. Nevertheless, what I am proposing is to develop an awareness of adult literacy development which is far more 'sensitive' to and 'open' to the metaphysical (not necessarily spiritual, but, certainly, ontological) effects of adult literacy education; or, as Fleming (2004) says, a kind of adult education that speaks to people's "highest aspirations". Fleming (2004) advises against seeing adults 'merely' as workers. I agree with this position and I think it is correct for the discourse on adult education in Ireland to continue to link development in that sector with equal opportunities and social inclusion. However, as this research demonstrates, the discourse on adult literacy education (and adult education, in general) could benefit from the inclusion of an ontologically informed layer of data. This 'layer' could be developed to include the dynamic which this research has highlighted; that is, the inclusion of the ontological experience, experienced by the adult learner and the adult literacy professional in the educational process itself. This will, I believe, further promote the democratising effects of the adult education process and will heighten both the public and private lives of the adult learner and the adult educator.

Recommendations for policy

Adult literacy policy development must not fall into a pedagogical malaise whereby we solely acknowledge the economic benefits of adult education. Research should promote the communicative, humanising, and transformative aspects of this area of education: Initial adult literacy tutor training programmes should include a focus on becoming/being a reflexive educator. Distinct policies need to be embraced within the newly developed Education and Training Boards

(ETBs) which highlight the need for continuing professional development and in-service training for all adult literacy educators. The focus of the training should be on the notion of reflexive practice in the pedagogy of the adult literacy professional. Adult education policy makers should be increasingly sensitive to the critical and emancipatory theories of adult education espoused by Paulo Freire. This would continue to promote the socio-economic and functional aspects of adult literacy development while highlighting and encouraging the 'consciousness raising' (ontological) aspects of adult literacy education.

Recommendations for Practice

The educational relationship between the adult literacy professional and the adult literacy learner *must* be thought of having a mentoring aspect to it. This should be reflected in the discourse on Irish adult literacy education and in programmes of initial tutor training. The more reflexive and open adult literacy educators are to learner influence in relation to the development of materials and curricula, the more learners can shape their own literacy destiny. Along with the learner's motivation to learn, the learning context should also shape engagement; how the educational environment, which is created by both the learner and the tutor, can influence the ways in which the learner learns. For practical reasons, the adult educator controls the educational context to a greater extent. However, if the educator understands how the educational context influences engagement, he/she can then influence engagement in a more positive way. Engagement with Freirean theory – as critical educational theory – can help the educator to do this. Adult literacy educators (if not already doing so) should embrace the understanding reflexive praxis – how a philosophical examination of one's attitudes, beliefs and biases can contribute to the understanding of how one forms an educational relationship with adult learners. This will have positive theoretical and methodological repercussions for their practice in adult education; a willingness to embrace the constantly changing narrative of one's identity may contribute to one's interior life also. Existentialism, as a research paradigm, should have more of an impact on critical educational research and practice. By embracing this unique body of knowledge theorists and educators can reject educational dualism and relativism. This will have a profound effect on the educational relationship between learner and adult educator.

The one outstanding principle which this paper has attempted to highlight is the Freirean idea that *dialogue* in the adult educational relationship is the centre point of all human associations. This research interprets the world as

an objective reality; a reality which is entirely independent of the existent (the subject), but which is a world that is capable of being known (Freire, 1970, p. 72). As one half of this phenomenon, adult literacy educators bring their own biography to the process of *praxis* in adult literacy teaching and practice. The same, I contend, is true for the other half of this educational phenomenon – the adult literacy learners – of whose primary locus in adult literacy development is informed by their biographies also. As [an] educational praxis, all adult educators have a pedagogical duty to uphold this fact as educational reality.

Conclusion: The implications of this type of research for practice

In conclusion, it is necessary to briefly analyse what the implications of this type of research are for practice in the adult education sector. The closer we can come to a critical understanding of this data the more beneficial it will be for adult learners also. The data collected from the adult literacy educators for this research is rich in detail. In order to develop 'theory' from this data I developed the typology 'factors identified by respondents'. The development of this category came from *emergent themes* which materialised from my application of Network Analysis (Bliss, Monk and Ogborn, 1983). The 'factors identified by respondents' proved fruitful as they highlighted how the respondents viewed their practice in adult literacy education.

The findings of this research were interpreted within the context in which they were uncovered. However, I believe this research type of research can allow other researchers to replicate and build upon what was undertaken here. The theoretical framework behind this research is solid, in that it follows the traditional structure of describing my hypothesis and the purpose of the research. As a teacher and researcher in adult education, I believe I have seen how literacy development in the adult can help them come to a closer understanding of their *being*. The findings of this research support the fact that my fellow adult educators think the same way. This understanding of adult literacy development is the type of understanding which I wish to promote, in the current discourse on adult literacy education in Ireland. In doing so, it will complement the 'voice' of the adult learner. According to Grummell (2007), developments in educational policy-making in the area of adult education and adult basic education are shaped by neo-liberal discourses that adapt adult education principles, such as life-long learning and emancipation, for its own economic and political logic. I agree with this view. Nevertheless, what I am proposing is to develop an awareness of adult literacy development which is far more 'sensitive' to and 'open' to the metaphysical (not necessarily spiritual, but

certainly ontological) effects of adult literacy education; or as Fleming (2004) says, a kind of adult education that speaks to peoples "highest aspirations". Fleming (2004) advises against seeing adults 'merely' as workers. I agree with this position and I think it is correct for the discourse on adult education in Ireland to continue to link development in that sector with equal opportunities and social inclusion. However, I believe the discourse on adult education could benefit from the inclusion of yet another 'layer of data'/'ontological position'. This other 'layer' might be something which could be developed to include the dynamic which this research has highlighted; that is, the inclusion of the ontological experience, experienced by the adult learner and the adult literacy professional in the educational process itself. This will further promote the democratising effects of the adult education process and will, I maintain, heighten both the public and private lives of the adult learner and the adult educator. In a methodological sense this is particularly relevant for one to one tutoring, but will also work in a small group situation – particularly when the group shares the same interests, similar biographies or experiences. When one examines the sample interviews above, it is not, I consider, without foundation to begin to see how an educational perspective – which is supported by an existentially informed pedagogy – could not be applied as a methodological approach to adult literacy development and teaching. This means that the subjective nature of adult literacy development, found in the educational process itself, could be utilised to generate themes which in turn would allow the adult literacy professional and learner to co-develop materials. This would also influence future research paradigms.

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Later Life Learning: A post-retirement perspective from Northern Ireland

FREDA MCCORMICK

Abstract

Despite an emphasis in government strategy on the provision of later life learning, little is known about the experiences of older people in their pursuit of such opportunities. This paper explores the extent to which middle-class retirees' learning needs are catered for in Northern Ireland. Data from semi-structured interviews suggest that the older learner has clearly defined learning needs. However, there is a perceived lack of support and understanding of these needs by those organisations involved in policy development and policy delivery.

Keywords: Retirees, middle-class, active ageing, later life learning

Introduction

This paper draws on a research study into the relationship between active ageing and later life learning. Whilst the wider study is in the context of informal education and the engagement of the older learner, this paper examines later life learning provision in Northern Ireland [NI] from the perspective of informal educational providers, the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland [COPNI], and the older people themselves. Three main themes, which are inter-related, emerge which shed light on learners' needs. The paper highlights tensions between policy aspirations in terms of meeting the learning needs of older people, against the need to reduce the burden on the public purse. It will be argued that despite the policy rhetoric on promoting learning opportunities amongst older people, there are a series of factors that impede participants from fully realising their learning goals. It is further shown that older people have very specific learning needs that differ significantly from other learners, and where these needs are overlooked it can reinforce older people's sense of marginalisation and isolation.

Methodological approach

A qualitative approach was adopted and data has been analysed following 22 semi-structured interviews which consisted mostly of middle-class retirees, participating in informal learning groups with the University of the Third Age (U3A) in one geographical area in NI. In addition, data from semi-structured interviews with three key informants from separate organisations involved in policy development and policy delivery were analysed.

Ethics approval was obtained before this study commenced and informed consent was given by all participants. To ensure anonymity, group participants which included four co-ordinators, were given a pseudonym which took into consideration their gender and age.

Study participants

The age profile of the participants extends from 60 to 89 years of age with the largest number being in the 70 – 79 age group.

Resource allocation for later life learning in Northern Ireland

The context of this study is situated within the U3A which comprises of independent, self-help groups for older people (The Third Age Trust, 2015). Whilst these groups have the capacity to deliver learning opportunities themselves, there are occasions when they need to utilise the services of the local College of Further Education [CoFE] and other education providers to fulfil their needs. Thus the vision of later life learning that is promulgated through the policy literature is one that suggests a policy context that is inclusive of retired people and older workers, and one where the emphasis is on enabling older people to learn new skills alongside younger people (HM Government, 2009). Significantly, and despite this emphasis though, key informants interviewed in this study suggested that affording opportunities for older people to engage in learning was a lesser priority than might be expected. The COPNI, for example, identified priorities for action in terms of older people in NI but it is significant that none of these specifically refer to informal learning:

> Some difficult choices had to be made about what was in and what was not because it is a small office with a limited budget. So you won't find any of those that are specifically dedicated to lifelong learning or what you are terming informal learning. However, there will probably be links that could be made particularly with regard to the employment project … for ongoing training and re-training and for the same opportunities that are available for younger people to be made available in later years (COPNI).

Yet even where opportunities do exist for older people to avail of education, not all are able or willing to exploit them. Government strategy in NI (OFMDFM, 2006) makes it clear that older people over 60 need to increase their use of information technology and there is an implied expectation that older people might engage in more distance or online courses. However, the expectation that older people should participate in online learning seemed to misconstrue the specific learning needs of the older person and this was well captured by the interviewee from COPNI:

> Everyone is being directed to do things online and remotely. Older people and a lot of younger people and all people want a face to face learning and communication and social engagement to foster relationships and networks and develop their informal education. The digital by default isn't going to work for that. It works for people who are busy doing jobs all day long or with families who are happy to do their learning in their solitary time but when it is a solitary activity and one that is screen based that is not attractive (COPNI).

In many ways taking online courses defeats or at least misapprehends the purpose of the learning that older people seek. The learning required is not often simply subject based, but is also about building relations and engaging with peers. Focusing on online courses as a mechanism through which older people might exploit learning needs is likely to undermine this objective and was something that was picked up by several participants, who pointed both to their lack of technological skill as a key barrier as well as the sense that this type of learning did little to aid their enjoyment.

The Department of Employment and Learning [DEL] allocate funding to Colleges of Further Education to support education taking place in community groups (DEL, 2008). However, and perhaps reflecting the comments from the COPNI above, the chief concern of the interviewee from the CoFE was less on older people and more on meeting the needs of the NEETs category of society [not in education, employment or training]:

> The learning is aimed at people who didn't have a Level 2 qualification and they were wanting to go back to work. Because of ageism you couldn't sort of say to the third parties, don't go out and recruit retired people. It's looking at people getting back into work (CoFE).

In some ways this is not surprising as government strategy is focused on those who are unemployed or classified as NEETs (DEL, 2014). As a consequence, the funding received from DEL is 'ring fenced' to the NEETs category of society. This decision however to create composite classes comprised of older and younger people is not fully consonant with the learning needs of older people, and had the effect of repelling rather than encouraging their involvement; two separate but related themes emerged from the data which shed light on the problems with the current approach.

The learning environment

Students' conflicting motivations

The decision to combine classes for NEETs and the older learner inevitably raise questions about the conflicting motivations of the different types of learner and this was a constant theme in the interview data. It was clear that older people preferred not to engage in education in a classroom with teenagers with different priorities and behavioural patterns. The interviewee from the CoFE fully acknowledged the issue:

> I think older people generally feel happier coming to a class together. They would maybe see the college as full of youngsters and they don't want to come in and do a class with young people. So if they can come together, even two or three of them, I think having somebody else to do it along with definitely is an encouragement and I think coming in on their own for some older students think "I will end up in a class with these whizz kids who know their way around a computer and I will not go" (CoFE).

Hence, the objective of encouraging older people to learn alongside younger people appears not to be something that is necessarily in the older person's interests or palatable to them, especially if they are attending a class on their own. There was mention of intergenerational learning, however, the participants demonstrated uncertainty and a lack of enthusiasm for it, and there was no evidence in this study of it being successfully implemented:

> [*Name of school*] are working alongside us a bit, they are being very good, they have offered us their computer suite if we want it and also if we want to join in with their pupils because they are also trying very hard to make their pupils realise that old people are not elderly, old people are good fun, intergeneration work, and they are very keen on that. They have actually offered us their facilities but they are not great from the point of view of

making tea because there is a coffee shop in the school and they would be finished when we would be using it so we are not really sure (Susan).

This reticence to use the school facilities and to learn alongside the pupils may be considered a missed opportunity for both young and older learners. Yet engagement of later life learners can be achieved when the learning is meaningful and of interest to them (Formosa, 2011; Glass, 1996). Whilst the interviewees from the CoFE and COPNI appreciated the difficulties that these issues raised, there was little real sense that they sought to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy – instead there was a sense of resignation to the prevailing system:

That's the DEL programme and the way we have to run with it…it is really based on getting people back to work (CoFE).

