

# SECTION ONE

*Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning*



# Hopes and Worries in Learning to Grow Together: Key Praxiological Lessons for the Adult Educator

FINOLA MCCARTHY, STEPHEN O'BRIEN

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the experiences of one adult educator's engagement with Freire's praxis through teaching horticulture. The principal belief of the paper is that engaging in critical dialogue and reflexive action is an evolving journey of unlearning and hope for both learners and educators. The paper suggests that trusting in Freire's humanising education has implications beyond individual adult learners to encompass larger socio-ecological issues of our time.*

**Keywords:** Freire, Praxis, Humanising Education, Horticulture, Sustainability

## **Introduction**

This practice paper explores one adult educator's 'laborious' journey – so-called because the educator is continually tasked with working with one's 'self' and 'others' – on a specially designed Horticulture Local Training Initiative (LTI) programme in Cork City (see below). A number of qualitative observations, self-reflections and critical incidents are drawn upon to make 'sense and sensibility' (O'Brien, 2016) of how it is we learn to 'grow together' with our learners on this programme. We describe the adult education experience more in terms of engaging in 're-connection' than in 'inclusion' and we demonstrate transformative learning as hopeful and worrisome, uneven and uncertain. Key praxiological lessons are highlighted for the adult educator which help us to understand how we can work together within the system while also strategically critiquing it and seeking to make it better. Finally, we hope to demonstrate how Freire's concept of praxis is particularly close to the ecological themes of this adult education programme – that while such links may be worrisome at the outset, they may also provide hope for local and global communities looking to build capacity and resilience in the face of such issues as food security, biodiversity loss and climate change.

### **The Context – One Horticulture LTI Programme in Cork City**

The Horticulture LTI is a full-time community training course located on the grounds of Ardfoyle Convent in Ballintemple, a suburb of Cork City. It is funded by the Cork Education and Training Board (ETB) and sponsored by The Bessborough Centre. The programme offers a QQI Level 4 Major Award in Horticulture and, while most work towards this goal, there is space for learners to partake in the learning without completing all of the modules necessary to attain the major award. An average of 10 to 14 learners attain their awards each year. Learners from the ages of 18 to 62 have completed the programme and there is on average an 80% male cohort each year. The learners' literacy levels are widely varied - learners who left school at primary level learn alongside graduates. The learners are predominantly long-term unemployed and can be battling with poor mental health, drug/alcohol misuse, trauma, low self-esteem and/or poverty.

Within the definition of an LTI there is space to create highly individualised, learner-responsive and community-based programmes. Programme design is grounded in the principles of community development, with a focus on project-based and experiential learning. On the Horticulture LTI programme individual learner plans are designed; some learners can engage in integrated literacy work, while others can work towards additional Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) qualifications. The small size of the class means that learners and staff can partake in consensus decision-making as much as possible and feedback can continually be requested and acted upon. Consequently, the course is constantly evolving to facilitate a more learner-informed curriculum design. Teachers regularly communicate regarding learners' concerns, interests and abilities and the curriculum is constantly developed in order to fully integrate the social and therapeutic benefits of horticulture and promote learner wellbeing. This curriculum approach seeks to support the learners to build positive peer-learning relationships, to connect to place through landscape photography, to develop a love of learning by understanding how adults learn, to enjoy the physical benefits of project-based horticulture training, and to 'give back' through meaningful community planting projects and events.

### **Hopes and Worries in Learning to Grow Together: Key Praxiological Lessons for the Adult Educator**

What follows is a forthright and critical appraisal of one educator's (the lead author's) experiences of working with adult learners on this Horticulture LTI programme. In critical dialogue, we (both authors) draw together

key praxiological lessons for the adult educator. We hope to show that transformative learning is often messy and unknown and involves a great deal of 'self' and 'other' work. Far from the praxis 'ideal', then, we are keen to 'turn critical theory back on itself' (O'Sullivan, 2006) and show that praxis is itself a 'laborious' journey. The following key praxiological lessons were identified, though we know that there are many others 'still in the making'.

### **Learner Struggles**

It was clear from the outset of the programme that one learner in particular – and others who I had not yet developed deeper relations with – had embodied the 'teacher as expert' ideal. There was a certain security attaching to this value – for many years of formal schooling and beyond it was this teacher ideal that had become familiar, normalised. Freire challenges us to become authentic educators. In my case this meant explaining that 'I am no expert'; that 'I do not have a degree in horticulture'; and that 'I consider myself to be an enthusiastic gardener who is happy to learn alongside you [the learners]'. I noted in critical reflection how this teacher ideal transition was particularly difficult for one adult learner and that others, too, needed some convincing. It was also difficult for the learners to accept a degree of responsibility for their own learning and practise some curricular and assessment choices of their own making.

At the beginning of the first year of the programme I explained that we would grow plants together as a group to help us develop our project work. We all agreed to this approach yet in practice one particular learner separated what they sowed, placed them in the best spot in the greenhouse and took extra care of them. In response to this observation, I facilitated a critical group discussion around competition versus supportive teamwork, discussing ideas like 'do we really own plants?' and that a fundamental part of our ethos is to use our skills and materials to support each other and to impact our local communities. This learner was dismissive during discussions and continued to behave competitively, caring only for the plants he sowed and comparing his work with others to show himself in 'a better light'. I found that the support that the teacher needs to give learners who sometimes 'resist' is problematic because this support needs to be humanising and not humanitarian. There is a significant amount of 'unlearning' that needs to be facilitated, too. I take my duty of care very seriously and I teach because I want to help people and I believe that the work matters. I needed to remind myself that much of my habitual thinking and behaviour is system-based and that this itself needs to be challenged. In effect, both I and this learner found ourselves wandering in unfamiliar terrain without

any absolute direction. Rather than reacting to this learner's behaviour and labelling it as 'problematic', I kept in mind a reflective prompt from one of Dr. Karen Treisman's workshops – 'behaviour is communication'. Now I considered broader messages that he might be communicating to me and the group. While he certainly appeared resistant to the collaborative way of working, he did engage (in a parallel way) with the activity of growing plants with the group. Perhaps this adult learner needed to assert his individual identity within the group setting; he may have even needed to 'win' as he saw fit. Nevertheless, I was keen to ensure (as far as possible) that our collaborative culture was not going to fall apart by allowing him to express himself in the way that he felt that he needed to. Collaboration with like-minded individuals, we (the authors) later reflected, is easy. But collaborating in transformative learning experiences with individuals with different worldviews and learning perspectives, attitudes and behaviours often means embracing contested moments and 'heated' debates and allowing the space for diversity to be more authentically valued and held within the group. Through critical dialogue, adult education can bring the learning of the group towards the individual rather than the other way around. And for this learner he was, we reflected, at least exposed to a transformational learning experience as the group encountered and 'moved towards' him.

Engaging in critical dialogue with the learners was certainly challenging. Most agreed with the ethos and enjoyed the debates, though some appeared resentful and critically vocal. Discussions on topics such as poverty, homelessness and mental health were lively and engaging as myself and the learners would have similar views and share similar socio-economic backgrounds. Engaging in critical dialogue on topics where you have similar experiences and can empathise can be more straightforward. However, critically discussing issues where you might share fundamentally different views, in my case on education and gender, can prove to be the most rewarding. Reflecting openly with the learners on my beliefs about learning and asking them to do the same, and questioning the very system that I was also asking them to 'buy into', turned out to be incredibly challenging. Ultimately, as I noted in later critical reflections, this critical dialogue was empowering for us. Specifically, it enabled us to see ourselves as learning together in the hope of nurturing positive personal and social change. Critical dialogue became the most powerful way of strengthening our learning relationships, building trust and motivating us to creatively explore how and what we would do to learn and create this change. Transformation in this respect was not smooth or even – the change narrative does not end with the re-formed learner that sparked this journey or with me as the complete

emancipatory educator. Rather, the learner leaves the course in what we can only politely term as ‘uncomfortable’ circumstances. I have observed over the years that there can be no accomplished adult learners; just real people engaging in complex relational, cognitive and emotional explorations that are often gritty and not instantly rewarding. As educators attempting to model Freirean ideals we may ‘sow the seeds’ but we ‘do not reap the harvest’. Perhaps we can never produce a complete ‘product’ (to put it crudely) if we hope that our own engagement is more fully authentic and humanising.

### **The Apprehensive Teacher**

Some adults join a course in the hope of hiding in a safe place from the challenges and traumas of living in poverty and unemployment. It can seem irresponsible not to take a directive lead in teaching, especially when you care for your learners who may be battling depression, drug/alcohol misuse, abusive relationships or homelessness. Sometimes the lofty ideals of Freirean teaching can seem ‘out-of-reach’ or ‘too scholarly’ for so-called ‘hard hands’ or ‘practical’ learners who are facing more immediate life concerns. But of course, Freire encourages learning to reflect those very ‘lived experiences’. It can seem cruel or ‘inhuman’ to bring wider social and political problems into a learning space where people feel that they may have nothing else but problems. Putting faith in praxis and the power of critical dialogue is a tall ask in such circumstances. But fundamental questions (or significant moments of ‘problem-posing’) need to be worked upon by the teacher. It may be important to remind oneself that learners might find welcome relief in a safe, secure learning space where their dignity, worldviews and feelings are collectively honoured and healthily challenged. Developing trust amongst a community of learners is the linchpin of the practice of humanising education. Trust means that the learners do not need our paternalistic/maternalistic protection from ‘problems’. And for the educator it may mean developing over time with learners a level of political consciousness that is attuned to world realities, not separate from them. Indeed, it may be essential to link everyday problems to wider social and political systems in the hope that such systems are not seen as ‘natural’. Systems are made by people (those in oft dominant power positions) and therefore can be changed by people (those in oft ‘oppressed’ power positions but who are committed to new change). It is hard for the teacher, as well as the learners, to see learning in such ‘power-full’ ways, but as Freire remarks ‘[education] cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion’ (Freire, 2013, p.34).

I have had to learn to trust that engaging in critical dialogue around poverty, trauma, oppression, food security and the environment would be positively stimulating in some political way and that this might prompt positive personal/ social changes. My language here is deliberately cautious because I am not some blind indoctrinated follower of Freire (nor do I believe that he would approve of such acritical ‘followers’). I had read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and was excited to engage in praxis with my learners but as to what we would achieve together, I had no idea. I was hopeful that we could make our lives a little better and Freire affirmed for me that:

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 2018, p.72).

Knowing that I was not an ‘expert’ helped me to open up to critical dialogue and take the lead from the learners. At the beginning of the horticultural science and personal development modules I gave everyone the module descriptor and we discussed how we could engage with different ecological topics. I asked the learners if there were other learning ways (e.g. films) through which we could capture different perspectives. We discussed how we could work creatively together to bring these topics to life. Throughout years of learning engagement, I have come to trust learner ‘feedback’ and build the learning events around diverse learners’ needs, interests and abilities. I have learned that ‘hot debates’ and ‘problem-posing challenges’ were precisely the learning moments that had the learners turning up every day and that motivated them to learn. As one adult learner told me:

it’s not like the standardized learning you get in most places. Our teachers devise ways for how to do theory that makes it interesting and gets everyone included in hot debates [...] There is always a challenge to face daily which only helps us to grow as humans (McCarthy, 2020, Conversation with Adult Learner, July 2017).

### **Hopes and Worries Aligning Freire and Learning about Sustainable Horticulture**

Critical dialogue may be facilitated through personal development, communication and work experience modules and there is always hope that such work yields personal and social benefits for all participants. Yet the challenge remains to make the subject knowledge itself relevant to the lived



experiences of learners and to put in situ facilitators who have the necessary personal/professional attributes and competences to design, enable and evaluate appropriate learning modules. I found it difficult to continue to carry out praxis when it came to the more subject-specific and plant science-based learning modules. I had printed out my favourite quotation from Freire and stuck it over my desk at work: 'Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information' (Freire, 2018, p.79). Yet I had no idea how to engage fully in this work with a set curriculum designed (at least conventionally) to provide surface level and rote learning. Indeed, when I tried to link Freire to socio-ecological concerns, I initially found his approach to 'nature' to be based predominantly on creationist/imperialist values. As an educator interested in connecting people to nature to improve their wellbeing, build capacity and resilience within the community, and spur action in the face of food security and climate change issues, I could not reconcile Freire to these most modern of movements. To me, humanising is not acting upon nature, demonstrating our command over it, and demonstrating our critical abilities and creativity in superiority to it. Our role as free humans is as carers and tenders to the natural world that ultimately sustains our life on this planet. For me, a humanising education reconnects us to the natural world, to the seasonality of life and to our place in our local eco-communities.

Perhaps Freire could not be expected to anticipate the latest climate justice movement developments. As a 'teachable moment', no doubt he might approve of the need to engage with 'sustainability' and other pressing socio-ecological and political concerns. As an entry point to this work, we began learning about sustainable horticulture, biodiversity loss and food security as 'enthusiastic gardeners'. While we discussed, researched and designed local responses to connecting people to plants and growing their own food in an urban setting, I re-discovered my fundamental difficulties with Freire's own representations of nature. I may have allowed my negative emotive responses to (what I saw as) Freire's 'insensitivity' to modern-day sustainability concerns to blind me to wider educational issues at hand. I was, I reflected later, trying to 'fit' everything neatly together – Freire and sustainability – in order to positively promote social action in my teaching. I shared with the learners my perceived difficulties with aligning Freire's creationist/imperialist values on 'nature' and what values 'we' might wish to hold on this course. How could Freire be useful when I (the teacher) found his representations of nature out of step with 'our' sustainability principles and values? I needed others' perspectives – to talk this through (critical dialogue) and ultimately realise that it is okay not to agree with

each particular aspect of Freire's approach. Perhaps 'discord', 'challenge', 'dissent' are natural features of a humanising education? Freire's ideas, too, are of their time and can be responded to differently. I have learned that we can create praxiological approaches that are 'in tune' with our own time, place and people. My focus on Freire's humanising education through caring critical dialogue and authentic action is closely aligned to sustainability goals. Sustainability, after all, involves 'ways of living [...] grounded in a reflexive value system that requires continuous learning to respond to ever-changing circumstances' (Souza et al., 2019, p.3).