Similarly, the interviewee from COPNI, whilst acknowledging the problems that such an approach invariably creates and to whom older people have voiced their concerns at being excluded from learning opportunities, was apparently unable to offer any substantive challenge to it:

At the minute the focus on learning is generally for those who are unemployed and have been unemployed that are NEETs. We had older people round the table in the boardroom saying we are NEETs too. We are not in education, or employment or training. That is pretty hard to argue with (COPNI).

Yet their inertia and lack of challenge to these practices had quite negative effects on the older learners, who were acutely aware of the lack of attention to their needs and there was a palpable sense of frustration. They lamented the lack of support offered by government agencies and their comments revealed that they were deeply cognisant of the gap between the official commitment to the education of older people, and the support for those wishing to avail of informal learning:

They preach, but they don't encourage it at all. They need to sort their camp out. There are too many older people who are just left to flounder now (Susan).

This sense of being 'left to flounder' was resonant across several interviews and was perhaps compounded by the fact that participants felt that they had limited information about the range of, and access to, alternative sources of educational provision for older people in NI.

Student aspiration

All of the participants suggested that they wished to learn for enjoyment and to enhance their quality of life. However, there was a general concern that the objectives of the key provider of informal education in NI, the CoFE, did not reflect these aspirations. The emphasis in the classes offered was on formalised assessment and the acquisition of formal qualifications. The interviewee from the CoFE, although aware that older people did not always seek qualifications, explained that due to curriculum restrictions enforced by government funding they were not in a position to provide non-accredited education (DEL, 2014; McNair, 2009). However, efforts were made to facilitate learners' needs. When a Level One qualification was achieved by participating in courses facilitated by the College, learners, especially older people, were permitted to repeat the same course as many times as they wished, without the need to work towards further accreditation. Whilst this, according to the interviewee from the College, had a clear benefit in so far as it enabled participants to continue attending classes to refresh their knowledge and skills, due to pressures on the College budget, a more stringent approach was implemented; this was something that the interviewee readily agreed had the potential to undo the benefits of the programme:

> Now we police that much more…and the message has got through if you have already got the qualification you cannot come back. But I think quite a few of them do want to come back because if it is something they don't use all the time they forget it and it maybe takes that wee bit longer to bed in, so I think there are definitely people out there who want to do a course without an accreditation. But then that brings a fee to it and particularly the leisure courses are much higher then than an accredited course (CoFE).

Learning solely to acquire qualifications is generally not a priority for older learners. For example, older people are often attracted to informal learning opportunities precisely because there is not an emphasis on formalised assessment procedures (Formosa, 2012; MacKean and Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Withnall, 2006). The data in this study similarly suggested that such requirements held little appeal. Rather, the primary motivation for participants to engage in learning was to extend their knowledge and skills, than to gain a qualification, as the following extracts make clear:

> We don't really want a little piece of paper…and certificates to say we had done that because we didn't want to sit the tests…we just wanted to learn… you are learning and you know you are learning but you are not trying to get a certificate at the end of it (Donna).

> When I got there they said, "now at the end of the course there are these exams", well I nearly had a heart attack, I said I don't want to do exams, I am only here to enjoy myself (Anna).

The desire to learn for fun and enjoyment without the restrictions of a syllabus (Coffield, 2000; Mark *et al.*, 2010), or the need to gain a qualification (Yenerall, 2003), are crucial for older learners as this freedom can allow participants to learn what they want and at their own pace:

> There is no real pressure on you…it is not like a school situation where you have to learn stuff for an exam. You just take it on board if you wish and you can expand on it in your own time or go to libraries or read books. Sort of take it at your own speed if you like (Gary).

Indeed, taking examinations were not cited by any participant as an objective and as noted above may potentially detract from and impair the enjoyment of the learning experience. This is something that is also highlighted by Withnall (2006) who found that the majority of older learners prefer flexibility and no exams as these can be a reminder of previous, sometimes negative, educational experiences. The sense of freedom that is so relished by learners aged 65 and over is also something recognised by MacKean and Abbott-Chapman (2011), as an advantage and indeed an incentive to encourage participation in community-based groups and this was also reflected in the data below:

> [*You learn*] because you want to, not because you are forced to do something (Sandra).

> Enjoyment is the word I think you would use about learning when you are older. If you don't enjoy it well then don't do it. As long as you enjoy it, that's important (Helen).

Yet, and importantly, the enjoyment that Helen seeks is likely to be increasingly difficult to attain as tensions between funding restrictions and the needs of older people are only likely to intensify in the current climate of economic parsimony (DEL, 2008; DEL, 2014). Yet whilst the informal educational opportunities

offered in the formal setting were not perceived to fully capture the specific needs of older people, participants reported that they found it difficult to access alternative provision.

Access to learning opportunities

In order for older learners to be supported in their informal learning endeavours there needs to be a commitment by policy makers and local providers to the promotion and advertising of learning opportunities and a recognition of the need, ensuring that the acquisition of learning places and spaces in the community is facilitated (Aldridge and Hughes, 2012). Responses to this study suggested, however, that there was a general lack of awareness amongst older people in terms of where learning could take place and this was fully acknowledged by the interviewee from COPNI:

> Older people will access learning opportunities that are available to them and those are not equal across Northern Ireland, they are in pockets. And older people who are looking for those kind of opportunities are in the more mobile, better off, keeping active category and a lot of what we are doing is trying to get in touch with and act on behalf of older people whose voices are more seldom heard (COPNI).

Moreover, there was considerable evidence to suggest that the availability of information in local communities informing older people of learning opportunities was inadequate. For example, the key informant from the U3A suggested that it provides 'at least 200,000 hours of learning per year at no public cost' but has concerns about the lack of information made available to older people:

> Many lack awareness of the opportunities available to them. And there are lots out there, groups of all sorts…but there is no general information… things need to be plugged a bit more to let people know more about them because most of our members come by word of mouth (U3A).

This dearth of information was well explained by one of the participants who described the resistance of a local health centre to a request that they advertise some of her educational group's activities:

> I said to Dr [*name of doctor*] would it be possible for me to put a poster up about the U3A, he says, "oh, I cannot do that, once I start putting posters up then I have to put posters up for everybody". I said wait till I tell you

> something, if you would put a poster up you would have half the work to do in here because the majority of your elderly people come here as a day out. It is their wee way of having something to do and if they had that, you might gain 10% less appointments. I said I am sorry you could not oblige me (Susan).

This finding is similar to the work of Leon *et al.,* (2015) in relation to negative attitudes towards older people by healthcare students. However, this is a particularly important comment, as it was made by a healthcare professional who might be expected to be empathetic towards the plight of older people, and also to appreciate the potential for staving off health issues through learning. Although this is only one comment, it does illustrate the challenges that were experienced by participants in relation to their social marginalisation. Rather than recognising the benefits learning might have for them, it further perpetuates the risk of marginalisation and subjugation of the older person in NI. Such a negative response to advertising inevitably compounds the lack of knowledge about learning opportunities and potential isolation of older people and is significant, particularly when considered in the context of the official rationale for widening access to educational opportunities for older people (HM Government, 2009; OFMDFM, 2006; UNECE, 2012; United Nations, 2002; WHO, 2002). However, to counteract such negative experiences and to promote their groups, participants had ideas about how things might be improved:

> I think when you become pension age, not only should you get a pension book, you get a résumé of what is available to you as a pensioner whether you want to join a U3A group or whether you want to work for cancer research (Susan).

> Something which actually we are thinking about this year is having an open day…it's probably telling people there is a world out there when you retire (Michael).

Yet it was not just the lack of advertising that hindered older people from exploiting learning opportunities. There were also concerns that public space was not made readily available for classes to take place within the community. So, for example, access to local facilities in the community, such as libraries, was recognised by Government (OFMDFM, 2005) as something that may encourage older people to participate in learning.

The interviewee from the U3A suggested that although libraries had an agreement whereby they could be used as spaces for informal learning for older people, there remained quite significant gaps in the provision. Her reference to 'neutral venues' directly relates to the societal division in NI and raises important issues around the intersection of the conflict with learning opportunities for older people in NI:

> We want the opportunity to replicate the type of agreement which we have with the libraries with other public buildings and hope to ensure that the official strategy be implemented at local councils, education and health board levels…It's very hard to get neutral venues. I think that is a bug bear. There are no neutral community places. You are either stuck with a church hall or a chapel (U3A).

Significantly, the venue also had an impact on the learning experiences for the older men in areas of social disadvantage in the study by Mark *et al.,* (2010). These older men felt intimidated as they had to leave their own familiar surroundings and enter a different community in NI to access learning opportunities. Although the participants in this study were mostly from middle-class backgrounds, the need for familiar surroundings and neutrality was also important for them. This need is particularly relevant in NI as social identity is 'multifaceted with historical, religious, political, social, economic, and psychological underpinnings' emanating from the sectarian conflict known as the 'Troubles' from 1968 to 1998 (Goeke-Morey *et al.,* 2015, p. 283). The absence of neutral facilities in local communities and charges incurred for the hire of rooms places an additional financial burden on community learning organisations which is ultimately transferred to the older learners. Despite their resilience to a perceived lack of support, and lack of enthusiasm for online courses as discussed above, occasionally the retirees were reliant on teaching input from external sources. However, the teaching approach adopted by external tutors sat uneasily with the needs of the older people and did not always meet their expectations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine perceptions of the extent of support available in NI for older people who were mostly middle-class retirees, wanting to engage with later life learning. Whilst the data cannot be generalised it is suggested that, despite a national and international policy emphasis on involving older people in informal learning, there is a notable perceived lack of support

and understanding of their needs. As a consequence of these perceptions, the retirees in this study have used initiative and created opportunities to fulfil their needs independently. There is little doubt that the educational and working experiences of participants smoothed their route to becoming involved in informal learning groups, and this raises questions about the extent to which those from less advantaged groups are supported in their endeavours to engage with learning (McAleavy *et al.*, 2004; McGrath, 2009; Withnall, 2006).

What is perhaps most significant is that despite the extensive policy rhetoric which champions the value of informal learning for older people, the data presented here suggests that there is very little real support from Government policy and the CoFE to accommodate the learning needs of those older people who want to learn without restrictions, or the need to undertake further qualifications (Formosa, 2012; OFMDFM, 2005). This lack of support for their needs is leading to the subjugation of older people, giving a sense that they are inferior to society. This is resulting in older people having to overcome considerable barriers and fight to have their learning needs met, resulting in them having to make provision for themselves. Given that the participants in this study were mainly educated to degree level and familiar with social and political structures, it is recognised that this may have contributed to their enthusiasm and motivation for participating in their learning activities. A longitudinal study with a cohort of recent retirees, drawn from different social classes across different geographical areas would be really interesting. This could shed light on the socioeconomic dimensions and the barriers that are faced by those who are less educated than those in this sample as highlighted by Mark *et al.*, (2010).

Whilst the voluntary and community sector have increased provision of informal learning opportunities, they also are restricted in the opportunities they offer, due to the stringent conditions placed on sources of funding received from Government. Therefore, a greater appreciation of the needs of older people, and particularly middle-class retirees, might allow them to be recognised and supported. The irony is that without these informal learning opportunities and support, it is suggested that middle-class retirees could inadvertently become dependent on healthcare and government benefits and thus the burden on the public purse could become even greater (Findsen *et al.*, 2011; Foley *et al.*, 2008; MacKean and Abbott-Chapman, 2011).

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Learning to mother over coffee and cake: Naming our informal learning

SARAH COSS

Abstract

This article is a feminist inquiry into the learning experiences of mothers in an informal parent support group and asks: What is quality education and how do we ensure we are identifying it appropriately? Drawing on feminist research and incorporating contributions from 16 women, this article highlights how a group of women identify their experiences as significant learning episodes. In doing this they reject other methods of learning in favour of informal, dialogical learning in convivial and supportive settings. Rather than relying on authorised knowledge (Letherby, 2003) they rely on the experiential knowledge of other mothers. Reminiscent of feminist community education this group enables the women to overcome oppression and isolation by collectively naming their world in order to understand it. The community education setting is in decline in Ireland but when we draw on quantitative methods to define, categorise and count educational groups we need to ensure we are naming, counting and including all forms of education. This paper argues that we are overlooking important groups who are engaging in quality informal community education.

Keywords: Informal learning, community education, 'really useful research', feminist research, defining quality

Introduction

This article seeks to explore what constitutes quality education and to inquire whether we are recognising quality education in all its forms. Drawing on my recent research uncovering the experiences of women in a parent support group I will provide an exploration of learning experiences in a non-traditional educational setting through convivial relationship and dialogue (Coss, 2016). The women in this support group rate their learning experiences very highly

yet prior to participating in my research they, like many others, might not have identified these experiences as quality educational incidents. Jarvis notes that everyday life is a strangely under researched subject, with adults often not recognising their changing and developing thoughts and behaviour as learning unless they are engaging in an active, formally acknowledged or accredited, conscious episode of learning (Jarvis, 2010, p. 63). My research explores how creating space for dialogical learning in a highly informal setting, a coffee morning, led to significant learning experiences for the women involved. My interest in this area began when participating in research for the Central Statistics Office. I was asked a series of questions designed to identify to what extent I had participated in Lifelong Learning in the preceding months (CSO, 2014). The pre-set categories included formal, non-formal and informal. My enthusiastic description of how I had learned as a mother attending a local parent support group – to my mind social, dialogical, experiential and transformative learning – didn't fit into any of the prescribed boxes. Statistically I had not in fact learned anything that could be quantified in any way except 'other'.

Overview

Murray discusses the attempt to define the field of education and learning as an attempt to control and dominate the discipline (2014, pp. 105-106). Despite this viewpoint, different learning environments are often defined as formal, non-formal and informal and these definitions are recognised and utilised in many settings, for example inclusion in quantitative research by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2015) and the Central Statistics Office in Ireland (CSO, 2010). Jarvis states that when attempting to categorise these various types of learning into examples of formal, non-formal and informal there is an inherent prejudice displayed, since the terms informal and non-formal imply that all the important learning, the quality learning, is formal – structured, accredited, provided for in recognised institutions of education, and so on – whereas the remaining examples of learning which are not so orientated can be lumped together as 'informal' (Jarvis, 2010, p. 66). This categorisation has led to a hierarchical interpretation of what constitutes learning. For many, the concept of learning conjures up images of classrooms, training, teachers, textbooks, homework, and exercises, yet in reality learning is an integral part of our everyday lives, part of our participation in our communities and organisations (Wenger, 1999; Tough, 1971). For Wenger, 'the problem is not that we do not know this, but rather that we do not have very systematic ways of talking about this familiar experience' (1999, p. 8). Finnegan (2016, p. 52) also discusses this defining of learning, exploring what

he calls a 'narrowing educational imagination' and setting out his vision for a future where adult education is viewed as a set of practices across various social spaces encouraging democracy, participation and critical reflection. Sources of knowledge, the production of knowledge and the sites where knowledge are produced are common themes in writings on adult education. When people create their own knowledge and have their voices heard, narrow definitions of what is thought to be 'educated knowledge' and who it is that makes it are thrown into question (Tett, 2006).

Coffee and Cake: Methodology

The inclusion of 'Coffee and Cake' as part of my title is used to reflect the informal and relational nature of the setting and to examine the significance of these features in producing spaces conducive to learning. These conditions of informality were also crucial to my research approach. Leaning on the work of Letherby (2003) and Oakley (2000; 1999) I understood that issues of methodology and epistemology mattered. In keeping with my desire to conduct feminist research I drew on my experience of over 15 years working with adult and community groups. I used a series of open-ended activities and 'codes' (Freire, 1993) that aimed to produce the core conditions needed for us to explore this subject together putting my trust in the mantra 'the group can take care of itself' (Sheehy, 2001, p. 33). The unstructured nature of my activities provided qualitative depth by enabling respondents to talk about the subject within their own frames of reference, drawing upon meanings with which they were familiar and allowing those meanings of events and relationships be understood on their own terms (May, 2001). This research includes the contributions of 16 women in total, 17 including myself. Although I am a member of this parent support group and have attended coffee mornings in the past all findings included in this paper were generated from discussion and contributions voiced through three focus groups with a combined total of 13 respondents and a further 3 contributions by e-interview. The women range in age from their early 30s to their 50s and are at various stages in their parenting journey, with some having one child and others having two or more. These women adopt practices that are peripheral to mainstream culture in Irish society (Layte and McCrory, 2014), practices that are often ostracised, for example longer-term breastfeeding and co-sleeping, and in the focus groups more than one woman described themselves as a 'hippy mum' (Coss, 2016). This is where drawing on research brings useful information into focus, for example, in stark contrast to the dominant norm in Irish society, almost all the women in the study identified themselves as extended or 'full term' breast feeders (WHO, 2016; DOHC, 2005)

with many continuing to breastfeed their children to two years or beyond. There was also a far higher than national average of respondents who gave birth at home or with midwifery-led services despite the dominant model of birth in Ireland being hospital-based consultant-led care (Begley *et al.*, 2011). The research was co-constructed (Bryman, 2004; May, 2001) and the women who attended the focus groups were invited to comment on the transcript from which some did, giving insightful and thought-provoking responses.

Ways of Learning

Throughout my research it was clear that mothering in our society can be an isolating experience and that the women found their experiences of mothering challenging and difficult. Chodorow (1999, p. 7) maintained that mothering was socially constructed, that women were taught to be mothers and were trained for nurturance. If we uphold this socialisation of women as mothers we can see that the women in my research did not always feel adequately 'taught' or 'trained' for this task. One of the first pieces of information to emerge from the focus groups was the inadequacy of the knowledge about mothering these women considered themselves to have before they had their first child. There were many references in the research about the 'isolation', 'loneliness' and 'vulnerability' they felt and the occasions when they describe openly and honestly their feelings of being overwhelmed are very powerful. In order to learn new ways of facing these challenges they sought out and valued the emotional support and connection from other mothers. In contrast to Chodorow's concept of socially constructed mothering a number of the women in this research expressed thoughts and feelings about the natural, gendered virtues of motherhood, for example 'a mother is naturally nurturing'. Despite changes in Irish society, which have led to significantly more involvement from fathers and men in general, women predominantly populate this parent-support group. When men are involved it is most often to attend annual family orientated events or 'non-formal' events such as information talks rather than the informal weekly coffee mornings. In their review of the literature on social support and parenting Geens and Vandenbroek (2014) showed there is minimal attention given to the relational aspect of social support, yet they also present the widespread position in the literature that the informal network of parents is the first place parents turn to for support. This produces a complexity whereby regular attendance at informal coffee mornings creates conditions favourable to support and learning yet it is a setting where, for the most part, women undertake the parenting; men are not present or certainly are not visible. This absence compounds the perspective that informal networking in relation to parenting is something for mothers

to engage in. Crucially, this paper proposes that the proliferation of women in informal parent support groups is precisely the reason why these groups are not being named and counted as sites for learning. Whether the women in this research believe their mothering behaviour is innate, socially constructed or a complex combination of both, this research has comprehensively shown that for these women when it comes to mothering, traditional methods of learning do not always work for them. Throughout the focus groups there was a large amount of discussion about methods of learning to be a mother, including a shift from previous methods of learning and a move towards informal methods. I have included the following exchange between Denise, Niamh and Jenny in Focus Group Two as an example:

> **Denise:** I think you learn in a different way, I think how you've "learned to learn" is a different way of learning to how we're learning as mothers.
>
> **Niamh:** The 1 plus 1 doesn't equal 2.
>
> **Jenny:** Yeah, and it's not appreciated the same way because you can't measure it, you can't say she's doing a worse job than I am, or I got an A and you got a B minus.

Letting Go

Conversations about the nature of learning focused on examples of learning that were preferred, such as observation, using social media, and experiential learning. They also included discussions of methods of learning that didn't work, observed in comments such as:

> **Michelle:** It was learn, learn, learn, academic, academic, academic, and now it's much more...empirical. That? Ok, that didn't work, try something else. Ok that didn't work, try something else (laughter).
>
> **Denise:** All the information you get it really comes from this community of mothers you find…but it's other mothers rather than, sort of, outside of that, books or TV, you know?

An unexpected outcome for me was how forcefully this leaving behind of more traditional ways of learning was voiced, especially in relation to learning from books. Across the three focus groups all references to books as a means of learning were negative, yet respondents identified previous success when learning using this method. For example, Elaine and Michelle had these comments about book learning:

Elaine: It's the way I've always done everything, if I'm going on holiday I read the guide book. It's always been all about the books and the studying and if you do X you will get Y and you will plan, plan, plan...and now that's gone! You can't do that…your child is not in any book.

Michelle: At first I read everything. And now...I think it was clouding my gut reaction 'cos I was reading and going "oh that must be how I think". No! I actively stopped reading parenting books.

Intersectionality and Oppression

What is perhaps most interesting to note from the research is the evidence of intersectionality and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). For these women, the experience of being a patient in the Irish medical system – one with strong Catholic undertones – combines with their gender and their status as pregnant women or birthing women to create a particular form of oppression. There are clear stories in the research of women who occupy typically dominant positions in wider society (by virtue of their race, their age, their educational level, their occupation and their social status) being oppressed as expectant and/or birthing mothers, with striking use of language such as 'butchered', 'violated', 'traumatic', and 'silenced'. The women in Focus Group One teased out the homogenous nature of the group by discussing with each other the lack of diversity relating to age, religion and status, describing themselves as 'middle-class', 'well-educated' and 'in their mid-late 30s' (Coss, 2016, pp. 52-53). Using these frames of reference, the protective factors the women might have against certain forms of discrimination and oppression are eroded by the manner in which their experiences are structured by their gender and by the policies and practices they encountered (Crenshaw, 1991). Their position in society as mother includes many stories relating to oppression, perhaps more prevalent due to their alternative choices relating to parenting, birth and breastfeeding in particular. As noted above, the women in this focus group often mother in ways which deviate from the dominant norms, their choices intersect with already existing perceptions of mothering to further compound the feelings of marginality. These women possess different levels of power and marginality dependent on their roles, for example: doctor/birthing mother; engineer/stay-at-home mother; full-time business entrepreneur/full-time carer. As such, they would not often be the type of demographic we would expect to be described as 'silenced 'or 'other'. Their power or marginality is relational and their role or status in one arena does not necessarily transfer to the other (Ryan, 2001, pp. 37-38). Evidence of silencing, trivialising, sexualising and infantilising women

and traditionally women's lived experiences can be found in the focus groups including language used by the women and others to name the group, such as 'baby club' and 'booby group' with a further example given of a husband referring to 'tea parties on Fridays'. When reflecting on the importance of the coffee mornings Michelle noted:

> My husband would definitely have seen the value and been very supportive but I think he saw the value of the groups to me, I wonder would he see the value of the groups to society, probably not.

A large feature of discussion regarding the support that women received at the coffee mornings related to sharing similar experiences, experiences which they 'would never say in public' and the resultant feelings of 'being normal'.

> **Emma:** A lot of us feel the same things but we don't realise our feelings are normal, the fact that two people just open up and say "yeah, I've got that too", it's so liberating.

In summary, these women utilised new ways of learning to mother, which included more than just the traditional educational methods. The women in this research use groups such as this one in order to share and explore their subjective meanings with the hope that it will lead to a more secure understanding of their world. This understanding of their world and their new place within it leads to greater feelings of stability and greater feelings of connection. Sharing space, discussing generative themes that affect women's lives, exploring and understanding the structures and systems behind those themes provide us with an opportunity to understand and change our world. This can be achieved within informal education groups that uphold the principles of feminist community education (Moane and Quilty, 2012).

Discussion: Naming Our Informal Learning.

Belenkey *et al.* (1986, p. 13) describe how mothering has 'at its centre the teaching of the next generation' so as such, it is imperative that something so crucial should feature in the measurement of lifelong learning. Yet, as will be discussed here, the activities of certain informal groups are consistently overlooked and in doing so valuable sites of education are disregarded. Smith (2012) states that participation in local organisations has considerable educative power and AONTAS (2009) describe a women's support group as educative, maintaining that providing space to tell our stories teaches us to understand

our lives and cope with difficulties. The imagining of a parent support group as a site for education is clearly displayed in the responses of the women in this study when they outline the learning experiences and shifts in perspectives they have undergone while a member of this group. Despite the ability of this parent support group to provide spaces for meaningful learning, these forms of learning are more difficult to measure and quantify, they are by their nature non-accredited and are most often seen as having no value to the labour market. Traditionally, community education in Ireland provided a forum for voices of otherwise silenced people, it developed a process that valued their stories and it enabled the participants to interrogate their own words (CEFA, 2011; Connolly, 2003). Taking the lived experiences of the participants as its starting point, community education has evolved to include a combination of informal and non-formal education programmes, accredited and non-accredited, across a range of contexts, with particular attraction for women located in isolated, disadvantaged or socially excluded settings (Quilty *et al.*, 2016, p. 36; DES, 2000). It is well documented that there has been a decline in this form of women's community education (Fitzsimons, 2017; Connolly, 2014; Connolly 2013) most likely aligned with the move toward neo-liberal policies of community development and education (widely discussed in Murray, Grummell and Ryan, 2014; CEFA 2014). This decline becomes even more pronounced if we fail to recognise community education in all its guises.

Overlooking this arena of learning is a perfect example of where experiential and affective knowledge that is associated with the private sphere is disregarded in favour of the far more measurable political, economic and technical knowledge that dominate public spheres (Grummell, 2014). Moreover, the act of mothering is not just located in the private sphere; it is located in the private, feminised sphere. Carragher and Golding, in their discussions of the Men's Shed Movement (2016; 2015) discuss the aim for Ireland to 'achieve the 15 per cent EU benchmark for participation in lifelong learning by 2020' (Carragher and Golding, 2016, p. 60), but what are we counting as participation in lifelong learning? The Men's Shed movement, established in Ireland as recently as 2011 (IMSA, 2016) is surely being counted, but what of other informal groups? The parent support group at the centre of my research is just one branch of a national organisation established decades ago, it has high membership, is open to mothers, fathers, parents, grandparents, and is active in many communities in Ireland. Yet my experience, akin to those who took part in the research, is that relatively few people know its name. A discussion in Focus Group One addressed this issue, considering whether this was a branding failure or whether

it was in fact because nobody really cares. They concluded it was predominantly the latter (Coss, 2016, p. 74).