### **Conclusion**

Emerging from my observations, self-reflections and critical incidents over the years, and from our critical dialogue on same, is a clearer 'sense and sensibility' (O'Brien, 2016) of how it is we learn to 'grow together' on this programme. Within the restraints of a hierarchal system of education (e.g. different QQI levels), it is not easy to practise critical pedagogy. Critical reflection requires time, space and effort that are not easily afforded in 'official' curricula. But carving out spaces for quiet contemplation or lively debate is what we do when we landscape a garden. Problem-posing together humanises learners and ourselves – it allows space for our passions and emotions to be expressed and engaged with. It can lead to action and can improve wellbeing at the same time – creating real learning (epistemological) and real identity (ontological) connections. Yet for such connections to happen, the teacher and learners need at some appropriate stage to challenge fatalism and commit to some change. This change is neither smooth or certain. And it can be small changes, such as a greater connection to the seasons or to the local community. We have a small exhibition of the learners' landscape photographs every year, where the learners each choose one photograph to exhibit and explain their choices. One learner's photograph appeared very drab – it was of a dark wall with an old window box sparsely planted with small, unimpressive plants in early Spring. When asked why he chose this 'dull' photo, he said that he did not believe when he planted it that it could turn out to be as beautiful and full of life as it became; that a small effort makes big changes down the line. This was a powerful metaphor for me. Taking part in structured horticultural activities offers the opportunity to improve life skills such as initiative, team working, problem-solving, communication, patience, concentration, numeracy and literacy – all necessary skills for critical citizenry. Freire offers us hope and opportunity to create for ourselves local solutions to pressing socio-ecological and global concerns.

And Freire enables us to see that the educational project is always incomplete, which may explain, indeed necessitate, its persistence.

From a teacher's perspective, it is reassuring to know that technical knowledge and political formation are inter-connected. We our 'selves' are tasked with overcoming systemic and ideological prejudices. We are challenged to see transformation as messy, as ephemeral, as lifelong. While the capacity for personal and social change is always there, it is never a given. In the way of seeing anew is seeing the same – doctrinaire thinking and action is likely to be the dominant 'reality' for learners and our 'selves'. Yet, for all these worries, there are hopes. We have found that the cycle of reflection, dialogue and action (praxis) is often difficult but often rewarding. It sustains us in our work, in our commitment to 'others' and it challenges us to be creative – to re-design curricula and assessment with diverse learners at the core; to teach in 'other' ways; to be tolerant, trusting and risk-taking professionals. 'Ecological' practices are not just concerned with the relationships between plants and animals and the environment in which they live; ecological practices are essentially human activities. Thus, while I teach about the technical science of horticulture it is possible to purposively mobilise a 'green education' which, at the very least, counters dominant knowledge and identity forms. In this way, it is possible to rethink 'the way things are', to experience education as being connected to the world and to even become caught up in transformation. In this praxiological way, education itself is presented as the means to respond to the much bigger question: 'How should we live together – with each other and with nature?'

### *References*

- Darder, A. 2018. Freire and a revolutionary praxis of the body. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*. 40(5), pp. 422-432. [Online]. [Accessed 30 August 2019]. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10714413.2019.1570788?journalCode=gred20>
- Freire, P. 2013. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Freire, P. 2018. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 4th ed. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- McCarthy, F. 2020. *Conversation with Adult Learner*. July 2017.
- Monroe, M., Plate, R., Oxarart, A., Bowers, A. and Chaves, W. 2017. Identifying effective climate change education strategies: a systematic review of the research. *Environmental Education Research*. 25(6). [Online]. [Accessed 7 October 2019]. Available from: <https://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13504622.2017.1360842>

- O'Brien, S. 2016. *Inside Education – exploring the art of good learning*. London and New York: Routledge.
- O'Sullivan, D. 2006. *Cultural Politics and Irish Education since the 1950s: Policy Paradigms and Power*. Dublin: IPA Publication.
- Souza, D., Wals, A. and Jacobi, P. 2019. Learning-based transformations towards sustainability: a relational approach based on Humberto Maturana and Paulo Freire. *Environmental Education Research*. [Online]. [Accessed 7 October 2019]. Available from: <https://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13504622.2019.1641183>
- Wals, A. ed. 2009. *Social Learning towards a Sustainable World: Principles, Perspectives and Praxis*. Netherlands: Wageningen Academic Publishers.

# Inspired by Freire: From Literacy to Community. How the Ideas of Paulo Freire Shaped Work in the UK

PETER LAVENDER, ALAN TUCKETT

---

## Abstract

*This article reviews the adult literacy campaign in the 1970s in the United Kingdom (UK) and the influence of Paulo Freire's thinking on how we worked. We argue that much adult literacy provision had been designed to 'domesticate' rather than 'liberate'. The mid-1970s 'Right to Read' campaign in the UK rejected this approach (BAS, 1974). The use by tutors of the language and the experience of learners led in part to the publication of student writing, creating reading materials and approaches that were different, and challenging to existing power structures. Emancipatory adult literacy work could not withstand the arrival of substantial government funding in 2001, which brought a new Skills for Life government strategy, together with new teacher-training, new standards and literacy qualifications. Also, in the 1970s and 1980s progressive educators and the institutions for whom they worked developed initiatives which focused on under-represented and marginalised groups, asking 'who isn't there, and what can be done about it?' The result was a renewed development of outreach work, better understanding of what helps and hinders participation, and improved progression routes for individuals. One aspect of this development flowed directly from the literacy work in the 1970s – the participation of volunteers as 'fellow learners'. Looking at educational work with older people in care homes, volunteers from among local university students acted as co-learners in a charity which illustrates Putnam's (2000, p.134) 'generalised reciprocity'. We consider how Freire's legacy emerges among voluntary action as much as it does in literacy programmes.*

**Keywords:** Adult Literacy, Paulo Freire, Volunteering, Volunteers, Outreach Work, Widening Participation, Later Life Learning

## Adult Literacy

Literacy has been a site of struggle in Britain for hundreds of years (Howard, 2012). On the whole the established order has been in favour of teaching reading, so that people could follow written instructions and read improving texts. Dissenters have been more passionate about writing – to encourage people to share their own versions of reality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these differences of focus recur in more recent UK literacy campaigns.

Both of our working lives have been centrally affected by our experience in the community-led adult literacy campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, and by the influence of Freire's ideas on our practice. There were two substantial government campaigns in England and Wales: a series of largely short-term initiatives, responding to civil society pressure, from the mid-1970s, and the 'Skills for Life' strategy from 2001-2012 (Hamilton et al. 2000). The 'Skills for Life' campaign derived from the activist lifelong learning policies of a Labour government, and to the findings of the Moser Report it commissioned (Moser, 1999). We both started working with adults wanting to strengthen their literacy and numeracy in the mid-1970s, at the time of the British Association of Settlements' 1973 'Right to Read' campaign, and just before the BBC's prime time 1975 television literacy series, *On the Move*, which made Bob Hoskins a star (BAS, 1974; Hamilton et al. 2000). Just as we began, Penguin published *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, and *Cultural action for freedom* (Freire, 1974a; 1974b), which we devoured.

There had of course been adult literacy provision in Britain before the 1970s, in the Army during and after both World Wars. A report to Parliament in December 1943, for example, noted that just under one and a quarter % of men enlisted in the Army were illiterate, and 'continued to be a drag on the Army, and on themselves, unable to read orders, to make the simplest application or report, or to correspond with their families' (Shawyer, 1944, p.75).

Women with basic skills needs were unable to enlist at all. From 1942 the Army made systematic provision for six to eight weeks' full-time study in dedicated centres, targeting '*the most intelligent*' of each intake of Army personnel with basic skills needs. Shawyer noted:

A quite surprising number claim to have attended an ordinary school for the full nine years. A smaller number never attended at all, the majority of these being the sons of gypsies, circus performers and other 'travellers' [...] the largest call of illiterates, however, has some history of illness (1944, p.79).

Whilst the Army continued to make some provision after 1945, outside the Services provision was bleak, and providers' attitudes bleaker. First there was precious little on offer and this remained the case right up to the 1975 campaign. Characteristically, students joined classes ranging from 13 to 35 students, signed in on arrival and waited in turn for the tutor to see students for five or 10 minutes each. Reading material, such as the *Out with Tom* 'adult' readers offered simplified texts with child-like story lines. The National Association for Remedial Education (NARE), which represented teachers, had low expectations of success for students who were seen as problem learners, and of limited ability:

The personal immaturity, insecurity and impairment of social development associated with adult literacy is reflected in the number of men and women who either marry later or fail to marry [...] [Lack] of intelligence can be assumed to be a major factor associated with reading disability in adults. That about half of the students attending classes are deemed to be 'clearly of low intelligence' suggests that the community is always likely to include some persons of limited intellectual capacity who may nevertheless be functioning at or near their level of potential, even though reading and writing levels are sufficiently low to cause some personal embarrassment (NARE, 1971, pp.4-6).

Difficulties with literacy were seen, then, as a feature of personal aptitude. Such attitudes to learners were not uncommon. The 1970s campaign, emerging largely from the voluntary sector, consciously rejected a model of literacy work built on negative stereotypes – '*Blaming the Victim*', as Jane Mace described it in a memorable article (Mace, 1975). Or, as Sue Shrapnel (later Gardener) put it, '*My students seem to me to **have** problems not to **be** problems*' (Shrapnel, 1974). The British campaign emerged first in social work settlements, using social work models of one to one teaching. Clear that literacy was not a social problem to be managed but a political issue, concerning the right to learn, and to be heard, Shrapnel wrote, 'The political approach [...] sees the student as a person wronged and deprived, not as a backwards person':

The social work approach [...] implies the inadequacy of the student (by criteria only defined as 'social'); it sees the teacher's job as adjustment; it risks expecting little learning and settling for the performance of limited tasks; it risks also fostering dependence and reinforcing the student's vision of himself as inferior. It also [...] implies indifference to the nature of the teaching material as long as it does the job (what job?) and so tolerance of

childish stuff; acceptance of the [...] remedial – that is to say, hole-patching – nature of present provision; and a wholesale belief in the professional's competence to solve the problem. It needs no search for structures other than the carefully protected class or one-to-one pair, because the student's deference and isolation are not, in this view, part of his problem, though his confidence may be (Shrapnel, 1974 cited in Mace, 1979, pp.26-27).

Mace, who worked at the ground-breaking literacy scheme at Cambridge House settlement in London, concurred:

As tutors, we have no right merely to offer a second chance, a repeat performance of the teacher- pupil model that has already failed [...] We have to shed the idea of knowing teacher versus ignorant student [...] It means above all learning how to listen [...] to give value and literate dress to an oral culture we have forgotten how to appreciate (Mace, 1975, cited in Mace, 1979, p.28).

This approach was one shared by the adult education sites in which both the authors of this paper worked. Excited by Freire's work, we struggled at first to see how the pedagogical method for building codes could be translated to a language which lacked syllabic regularity and where phonics seemed an impassable gateway. We were helped by Cynthia Brown's practical booklet expounding Freire's method, *Literacy in thirty hours* (Brown, 1975).

The connection between Freire's work and the development of an approach that used the language and the experience of the learners was at first difficult to explain to colleagues who were used to working with children, with 'reading schemes' and an imposed vocabulary approach. It is also true that some adult learners expected to start where children learning to read began – learning the sounds and shapes of letters and then stringing them together, and reading aloud. That such methods evidently worked for some learners left many tutors – paid or voluntary – with a layer of confusion about what they were doing. It was Freire's 'domestication' (transferring knowledge) or 'liberation' (transforming action) argument which helped tutors to develop an approach based on what the students said (Freire, 1972, p.173). And writing down what students said created a new voice altogether, emancipating learners to name their own experiences, and to help shape their own lives. Such a methodology we termed 'a language experience approach' to distinguish it from approaches based on the use of an imposed vocabulary, like a reading scheme for children.



Freire's work also gave tutors permission to develop their creativity and to use Freire's concept of 'conscientization'. In Australia for example, Roy Pugh recalls this time:

That was the power that Freire had for me [...] I've got permission to be with people and to talk with people and to bring them into [...] some kind of collective understanding where we can all support each other and that's the way I've been. [...] it was about helping people to become conscious of their worlds. The words they were using [...] to be critical of the world [...] to reflect on their world and to give voice to it and to have some aspirations about what they might do in it and with others (2020).

Common to the most exciting literacy work in Britain was the focus given to teaching literacy which placed writing at the centre of the process. Teaching reading through what students actually said liberated student voices, and these were sometimes shared through publication, where learners were engaged at each step of the writing, editing and production process. Publications like *Father's Cap* (Cambridge House Literacy Scheme Students, 1975), *A Bristol Childhood* (Harvey, 1976), *George and the Bus* (Fenner, 1975), *I wanted to write it down* (Women in Peckham, 1980), and *Brighton Writing* (Brighton Writing, 1976) emerged from literacy schemes at a time in the 1970s when the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishing was bringing together community publishing initiatives concerned to secure a voice for working class people's experiences (Howarth, 2016; Mace 1979). Together they built an impressive body of readings for adults – each stimulating readers to write, either in response, or in the recognition that writing could be 'for people like us', as one student put it:

I think it is very important that a student sees something of their writing in print. I got a wonderful feeling when I saw it, a feeling that I could never explain. I feel as if people over there in other parts of Manchester or over there in other parts of the country need to see these things, need to see my work in print say "Oh, if he can do it, I can do it" (Glynn, 1984, p.6).

At the same time, a national newspaper for new readers, *Write First Time*, emerged, produced by literacy workers and students, and funded by the national agency created as part of the Government's response to the voluntary sector literacy campaign (Hamilton et al., 2000). At this time there was a massive increase in attention secured by the BBC's 'On the Move' programmes

in 1975-6, designed to both teach and to recruit learners. The editorial to *Write First Time 5*, line-broken for ease of reading, captured the spirit of the literacy work at the time:

Few of us find writing easy. Have you ever said

‘It’s all there in my head

but I just can’t put it down?’

So have we.

So have people who write for a living [...]

The authors go on to make the point that writing isn’t only something you do when you can already read:

There are all sorts of ways to get your words out.

You don’t have to put pen to paper.

You can talk into a tape recorder

or get someone else to write it down.

It’s still your words and your work.

When it’s written down it looks different.

You may want to change it.

Other people may say things

that make you see it different.

Then you can change it.

You have more control than when you talk...

When we write for the paper –

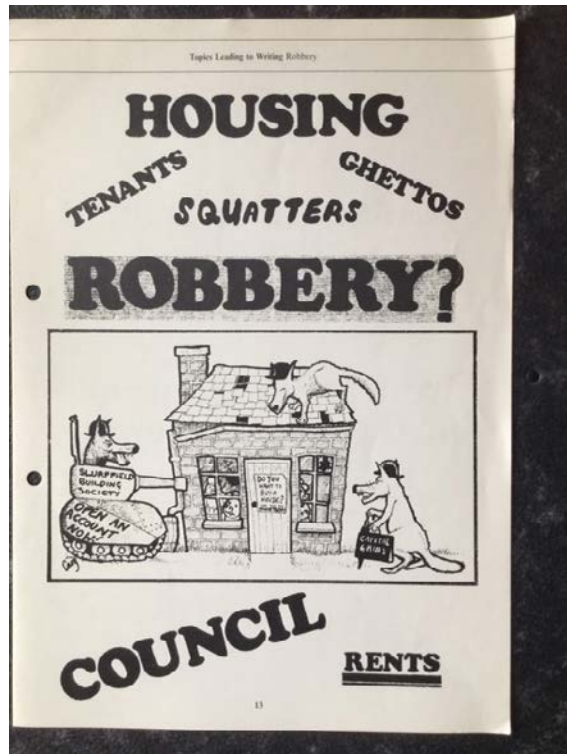
like when we wrote this article –  
we have trouble too.

First one person tried four times,  
Then a group of us argued for half a Saturday  
about what it said.  
Then two of us wrote it again.  
We have to think exactly what we want to say  
and how to say it clearly  
and why, and who to  
(*Write First Time* 5, 1975, cited in Tuckett, 1978, pp.136-7).

From Freire's work, tutors developed the confidence to assert that literacy is fundamentally political, that the task is to read the world, not just the words, and that 'washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral' (Freire, 1985, p.122).

By no means did all the literacy activity of the 1970s in Britain share these approaches, and like Freire's work in Brazil, literacy work that engaged students with the public debates of the day provoked a reaction. In 1977, in the first set of public enquiries into political bias in literacy work, Andrew Bowden, a Brighton Conservative MP, called on television for the Department of Education to institute enquiries. The Department had funded curriculum development at the Brighton Friends' Centre. In addition, the UK government's arms-length training arm, the Manpower Services Commission, was funding a full-time year-long Training Opportunities Scheme Preparatory course in literacy and numeracy, and the local authority (which gave grant aid to the Centre) also reacted to the pressure. The complaint was about the impact of the work of the Friends Centre in Brighton on the 'vulnerable minds' of literacy students. The *Daily Telegraph* article reporting the call was headlined 'Left-wing bias' attack on

school for semi-literates.’ The Centre had published resources for tutors to use in order to stimulate dialogue and student writing, whilst developing technical skills along the way. They drew on newspaper reports on Mao’s death, labour disputes in industry, debates about nuclear power, and the future of Brighton’s West Pier. Each was designed to generate critical questions, not to sell answers. The worksheet that triggered the critique was drawn from the cover of the housing charity Shelter’s front page, and used a series of strong words around the issue of squatting, and asked for students’ views:



(Friends Centre, 1978)

The worksheet generated perhaps 30 student responses, broadly divided into pieces sympathetic to the rights of property owners, and pieces calling for the right to housing, and an end to homelessness. The Centre invited the MP to visit and to discuss his concerns with students (he refused), and published the local paper report of Bowden’s views as a worksheet:



The public interest sparked debate among the students. As Roger Weedon, one of the students, responded:

What are we? What makes us different? Why can't we read about things everyone else can? We've got to read something; and I'm bloody sure I'm not reading Andy Pandy. That's a racing certainty' (Mace, 1979, p.24; Tuckett, 2000, p.81).

Of course, responding to enquiries sucked a good deal of time away from the work, but in the end the Centre was told by the Education Minister that the materials were, in the Department's view, not only unbiased but the best examples in the country of adult literacy worksheets, and the government agency Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) then published them as *Wages to Windscale: worksheets and how we have used them* (Friends Centre, 1978). Such questions about the alleged political content of adult literacy programmes recurred in other places in the late 1970s and early 1980s, always disrupting the work of local schemes, and culminated when a Conservative government closed down *Write First Time*, not long after it had published a learner's work hostile to government policies. The closure of *Write First Time* meant there was no longer a national voice for literacy student writing, and in a short time the focus on literacy through learners' writing lost significant momentum.

From the confidence and creative energy of the late 1970s, much of the 1980s and 1990s felt, for more radical literacy and numeracy workers, like defending

a redoubt in a losing battle. The return of a Labour government in 1997, and the report on adult literacy it commissioned from a group chaired by Sir Claus Moser kick-started fresh energy (Moser, 1999). Dramatically increased budgets, national training schemes for tutors, innovation grants for third sector providers, and the engagement of Departments across government all ensued, and the remit of a newly established Skills for Life unit in the Education Department was expanded to include English for Speakers of Other Languages. The price of such largesse lay in the elaboration of national standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening; and graded levels of literacy which could be assessed at three entry levels and two levels articulated with the national vocational qualifications framework. Over the decade to 2010 five million people gained a literacy qualification. The programme was assessed as a success. And yet. The price paid in creating the national framework was that literacy as emancipatory practice, as a tool of conscientisation, got lost. Literacy work, for too many, became concerned with the acquisition of technical skills. As Tom Macfarlane argued, 'You teach what you test' (Macfarlane, 1979). This is not to suggest that there have not been thousands of creative teachers engaged in emancipatory education, defending learner centred literacy work despite the limitations of a qualifications-driven national curriculum, and developing a pedagogy shaped by what Thierault calls 'conflictual co-operation' (Thierault, 2019). But the temper of the times, and the rise of neo-liberalism squeezed such work to the margins of mainstream literacy provision – to the residential colleges and voluntary agencies, to Access courses, and to a wider adult and community education.

A detailed research review of the waves of adult literacy development from the 1970s onwards concluded that 'The student writing and community publishing movement was a visible strand in early work in Adult Literacy. Today it is hardly talked about' (Hamilton et al., 2000b)

There is a reason for this. Hamilton et al. argued that changes began when the funding regime was formalised as a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and colleges took the dominant role in provision. 'Be careful what you wish for' was never so apt. Now called 'basic skills' the provision became mandatory with a new set of goals:

no longer open-ended and community-focussed, but subjected to a funding regime that stressed vocational outcomes and required formal audit. In 1995-6 ALBSU reported that 319,402 people were receiving tuition in

England, two thirds of whom were studying in the FE sector (Hamilton et al., 2000b)

Hamilton et al. saw the evolution of British policy and programmes from the 1970s on as a direct response to more powerful social concerns such as unemployment and the size of the adult population with no or low qualifications. The growth from a part-time and voluntary ethos ultimately led to very different concerns, following the professionalisation and marketisation of further and adult education. The number of volunteers involved dwindled dramatically. The resources were welcome, the programmes expanded massively and it changed the methodology to more of a utilitarian approach.

### **Outreach and Popular Planning**

At the same time adult literacy work was developing in the UK in the 1970s, there were initiatives in London, Liverpool, Sheffield, Nottingham and Southampton focused on engaging under-represented and marginalised groups and, in particular, working class people in education for social change (Taubman and Cushman, 2000). They were reacting to a process of gentrification in adult education, described well as long ago as the 1950s by Wiltshire, but persisting into the 1970s:

Each group settles down at its own social level, tends to be mainly middle class or mainly working class and tends to renew itself from that section of the community [...] If the same process goes on in a Centre – and all the evidence goes to show that it does, then the whole work of the institution, perhaps the whole adult education programme in the town, will become socially homogeneous. In practice it will be captured by the [...] middle class (Wiltshire, 1976 [1959], p.21)

Just as Freire and his colleagues spent time listening to community members before proposing ways of studying together, so too, in Britain, did progressive educators and the institutions and authorities for whom they worked recognise that the traditional modes of adult education were not working. They asked, ‘who isn’t there, and what can be done about it?’ And to answer those questions they set about actively engaging with and listening to working class communities, and in co-designing programmes of work that were characteristically sharply different from traditional weekly day and evening classes. In Nottingham this took the form of housing and tenant rights education and campaigns on the St Anne’s estate (Coates and Silburn, 1973). In South Yorkshire the Northern

College supported an outreach worker to engage mining communities and others to shape programmes of short-term residential courses (Ball and Hampton, 1984). In Liverpool, Tom Lovett spent time in pubs and community centres helping people identify things they wanted to see changed, and then what kind of things they would need to know more about to see it happen. It was a process of empowerment – and success in securing a zebra crossing outside a children’s primary school spilled over. Learning leaks, as does the confidence that things can be changed, once you can see how power is organised and build alliances to contest it. Much of this work involved in engaging with the power structures of local government, defending people’s rights, and re-building a sense of community where de-industrialisation had demoralised and separated people (Lovett, 1975). In London, a whole cohort of outreach workers were appointed, and much of the creative engagement with women’s groups, with gay rights, and with black communities came from outreach workers’ willingness to fund groups to explore and strengthen their organisational goals (Newman, 1979).

The Greater London Council (GLC) recognised the role adult education could play in London’s economy through involving people in popular planning. It sponsored three projects in East and South London to provide support for less organised groups wanting to meet needs neglected by the market. The closure of the Battersea Power Station stimulated a good deal of interest from major companies, reported in the *Financial Times*, notable among which was the proposal to make the site into a theme park, an Alton Towers for London. For residents of the narrow streets of Battersea the idea was anathema – recognising that if the proposal succeeded the need for car parking and access routes would decimate community housing. The Popular Planning project called a community conference to articulate the frustrations and seek viable alternatives that would meet the needs of local communities. Alas, the GLC was closed by the government of Mrs. Thatcher before any of its ideas could be acted on and, as Alexander comments, ‘without power, planning a better future and raising expectations is demoralising’ (1986, p.11).

Practical outcomes did flow, though. Wandsworth’s Black Pages brought together the small businesses and self-employed traders of south London’s black and Asian businesses in a publication designed to advertise their wares, and to contest popular images, fuelled by the press, about black people’s entrepreneurial skills. A childcare conference brought together childminders, care workers, health professionals and educators working with small children to explore their common goals. As a result of their discussions a group persuaded



a supermarket chain, developing a new shop at Clapham Junction in South London, to include a crèche, to enable single parents to shop there. Its success led to the inclusion of childcare facilities in a range of the chain's subsequent developments (Alexander, 1986; Tuckett, 1990).

A major element of outreach work – working alongside community groups to jointly shape learning programmes in support of social change – weakened as more narrowly utilitarian skills policies took hold in the 1990s. With the exception of New Labour's *Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities* programme, which led to a brief renaissance around the millennium, outreach to groups to foster learning on their own terms has declined ever since.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Freire argued that in order to change the world, teachers needed to change their stance, to one of shared power with learners. And in teachers he included volunteers. One significant element of the 1975 adult literacy campaign in the UK described earlier was the substantial number of volunteers who came forward to help. They were trained and supported in a number of different pedagogies and without them the large number of referrals from the BBC action line would have resulted in many waiting lists. Curiously, the volunteers were rarely seen as learners or as co-workers – more as a means to an end (Lavender, 2007). There were different voices though, even then:

For the volunteer to see her role as one of fellow learner makes her job both more honest and more easy. Conventionally, if the tutor thinks the student isn't trying hard enough [...] she or he complains. On this model, if the student thinks the tutor is falling into stereotyped 'teaching' behaviour, then the student can complain (Mace, 1979, p.28).