The experiences of the women (and men) who attend these coffee mornings and the subsequent knowledge created from these experiences have been subjugated by traditional education and the pursuit of more legitimate knowledge and learning experiences. Taking a feminist perspective the omission of the topic of parenting from official statistics on Lifelong Learning (CEDEFOP, 2015) could indicate that despite their educational worth these spaces for learning are not recognised or valued because parenting was traditionally seen as something that women do, individually and privately. Omitting these sites of learning leads to situations where the experiences described by these women remain silenced and 'other' (DeBeauvoir, 2009). In 1993 AONTAS produced a report, 'Liberating Learning', with the aim of identifying 'daytime groups' to compile accurate statistics and information. The main challenge named in this report was to find and contact these groups as many were run on such an informal level (Inglis *et al.*, 1993). This problem of identification of women's groups as spaces of learning continues in Ireland. The National Women's Council of Ireland, in its 2001 publication 'Framing the Future' which sought to examine the quantity and nature of women's community based groups, discounted certain groups stating that 'where women were not the main focus, such as in toddler groups or pre-school play groups, these were not included' (NWCI, 2001, p. 27) and the inclusion of breastfeeding groups and parenting groups are not explicitly named as a 'target group' or 'main focus' (NWCI, 2001, p. 30). Connolly makes the case that quantitative research has a place in 'really useful research' (2016, p.96). If these types of groups are not counted, if they are not seen, how can we begin to uncover what is taking place within them? When we begin to regard parent support groups as quality learning spaces we can then inquire about the nature of the learning taking place.

Sites of Learning

Community education recognises learning not just as the individual act of acquiring knowledge but also as a group process, with each group member bringing their gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and status with them (Connolly and Hussey, 2013). Community education reaches difficult to reach people and communities but not just that, it reaches difficult issues and trends. Connolly (2010) states that these difficult issues are not always located just at the local level, which is clearly shown by the ostensibly private issue of mothering, which in reality is politically and socially contested, including many different

perceptions of what it means to be a 'good mother' (Smart, 1996). This parent group is reminiscent of the wider grass-roots community education movement in Ireland where content and format were organised by the local community for the community, but takes this even further as all content is unprepared and spontaneous, it is by its nature self-directed. Many theories of informal education still point towards an 'educator' being present (Jeffs and Smith, 1997; 2005; 2011). Illich (1978) critiqued the role of institutions, professional educators and schools and the manner in which they reproduce the dominant hegemonic norms and create inequality. Instead, Illich put forward his vision for education where knowledge was accessible to everyone, at any time, through a sharing of knowledge in convivial peer relationships (Illich, 1978). Similarly, Illeris (2007; 2004) believes the terms of formal and informal to be very abstract and instead introduces the concept of different learning spaces. The central idea behind this concept is that since all learning is situated, different types of learning situations or learning spaces have different characteristics. For Illeris (2007; 2004) everyday learning takes place in daily life; it is mainly informal, multifarious, personal and related to the cultures and subcultures in which the person is integrated. This parent support group is a co-operative movement with minimal assigned roles. In the coffee mornings nobody is working overtly as an educator, informal or otherwise, and the setting is not a traditional site for education, reminiscent of Illich's vision. There are benefits to the truly informal act of learning through conversation, one where the input of group members into conversation is the only direction the learning can take, reminiscent of Freire's 'Culture Circle' (Freire, 1974, pp. 39-40). Yet even within this highly informal setting, one where the women themselves may not overtly recognise or name their activities as learning activities, a more fluid definition of education is useful. Within formal and non-formal settings we can seek to incorporate the more relational attributes of the informal settings; within informal settings there may be a place to incorporate a professional or para-professional adult educator (Percy, 1997). As an integral part of my methodology the transcript from the research was sent to all of the women and I invited a response from them. Like their conversation in the groups the women's responses were honest, visceral, eloquent and poignant; they spoke of the connection they felt during the focus groups and the importance of talking with and being with other women. Alongside these connections and relationships three of the women named in their responses the value of a facilitated space, one where 'discussion was guided but still let go where it needed to go' with one woman suggesting a need for facilitated evenings with a particular topic up for discussion (Coss,

2016, pp. 74-75). We can create and make visible more imaginative learning spaces if we further integrate our definitions of what constitutes formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Conclusion: Naming Our World

This group provides a space where women can share their cultural norms that often deviate from the dominant parenting norms, they can share their personal histories, they can share their perspectives, and in doing so feel more at ease with the construction of their own identities as women, as mothers and as members of their societies. This research shows, through a move away from more traditional ways of learning, that for these women certain types of knowledge are more highly valued than others in the area of parenting. These women describe relationships, support, and dialogue with other mothers as important to them when negotiating and learning through their transition to motherhood. They are largely relying on 'experiential knowledge' rather than 'authorised knowledge' (Letherby, 2003, p. 22). This is the 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 1996); this is the knowledge that these mothers trust. The learning episodes in these coffee mornings are a valid form of quality education but they are being overlooked due to the dominant imagining of sites and structures of education. Community education is regarded as being in decline in Ireland therefore we need to ensure that we are not missing quality community education simply because it doesn't fit with our delineated perceptions of what education looks like.

In conclusion, my research aimed to shine a light on the educative nature of the parent support group and the value it brings to its members and to wider society. Drawing on that research this paper seeks to further explore the nature of education and how we define it. The findings highlight the inadequacy of formal methods of learning to mother, with traditional methods of learning not preparing these women for the reality of being a mother. Instead, the women are involved in the collective process of naming their world and seeing that world reflected in the experiences of other mothers (Freire, 1993). Furthermore, for these women, this form of informal learning supersedes other forms of learning, exposing a reliance on experiential knowledge above authorised knowledge. Learning that takes place informally in non-traditional spaces, as described in this paper, should be recognised and counted as an important and effective means of learning, it is not something to be squeezed in between more validated formal and non-formal learning but has a distinct value and merit of its own.

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SECTION TWO

Case Studies on Improving Practice

Examination of quality in a community family communication course

EIMER CADOGAN, LIAM MCCARTHY AND MARY MANGAN

Abstract

Adult education is under-researched and when quality is researched it is based on summative assessment, having implications for both policy and practice. Courses which deal with parenting often measure progress in this manner, missing out on the experience of learners. The present study uses conventional content analysis to examine the positive experiences of participants as an indicator of quality. The principal finding of this study was that the group process was critical to the learning, and that being listened to was the main benefit noted by participants, though this is not often used as a signifier of quality.

Keywords: Experiential learning, quality measurements, community education, family communication, group-work, facilitation, participants' experience, listening

Introduction

Quality in Non-Accredited Learning

Adult education is an under-researched area, with summative assessment largely being used as a judgement of course quality (Boshier, 2006). Consequently, non-accredited learning is often disregarded in terms of its benefits, and given low-priority in terms of policy making and funding. The Cork City Centre Community Education Network (2015) set out a literature review of local, regional and international case studies evidencing the quality of experiences for learners in community-located adult education courses. They argued that policy makers need to

> Take serious cognisance of the existing body of evidence related to the place and efficacy of community education, exploring further together what are

to count as valued outcomes of this work and how these can be 'evidenced' in ways meaningful to all stakeholders (p. 4).

While the need to ensure quality in adult education is paramount, often when referencing quality of education, quality is based solely on standards and outcomes e.g. examination results or skills acquired (Boshier, 2006). This does not leave much room for learning which is not academically assessed, or for learning which focuses on personal experience and growth. Personal development is at the heart of courses offered by the Social and Health Education Project (SHEP).

SHEP Training Courses

SHEP is an Irish community-based training and development organisation established in 1974, whose key areas of work include a unique training programme which pioneered experiential group-work approaches and developed over many years. Although SHEP is a QQI-accredited provider, most of the courses offered are non-accredited by choice.

Family Communication and Other Parenting Courses

One such community education course offered is the SHEP course in Family Communication. This is an 8/10 week course which covers a wide range of topics relating to family life and parenting. The course is certified by SHEP and follows an experiential learning methodology. It has solid grounding in adult learning psychology, developmental psychology, and family systems theory. Relevant theory is introduced as appropriate in an accessible way.

Previous research shows such parenting courses have had a transformative effect on those who take part, with findings suggesting many participants experience enhanced personal empowerment (Wolfe and Haddy, 2001). They also provide critical support for parents who may be socially isolated in their own lives, as the group provides an outlet for socialisation and bonding. Finally, and importantly, parenting groups allow for the acquisition of more effective parenting skills (Wolfe and Haddy, 2001).

There has been some research on Irish samples, with courses like Incredible Years having a large body of evidence behind their course. Studies in this area have shown that investment in such programmes may have long-term benefits with regards to economic returns for the state (O' Neill *et al.*, 2013). This comes as a result of the reduction in behavioural problems shown by the children of

course participants. McGilloway *et al.* (2012) showed that children of parents who participated in the Incredible Years programme showed decreased behavioural problems and hyperactive-inattentive behaviours, and showed an increase in social competence. Furthermore, it was found that participation in the programme increased parental competencies and parental wellbeing.

The majority of research on parenting courses tends to focus on quantitative outcomes, looking at levels of conduct disorder, poor behaviour, and parental wellbeing. While important, this does not provide an insight into the experience of the parents completing such a course, or the quality of the course itself. Even research looking at parents' experiences on such courses rarely focuses on what parents got from the course, but focuses instead on the feasibility of course attendance and other practicalities.

As noted by To *et al.* (2015), many parenting courses ignore the opportunities which are enmeshed within parenthood which can aid in advancing the parents as individuals, helping them develop their strengths and inspiring them to seek positive changes.

For the writers, this raises the question of how quality in parenting and family communication courses can be properly assessed.

The Current Study

Motivated by these considerations, SHEP undertook this study to assess SHEP's Family Communication course, looking not at parenting outcomes, but the participants' positive experiences in order to assess the quality of the course, and in doing so demonstrate how participants' experiences are as valuable an indicator of good quality as more quantitative outcomes.

Methodology

The current study employed a descriptive qualitative design, using conventional content analysis (CCA) described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) to identify, analyse, and describe the content of participants' evaluations of SHEP's Family Communication course. In CCA the text is analysed by first coding the data, then sorting these codes into categories and subcategories based on the links and relatedness of the different codes. This method was chosen as it aims to describe the participants' experience of a phenomenon; an inductive approach was considered to be the most appropriate.

Sample

All participants were part of a SHEP Family Communication course between the years 2010 and 2015.

Data

Data from the participant evaluation forms for SHEP's Family Communication course 2010 – 2015 were utilised. As this study aimed to look at the good quality of the course, only data relating to the questions, "what was the most helpful thing (about the course)?" and "what was the best part of the course?" were analysed. Data consisted of the answers participants gave for these questions with 187 responses collected for the best thing about the course, and 113 for the most helpful. No identifying information was collected on the evaluation forms, thus no demographic information is available to the study.

Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure the integrity of the participants, all data was anonymised with any identifying information removed from the dataset.

Data Analysis

CCA guidelines (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) were followed in the analytic process. In CCA, codes are derived directly from the textual data. First, the lead researcher read through the comments, attempting to get a feel and a general thrust for each question. Next, the data were read through again word by word, with the lead researcher developing codes for each identified unit of meaning. Following this, the data were reflected upon in context by the researcher, and thus codes emerged which mirrored the whole dataset. Each code had a working definition and codes with similar meanings were clustered together to form categories. Every category received a definition in order to identify its precise meaning in comparison to other categories. A second researcher then conducted a similar approach and the results of this were compared in order to test the validity/reliability of the findings.

Results

The results of the CCA yielded a number of codes. Each code was re-analysed in context giving rise to the following categories; Personal Development; The Group Experience; and Knowledge Valued. Each category is described with evidence from the data in order to clarify meaning.

Personal Development

The first category, Personal Development, was defined as "looking deeply at oneself, growing in awareness of identity and building on talents and potential". This category captures participants' experience of self-exploration and growth, as a result of taking part in the course.

Throughout the coding process, it became apparent that participants in the course had developed a better sense of who they were, as they had the opportunity to explore feelings and challenges they had in their lives as parents. This is most apparent as they discussed how they had developed.

> I learned to listen more, to understand my feelings and other(s'), to stop and take a breath and think more about a situation!

Here, one participant notes that they had gained the ability to better manage their impulse control, as well as a more reflective and less reactive response to situations.

It was clear that it was the space and set-up which allowed for this exploration to occur, with the safety of the space being a recurring aspect. One participant noted it was the honest way in which parenting was discussed and examined which they benefited from most.

> Having some space to explore parenting difficulties honestly.

Participants testified to having developed skills in communication, with many participants noting they were "*more comfortable talking*" having completed the course. Listening skills and learning to not speak over others were also identified as important learnings. This could be as a result of the nature of the group, as well as the style of the tutors who were experienced group facilitators.

The participants' concept of parenting had expanded to include not only the day-to-day acts of parenting, but reflected learning on a deeper level of the gift that parenting can be and the intrinsic value of the role of parent.

> Relearning the value of my children and our relationship.

These learnings and personal growth had the impact on some of creating more confidence, with parents noting that they now feel more competent in their role;

> The most helpful aspect was realising my children have feelings and that I am a good enough parent, because before the course I wanted to be a perfect parent.

This participant learned not only skills, but a new way of looking at and approaching their role as a parent. Such discoveries are an intrinsic part of experiential learning.

The Group Experience

The second category, the Group Experience, was defined as "The experience of social connectedness and support by the participants". This category captures both the social aspect of attending the course as well as the types of support experienced by the participants.

The social aspect of the course was a recurring answer for the "best thing about the course" question. Participants noted that they had bonded quickly with their group and it gave them an opportunity to socialise, which many noted was lacking in their own lives.

> The "sociability" - how total strangers opened up to each other and trusted each other – the ground rules laid down by us on the first night helped.

Another aspect of the group experience was participants learning that they were not alone in their struggles or issues, and things which they had felt alone in experiencing were actually very common. This gave the participants a sense of belonging, bonding, and normality.