The problem with volunteers can sometimes be how uneven the relationship is – differences in academic skills, social class distances, and uncomfortable truths. 'You can't criticise something that's free', as a student told Jane Mace (1979, p.44). In fact, earlier research on volunteers in adult literacy suggests that they were seen as 'as if' teachers, termed 'voluntary tutors' rather than co-learners, and there were many of them – 31,437 recorded as teaching in 1979 (Lavender, 2007, p.108; ALU, 1980). Freire's proposition that pedagogy should involve dialogue-based investigation of reality and co-creation of knowledge was not that evident in the involvement of volunteers in many literacy programmes of the 1970s in the UK. As time went on the numbers of volunteers engaged in

adult literacy work as tutors reduced rapidly. Since that time there have been successive UK policy interests in national citizenship projects – often connected to occupying unemployed young people (Lavender, 2007). However, volunteers have also been the cornerstone of many community programmes.

The UK is a set of nations who volunteer in extraordinary numbers. Over one in five people (22 per cent) volunteered regularly in the UK in 2017-18. At least once a month some 11.9 million people volunteer (NCVO, 2020) and these numbers have remained stable for several years. Volunteers, defined as those who give unpaid help to someone who is not a relative, get involved in a wide range of activities. They include volunteering for public sector organisations (17%) but most volunteer for civil society organisations (67%) and over half give time to more than one organisation. The data is significant: the scale inescapable.

Yet if Freire's thinking had only modest impact on the use of volunteers in the 1970s, the value of his approach can be seen to impressive effect still today. One programme which does value volunteers and their tutoring role in a way in which Freire would have recognised is 'Learning for the Fourth Age' (L4A). L4A is an educational charity, where students from local universities are matched carefully to work in paired learning with older people living in care homes in Leicester. L4A's evaluation took place five years after the programme started and is broadly described in Hafford-Letchfield and Lavender (2018 p.118). The evaluation noted Freire's observation that, 'Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity' (1974, p.31).

The study found that volunteer learning mentors brought flexibility, tailoring their work to the interests of the participants, and much co-production of learning (Carr, 2011). The 'new learning' in relation to volunteers was often informal but included learning Welsh, the novels of Thomas Hardy and discussing modern-day China. As in adult literacy, the volunteers usually worked one to one, but this time there was a conscious focus on reciprocity and mutual benefit. Also reviewed was the nature of 'giving' within volunteering, which had often been confused in the past as an unequal gift exchange (Titmuss, 1971; Arrow, 1972). In L4A the message was clear: 'It's very much a two-way thing', as one organiser said (Lavender, 2016).

It is a curiously British thing, this anxiety about the gift work (or 'gift exchange') involved in volunteering, with its ramifications of uneven social class concerns,

identified by Mace (1979). Nevertheless, with Lawrence Blum's careful definition of the nature of altruism as 'a direct concern for and responsiveness to the weal and woe of others' (Blum, 1980, p.4), there seems to be less unease about reciprocal gain from the process of giving. Altruism, argued Philip Abrams (1979), is a form of reciprocity.

The topic of motivation lies partly in the moral domain as Blum asserted, so it is not surprising that voluntary action can involve some unease from the organisers about discussing motives with volunteers. 'Acceptable' and 'unacceptable' motives become less of a problem if there is a genuine gift exchange and the nature of 'giving' is properly valued. In the case of ageing, it has been argued that we need to move beyond notions of dependency and towards the promotion of agency and autonomy (Biddee et al., 2013; Hafford-Letchfield, 2013). Sensitivity around volunteering is necessary where there might be job substitution but without voluntary action a great deal can be lost – benefits to communities and social cohesion. We need to see learning as part of that discussion about co-creation: volunteers as co-learners, called for by Mace in relation to literacy volunteers (Mace, 1979). In fact, Freire did not want to see this confused with non-directive education, where teachers and learners are considered equal:

The educator who says that he or she is equal to his or her learners is either a demagogue, lies or is incompetent. Education is always directive, and this is already said in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [...] (Mace, 1979, pp.26-7).

More recently, Putnam suggests we might look at the gift of labour in terms of a norm of 'generalised reciprocity':

I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favour (Putnam, 2000, p.134).

Understanding this norm of generalised reciprocity is important. We believe that many people frequently misunderstand the nature of volunteering, and see it more in transactional terms.

There is a parallel in the world of health. It has been suggested that, when medical volunteers work overseas, they need a framework,

[...] for understanding the limitations of their volunteering, whereby the presence of privileged volunteers implementing Western models of development may hinder aspects of local movements (Qaiser et al., 2016, e.31).

Qaiser et al. call this 'the voluntariat' and argue that this asymmetry, particularly among North American students working in short-term international settings, needs a pedagogy based on social justice. The 'voluntariat' need encouragement to reflect on the causes of health inequalities and to identify ways in which they themselves might be 'complicit in the suffering of the populations with which they are working, rather than seeing themselves as saviours' (Qaiser et al., 2016, e.36). It might well be the same in education too. Volunteers and learners alike may need the comfort of a framework which liberates through co-production and co-learning, and to shared understandings of how things could be better, and more equitably arranged, whatever the setting.

### **Conclusion**

The adult literacy work in 1970s Britain has left a legacy, but not just in our understanding of what it meant for the students and the pedagogy which set out to liberate many of us from the grim negative attitudes prevalent then, but in the reflection on volunteers and their learning too. It was work initiated in the voluntary sector, migrating over time to state-funded provision, and confirmed a key finding of the finest report on adult education published in Britain – the final report of the Ministry for Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee, (the 1919 report), which had argued:

In a modern community voluntary organisation must always occupy a prominent place. The free association of individuals is a normal process in civilised society, and one which arises from the inevitable inadequacy of State and municipal organisation. It is not primarily a result of defective public organisation; it grows out of the existence of human needs which the State and municipality cannot satisfy. Voluntary organisations, whatever their purpose, are fundamentally similar in their interest (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, pp.113-4)

Younger generations in a Britain struggling with the sharpened social and demographic divisions revealed and exacerbated by the 2016 European referendum have discovered their own sites of emancipatory learning through other struggles to secure the right to shape their future, for example in the climate change activism

of the extinction rebellion movement (Extinction-rebellion, 2020), revivifying in their own way Freire's belief that we should read the world as well as the word.

### References

- Abrams, P. 1979. *Altruism and reciprocity: altruism as reciprocity*. Working Paper 2. Durham: University of Durham Rowntree Research Group.
- Alexander, T. 1986. *Value for people: Adult education and popular planning*. London: Clapham-Battersea Adult Education Institute.
- ALU. 1980. *Adult Literacy: 1978/79: Report to the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the Secretary of State for Wales by the Adult Literacy Unit's Management Committee on the First Year of Operation*. London: HMSO.
- Arrow, K. 1972. Gifts and Exchanges. *Philosophy and Public Affair*. **1**(4), pp.343-362.
- Ball, M., and Hampton, W. 1984. *The Northern College – twenty-five years of adult learning*. Leicester: NIACE
- Biddee, J., Vantilborgh, T., Pepermans, R., Huybrechts, G., Willems, J., Jegers, M., and Hofmans, J. 2013. Autonomous motivation stimulates volunteers' work effort: a self-determination theory approach to volunteerism. *Voluntas*. **24**, pp.32-47.
- Blum, L.A. 1980. *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Brighton Writing. 1976. *Brighton Writing*. Brighton: Friends Centre.
- British Association of Settlements. 1974. *A right to read: Action for a literate Britain*. London: BAS.
- Brown, C. 1975. *Literacy in 30 hours*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative.
- Butler, J. 2019. Our ruined, lifeless planet. 24 April 2019. *London Review of Books* Blog. [Online]. [Accessed 12 March 2020]. Available from: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2019/april/our-ruined-lifeless-planet>
- Cambridge House Literacy Scheme Students. 1975. *Father's Cap and other stories*. London: Cambridge House.
- Carr, S. 2011. Enabling risk and ensuring safety: self-directed support and personal budgets. *Journal of Adult Protection*. **13**(3), pp.122-136.
- Coates, K. and Silburn, R. 1973. *Poverty, the forgotten Englishmen*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Daily Telegraph. 'Left-wing bias' attack on school for semi-literates. *Daily Telegraph*. 19 March 1977.
- Extinction-rebellion 2020. Extinction-rebellion. 2020. [Online]. [Accessed 16 March 2020]. Available from: <https://rebellion.earth/extinction-rebellion-uk-2020>
- Fenner, A. 1975. *George and the bus*. London: Centreprise publishing project.
- Freire, P. 1974a. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freire, P. 1974b. *Cultural Action for Freedom*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Freire, P. 1985. *The Politics of Education*. Westport: Greenwood.
- Friends Centre, Brighton. 1978. *From wages to Windscale: worksheets and how we have used them*. London: ALBSU.
- Glynn, J., ed. 1984. *Where do we go from here?* Manchester: Gatehouse.
- Hafford-Letchfield, T. 2013. Social work, class and later life. In: Formosa, M. and Higgs, P. eds. *Social Class in Later Life: Power, Identity and Lifestyle*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hafford-Letchfield, T. and Lavender, P. 2018. The Benefits of Giving: Learning in the Fourth Age and the Role of Volunteer Learning Mentors. In: Melling, A. and Pilkington, R. 2018. *Paulo Freire and Transformative Education: Changing lives and Transforming Communities*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hamilton, M., Hillier, Y. and Parsons, S. 2000. *Changing faces of Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL: A critical history of policy and practice 1970-2000*. [Online]. [Accessed 3 February 2020]. Available from: <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fss/projects/edres/changingfaces/index.html>
- Harvey, R. 1976. *A Bristol Childhood*. Bristol: Workers' Educational Association Western District.
- Howard, U. 2012. *Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century: A Strange Blossoming of Spirit*. Leicester, UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).
- Lavender, P. 2007. Volunteers, social policy and adult learning. In: Tuckett, A. ed. 2007. *Participation and the pursuit of equality: Essays in adult learning, widening participation and achievement*. Leicester: NIACE, pp.104-122.
- Lavender, P. 2016. *The gift of learning: Volunteering and lifelong learning – a research journey*. 13 January 2016, University of Wolverhampton.
- Lovett, T. 1975. *Adult education, community development and the working class*. London: Ward Lock.
- Mace, J. 1979. *Working with words*. London: Chameleon Books.
- Macfarlane, T. 1979. *Helping Adults to Read (Adult Literacy Guides)*. Houndmills: Nelson Thornes Ltd.
- Ministry of Reconstruction, Board of Adult Education. 1919. *Final report*. London: HMSO.
- Moser, Sir C. 1999. *Improving literacy and numeracy: a fresh start*. London: HMSO for Department of Education and Employment.
- National Association for Remedial Education (NARE). 1971. *Remedial Education*. National Association for Remedial Education (Great Britain).
- National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). *Volunteering overview*. [Online]. [Accessed 17 March 2020]. Available from: <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/volunteering/>
- Newman, M. 1979. *The poor cousin*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Pugh, R. 2020. *Interview with Lavender, P*. 20 December 2019, Lindisfarne, Tasmania.

- Putnam, R. D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Qaiser, S., Dimasras, H. and Hamel, P. 2016. The Voluntariat: A Freirean framework to understand the nature of undergraduate international (medical) experiences. *Canadian Medical Education Journal*. 7(3), pp.31-36.
- Ronson, J. 2016. *Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers Collection at the TUC Library, London Metropolitan University*. 3 May 2016. Archives Hub. [Online]. [Accessed 12 March 2020]. Available from: <https://blog.archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/2016/05/03/federation-of-worker-writers-and-community-publishers-collection-at-the-tuc-library-london-metropolitan-university/>
- Shawyer, R.C. 1944. *The Army fights illiteracy*. *Adult Education*. 17(2), pp.74–83.
- Shrapnel, S. 1974. 'They look normal, but ...' In: Bentovim, M. and Kedney, R. *Aspects of adult illiteracy*. Liverpool: Merseyside and District Institute of Adult Education.
- Taubman, D. and Cushman, M. 2000. A history of ILEA Outreach Work and its Precursors. In: Nicholls, S., Taubman, D., Murray, E., Clarke, K. *Aylesbury Revisited: Outreach in the 1980s*. 2nd edn. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, pp.43-53.
- Theriault, V. 2019. Accountability literacies and conflictual cooperation in community-based organisations for young people in Quebec. In: Tett, L. and Hamilton, M. eds. *Resisting neo-liberalism in education: local, national and transnational perspectives*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Titmuss, R. 1970. *The Gift Relationship: from Human Blood to Social Policy*. New York: University of Chicago Press.
- Torres, R.M. 2007. *The Million Paulo Freires*. [Online]. [Accessed 5 February 2020]. Available from: <https://www.dvv-international.de/en/adult-education-and-development/editions/aed-692007/10th-anniversary-of-paulo-freiresquos-death/the-million-paulo-freires/>
- Tuckett, A. 1978. *Analfabetism und Politik*. In: Jartelius, A., ed. *Folkbildningsboken* Stockholm: Laromedel, pp.136-7.
- Tuckett, A. 1990. *Adult Learners Hold the Key to Future Development*. District Councils Review.
- Tuckett, A. 2000. *A Right To Read? 25 years of adult literacy campaigns in the UK*. Pismenost, Participacija in Druzba Znanja. Ljubljana: ASC, pp.78-88.
- Wiltshire, H.C. 1976 [1959]. Giving adult education a home. In: Rogers, A. ed. 1976. *The Spirit and the Form: Essays in honour of H.C. Wiltshire*. Nottingham: Department of Adult Education, University of Nottingham, pp.20-22.
- Women in Peckham. 1980. *I wanted to write it down*. London: Peckham publishing project.
- Write First Time 5. 1975. *Write First Time*. London: Write First Time Collective.