> The fact that we all shared so much in common – makes you feel not alone!

The group experience also gave rise to peer support which aided the participants in their role as parents. While it was noted that the tutor/facilitators were very supportive and helpful, more often than not participants felt that the help/advice which they had received from their fellow participants was the most valuable thing they had gotten from the course.

> The interaction and the opportunity to be really listened to and the advice and understanding of others in the group.

Finally, the group offered the participants a safe space in which to talk about their feelings and experiences. Ground rules including confidentiality are set

at the first session of each course. This confidentiality gives the participants the safety to say what they want to, and ask questions, without any chance of what they have to say being revealed, except in exceptional circumstances e.g. child protection.

> Having some space to explore parenting difficulties honestly.

Knowledge Valued

The third and final category, Knowledge Valued, was defined as "the specific lessons based on the psychological/sociological canon which the participants learnt from the course".

Some of these lessons were related to complicated areas of family difficulties.

> Getting information and tips on better ways to deal with family situations.

One area where a number of participants experienced some growth was in emotional intelligence. The ability to assert oneself and speak one's mind were skills which a number of participants noted as being especially helpful;

> The "I" statement and knowledge about being passive, assertive, or aggressive.

For some participants, the knowledge valued was in relation to substance abuse.

> I have learned much about the various types of drugs, their effect and lots more but my best thing is about the positive change of my behaviour.

Discussion

Through examining these participants' positive experiences, one can see the benefits of this course. Indeed, it does much in the way of highlighting the value of experiential learning. The quality of the course is mirrored in the quality of the participants' experience.

Essential to the positive experience to which participants testified was the quality of facilitation, and the capacity of the community tutors to co-create a climate of safety in the course groups. Humans are hard-wired for warm relationships and the developing field of interpersonal neurobiology is providing exciting affirmation for the rich potential of experiential group-work for shared learning (Gantt and Badenoch, 2013).

This research underlines the role which belonging and being listened to play in learning. Some participants in the courses stated that the experience of being listened to was the most helpful thing about the course. Participants learning to listen to each other and transferring that learning to their interactions with their children has the potential to be profoundly transformational in family life and child development. A tutor who imposes an agenda to teach skills, or to fix, or even to give ideas, unless asked for, interferes in the participants' felt sense experience of being seen, of being known. Fundamental to the development of self-regulation – which is actually co-regulation (Porges, 2011) – is the experience of supportive presence.

The development of the community tutors' capacity for attuned, responsive relating happens over time. The community tutors who facilitated the Family Communication courses undertook a substantial training programme to prepare for this work, thus enhancing the likelihood of participants in the community courses having a high quality experience. This is the case for all the community tutors who work through SHEP. By the time a tutor comes to facilitate a community course, she will have completed at least three years of part-time training in personal development, social awareness and community empowerment, facilitation training and practitioner-level specialised tutor training; all using – primarily – an experiential group-work approach. At the end of tutor training, there is an assessment (self/peer/trainer) of readiness to facilitate in the community. Those who are ready are supported into the work through an apprenticeship system, co-facilitating alongside an experienced tutor. Furthermore, an important aspect of SHEP's quality assurance is the provision of group supervision for community tutors. In this context, the tutors also reflect in a safe, supportive space on their experience of facilitation and they continue to learn from each other.

Conclusion

It is a critical challenge to go beyond the dominant discourses related to quality and to develop ways of measuring quality which are consistent with andragogy. It was Einstein's bringing of attention to the limits and assumptions embedded in the measuring frameworks of scientists that led to major advances over the last century. A similar mistake could be made in the educational field, if we fail to bring our attention to the assumptions and limits of measuring frameworks related to quality – what we come to 'know' about quality is integrally connected with how we go about the processes of measuring it.

It is clear that participants benefitted significantly from this course, both on a personal and interpersonal level. They internalised relevant psychological theory including the idea of "good enough parenting" (Bettelheim, 1987) and have access to a wider range of family communication strategies. The group process was the *sine qua non* for transformational learning. Ascertaining course quality here could only truly be done through examining the experience of participants and not through summative assessment as is most often favoured by policy makers and funders.

> Love, care and solidarity matter also because they each involve work that produces outcomes that can be seen and felt, if not always easily measured (Lynch *et al.* 2007).

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Holding the line: A slow movement towards a critical professional development for community educators

JERRY O'NEILL AND SUSAN CULLINANE

Abstract

Professional development is a fundamental, if sometimes, overlooked aspect of nurturing high quality adult education. Creating genuine and engaging spaces for such development presents a number of challenges for organisers in any one of Ireland's sixteen Education and Training Board's community education services who work with a tutor body that are contractually and occupationally precarious and geographically dispersed. In December 2016 a group of adult and community education practitioners came together for a day-long professional development workshop, entitled 'Deepening Practice' in which they critically reflected on their values, philosophies, challenges and opportunities as educators. The workshop was creatively recorded by the graphic harvester, Eimear McNally, as a series of hand-drawn, wall-postered images (Figs. 1-7). In what follows Susan Cullinane, a Community Education Facilitator who was also a participant on the day, and Jerry O'Neill, the workshop co-facilitator, engage in an asynchronous reflective dialogue about the process and significance of the workshop that aspired to be part of a slow move towards a critical and creative professional development space for ETB educators.

Keywords: adult and community education, critical professional development, quality, creative, precarity

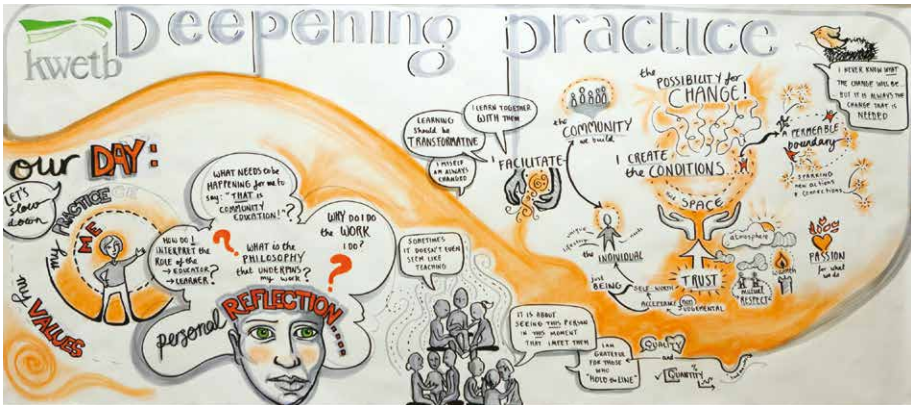

Figure 1: Graphic recording of workshop

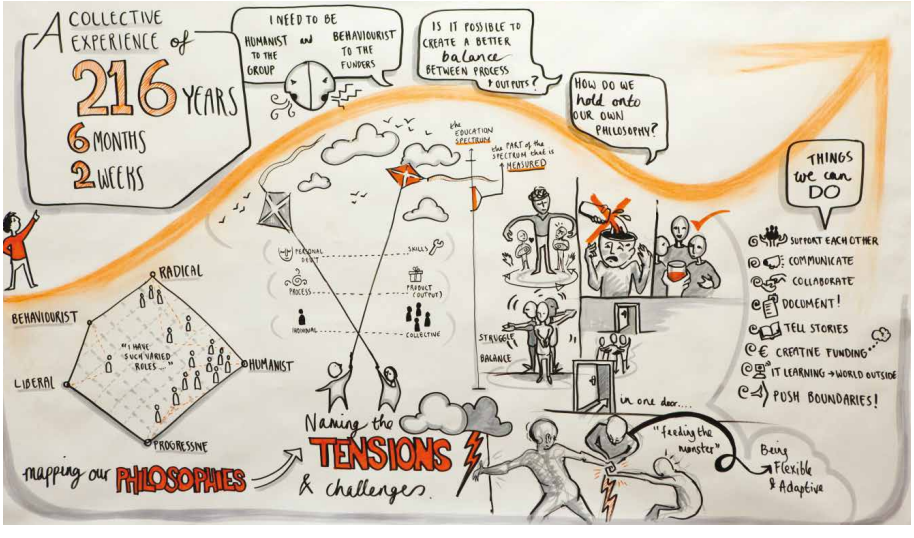

Figure 2: Graphic recording of workshop

Introduction

On the 6th of December 2016 a group of adult and community education practitioners came together for a day-long professional development workshop, entitled 'Deepening Practice', in Blessington, Co Wicklow. The day was organised by Susan Cullinane, a Community Education Facilitator with Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB) and was developed and

facilitated by Jerry O'Neill and Camilla Fitzsimons from the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. The conversations and themes that emerged throughout a day of critical reflection, group dialogue and activities on participants' values, philosophies, challenges and opportunities as educators were creatively recorded by the graphic harvester, Eimear McNally, as a series of hand-drawn, wall-postered images (Figs. 1-7). In what follows Susan, who was also a participant on the day, and Jerry engage in an asynchronous reflective dialogue about the process and significance of the workshop that aspired to be a slow move towards a critical and creative professional development space for ETB educators.

Settling in

Jerry: So, early on a wet, grey Tuesday morning in December, myself, Camilla, Eimear and yourself, Susan, gathered in the ETB centre in Blessington to set up the space and attend to the final bits and pieces that always remain to be done before a session. People started arriving from about 9 am until, in the end, the group composed itself into sixteen participants. In addition to tutors we had some administrative and coordination staff who are centrally involved in community and adult education provision within the service. In fact, I wondered, at one stage, whether having coordinators, like yourself Susan, attend a workshop with tutors would restrict openness in dialogue as you could be seen, if not formally, at least in practice, to represent a line manager role. Was this something you thought about? I was wondering if we should have talked through that more beforehand. With all our sensibility to the play of power in education it seems obvious now that we should.

Susan: It is something that myself and some of my colleagues have considered. For instance, we don't participate at induction workshops for new tutors precisely because we feel that tutors, particularly new tutors to the service, can be more open about the challenges they face. However, due to the dispersed nature of community education provision where we have limited opportunities to spend time with tutors we feel it is important that we are present to hear what the tutors have to say and to get to know them better. Even more so since the amalgamation of the Kildare and Wicklow Community Education Service where we are getting to know tutors working in each other's county. I don't know how all participants felt about this, but one, in their feedback, said that their most significant learning from the day was that the 'KWETB Co-ordinators wanted quality, feel-good education and realised the value of a small number of students getting huge benefit from a course.'

I do think you raise an important point though and I would like to have a space where tutors could come together to discuss their practice without CES staff being present. We tried this in the past and the take up was extremely low but perhaps that could be a recommendation from this experience.

Jerry: Well, that one piece of feedback was a success in itself – that sense of a unity of purpose being forged, or being suddenly made visible, between yourselves as CEFs and the tutors. And I do take your point about the difficulties of getting tutors together on their own – this is something I noticed myself both as a tutor and, later, through my own research with ETB tutors (O'Neill, 2015). It is really difficult to develop and sustain a community of practice amongst such a precarious and dispersed body of educators (James and Biesta, 2007; Scales *et al.*, 2011) – yet something that we must, I feel, work towards achieving if we are genuinely interested in facilitating high quality community education. Maybe we will come back to that…

I have to say that, despite the diversity in tutors' subject specialism, what really stood out for me as the group formed that morning was the lack of diversity in terms of gender. In fact, the only male in the room was me. I know that the majority of tutors in community education are women, but there are still plenty of male tutors out there and I wondered about this gender imbalance at the workshop.

Susan: We do have male tutors who have attended CPD in the past and who have been open to the process used but the numbers have been low (1-4 men in the last 2 events). Maybe this also reflects the male participation rates (24%) in our community education service. In our situation, though, I feel the biggest difficulty in achieving good attendance is finding a day and location that suits people. As you've just alluded to, occupational precarity is becoming an increasingly challenging issue in education in general and community education is no exception: tutors do not have secure contracts; the hours are precarious; and they are likely to be juggling several jobs. It may not be financially feasible to give up a day's work elsewhere to attend CPD for which they are paid a lower hourly rate than for tuition, particularly if it involves a long journey.

Jerry: I think this is a really significant point and reinforces the link that has been made elsewhere between conditions of work, professional development and quality of education (Research voor Beleid, 2008; Scales *et al.* 2011). And possibly there is some thinking to be done in terms of gender and professional

development too – do you think male tutors frame, or value, CPD differently to their female colleagues?

Susan: I don't know – but wouldn't it be an interesting thing to explore?

Jerry: It really would!

Hopes for the day

Jerry: So we eased ourselves into the day through a series of individual, paired, small and whole group activities which encouraged participants to reflect on their own reasons for attending and to draw us away, momentarily, from all the things that cluttered our thoughts in this break from our normal Tuesday morning routine. Slowly the thin film of tension, or maybe expectation, that accompanies the coming together of a new group for the first time was eased through conversation and the sharing of some personal stories. It was at this stage, that we spent some time identifying the group's hopes for the day.

Figure 3

Of course, having these hopes graphically recorded by Eimear provided us with a group-authored resource (Fig. 3) which we could return to at the end of the day to evaluate the workshop.

Excavating personal educational values

Jerry: With the hopes of the participants guiding us, we settled down into the space and moved towards an exploration of participants' educational values. We are always keen to start with where participants are at – and we are also committed to the idea that a critically reflective practice (Bradbury *et al.* 2010) needs to be grounded, first and foremost, in an interrogation of our own beliefs, our own values (Stoll, 2009; Beare, 2012). So, to start this process, we posed a series of four reflective questions:

- When you walk into a room, what is going on that might prompt you to say, 'now that's adult education'?
- What do you see as the fundamental role of the adult educator?
- If there are a set of principles or values that ground your approach as an educator, how would you describe them?
- Why do you do the work that you do?