# A Story from the Margin

ZORYANA PSHYK

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper draws on narrative inquiry research: an epistolary autoethnography from a daughter to her mother written to communicate a story of powerlessness and oppression and an immense desire for liberation. The researcher sought to make meaning from her personal experience and to understand the impact of the Direct Provision System on her life. The research was undertaken as part of a Master's Degree in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. The researcher reflects on her search for freedom through the power of support and the solidarity of local community, and through the life-changing experience of adult education and learning.*

**Keywords:** Asylum Seeker, Letters, Epistolary Autoethnography, Subjectivity, Praxis, Learning, Education, Generative Themes, Conscientization, Disorienting Dilemma

## **Snapshot of the Letter 'The Women'**

Dear Mamusya!

Just left my friend's house after a lovely chat about us, and kids, and life... and I thought I will tell you a bit about the wonderful women I have met in Ireland, who "brought me up", supported me and stayed with me in solidarity all those years I had been living in direct provision and beyond...

I was really lucky, Mum, to meet the most incredible women in Ireland, whom I can call indeed my tribe. Some of them you have met, some – not. I don't even know, if I will ever be able to explain how important these women were in the becoming of who I am now... So, meet my tribe, Mamusya.

There are women who I call my "Irish Mummies". They have taken the role, that would have been fulfilled by you, Mamusya, if I was living back home. I am very lucky to have them in my life.



I have met Bernie when she came up to the services she worked in to find out about recognition of my qualifications from back home in my first year in direct provision. We had Irish coffee in pubs and restaurants. Bernie taught me Irish culture. She explained to me the nuances of phrases and proverbs, and I told her similar proverbs in Ukrainian. We had long chats about similarities of Ukrainian and Irish languages – how picturesque and rich both languages are... We talked about our childhood memories – so different yet so similar... I still can talk to her about anything in the world! We dreamt my dreams together... about moving out of direct provision centre... being free... She gave me a straw to hold on to, when I was drowning... She drove me with children to Wicklow to see lambs in Springs. She hugged me with her whole heart... She gave me Hope... (Pshyk, Z. 2019a. *Letter 5. The Women*, 10 May).

### **Learning to Read the World**

To the oppressed,  
and to those who suffer with them,  
and fight at their side  
(Freire, 1996, p.5).

My first reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996) happened when I was still living in Direct Provision (DP). In Freire I found an ally who had a more precise understanding of my day-to-day struggles than anyone ever did. Even though the context in which his philosophy was born was distant from me by more than forty years and thousands of kilometres, it was strikingly applicable to my experience of oppression in the context of the Direct Provision System (DPS). Just like bell hooks (2014, p.46), I felt I ‘deeply identified with the marginalized peasants Freire speaks about’ and just like her I did not have a political language to name my world.

Even though Freire recognised the subject position of those ‘who suffer the gravest weight of oppressive forces’ (hooks, 2014, p.53), it is important to assert that he failed to address gender-specific oppression. hooks and Mayo criticise Freire for ‘not acknowledging the specific gendered realities of oppression and exploitation’ (hooks, 2014, p.53) and for not ‘addressing gender, race and sexuality’ (Mayo, 1999, p.113). So, when engaging in an exploration of

oppression, it is important to be aware of how it can be experienced from the female perspective in patriarchal structures and to be aware of the positioning of female experience in the liberatory paradigm. However, as a woman, an educator, and now as a researcher, I deeply value Freire's regret in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994, p.55) of not addressing 'the discrimination against women, expressed and committed by sexist discourses' and his appeal for us to reject sexist ideology, 'which necessarily involves the re-creation of language.'

As an adult educator and through my involvement in local community groups and networks, I had an opportunity to share my story of living in the DP. It was a fragmented storytelling, embedded in the process of facilitating learning with youth and community groups and with learning communities in Adult, Secondary and Higher Education. Storytelling helped me to feel vulnerable and empowered at the same time. I felt vulnerable because, every time I share my story, I am giving a little bit of myself to the world and what is going to happen with the story I told is out of my control. I feel empowered because more people can learn and change their understanding and perception about asylum seekers.

The experiences of people are not detached from context. They are being created in a historical context in a society that has a political agenda and power in relation to humanity. Having experienced life in the DP, I have come to realise that life experiences are like funnels which squeeze humans into understanding the world in a particular way. They shape who we are, our relation to the world and to those who share the world with us. Our life experiences are important ways of knowing and understanding the world. This epistemological stance is congruent with poststructuralist feminism and forms my ontological position in relation to the world. Ryan (1997, p.10) indicates that 'feminist poststructuralists recognise identity difference and power differentials' and, along with subjectivity, poststructuralist feminism is concerned with 'discourse, difference, deconstruction.'

Feminist analysis illuminates the importance of subjectivities, the complexities of oppression and its impact on personal experiences. I identify with the critical feminism which is concerned not only with women and their struggle for equality but with all who experience inequality, discrimination, racism, abuse, subordination, marginalisation and structural injustice, whose voices are subjugated in male-dominant societies. These experiences should be viewed and understood in the context of intersectionality, because the concept of life cannot be separated into disjointed strands. Brah and Phoenix (2004, p.76) point out that intersectionality signifies:

The complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts.

Viewing human struggle through the lens of the above concept highlights the impacts of oppression and helps to unearth the roots of injustice across all avenues with the hope to eliminate it at the core. The significance of intersectionality for this research cannot be underestimated, particularly when listening to the stories of women from all walks of life. Notwithstanding that this research is giving a personal account of oppression in a particular context, understanding the oppression in intersectionality will help to ‘elucidate current entanglements with similar problematics’ (Brah and Phoenix, 2004, p.75).

Often considered a weaker sex in capitalist patriarchal structures (hooks, 2014), women experience multiple dimensions of oppression. Ireland’s history of treating women is far from equal. However, while women outside of the DPS (Direct Provision System) are still battling for equal pay for work, equality in decision making, gender equality in higher education and across wider society, dignity, integrity and an end to gender-based violence (European Commission, 2019), women asylum seekers are excluded from these discourses. Recent reports (Ombudsman, 2018; AkiDwA, 2020) highlight the hegemonic construction of the experiences of women in the DPS. Extraordinarily disadvantaged materially (Ombudsman, 2018), they also have to meet societal expectations fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives. These expectations become an unbearably oppressive burden in places like the DP centres where womanhood is caught up in the male identity of an asylum seeker and therefore becomes invisible.

Navigating between levels of oppression, women turn into shields protecting their children from institutional discrimination (AkiDwA, 2020) and trying to cope with day-to-day discriminative practices against their race, religion (Fitzsimons, 2017a) and worldviews. On the margin of despair, it is difficult for a woman asylum seeker to stay sane in ‘the world that is not inclusive of you’ (hooks, 2014), where oppression in all its forms is supported by institutions and social structures.

### **Story of the Story-ing**

The data for this research was created via the method of epistolary autoethnography, namely reflecting on personal experience through writing

letters. Letter-writing has been previously used as a research method for education (Knowles and Cole, 1994, p.27; Ciuffetelli Parker, 2011a, b). The innovation of using letters for this research is that the letters were written intentionally to express personal experience for the purpose of the research into adult education. Letter-writing was not studied as a research method prior to writing the letters. The method choice was rather accidental, emerging when I posed a question to myself: if I were to give an account of my experience of living in the DP to a person with whom I could be as honest as with myself, who would I tell the story to? The immediate response in my head was: I am going to write letters to my mother.

Letters as a means of storytelling in the first person about one's own life experience is an autoethnographic activity. Ellis (2004, xix) defines autoethnography as a form of research, writing and method that connects the autobiographical and the personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection (Denzin, 2009, p.205). As a form of research, autoethnography 'locates the researcher's deeply personal and emotional experiences as topics in a context related to larger social issues' (Denzin, 1997, p.200 cited in Olesen, 2005, p.254). Caisel and Salvo (2018, p.1) assert that, through its philosophical and narrative orientation, autoethnography 'rehumanizes the abstract speaking position of the political subject'.

Critics often accuse autoethnography of being 'merely solipsistic' (Patai, 1994 cited in Olesen, 2005, p.254), biased, self-indulgent and introspective (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999), self-serving and 'navel-gazing' (Diversi and Moreira, 2016, p.190), mostly because in qualitative research objectivity is equated with masculinity and subjectivity with femininity. However, Freire (1996, p.32) emphasises that 'one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity; subjectivity and objectivity should be in constant dialectical relationship'. Denzin (2009, p.507) points out that all qualitative texts are biased as they are 'reflecting the play of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and culture, suggesting that so-called objective interpretations are impossible'. It is important 'to develop an understanding of subjectivity as a powerful aspect of the human condition, rather than an inadequate, deficient opposite of objectivity' (Connolly, 2013, p.15).

### **Generative Themes of the Letters**

Freire (1996) asserts that in order to reach conscientization people must first investigate their 'thematic universe' (p.103) which can be revealed through generative themes – the themes and the issues which affect people's lives and which, through reflection, 'generate energy and hope' (Hope and Timmel, 2014, p.17). The feelings and emotions that accompany the process of their generation play a crucial role in motivating the transformation of our world. As Hope and Timmel (2014, p.17) write, 'suppressed feelings contribute to a sense of powerlessness and apathy but if we tap into them, people can unearth new life for themselves.'

Practically, the generative themes are drawn out in 'cultural circles' (Freire, 1996, p.45) by engaging in personal reflection through problem-posing material. Through dialogue, 'the issues which the local people speak about with excitement, hope, fear, anxiety or anger' (Hope and Timmel, 2014, p.8) reveal the generative themes. The energy that surrounds these themes are a lifegiving energy for planning action for radical change. Therefore, generative themes are integral to emancipatory pedagogy. Garcia (1974, p.69) explains that to investigate generative themes means 'to investigate man's thinking about reality and man's action upon reality, which is his praxis.' The first theme that emerged in the letters was food, unveiling the issue of food provision and the prohibition of cooking. Further themes emerged as follows: Right to Work, Discrimination, After Direct Provision, The Women, Education Path.

Garcia (1974, p.69) explains:

Opting for the interpretation that sees themes as linguistic representation of affective and cognitive responses and of the situations which elicit such responses does not mean that themes are entirely subjective. Thought and language exist always in reference to reality.

The circumstances current to the letters are quite explicit and, as pointed out above, are not entirely subjective. The letters tap into the realities and stories of other people and create a dynamic narrative which is comparative and relational. Furthermore, the main themes generate myriads of other themes which at times interact with their opposite, such as inclusion/exclusion, oppression/freedom and so forth.

As contextualised material, which is ‘historical, relational and processual’ (Denzin, 2009, p.109) interpretive material, the letters illuminate the phenomenon of subjective lived experience. Denzin (2009, p.109) points out that the stories should be connected to ‘larger institutional, group, and cultural contexts, including written texts and other systems of discourse’. Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p.8) highlight that narrative text always functions in context, and, therefore, context is a very important ingredient of narrative, as it ‘always has to do with ideology’. Freirean critical pedagogy is deeply concerned with understanding social context and historical milieu. The contexts that were explicitly elaborated on in the letters and researched in the academic literature referenced are the following:

1. The context of the DPS
2. The theoretical emergence of the DPS
3. The context of being a woman in Ireland
4. The context of a woman living in the DPS

These layers of contextualised oppression created multiple narratives of oppression which shaped the experience that has been researched.

Phenomenology is a rich source of data but appears to be difficult to analyse due to myriads of emerging meanings. Due to this process, other rich generative themes had to be abandoned to make data a manageable source for producing meanings. For the process of objectively analysing the data and distancing from the ever-colonising ‘I’ of the letters, I situated myself in the objective position of the researcher to ‘suspend my subjectivity’ temporarily and ‘assumed the attitude of a disinterested observer’ (Scott and Usher, 1996, p.21) by referring to myself in the analysis with my first name, Zoryana.

As the research was not traditional in its form, the letters were considered findings. The analysis of the themes was carried out according to what Denzin (2009, p.108-109) terms ‘interpretive interactionism’, where the focus is on ‘those life experiences (epiphanies) that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects’. Contrary to the moments of crisis that emerged during analysis in Denzin’s account of interpretive interactionism, this research is driven to moments of transformation through education and learning.

It is difficult to capture with precision the learning that can occur in a person's life as well as how one experience of learning leads to another, as it is a perpetually evolving process. However, the threads of transformative learning were vividly evident in the data of this research project, signifying disorienting dilemmas and capturing the empowering elements of personal transformation.

The learning was analysed from two positions – learning in formal spaces and learning in informal spaces. Here, formal refers to educational settings, while the informal encompasses day-to-day life and the spaces that can be deemed informal. This separation of contexts was done consciously in order to help reveal the deeper meaning of the experiences. The following themes emerged through analysis of the learning: Cooking as an Act of Resistance, Fostering Resistance Through Learning Solidarity and Learning for Liberation. The subthemes are elaborated on below.