These questions were informed by similar questions which arose in Camilla's and my work with community and adult educators in our doctoral studies (Fitzsimons, 2015; O'Neill, 2015).

These questions were starting points for personal reflection, then, small group discussion. Generally, the values that started to emerge, as the graphic illustrates (Fig. 4), resonated with ways of approaching groups that would be familiar to adult education practitioners: the facilitator as co-learner in the process; transformative educational aims; the importance of the context and conditions of learning; the importance of the affective and interpersonal dimensions of learning.

Figure 4

From personal values to philosophical positions

Jerry: And you may remember, Susan, right back in our first conversation when the possibility of this workshop was being worked out between us, you asked whether we could do something which would make the links between practice and theory. Well, I'm not so sure they are so separate in adult education (although, interesting enough, these pages sustain such distinctions), but we felt we'd try to do that by exploring how these personal values might correspond to educational philosophical positions.

So, in the next stage of the workshop, we attempted to link these values to broader educational philosophical orientations by asking participants to complete the, rather time-consuming, *Zinn Inventory on Educational Philosophies* (Zinn, 2016). I was, and still am, a bit torn on using such an instrument. Although the end result was useful for the discussion that followed, the process which involved completing a survey of our pedagogical approach was probably too long. But I'm learning from all this slowly too and you made some suggestions afterwards that have given me some ideas about developing a more participative way of doing this in the future.

The purpose of the inventory was to provide some indication of respondents' position in relation to five broad educational philosophies or paradigms: behaviourist; liberal; progressive; humanist; and radical. Once everyone had completed the inventory, we posted the five philosophical positions on sheets around the room and asked participants to stand in a space near or between the paradigms that they scored highest in – again, Eimear really captured that distribution well on the graphic (Fig. 5).

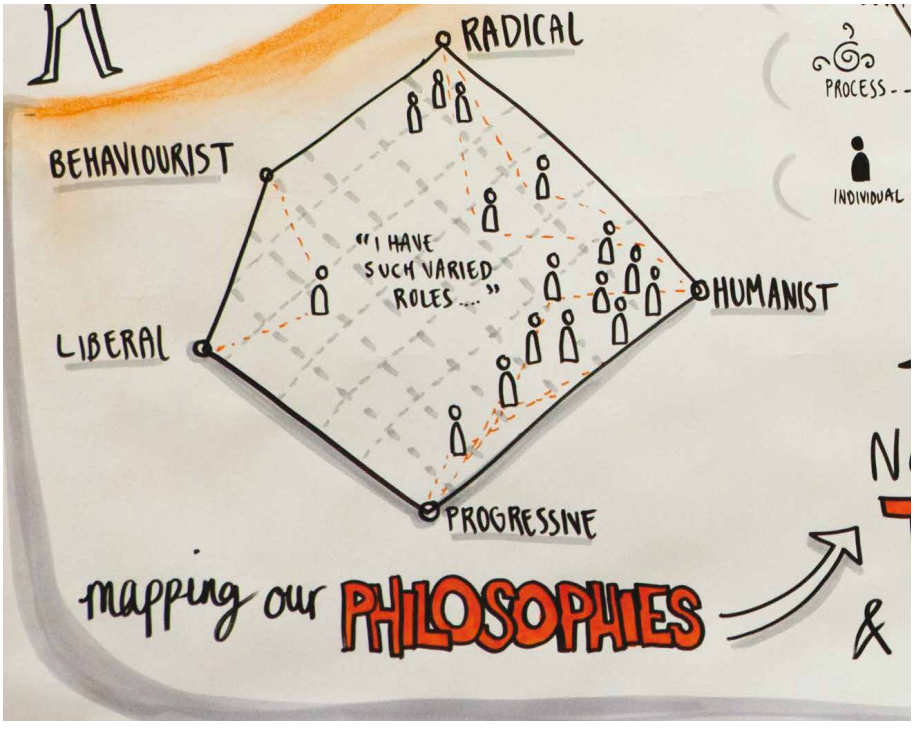

Figure 5

As can be seen, there was a general clustering of participants around humanist and progressive philosophical orientations with a number moving towards radical and one identifying somewhere between behaviourist and liberal.

Anyway, with much caution about holding on too firmly to these philosophical labels, we discussed what they might mean and mentioned theorists who we might associate with each (Rogers, 1961; Bloom and Krathwohl, 1972; Skinner, 1974; Knowles, 1984; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996; Newman, 1996; Nussbaum,

1997; Dewey, 1997; Maslow, 1999; Connolly *et al.*, 2007). But how was this part of the workshop for you, Susan?

Susan: I felt that there was a level of 'aha' when people saw their results from the inventory, a sense of recognition or 'that explains how I experience the work'. It was very useful to have the theoretical underpinnings and signposts for further reading.

It highlights to me that if we are serious about fulfilling the Department of Education's aim of community education as 'contributing to civic society' (Department of Education and Skills, 2012, p. 3) then we need to look at moving towards the radical perspective. However, all approaches have benefits in certain situations.

And, yes, it is worrying that personal development or community development programmes are being measured by behaviourist standards and criteria. Although some work has been done by ETBI to develop a tool to measure the wider benefits of learning, this is not yet at implementation stage (Community Education Facilitators' Association (CEFA), 2016).

Regarding QQI (Quality & Qualifications Ireland) I feel that there is some flexibility in designing alternative assessment but that is an area that would need more development i.e. how to design and implement these. Perhaps there is a tendency to use tried and trusted methods?

Jerry: Maybe…and, yet, maybe starting to think about the ideas, the values that underpin conventional assessment design or curricula and looking at those alongside our own values and philosophies as a sector and as individuals is a step in gaining more confidence to do things differently.

And although I'm really not sure how useful this part of the day was in the end, at least one participant got something out of it – chatting to her afterwards she said that this was the best part of the day for her. She had been working as a community educator for many years and was always a bit resistant to 'theoretical stuff' but at the workshop, so she said, she could start to not just see the connections of theory to the ways she worked but also the importance of theory – how it could act as any ally for her in justifying her ways of working.

It was also interesting to see the strongest concentration around humanist and progressive positions. People spoke really strongly about their commitment

to their learners and things like the 'learner experience' – I got the sense that tutors genuinely respected and acknowledged the knowledge learners brought to a group and worked hard to enhance the growth of each individual learner. I think when we're caught up in the personal intensity of such pedagogic relationships, it can be, sometimes, hard to shift our gaze a bit and see an educational purpose that isn't defined by the individual learner as such but by something more abstract, such as social transformation. Of course, there were a few participants scattered between the radical and the humanist – torn a bit between the personal and the social focus of adult education. And, to be honest, that's where I always end up when I do this exercise and leaves me, I suppose, as a kind of radical-humanist educator – or maybe, humanist-radical. I'm not sure which.

But, you're right, Susan you could see people were really puzzling the significance of these positions out in terms of their practice.

Challenges and tensions for practitioners

Jerry: And so, all these activities, reflections and discussions about personal values and philosophical positions took us up to lunch. The rest of the day was spent looking at challenges and opportunities for educators.

As a group we had talked a lot already at that stage, so, we asked participants to get into groups to express their challenges visually as a piece of drama or a Boalian-inspired embodied still image piece (Boal, 1998). These images were then presented, without comment from the presenting groups, as the rest of us tried to read the challenges in the pieces (Fig. 6). What kind of challenges did you see in these pieces Susan?

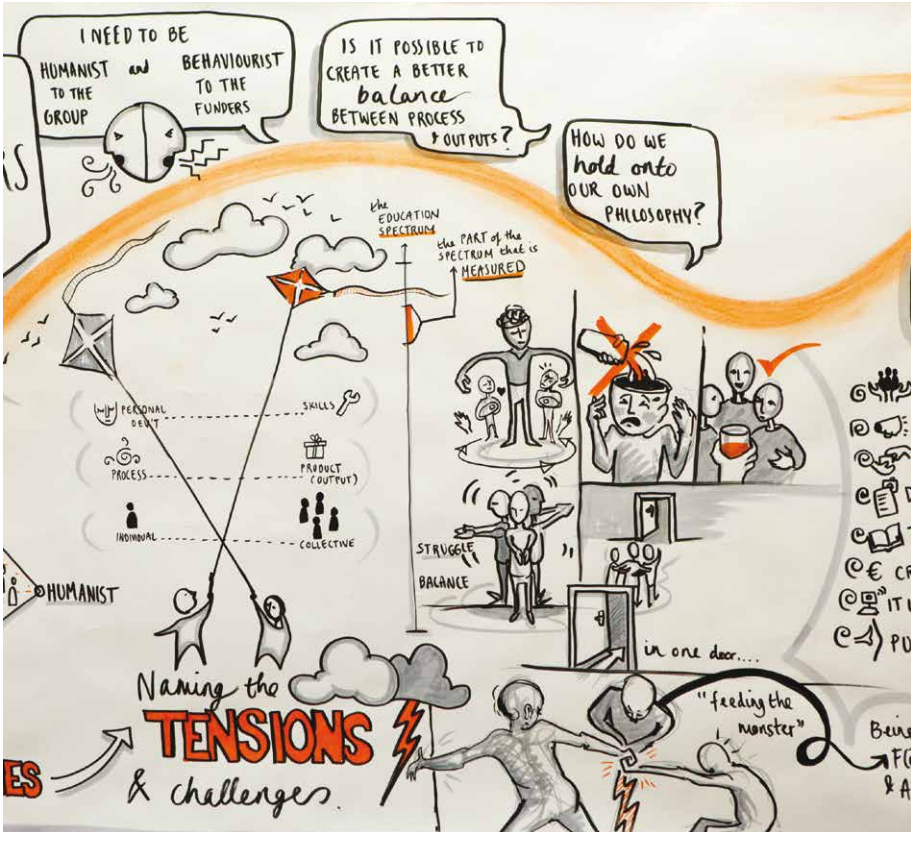

Figure 6

Susan: Well, there's something to me about quality versus quantity – we touched on this earlier when talking about philosophies and values and the ways of measuring the impact of learning. It feels like more emphasis is placed on quantitative data. As I mentioned it is hoped that a tool will be developed to measure the wider benefits of learning – but there is no sign of it yet. The process is key for successful implementation of community education projects but there is little recognition or support given to that.

The other thing I saw in these pieces was the tension between individual learning and collective learning. Where possible we try to include group activities in our projects to embed the idea of collective learning.

And another challenge is to keep a balance in work that falls into different parts of the community education continuum – Personal Development, Community Development and Active Citizenship. There is a lot to unpack in these pieces.

What can we do?

Jerry: There certainly is and I'm still thinking about them. I'm so glad we have Eimear's images – they are really important reflective artefacts.

At this stage of the day we were pushed for time but we were keen that tutors wouldn't leave with the last word being on the barriers they are confronted with in their work. We asked participants to reflect on what is in our control to confront these challenges, as educators, and, coming back to the earlier part of the workshop, to identify at least one thing we could do to help us work in a way that is more consistent with our values. A range of responses emerged – many relating to the need for more dialogue and peer support (Fig. 7) but what came across very clearly for me was the need for a robust community that could tell the stories of the powerful work they were doing as educators and to fight to both protect the work and push the boundaries of what is deemed possible.

We finished the day, more rushed than we would have liked, but mindful of the agreed finishing time, by a brief evaluative exercise, which used the graphically-harvested hopes outlined by the participants at the start of the day (Fig. 3).

Figure 7

Final thoughts and what next?

Jerry: So, Susan, maybe, we could just finish ourselves with some evaluative thoughts on the day?

Susan: I felt it was a worthwhile day. It was well attended and the participation was excellent. It sparked several ideas that could be taken forward as part of a more regular CPD such as continuing to document and highlight our work. Having a day like this is one way, particularly having the visual record and this conversation. We have also used film to record projects and at the moment we are creating story boards for another piece of work.

I'm thinking of the idea that CPD is the single most important factor in good educational practice and quality and, also, thinking about creating spaces for a tutor-led peer support structure to emerge and some longer training to raise the capacity of tutors and others working in this area.

Jerry: Yes, I'd agree with the centrality of CPD in a high-quality practice. But for me, it seems imperative to reinforce that link clear between CPD, occupational precarity and quality that we touched on at the beginning. Standing, in his study of precarious labour in a global context, refers to the temporal dimensions of such work and, in particular, how 'futureless' work is now part of such labour more generally: 'there is no "shadow of the future" hanging over their actions, to give them [the precariat] a sense that what they say, do or feel today will have strong and binding effect on their longer-term relationships' (2011, p. 12).

In fact, I came across similar concerns about perceptions of career futures elsewhere (Lopes and Dewan, 2015; Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015) and in my own research with ETB adult education tutors – that tutors' precarity really impacted on their sense of a professional identity and, importantly in any discussion around quality, development. As one experienced tutor put it,

For tutors

there is nothing

to go towards

there is nowhere to go.

(O'Neill, 2015, p. 120)

This sense of a futureless occupation for tutors is, I think, highly significant for ETBs if, coming back to James and Biesta (2007) and Scales *et al.* (2011), we accept the dependency of quality on professional development in adult education. Any professional development process is based on the temporal dimension of practice and requires some sense of stability of, and in, an occupational past, present and future. How can any sense of a developmental arc for adult educators be facilitated when their presents and futures are so unstable, so unsure?