### **Cooking as an Act of Resistance**

#### *Cooking as Learning*

Not being allowed to cook, especially in structures like the DPS, had taken the possibility of engaging in creative praxis away from Zoryana. Freire points out that creativity is crucial for the human 'drive to search' and 'restlessness' (1996, p.42) and that a lack of creative power suppresses life and pushes the embodiment of oppression further. For Zoryana, the practice of cooking covertly as a means of providing nutrition for children becomes a process of reclaiming her identity as a mother, which entails certain expectations of this role in patriarchal structures, including cooking for her family. This creates a struggle for Zoryana to fulfil her expectations of herself, of her family and of society, as a process inherent to this role is being taken away from her.

Furthermore, cooking is an indigenous way of learning and a way of passing on customs, traditions and culture. Taking away this abundant source of learning opens up a colonial narrative of the oppressors' culture, turning asylum seekers into colonial subjects. As an instrument of domination, the prohibition of cooking in the DPS becomes a cultural invasion, which 'penetrates the cultural context of another group', here a culturally diverse community of asylum seekers. As Freire (1996, p.152) highlights, 'in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression'. Taking away the possibility of cooking as an indigenous way of learning breaks the connection in 'intergenerational learning' (Murphy, 2012, p.53) which leads to the fragmentation of authentic cultural identity:

Over the last Christmas I have got to cook a lot, and especially traditional food, that we cooked with grandma for the Christmas Eve's supper – kutya, varenyky with wild mushrooms, with cherries, with sour cabbage; lent holubtsi, mushroom sauce, uzvar... It brought a lot of wonderful memories, but a lot of sadness as well. Tasting granny's food was like an explosion of taste in the mouth and the happiness in the heart. And not only because she was a good cook. It's because the food she prepared was shared with sisters and brothers, and cousins, and neighbours. All of us were sitting together at the table, and the food was a symbol of unity of the extended family. It was a symbol of gathering and learning from each other – an intergenerational learning. It was a symbol connecting past and present... It was a symbol of relationships we had; of the connection we had kept over the years from a mother to a daughter. Mine has been broken... (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August).

#### *Cooking as Learning Resistance*

On the one hand, the total provision of food is experienced as safety, but on the other hand, it becomes a tool for governing the human body and a tool of oppression. The use of discipline and punishment (Foucault, 1995) is an attempt to govern the food-body relationship.

Going downstairs and line up for breakfast, go back upstairs, go downstairs and line up for lunch... Going downstairs for dinner... and Storing, cooking or having food in the rooms was prohibited...being late for breakfast means no breakfast (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August).

This regulation produces 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1995, p.138) and reinforces a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1996, p.15), creating people without will. This completely opposes the ongoing discourses in society on healthy eating which are especially evident in the light of the Healthy Food Made Easy campaign, a national programme which aims to help people learn about healthy eating and healthy cooking in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere (Share and Share and Geraghty, 2009).

The following quotation illustrates the presence of 'epigenetic transgenerational trauma' (Rechavi, Hourì-Ze'evi, Anava, Goh, Kerk, Hannon and Hobert, 2014, p.1) which concerns DNA recording memories of starvation during the famine and the passing of this traumatic information to the survivors' descendants:



...During our sessions we talked about different issues and things, that bothered me. I think, central to all those sessions was FOOD... The counsellor noticed it as well... I thought a lot, why is it so... Then in November, during the Holodomor Memorial, I had read an article, which was explaining how experiencing starvation during the famine is “recorded” by the human genes and passed down to the generations of descendants... it all came together for me... I remember grandma telling me about the famine...she should not have remembered; she was only four years old... but she remembered the feeling of hunger... 1932-1933... Great Famine... 10 million of Ukrainian people perished as victims of death inflicted by starvation under Stalin’s regime... people were killed for a tiny seed of wheat...genocide through food ...food...was a means of control... means for survival... (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August).

This bodily memory evokes intergenerational trauma for Zoryana and creates anxiety relating to the inability to have control over food preparation, intake times and cooking. The analysis reveals the embodiment of intergenerational oppression for Zoryana, as a Ukrainian and as a woman of a particular family line. This intergenerational oppression is evoked through bodily memory and the prohibition of cooking in the DP, echoing hooks’ (2014) assertion about the fragmentation of the person’s wholeness in patriarchal structures and the traumatic experiences of domination.

The statement ‘I had chosen to survive! To survive and withstand the oppression I had experienced through control of the food’ (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August) affirms a willpower to refuse acceptance of the situation and proceeding with cooking, through the fear of being caught by the hand. Scott (1985, p.33) substantiates that ‘where institutionalised politics is formal, overt, concerned with systematic, de jure change, everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains’. The decision to start cooking covertly in Zoryana’s case becomes an act of ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1985, p.33). Thus, cooking as a practice of everyday resistance becomes an initial steppingstone for further resisting oppressive patriarchal structures as well as resisting transgenerational oppression.

### **Fostering Resistance through Learning Solidarity**

#### *Learning to Mother without my Mother*

Becoming a mother is a process which takes a lot of learning about oneself as a woman and embracing the new identity of a mother. For Zoryana, it comes

with the struggle of fulfilling the expectations she has of herself as a mother in the DP and in society and the expectations and responsibilities that patriarchal society has placed on her. Being in tune with the little children and providing for all of their physical and emotional needs becomes a hard task. There is also a profound sense of loss linked to her mother's distance. This can be felt in the memories that are connecting the present with the past and that leave Zoryana wondering how mothering would have been different if her mother were near. However, embracing the identity of being a mother puts her on the path of ongoing learning:

I had to learn a lot about babies, - naturally, as a mother you need to learn a lot in a very quick pace, because babies are developing and grow very fast, and as a mother, you need to be in tune with each milestone of theirs. A role of a mother involves many professions, - you are a teacher, a nurse, - even a doctor, a counsellor, a cleaner, a cook, a launder, a photographer, a manager, a strategic planner, an accountant, a nutritionist, a hairdresser, - you name it! But most important, you are a carer, a nurturer, a storyteller, a memories-keeper, a hugger, a love-giver, a listener, a healer, a protector, an inventor, an idea-generator, a dreamer, a creator, - a life giver... (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June).

***Learning to mother with the community of women*** in the DP centre brings a sense of solidarity and affirmation to the new role and prompts the birth of agency by creating a learning space, the Mother and Toddler group, for the children in the DP centre:

A few of us have organised ourselves and started our own Mother and Toddler group. We planned activities for children of two age groups, shared responsibilities in organising play times, facilitating activities, cleaning the playroom before and after the play, making coffees and teas. It was our little world, which was very enjoyable. We were looking forward to those days, hmmm, especially, when it was your turn to sit back and drink coffee (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June).

This shows that the collective weakness expressed through the praxis of critical reflection and action grows into a collective strength, which is a goal of Freire's solidarity (Freire, 1996).

***Unlearning institutionalisation***, explained as ‘gripping with the new reality and learning to adjust to the living in an “open” society... and trying to fit into new frame of what my life must be like’, is in fact the process of unlearning oppression ‘to shed the peels and layers, that direct provision has covered me with’ (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June).

This process is identified with the trauma of losing a familiar space and learning and knowing how to deal with the familiar circumstances of oppression – ‘my inner world was falling apart’ (Pshyk, 2019b). Living in an ‘open’ society is experienced as a disorienting dilemma and brings a huge challenge to ontological and epistemological positions. It comes with a realisation that the ‘open’ society is not as open as expected, and that the desired freedom from behind the walls of the DP centre does not exist: ‘I was being crushed by the realisation, that the freedom I was dreaming of for so many years while in direct provision, in fact, doesn’t exist’ (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June). This revelation comes with pain and creates a traumatic experience for Zoryana. Furthermore, the desire to fit in means that there is a struggle with a new identity, which is still unknown and only in the process of forming. Nevertheless, the loss of the asylum seeker’s identity brings an experience of grieving.

***Learning from failure*** is a painful process filled with self-doubt and anxiety. In the culture of achievement, which is deeply inherent to human nature through the banking model of education (Freire, 1996), it is unacceptable to fail, especially in education. Capitalist society does not recognise failure, therefore, failing comes with guilt, shame and anxiety. These feelings are an impact of self-deprecating behaviour (Freire, 1996), which stems from oppression in patriarchal structures: ‘for a while I thought of myself as a complete failure. Only about a year later, when writing a speech... I suddenly realised – It was not a failure! Not at all! It was just a part of a learning process!’ (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June). Accepting this experience as a learning experience is empowering and brings a sense of liberation. hooks (1984) explains that institutionalisation is an internalisation of the domination of patriarchal structures. She asserts that the culture we live in is ‘the one institutionalised sphere of power’ (hooks, 1984, p.20) which impacts all levels of society and is being reinforced through social institutions, including the family. She argues that there is a need to learn self-acceptance, which is hard to achieve in existing structures.

*Learning from my mother* is a theme that emerges through Zoryana's childhood memories, which are being unearthed and intertwined with memories from the DP. Her mother's break away from modern-day slavery for the sake of her daughter's education has had a profound impact on the meaning of education in Zoryana's life. This so-called slavery is enforced through the traditional expectations of hard work and obedience from a daughter-in-law within the patriarchal structures of society. Another important experience of her mother's is the experience of going back to education as an adult and refusing to submit to demands of bribery for entrance to college. Yet Zoryana emphasises that she agrees to pay whatever it takes for her education, even though she has no means and puts herself into conscious debt. It shows how Zoryana yields to the meritocratic narrative of neoliberal discourse and how her mother is able to resist to the point of refusing to study. This difference in their experiences is astounding.

*Learning with the community of women* inside and outside of the DP is especially evident in the letter *The Women* (Pshyk, Z. 2019a. Letter 5. *The Women*, 10 May), which shows respect to women's struggles and tells the story of receiving immense support from 'Irish Mothers, Irish Sisters and Women Heroes':

But we stayed... hand in hand... shoulder to shoulder... We supported each other... We have shared bread and milk... happiness and sorrow... We resisted... We fought... We cried... We hugged... and weren't letting anyone to break us! We walked the road together... We dragged each other through the sameness of the days and nights... And if there were no strengths in our bodies to walk, we were lifting each other and carrying through...

These women are remarkable! ... They educated me! They showed me what is diversity, and the wealth of cultures we have in this world! Living with these women as a community gave me an understanding and a privilege to experience their traditions and learn their customs. It gave me an understanding of their lives, and connected my life with theirs, as we have been living through the same struggle...

They have taught me to stand back from my bias and treat people equally, no matter who they are! They have taught me to see a person – holistically – through life experiences which shape and change our characters, change our perception about others, change our relation to other people and how we become who we are...

These women have humanised me... (Pshyk, Z. 2019a. *Letter 5. The Women*, 10 May).

When women come together, they engage in discussions that are paving the way to overcoming a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1996, p.32) and fostering a critical reflection on their experiences created by patriarchal structures. Freire emphasises that having trust in people and an ability to engage in their struggles will create an authentic comradeship which, in its plenitude, will become an act of love and will be true solidarity in its *praxis* (1996, p.32).

Mezirow (2000, p.134) argued that a new meaning, born from the transformed structure of assumptions, will be tested through engagement in 'discourse' – a 'dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief', which can occur in one-to-one group relationships, in community groups or in formal and informal education settings. Through repeating the cyclical process of action and reflection, women reach 'conscientization' (Freire, 1996, p.36), an ability to critically understand their reality and recognise the social and political structures that oppress them. The solidarity of women clearly did not lead to emancipation in Zoryana's case, but certainly fostered the development of agency and personal empowerment both in friendships and in a collective empowerment within the community in DP. This 'unity in resistance and struggles', hooks (1984, p.38) states, is a 'deeply political feminist unity and a struggle against the oppression of patriarchal structures which we all experience'. This unity makes Zoryana's personal experience less of a burden and empowers her to resist daily oppression. The solidarity that she experiences with the women in DP is a deeply humanising process. The site of oppression becomes a site of possibility for liberation by resisting submission to oppression.

### **Learning for Liberation**

#### *Learning to Speak*

Apart from accessing Western knowledge, learning English opens up the possibility of engaging in the practice of dialogue, which creates an opportunity for Zoryana to reveal the world around her and to engage in further learning. This significant revelation comes upon reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996), which gives a name to the experience of oppression. This transformative experience raises the question of why the word 'oppression' was not learnt in English class and highlights the importance of critical literacy which creates a connection between 'reading the word and the world' and

'approaches subjectivity through the development of *conscientization*' (Freire, 1996, p.19). Learning literacy has the potential to be 'a cultural action for freedom' (Freire, 2000). However, in Zoryana's instance, learning the English language became a tool for fully engaging with and integrating into the culture of the oppressor, namely the culture of wider society, which, by allowing for oppression to exist in the DPS, becomes the oppressor itself.

***Learning creativity*** is associated with the experience of feeling like 'becoming a God' (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June), and this revelation explains the repetitive return to this empowering experience. Creative power is a life-giving force which prompts 'the drive to search, to restlessness' (Freire, 1996, p.42). Engagement in the process of creativity unveils and reproduces creative power. Thus, learning creativity becomes a process of overcoming alienation which is constructed by the 'prescriptions' (Freire, 1996, p.133), namely, the regulations of the DPS. Developing creativity extends human repertoires of organic intellectual engagement, as Connolly (2013, p.1) points out. Furthermore, practicing creativity creates conditions for having 'the capacity to exercise agency, while, at the same time, resisting discourse and social practises that are subjugating', as Larkin (2016, p. 17) conveys. Learning creativity moves outside of the spaces of Community Education and outside of the walls of the DP centre and becomes a practice of creativity and friendship which brings colours to the everyday reality of the dark room Zoryana lives in with her family.