Susan: And developing the idea of slow education...we talked a lot before and during the session about slowing things down – about the difficulties we all found in making the time to pause and reflect, individually and communally, on the small and the big stories of our work – how might we do that?

Jerry: Well, I think coming together to write this is part of an attempt to resist the linear rush of work – to go back on things that we think are important – to make the time. Maybe we should shift, a bit more resolutely, towards our radical positions and, as O'Neill *et al.* (2014) and Mountz *et al.* (2015) urge us, to see slowness as a feminist-inspired political act of resistance against the 'accelerated timelines' of educational managerialism. Maybe that's all part of the critical professional development that we are trying to work through together.

But whatever about the lack of temporal spaces for development, I think we're running out of white space for this particular reflective dialogue.

I've really enjoyed carrying on the conversation from December, Susan, and, hopefully, we can sustain it into the future somehow.

Susan: I've loved this collaborative way of writing an article. It has given me a great opportunity to tease out the work and been another step in building collaborative relationships that I hope we can build on.

Jerry: sounds good Susan – count me in!

Susan: I look forward to it, Jerry.

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SECTION THREE

Book Reviews

A new skills agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, BRUSSELS, 10.6.16, COM (2016) 381 FINAL.

From where I sit, it could seem a strange time to be reviewing a European Commission document published just before the Brexit vote last June. However, 'A New Skills Agenda' is important for a number of reasons wherever you live in Europe. Firstly, it sets the agenda for the use of European funded programmes. Secondly, its analysis of the challenges that Europe faces and the proposed solutions need to be discussed and, in some cases, challenged by adult educators and learners. It argues that European countries, whether they are in the EU or not, face a similar set of challenges that the publication highlights in its introduction.

At the outset, we learn that "70 million Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills." Even more have poor numeracy and digital skills. "More than half of the 12 million long-term unemployed are considered low-skilled." This is the sort of analysis that is very high-level and open to challenge. For example, at last December's European Commission conference on this subject, some adult educators questioned the use of 'low-skilled' to refer to people who lacked qualifications. Not being qualified, it was argued, did not equate with not having skills. We may lack some skills – literacy, numeracy, digital – but we can still bring up our children and put a cross on a ballot paper. Reasons for unemployment, or insecure employment, may not be wholly down to our skill levels.

But at the macro-level these things are critical, as 'A New Skills Agenda' highlights. In the city-regions I work with, skills gaps and mismatches are undoubtedly important, as is graduate under-employment (that is, working below one's level of competence), female under-employment, ageing workforces, as well as the basic skills challenges highlighted above.

The introductory analysis also recognises that "people increasingly learn in settings outside formal education – online, at work, through professional courses, social activities or volunteering." This is a document with few citations so there is no evidence cited as to how the authors know there is more non-formal learning out there. However, I felt it was good to recognise that non-formal learning was important not just in terms of scale but in terms of how adults, particularly those with a negative experience of school, want to learn.

Many practitioners will cheer when they read the paragraphs that address the need for learning that is relevant to people's lives as well as businesses. At a European level this could be addressed by more sensitive and nuanced use of European Social Fund, the Regional Development Fund, and Erasmus+. At a national level, how member states take on board this advice is up to them.

For British and Irish audiences, 'A New Skills Agenda' outlines a familiar narrative sometimes referred to 'it's the economy, stupid!' That is, the principal role of adult education is to help people find employment and progress at work. The benefits that accrue from participating in adult learning are similar to those from being in work. Prosperity touches all part of our lives. 'A New Skills Agenda' sits very much within the employment and work strand, but it also recognises that gaining 'soft' and transferable skills ("the ability to work in a team, creative thinking and problem solving") can be achieved through non-formal learning. Moreover, such courses (it might be family or community learning) should be recognised and validated as providing those skills and competences.

'A New Skills Agenda' resonates profoundly with a key finding of the report 'Learning Through Life' (2009) where such life-wide skills were termed capabilities. Here, Schuller and Watson proposed a Citizens' Curriculum approach that has since been developed in England with government funding and support from Erasmus+. More recently the approach has been proposed as part of an entry-pathway where adults gain civic, social, financial and digital capabilities alongside basic skills learning. In a similar vein, 'A New Skills Agenda' calls for "upskilling skills pathways" but has little to say as to how this could be achieved.

In a sense, it is up to member states (and their devolved administrations) as to how they achieve this. The cities I have worked with recognise the principle of inclusive growth: economic growth that reduces social inequalities. This becomes critical when it becomes harder, for whatever reason, to import labour

from other parts of Europe. Joined up approaches to government mean another aim of skills provision is to reduce benefit claims and demands on the health service. So, when adults decide they want to do a course on healthy eating, or anti-bullying, or glass-painting, or social media, you should go with their wishes.

There is a lot in 'A New Skills Agenda' to work with: a recommendation to look at what are the 'key competences' that adults need; how provision should be co-designed with employers and learners; the focus on digital skills (for adults, for adult educators, for the workplace); the mapping of qualifications across borders; skills profiling for migrants; strategies for specific industrial sectors (often multi-nationals); a better understanding of graduate employment and the 'brain drain' away from smaller countries and cities.

In setting the agenda going forward, this short document's final pages propose: more work-based and workplace learning and better links with industry; more support for learners moving between nations; and, more done to recognise the value of non-formal and informal learning. In order to do this, 'A New Skills Agenda' argues, that adult educators need to be supported more, and higher education modernised. In other words, the skills gaps and mismatches are not just at the so-called lower levels! In adult and higher education, we are not just an ageing workforce, we need to improve our skills. Let's just hope the funding follows the identification of need.

So, 'A New Skills Agenda' is worth a quick read. It has the benefit of brevity but also its drawbacks. It is very high-level, as one would expect, and comes from a social market, some might say neo-liberal, perspective. But it is also a good taster because it should encourage us to look further into the Commission's arguments and challenge them as well as our own perspective. In this, you might say, wherever we are in Europe, we face a common agenda. What is done about it is, for the most part, up to individual nation states (or devolved administrations). But in looking at the commonality of challenges, pan-European bodies such as the Commission, can also advocate for commonalities of approach. If there is one common agenda, it could be argued, there should also be a common approach. What is more, if there is a shared agenda, one might argue for a shared approach, where adult educators from across Europe come together to learn from each other.

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Community education and neoliberalism: Philosophies, practices and policies in Ireland

CAMILLA FITZSIMONS,
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2017
ISBN 978-3-319-45936-3

Despite the use of the term neoliberalism in its title, this is a highly readable book which explores a range of interconnected themes relating to community education in Ireland. A central argument put forward is that Ireland has shifted towards a model of free-market economics and that the resulting neoliberalisation has inculcated 'a business logic' into public and community spaces, and resulted in a political system that prioritises the economy above everything else.

Fitzsimons, a community education practitioner as well as an academic, brings the full force of her experience and expertise to bear in this book, described as the first major study of community education in Ireland. A mixed-methods approach is adopted, with theoretical analysis of core concepts under investigation, including community education and neoliberalism; along with three phases of field research which was undertaken between 2011 and 2013. The data generated through engagement with practitioners is problematised through theory and then made available to the field as an aid to reflection and analysis. The stated purpose of this book is to encourage practitioners 'to embody a more political approach where community education is seen as a democratic process that is part of the struggle for equality'. In so doing, Fitzsimons provides a comprehensive, critical account of the history, development and current state of community education in Ireland today.

The book is bisected into Part I: Community Education, Philosophies and Practices and Part II: The Neoliberalisation of Community Education. Chapters 2 to 4 interrogate, in turn, community education theories, the experience of community education in Ireland and theories of learning. Outlining the history of community education, Fitzsimons traces its development through

public provision since the early 1970s and via more independently managed community based organisations in the 1980s and 1990s. A broad description of community education – any localised, structured adult learning that happens outside of traditional institutions such as schools and colleges – is built on with definitions which include underpinning egalitarian principles and the potential to actualise citizens' rights 'through collective, praxis-oriented approaches that encourage systemic change.' Clearly advocating for the latter, she argues that much community education in Ireland has been depoliticised through the predominance of what she terms neoliberal logic, along with new public managerialism and social partnership. Increasingly community education has had to be justified and quantified in terms of value for money rather than in terms of capacity building and equality. Forced mergers and rationalisation processes within the community sector have ensured fewer resources and less control for local communities. She argues that one of the most insidious aspects of neoliberalism has been 'the injection of business logic into the heart of (community education) practice.'

In turning her attention to philosophies of adult and community education she outlines both humanistic and more critical perspectives, drawing on the work of Freire, among others. Noting the absence of a patriarchal analysis in Freire's work she enlists the theories of bell hooks and others to plug this gap. Whilst sympathetic to the real benefits of a humanistic approach, which supports change at an individual level, she nonetheless argues for a critical approach which is more concerned with social and structural change. Here she is somewhat out of step with a majority of research participants for, whilst an equality perspective is shared throughout their accounts, she notes that combined findings show a dominant humanistic philosophical leaning within education practice; fifty-six percent of research participants align themselves with a humanistic/person-centred approach. Her contention is that, whilst beginning with a person's life experience is an important component of humanist education approaches, a critical approach seeks to contextualise these in the context of social, economic and cultural structures. As such it goes beyond being self-affirming or therapeutic; rather, it supports people to 'act critically to transform reality.'

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 consider community education and its links with social policy on employment, accreditation and the professionalism debate. Here the dominant force of neoliberalism can be seen with its focus in education policy on continued economic growth to the neglect of community education's

concern with issues such as equality and empowerment. Education in this context is increasingly seen as little more than an instrument for employability, and the space for non-accredited learning appears to be shrinking. Fitzsimons problematises the concept of professionalism, drawing our attention to the tensions inherent in compulsory qualifications for community educators and the valid, lived experience of practitioners. She argues that professionalism can confer greater esteem to what she terms 'authority from above' over other sources of authority such as, for instance, from those we work with. She links this discussion on professionalism with growing employment precarity (insecure job conditions associated with part-time and zero hour contracts), a feature of neoliberal policies. Exacerbating this is the tendency within accrediting bodies to prioritise technical skills over developing critical capacities.

The final Chapter 8, is a call to action, offering ways to think differently about the potential for community education to help people and communities 'to critically, creatively and collectively act to shape their own history.' Concluding the book on a high note, Fitzsimons contends that the current neoliberal context, characterised as it is by high levels of poverty and inequality, is not inevitable and that 'cracks' are developing as the 'contradictions of capitalism are becoming more difficult to explain away.' Based on her fieldwork she identifies a series of five proposals aimed at practitioners seeking change: continue to work with the state, but in a more strategic way; strengthen practitioner networks to lobby and advocate for change; re-politicise community education practice; engage in direct action and campaigning work; and showcase community education. More broadly she makes a case for what she terms the rekindling of community education. This, she argues, can be achieved by the incorporation of 'really useful practice', described as an educational approach that starts where the person is at but locates personal circumstances within collective structures, into community education work. The rekindling she advocates can also be secured through creating oppositional spaces for problematising and politicising issues and by 'lighting many fires' through expanding the principles of community education into less traditional community education spaces.

This book has a broad reach, ranging from the subjects outlined above to practical tips for the 'classroom' to the theories of Foucault and Gramsci. As such, it will certainly appeal to a wide audience and, I suspect, especially practitioners, helping those engaged in community education reflect critically on their practice and consider the opportunities for broadening the field and reinvigorating community education and its potential. Whilst the context

is Ireland, it incorporates a global range of concerns, making this book also of interest to a wider geographic and thematic readership. It is a valuable contribution to the theory and practice of community education and, arguably succeeds in it stated aim of 'nudging practitioners towards a more radical way of working.'

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Inside Education: The art of good learning

STEPHEN O' BRIEN
ROUTLEDGE, 2016
ISBN: 978-0-415-52919-8

'Inside Education' takes the reader on a fascinating ethnographic journey to explore four distinct educational sites of practice, located in Ireland, New York and Brazil. These projects include: an all-Irish speaking, multi-faith primary school in Cork; an alternative post-primary school in Waterford for those who leave (or are left behind by) the formal education system; a highly competitive early college secondary school in Queens, New York for disadvantaged students and finally; an adult education training centre in Brazil that works with members of the landless movement. The book is organised into four distinctive chapters. Each resembles an ethnographic case study on the respective themes of: learning identity, personal learning, learning success and learning power.

Readers will experience an accessible but rich narrative drawing on: participant stories, educational theory, and scholarly interrogation of practice in each context. Critical theorists including: Freire, Bourdieu, Foucault, Arendt and Vygotsky enrich the exploration. Together the four case-studies raise many profound questions about educational practice. One of these concerns the dual positioning of teachers as workers both with the system (state workers) and workers against the system (cultural workers). The Freirean philosophy that education is politics; "Who am I favouring when I teach and what am I working against?" has resonance throughout.

In chapter one, the location is Mayfield, Cork City (at Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn) where the author explores the theme of 'learning identity' through the lens of native culture, identity and language, in a school community whose 'temporary prefabs' capture the frequently arduous evolution of Gaelscoileanna in Ireland. The author explores parental motive for the inclusive, culturally diverse multi-faith Gaelscoil experience. The focus on: music, community, an

ethical education curriculum (Croí na Scoile), learning as fun, competition, a relational way of being, celebrating diversity and values based leadership, are hallmarks in the success of the stated and hidden curriculum.

Paradoxically, however, there is also evidence of traditional pedagogies of testing and formal assessment (regimes of measurement) sitting side by side with more innovative (identity shaping pedagogies), where sixth class children are given cameras to capture images which speak to their sense of place and belonging.

Chapter two moves to an alternative post-primary school in Waterford, founded by Nuala Jackson, known as the XLC Project. The project is inspired by the courageous leadership of its founder and a pragmatic educational philosophy based on humanist principles for success. Democracy, relationships, choice, motivation, praise and personal responsibility are conducive to personal learning. Nuala's principles and ethos are derived from her experience of working with disaffected students. Some 40% of XLC's students have been expelled or indefinitely suspended from school and an inclusive ethos caters for single parents, Travellers, asylum seekers and refugees. In 2012, one third of their leaving certificate cohort and almost half of their junior cycle cohort had some specific learning difficulty. Over a thirteen-year period 700 students have sat their leaving certificate with over 85% succeeding in passing five subjects or more.

Readers of this chapter may reflect on formal schools as sites of reproduction, typically favouring middle class cultures. They will therefore be intrigued with how the XLC project has created an alternative authentic culture without uniforms, compulsory attendance, reports or homework. Bourdieu (1988) and Foucault (1991) are suitably referenced to explore the relationship between power relations and conditions of possibilities and constraints.

Chapter three brings the reader to the Queen's School of Inquiry in (QSI) New York – but via a most interesting historical account of the ideals of American Independence and more contemporary neo-liberal discourses, linked to Friedman's economics; "The drive, imagination and energy of competitive free enterprise." (p. 75). The author explores learning success by playing out the frequent tensions between notions of choice and meritocracy; against the reality of restrictions, placed by social habitus in the search for equality (Bourdieu 1977). QSI is a small, early college secondary school, with a population of

approximately 600. Its mission is to prepare typically disadvantaged high school students for college, most of whom will be first generation college students. The stringent, competitive assessment regime contributes to a palpable work ethic. Students compete for valuable entry scholarships to university. Here teachers favour the simultaneously cooperative, yet competitive paradigm in preparation for the culture of success celebrated in New York.

The final chapter on the theme of learning power is situated in Brazil where opportunity and inequality are evident in the truth that a mere one percent of the population controls and owns 50% of the land and one fifth live beneath a low-threshold poverty line. The setting is an adult education centre, west of Recife (Centro de Formacão Paulo Freire Recife – birthplace to Paulo Freire) in Pernambuco. The project Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) is centred around the landless movement.

In MST, adult learner groups use a Freirean political literacy approach (critical reflection, dialogue and action) to co-create curriculum, to resolve issues of land ownership, crop rotation and environmentally friendly farm practices, while also mobilising a green education for sustainable development. The challenges of modernisation and agribusiness make this a challenging task to disrupt the unyielding power of the multinational and transnational corporation. Transformative learning can be a tortuous process but establishing cooperatives, gaining security for seasonal workers, establishing over 400 associations, producing clean foodstuffs, securing land ownership, housing, schools and health clinics are just some of the achievements of MST.

In conclusion, this publication unfolds significant questions for: teachers, teacher educators, researchers, sociologists, and policy makers. How do marginalised groups experience formal curriculum? What models of education work in different contexts? Where does power reside? Is it invisible and dispersed, held in institutions but also in relationships and embedded practices? How do educators reconcile their roles as cultural and state workers?

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Reframing partnerships in education: Uniting the power of place and the wisdom of people

MIGUEL A. GUAJARDO, FRANCISCO GUAJARDO, CHRISTOPHER JANSON, AND MATTHEW MILETELLO
ROUTLEDGE, 2016
ISBN: 978-1-138-84076-8

This book's main purpose is to encourage all educators to improve the social fabric of communities by encouraging the use of Community Learning Exchange (CLE) pedagogies. It further claims that through such participatory practices and collective leadership models, the outcomes will culminate in the building of stronger communities and advanced learning for all. Its strength lies in the explanation of the CLE and Relationships, Assets, Stories, Place, Politic, Action (RASPPA) model which, rooted in the Freirean (1971) 'problem-posing' model, highlights a number of 'light bulb' moments that serve well to demonstrate individual self-awakening moments.

Section 1 sets out the purposeful aim of 're-framing schools and communities, changing bureaucratic communities and organisations, and those injustices found within institutes.' The authors claim that using the CLE (i.e. RASPPA) model, educators can co-construct solutions to challenges that emerge as a result of reflecting, and collectively empowering action for change. They describe this as the rhythm of CLE that culminates in it 'coming alive in multiple spaces and for varying purposes.' There are similarities to Gramsci's (1971) notion of 'organic intellectualism' in the call to create 'gracious space' within communities in order to perpetuate the axioms of RASPPA.

This next section explains the rationale, purpose and engagement pedagogies that the CLE model proposes to illuminate the core values of the five axioms that guide thought, practice and relationships. The role of leadership as a 'dynamic social process' is rooted as the means by which participants actively frame their learning. A number of strategies are suggested to support the development of relationship, such as play and creating safe spaces for dialogue. The authors emphasise the outpouring of experiences that assist people to find their voice

and power, thus generating a collective destiny. This is in fact one of the targets set for those who are trained in CLE, to infuse this model of questioning and injecting new hopes and innovations, that will hopefully be spread to other communities. This model seeks to 'invite the curiosity of the learners' and engender transformation by shifting the power balance with and in the local community, as a new way of addressing unresolved issues, all the while creating 'collective deviance.'

The authors' further postulate the shift in education occurring, when tutor and learner embark upon a journey of shared learning, which they refer to as 'crossing boundaries.' The claim of radical transformation from distress and hopelessness to hope and possibilities experienced through a dilemma is similar to Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformational learning where the individual comes seeking solution having been given the tools to discover their problem.

This next chapter focuses on the theory of change in action, moving away from community development that is based upon deficit thinking models, in favour of an asset building model, that encompasses school, parents, students and local community working collectively to address issues innovatively for positive change. The five axioms that are central to the CLE are explained here. The first is the relationship building where trust and life sustaining principles are developed in 'gracious space.' Asset building is crucial to the development of community building, inspiring people to work together for improved community life. Stories are the lifeblood of CLE where people tell their story, and have the 'gracious space' to re-frame and re-shape. When this is done collectively, the stories become part of the cathartic discipline with CLE. Place is an important aspect of CLE, as it is located at the crux of the teaching and learning process, that explores the concept of place as somewhere to play, create and celebrate, and incorporates home, neighbourhood and community. Inspiring and re-imagining can then be generated when participants are invited to critically reflect on their personal places. The final axiom of CLE 'action' promotes active citizenship through telling and re-telling of stories. This section includes testimonies from the authors, indicating how they personally changed, the institutions they connected with changed e.g. personal stories about the family, picture storytelling of a wake, asset mapping between university and community, encouraging intergenerational learning and 'family wisdom exchanges'; however, they do not offer any evidence of what those changes actually are.

The next section deals with story-making. The framework is the personal community, intersections of ecologies and axioms in lived experiences formalising and employing CLE pedagogies in public spaces. The claim here is that through these strategies, participants can re-author self, change organisations, transform communities and contribute to sustaining this healthy change. It concludes with an invitation to the reader to review these CLE pedagogies and in particular to develop an individual critical consciousness, that surfaces when the power of place and wisdom of people unite. The claim here is that when the participant understands their own needs they can begin the process of transformation.

The authors then address the notion of 'teaching for learning, learning to teach', proposing that knowledge and action are co-created by learners, teachers and community partners. They assert that this rests in the nature of application, where teaching and learning are interdependent and reciprocal. This, they state, brings about democratisation of learning. The dynamic critical pedagogies are listed as invitational, empowering, relational, engaging, experiential, impacting public and rejuvenating ways of learning within 'gracious space.'

The next chapter gives an overview of pedagogies of reflection. Many of these, e.g. the circle method, appreciative listening protocol, journey line, world café and learning walks 'meaningful conversations' application and implementation and the inquiry method, are all tried and tested adult education pedagogies. Nevertheless, the step by step process is a helpful guide to the novice, as is the explanation of their theoretical underpinnings and merits.

The section on dynamic critical pedagogies with and in the community, illustrates the importance of digital engagement and digital story telling. The authors introduce the reader to the importance of global digital advances that critically impact learning environments and challenges educators to embrace new ways of communicating. They give some innovative examples such as the digi-hunt, which is a refreshing method to explore community issues. The more common well-known strategies such as community site visits, work in progress activity and community mapping, serve to illustrate the outworking of CLE strategies. This section expresses the success stories of CLE practices from an individual perspective.

The short conclusion to the whole book can be summed up as the CLE evangelical mission statement, which is 'an invitation to imagine, a promise of

hope, an opportunity to think and a call to act!' The book will be of interest to those engaged in community development and especially adult educators who wish to develop models of democratising teaching and learning.

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The Irish Journal of Adult Learning

CALL FOR PAPERS 2018 EDITION

The Irish Journal of Adult Learning (previously the 'Adult Learner') was founded in Ireland in the mid-1980s. The Journal aims to serve the needs of the adult education community by providing a forum for critical reflection on the practices of teaching and learning.

The Journal seeks to make knowledge, research and writing accessible to the widest possible audience and emphasises the implications of critique for practice. The Journal has a long-established practice of giving priority to subject matter that addresses disadvantage; social exclusion; equality; literacy; access to education; workplace learning; and the role of teachers and students in adult learning. The Journal welcomes papers which are relevant to those working across the broad field of adult learning and which make a contribution to debates both in Ireland and internationally.

Submissions should fit within one of the following sections:

1. ***Papers which*** engage in critical debate and analysis of concepts, policies and theories and/or practices in the field. They may include findings from recent research and where this is so, should include a brief outline of any research methodologies used. Papers which initiate dialogue between individuals, groups or sectors in the field of lifelong learning are also welcome. These papers should **NOT** exceed **5,000** words in length, including references.

2. ***Practice based papers or other contributions including case studies*** which exchange ideas about what works in various programmes and contexts, which are innovative, and which share examples of good practice. These papers engage in analysis of practical aspects. Papers should **NOT** exceed **3,000** words in length including references.

3. ***Responses/Critiques.*** The Journal may publish critiques of articles or responses to topics/articles in the previous issue of the Journal. These should be written in academic style and should be backed up by evidence. They should be no more than **1,000** words in length.

Please state clearly to which section of the journal you are submitting. We will not accept papers which exceed the word limits. Only one submission can be accepted per author for each edition of the Journal (unless otherwise specified by the Editorial Board).

All papers submitted undergo a blind refereeing process which involves at least two referees. Where contributions are accepted this may be on condition that changes recommended by referees are noted and the article revised accordingly. We recommend contributors consider the diversity of our readership and articles should be written with an international readership in mind. We are very grateful for all contributions submitted and will consider each on its merits and provide feedback.

The theme of the 2018 Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education is **a reflection on the impacts of adult learning policy in the 21st century**. A lot of change has occurred in the field of Irish and international lifelong learning policy since the time of the economic crisis in 2008, this edition offers a space for reflection on that change." Information on the 2018 call will be available on the AONTAS website from October 2017.

All papers submitted should conform to the following guidelines:

- *Relate to the broad aims of the Journal and be relevant to the field of adult and community education*
- *Provide evidence of a coherent and focused argument and be supported by robust evidence*
- *Outline and explain any methodology used*
- *Be contextualised for an international audience (e.g. explain use of acronyms)*
- *Be submitted in the format outlined (see separate guidance, available online)*
- *Begin with a short abstract (not more than 100 words)*

Include a reference section which refers only to articles mentioned in the text

All papers MUST be presented in a style as outlined in the ***Style Guide for Contributors.*** Only books/articles /websites referred to in the text should be included in the references.

You may find it helpful to consult previous issues of the 'Adult Learner' which are available on the AONTAS website under the resources section.

The name, address, a short statement and email address of the author, or the corresponding author in case of multiple authorship, should be submitted in a separate Word document rather than on the manuscript and where appropriate should include the work-place of the author. A short statement about the author (no more than 60 words in length) should be included in this document.

The number of words should be included at the end of the article and MUST conform to the word limit for the section you are submitting to. Articles which exceed the length will be returned to the author(s).

Please note we cannot accept papers which do not conform strictly to the guidelines.

The editor welcomes queries from writers who may wish to discuss possible subject matter and approaches.

The deadline for all submissions will be 5pm Friday 26th January 2018. Please note that contributions cannot be accepted after this date.

Please send all correspondence to: **mail@aontas.com** and mark your email for the attention of ***The Editor***.

Notes

The Adult Learner is the Irish journal for adult and community education founded in the mid 1980s and is published by AONTAS.

Its aim is to serve the needs of the adult education and lifelong learning community both in Ireland and internationally by providing a forum for critical discussion and reflection. The journal seeks to make new knowledge easily accessible to the widest possible audience through emphasising the importance of describing and critiquing practice and through publishing the results of research. The journal gives priority to subject matter that addresses issues of community, citizenship and learning and which focus on disadvantage, literacy and equality. It also includes contributions on how adults learn in formal, non-formal and informal settings including life and work contexts.

The journal provides a forum for publication and dissemination of reflections on research, policy and practice in the broad field of adult and community education.

The journal can also be viewed on the AONTAS website, where further details on how individuals can make contributions are made available each year.
www.aontas.com

AONTAS The Voice of Adult Learning

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