Creativity is central to adult education, and particularly to Freirean pedagogy. Thus, this theme includes learning creativity for working with groups, from jewellery-making classes to creating and using problem-posing material, which is central to creating a dialogue and to eliciting generative themes with the groups, which unveil real issues that people experience. So, learning creativity in Zoryana's case moves over time from learning to create to practicing creativity with the groups in adult education. It becomes a life-giving force for overcoming personal alienation and fostering creativity in others.

***Leaning for liberation*** is the theme which encapsulates all the learning that leads to developing a critical awareness of the complexities of societal structures and fosters Zoryana's resistance to these structures, as well as leading to her engagement in facilitating Freirean pedagogy. Reconnecting with her cultural identity during the intercultural sessions; re-discovering her leadership skills; experiencing learning about power; realising that power can be shifted and

resisted; and learning the 'creative' toolbox of a facilitator working with groups in a Freirean approach are only some of the transformative learning experiences with Partners Training for Transformation (TFT) recalled in the letters. Fascinated with 'the practical application to the Freirean pedagogy' (Partners TFT, 2013), and with Partners TFT, Zoryana starts her journey as a facilitator.

Learning the word 'facilitator' and experiencing the facilitation of creating a shared knowledge; learning the word 'oppression' when reading Freire for the course; learning philosophy, sociology and feminist studies; and becoming a qualified tutor are only some of the significant experiences that occurred during the courses with the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. What the experiences with both organisations have in common is that they are truly transformative, not only because of the learning gained during the courses, but because of the people who facilitated the education. The significance of the solidarity of the tutors/facilitators, their trust in students and their humanity, and their understanding of human struggle and the facilitation of critical inquiry into the human experiences and into the world, turn these spaces of learning into spaces for experiencing democracy and freedom for Zoryana, as illustrated in the data. Freire (1996, p.60) emphasises that the 'real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour without that trust'. Hence, the experience of education is significant not only because of the learning it offers but because of the people who facilitate the learning, adhering to the adult education values of respect, dignity, equality and justice.

The process of repeatedly going back to education is empowering and disempowering at the same time. It is empowering due to its ability to give Zoryana hope and strength to resist oppressive structures. It is disempowering because, while she was seeking spaces of freedom, the power structures of the DPS remained the same, with her family remaining within these structures. Thus, the question of the longevity of transformative learning arises, as opposed to the temporary transformative empowerment of an individual within the existing power structures. Transformative learning allows for transformation within certain boundaries but does not actually allow the individual to reach emancipation (Tailor and Cranton, 2013). Personal transformation does not allow for social change, as social change needs a collective engagement in the praxis of freedom. Otherwise, it is merely an individual empowerment, which operates 'as a subtle form of self-control' (Inglis, 1998, p.13), as in Zoryana's case within the structures of the DPS. This statement challenges the notion of

emancipation being attained through personal transformation (Mezirow, 1990).

The quotation ‘I must go further; I must progress; I must achieve; I must succeed... because if not, – I am a failure’ (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June) clearly portrays a belief in the ‘individualist discourse that claims people can lift themselves out of poverty through their own actions’ (Fitzsimons, 2017b, p.42). This individualism, Fitzsimons (2017b, p.42) asserts, is ‘an important cornerstone in neoliberalism’ which is ‘increasingly cemented in hegemonic logic through the notion of social agency’.

There is a sense of grieving for lost time in the DPS which heightens the game of meritocracy or what Freire (1996, p.157) calls a manipulation by the ‘culture of achievement’ which is determined by the ‘culture of domination’ (1996, p.158). Internalisation of this narrative is the driving force behind Zoryana’s actions. Furthermore, her conscious decision to stop mourning her culture and ‘earn’ her way out of DP through education ends up in her committing ‘cultural suicide’ (Brookfield, 1995 cited in Taylor and Cranton, 2013, p.40) which ‘can result from people moving away from their communities and cultures through transformative learning’. ‘... Integration comes with blood and tears’... (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August). Zoryana’s statement reaffirms Taylor and Cranton’s (2013, p.40) conclusion that:

the phases of transformation involve pain, discontent, guilt and shame. The event or events that precipitate transformative learning are often traumatic but supposedly lead to positive outcome.

Contrary to the last point, the conscious decision to block part of Zoryana’s life experiences and culture in order to integrate into society created ongoing issues of anxiety and depression. It might have happened partly because the learning spaces she had been attending were not addressing her cultural needs and were reinforcing the culture of the ruling class. It could have been due to adult education not being culturally inclusive and not catering for a diversity of knowledge through intercultural curriculums (Zilliacus, 2009) as well as undermining world experiences as a source for enriching and diversifying Western knowledge.

Connolly (2013, p.14) points out that women and other subordinate groups develop their identity through feedback from their peers. Seeing herself through the eyes of society as an asylum seeker, Zoryana has internalised the dominant cultural norms of society. This ‘disjointed sense of identity’ (Connolly, 2013,



p.14) prompted her to deny the validity of her own experience prior to the DPS and turned her into a self-deprecating being. Zoryana is grieving because of her fragmented identity and uses education as a vehicle for reclaiming her identity prior to the DPS and for freeing herself from the internalised colonisation inflicted on her during her years in the DPS.

***Learning to find my voice.*** Through transformative learning and the praxis of conscientization, Zoryana becomes an adult educator. Through her work and volunteering she resists submitting to discourses of power and works to change the dominant narrative about asylum seekers by creating and sharing counter-narratives:

We are strong and smart people. We want to fully contribute to society. Don't steal our life in the dark rooms of the direct provision. Don't steel (sic) our hopes and dreams. We are Humans... Have a closer look. We are more alike than not. We are more connected than not. We all belong to this Planet... You and me ... (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June).

Her voice grows stronger through the course of the letters. Through the years of education and transformation she develops agency for herself, for her family and for the people who need solidarity like she needed it in her position on the margin of society. Her experience of oppression and subjugation carved her into who she is now. She facilitates education that is meaningful, congruent with people's experiences and that, through reflection and action, leads to conscientization. This is a praxis of personal radical transformation in solidarity with others which does not move her *From* [the] *Margin* to [the] *Centre* (hooks, 1984) but keeps her grounded in the roots of the community as an ex-asylum seeker with other asylum seekers and others on the margin of society, and unites her in solidarity with their struggles with hope for the emancipation for all.

### **Conclusion**

Researching subjectivity is a complex process. It allows for an exploration of deeper meanings, but it is emotionally demanding and hurtful. Writing epistolary autoethnography helped me to engage in a critical reflection on my experience of being an asylum-seeker and on my journey of becoming an adult educator. The writing became a process of knowledge acquisition which enabled me to reconnect with my sense of self and created a fertile ground for deeper meanings to emerge through 'reading', understanding and 'naming' the world.

This research proved that epistolary autoethnography is a method of research appropriate for the field of adult education and for eliciting subjectivities from the margin of society. Stories elicited from the margin will challenge the dominant discourses of power. Not only will they reveal the effects that these discourses have on personal experiences, they will also create counter-narratives for the greater possibility of engaging in conversations about the oppressive realities of people and the intersectionality of experiences. This research challenged assumptions about the meaning of learning and adult education. Engagement in education and the richness of learning from the family, peers and the diverse community created an abundant experience of empowerment, solidarity and resistance to multiple structures of oppression. If placed along an imaginary continuum of praxis, these experiences are a persistent move towards emancipation.

Through the analysis came the devastating understanding that emancipation is not a task that can be achieved alone. Transformative learning is a move along the continuum of learning that is closer to radical social transformation, but this transformation can only occur when the praxis of conscientization extends to collective action. However, the solidarity that the women in DP are able to foster in the face of patriarchal structures gives hope for this emancipatory change. This process is growing through emancipatory education that seeks to bring about conscientization from engagement in the praxis of solidarity.

Despite the research reaching its aims, there are unavoidable limitations. Subjectivity is congruent with personal experience. Therefore, to make meaning of the subjectivities of many asylum seekers, there is a need to either reframe the approach to the research or to extend the timeframe, allowing for the myriads of stories to be told. This study has explicitly asserted that personal experience is constructed by political systems of domination and political discourses of power. Thus, this research may be deemed 'an act of counterhegemonic resistance' (hooks, 2012, p.5). Only through the vehicle of feminist critical thinking and emancipatory education can women push boundaries and transgress to liberation, dismantling male dominance and challenging certain aspects of culture, as well as the governmental policies which colonise their existence in the 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (hooks, 1997, p.10).

This research is being shared with the hope that it prompts critical questioning, awareness, and solidarity amongst the cohort of adult educators who hold

the power to educate for change in the treatment of people who are seeking protection and those who remain on the margin. The data and the findings of this research may be used by teachers, educators and facilitators in the fields of adult, community and higher education as problem-posing material or as a starter for dialogue on the topic of asylum seekers. It is important to remember that at a time of uncertainty in the global discourses of power everybody is a potential asylum-seeker.

### References

- AkiDwA. 2020. *Let's Talk: Mental Health Experiences of Migrant Women*. Dublin: AkiDwA. [Online]. [Accessed 23 February 2020]. Available from: <https://akidwa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/LetsTalk2.pdf>
- Atkinson, P. 1997. Narrative turn or blind alley? *Qualitative Health Research*. 7(3), pp.325-344.
- Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. 2013. *Ain't I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality*. [Online]. Virtual Commons: Bridgewater State University. [Accessed 11 October 2018]. Available from: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss3/8/>.
- Ceisel, C. and Salvo, J. 2017. Autoethnographic Responses to the Political. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 24 (5), pp.307-308.
- Ciuffetelli Parker, D. 2011b. Related literacy narratives: Letters as a narrative inquiry method in teacher education. In: Kitchen, J., Ciuffetelli, D., and Pushor, D. eds. *Advances in Research on Teaching*. Bingley: Emerald Group publishing, pp.131-149.
- Coffey, A. 1999. *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: SAGE.
- Connolly, B. 2013. *Theorising Creative Critical Pedagogy: The Art of Politicized Agency*. [Online]. Maynooth: MURAL. [Accessed 3 January 2019]. Available from: [http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/7646/1/BC\\_theorising%20creative%20critical%20pedagogy.pdf](http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/7646/1/BC_theorising%20creative%20critical%20pedagogy.pdf)
- Denzin, N. 2009. *Qualitative Inquiry Under Fire: Toward a New Paradigm Debate*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press.
- Diversi, M. and Moreira, C. 2016. *Between Talk: Decolonizing Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Praxis*. [Online]. [Accessed 1 October 2018]. Available from: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- European Commission. 2019. *The EU and Irish Women*. [Online]. [Accessed 10 April 2019]. Available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/node/684\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/node/684_en)
- Fitzsimons, C. 2017a. *Adult education responses to the 'othering' of Muslim identity: Perspectives from Ireland*. [Online]. Maynooth: MURAL. [Accessed 15 January

- 2019]. Available from: [http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9007/1/CF\\_adult%20education%20reponses.pdf](http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9007/1/CF_adult%20education%20reponses.pdf)
- Fitzsimons, C. 2017b. *Community Education and Neoliberalism. Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. 1995. *Discipline and punish*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freire, P. 1994. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York and London: Continuum.
- Freire, P. 1996. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.
- Freire, P. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Heart*. New York: Continuum.
- Garcia, S.J.A. 1974. *Generative Themes: A Critical Examination of Their Nature and Function in Paulo Freire's Educational Model*. Master's thesis, Loyola University Chicago: Loyola eCommons. [Online]. [Accessed 15 January 2019]. Available from: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_theses/2683](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/2683)
- Herman, L. and Vervaeck, B. 2005. *Handbook of Narrative Analysis (Frontiers of narrative)*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- hooks, b. 1984. *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. 1997. *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*. MEF: Challenging Media. [Online]. [Accessed 23 January 2019]. Available from: <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf>
- hooks, b. 2014. *Teaching to Transgress*. London: Routledge.
- hooks, b. 2012. *Appalachian elegy*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Hope, A. and Timmel, S. 2014. *Training for Transformation. A Handbook for Community Workers*. London: ITDG Publishing.
- Inglis, T. 1998. A Critical Realist Approach to Emancipation: A Response to Mezirow. *Adult Education Quarterly*. **49** (1), pp. 72–76. [Online]. [Accessed 29 March 2017]. Available from: <https://search-ebcsohost-com.jproxy.nuim.ie/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1339283&site=ehost-live>.
- Kitchen, J., Ciuffetelli Parker, D., and Pushor, D., eds. 2011a. *Narrative Inquiries into Curriculum Making in Teacher Education*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Knowles, J. and Cole, A. 1994. We're Just like the Beginning Teachers We Study: Letters and Reflections on Our First Year as Beginning Professors. *Curriculum Inquiry*. **24** (1), 27-52. [Online]. [Accessed 13 February 2019]. Available from: <https://www-jstor-org.jproxy.nuim.ie/stable/1180144>
- Larkin, S. 2016. *Community Arts as an Act of Praxis and Resistance*. Master's thesis, Maynooth University. [Online]. [Accessed 15 January 2019]. Available from: <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9657>
- Mayo, P. 1999. *Gramsci, Freire, and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative*

- Action*. New York: Zed Books.
- McCormack, D. 2019. *Trina chéile: Reflections on journaling in the border country of doctoral research*. [Accessed 3 January 2019]. Available from: <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/7874>
- Mezirow, J. 1990. Conclusion: Toward transformative learning and emancipatory education. In: Mezirow, J. and Associates. eds. *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass, pp.354-376.
- Mezirow, J. 2000. Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory. In: Merriam, S.B., Caffarella, R. S., and Baumgartner, L. (2007). *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p.134.
- Murphy, C. 2012. *Transferring Knowledge and Life Experience Between Generations: The Potential of Community Based Intergenerational Projects*. Master's thesis, Technological University Dublin. [Online]. [Accessed 11 March 2019]. Available from: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/appamas/37/>
- Olesen, V. 2005. Early Millennial Feminist Qualitative Research. In: Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd edn). New York: Sage Publications, pp.235-278.
- Ombudsman. 2018. *The Ombudsman and Direct Provision: The story so far. A commentary by the Ombudsman*. [Online]. Dublin: Office of the Ombudsman. [Accessed 13 March 2019]. Available from: <https://www.ombudsman.ie/publications/reports/the-ombudsman-and-direct/Direct-Provision-Commentary.pdf>
- Partners Training for Transformation. 2013. *Who we are*. [Online]. [Accessed 25 August 2019]. Available from: <http://www.trainingfortransformation.ie/index.php/who-we-are/who-we-are>
- Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August.
- Pshyk, Z. 2019a. *Letter 5. The Women*, 10 May.
- Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June.
- Rechavi, O., Hourri-Ze'evi, L., Anava, S., Goh, W., Kerk, S., Hannon, G., and Hobert, O. 2014. Starvation-induced transgenerational inheritance of small RNAs in *C. elegans*. *Cell*. **158**(2), pp.277-287.
- Ryan, A. B. 1997. *Feminist Subjectivities: sources for a politicised practice of women's personal development education*. PhD thesis, Maynooth University. [Online]. [Accessed 10 March 2019]. Available from: <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/5283>
- Scott, D., and Usher, R. 1996. *Understanding Educational Research*. London: Routledge.
- Scott, J. C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Form of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven

and London: Yale University Press.

Share, P., Share, M., and Geraghty, R. 2009. *Healthy Food Made Easy Evaluation*.

[Online]. [Accessed 14 April 2019]. Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281861055\\_Healthy\\_Food\\_Made\\_Easy\\_Evaluation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281861055_Healthy_Food_Made_Easy_Evaluation)

Taylor, E., and Cranton, P. 2013. *The Handbook of Transformative Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

# Lessons from Freire: Towards a Pedagogy for Socio-Ecological Transformation

AMANDA SLEVIN, ROXANNE ELLIOTT, ROSIE GRAVES,  
COLLEEN PETTICREW AND ALEXANDRA POPOFF

---

## **Abstract**

*Climate breakdown is one of the greatest challenges our world faces. Driven by social, economic, political, environmental and ideological forces, the climate crisis necessitates critical, creative, inclusive and impactful action across multiple levels of society. Adult learning is a core element of societal transitions to a more sustainable future and this article explores Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a valuable resource for understanding processes of, and barriers to, multi-level changes. Drawing on our innovative 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' project, we situate Freirean pedagogy as a cornerstone of teaching, learning and action for socio-ecological transformation.*

**Keywords:** Climate Breakdown, Freirean Pedagogy, Climate Action, Adult Learning, Pedagogy for Socio-Ecological Transformation

## **Introduction**

We live in an era of unprecedented socio-ecological turmoil. Entwined with societal patterns of production and consumption, environmental catastrophes such as climate breakdown, deforestation and plastic waste in oceans are heightening awareness of human impacts on our planet. Focusing on the climate crisis as one of the greatest challenges facing our socio-ecological world, in this article we articulate the forces driving climate breakdown as being simultaneously social, economic, political, environmental and ideological. We argue that critical, creative, inclusive and impactful actions are required across multiple levels of society to tackle the climate and ecological crises; Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a valuable resource for understanding processes of, and barriers to, societal changes.

Outlining some of Freire's key concepts, we examine problem-posing education, conscientisation and praxis as essential components of adult learning for transformative climate action. We elucidate the influence of Freire's ideas on 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future', a non-formal educational initiative developed by staff and students in Queen's University Belfast. Situating Freirean pedagogy as a cornerstone of teaching and learning for socio-ecological transformation, we emphasise how adult learning is a core element of societal transitions to a healthier, fairer and sustainable future.

### **Climate Change**

A crucial issue of growing public discourse, climate change relates to large-scale, long-term shifts in our planet's average temperatures and weather patterns (Met Office, 2019). Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) and fluorinated gases are greenhouse gases (GHGs) which trap radiation from the sun within the earth's atmosphere, acting like a greenhouse which retains the sun's heat and prevents it from escaping into space (National Institutes of Health, 2019). This 'greenhouse effect' means the majority of solar radiation is absorbed within the Earth system, causing our oceans, atmosphere and land to heat up, warming the planet beyond normal temperatures and causing climate change (Lallanila, 2018). We, humans, increase the greenhouse effect and global warming by adding vast amounts of greenhouse gases to those which occur naturally in the atmosphere, through activities like: using oil, gas and coal (fossil fuels) to power our homes, workplaces and transport; cutting down trees to clear land for house construction or for livestock to graze (as trees absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, they act as carbon sinks; deforestation releases stored carbon into the atmosphere); unsustainable farming practices, livestock production and meat consumption (European Commission, 2019).

Despite growing public awareness of climate change, demand for fossil fuel resources keeps rising: primary energy consumption increased by 2.9% in 2018 (the fastest growth since 2010, nearly double the 10-year average of 1.5% per year); carbon emissions grew by 2.0% (the fastest growth in seven years) (BP, 2019). The fossil fuel industry has doubled its contribution to global warming by emitting as much greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in 28 years as in the 237 years between 1988 and the birth of the Industrial Revolution; 71% of global GHG emissions were traced to just 100 fossil fuel producers (CDP, 2017).

Accelerating GHG emissions are evident in dramatic increases in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> (NOAA, 2013) and since the Industrial Revolution, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> has



increased by over 40% to levels that are unmatched in at least 800,000 years (Met Office, 2019). In May 2019, global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were the highest ever recorded (414.7 parts per million) (NOAA, 2019a). Human activities have 'caused approximately 1.0°C of global warming above pre-industrial levels ... global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate' (IPCC, 2018). Global temperature records reveal escalating temperatures: for example, June 2019 was the hottest June in 140 years and it was the 414<sup>th</sup> consecutive month with above-average global temperatures (NOAA, 2019b). CO<sub>2</sub> remains in the atmosphere and oceans for thousands of years (NOAA, 2013) and global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions must peak by 2020 and be reduced by 45% before 2030 in order to limit temperature increases to 1.5°C (IPCC, 2018). However, we are on track for a 3°C increase by 2100 with serious ramifications (McGrath, 2019).

### **Climate Breakdown and Socio-Ecological Injustices**

One might find the idea of a hotter Ireland appealing but climate change isn't simply about warmer weather – as our atmosphere and oceans heat up, snow and ice levels are reduced and sea levels increase, producing wide-ranging consequences (DCCAE, 2019). Predicted impacts in Ireland include: rising sea-levels; extreme weather (more intense storms and rainfall); increased chance and scale of river and coastal flooding; poorer water quality; increased pressure on water resources and food production systems; greater political and security instability; population displacement and climate refugees; heightened risks from new pests and diseases; extensive impacts on plant and animal species (ibid.). Major socio-ecological, economic and political risks are inherent to climate breakdown:

Poverty and disadvantages are expected to increase in some populations as global warming increases; **limiting global warming to 1.5°C**, compared with 2°C, **could reduce the number of people both exposed to climate-related risks and susceptible to poverty by up to several hundred million by 2050** ... Climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5°C and increase further with 2°C (IPCC, 2018, p.11).

Climate breakdown is driven by, and further deepens, socio-economic inequalities globally. The top 10 emitting countries emit 45% of global GHG emissions yet the bottom 50% of countries emit only 13% of GHG emissions (UN, 2019, pp.iv–v). So-called 'developed' countries in the Global North

(particularly the US and Europe) have produced the most cumulative GHG emissions since 1850 (National Geographic, 2017) but poorer countries which bear least responsibility for emissions experience the worst consequences of climate change (Islam and Winkel, 2017; Goldenberg, 2014). Climate change worsens socio-economic and ecological inequalities within countries and climate risks affect people differently, depending on their social, economic and cultural environment (HM Government, 2017, p.10). Low-income households are particularly susceptible to climate change impacts which disproportionately affect their resources; low-income groups also have lower capacity and resources to adapt to climate change (ibid.).

Societal patterns responsible for climate breakdown are destructive in other ways, notably how 'human actions threaten more species with global extinction now than ever before ... around 1 million species already face extinction, many within decades, unless action is taken to reduce the intensity of drivers of biodiversity loss' (IPBES, 2019, pp.3-4). Since 1500, human activities have caused the extinction of approx. 680 vertebrate species (e.g. mammals, fish, birds, amphibians, reptiles) (O'Sullivan, 2019). When one considers these socio-ecological consequences on a global scale, Monbiot's articulation of climate breakdown is apt. Calling climate breakdown 'climate change' is like calling an invading army 'unwanted visitors' and Monbiot argues that 'climate change' and 'global warming' are inadequate terms for 'the collapse of the benign climate in which humans have prospered, and the loss of the conditions upon which many other life-forms depend' (2013, 2019). We face unimaginable socio-ecological crises and 'everything is getting much worse, faster, everywhere ... this is as much to do with social justice as it is climate and environmental breakdown' (Porritt, 2019).

### **Mitigation, Adaptation and Adult Learning**

A social issue, an ecological phenomenon, a matter of social justice, climate breakdown is an amalgam of socio-economic and political and ecological inequalities, risks and impacts on a scale humankind has never previously experienced. There is no single solution to climate breakdown and action is required across scientific, environmental, human, economic, political and spiritual domains (O'Brien, 2017); indeed, policies for climate change mitigation and adaptation highlight the necessity of cross-cutting responses at international and national levels (e.g. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). Mitigation involves decreasing the amount of heat-

trapping GHGs which enter the atmosphere by reducing GHG emissions and strengthening 'carbon sinks' (like forests) which can accrue and store greenhouse gases (NASA, 2019). Climate mitigation is a critical priority if we are to avoid a 'catastrophic rise' in global temperatures of 4°C (Gray, 2016) and there is an onus upon 'developed' countries to 'sharply reduce their overall carbon emissions... to maintain the habitability of the planet for current and future generations' (Geiger et al., 2017). Adaptation means adapting to climate breakdown to 'reduce our vulnerability' to wide-ranging socio-ecological impacts while utilising 'potential beneficial opportunities' like longer periods of warmer weather that could benefit food production (NASA, 2019).

The internationally-binding Paris Agreement commits states to ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its impacts by keeping global temperature rise this century well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels; preferably limiting temperature increase to 1.5°C (UNFCCC, 2018). Ireland has ratified the Paris Agreement and embedded strategies for climate change mitigation and adaptation within a policy framework that includes the *Climate Action Plan* (DCCAE, 2019), *National Mitigation Plan* (DCCAE, 2017), *Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act* (Government of Ireland, 2015). The Irish state committed to a 20% reduction in GHG emissions by 2020, however, the country will be lucky to achieve a 1% reduction by 2020 (EPA, 2018). To tackle climate breakdown, action must be taken across all levels of society, from a micro level of altered food choices to systemic decarbonisation of energy, transport, agriculture, industry, etc. (Slevin, 2018), including investments in energy efficiency and preparation for 'inevitable consequences of climate change such as flooding' (Wall et al., 2016, p.11). Policy initiatives alone will not address climate breakdown – people have to undertake climate action as the success, or lack thereof, of multi-level changes will depend on 'the public's willingness to accept, support, and actively engage' with required socio-economic, cultural, political and structural shifts (Geiger and Swim, 2016, p.79).

A fundamental challenge, however, is that humans have never before encountered such complex, far-reaching socio-ecological crises. The emergence of Extinction Rebellion and Youth Strikes for Climate illustrate how many children, young people and adults have embarked on a pathway of learning, reflection and action on climate breakdown; unfortunately, these social movements do not yet encompass the majority of people. Referring to crises like socio-economic risks, inequality, ecological disturbances and pollution, Mezirow (2007, p.10) identified a significant problem – 'learners cannot know

what they need to know to deal with such a high-risk society'. Citing Socrates, Mezirow outlines a relevant learning paradox:

A person can learn only that which he doesn't know,

But if he doesn't know it,

How does he know what he is seeking to learn?

Applying this paradox to the context of climate breakdown, if a person does not know about socio-ecological crises or comprehend human causes, will they realise the need for transformative climate action? As critical insights into climate breakdown may not be widely held, climate action includes people learning about causes, interrogating possible remedies and collaborating for change. Adult and community education can play a central role in strengthening societal responses to climate breakdown, after all, 'there is more to learning than being a worker, or a consumer or a client ... we do need to learn how to live together in peace, justice and with care for each other' (Fleming, 2007, p.5). We also need to learn how to live together in a radically changing world, co-creating new possibilities to transition away from socio-ecologically harmful consumption and production patterns towards a healthier, more sustainable and just future. In this context, an interrogation of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers valuable insights to help us develop a pedagogy for socio-ecological transformation.

### **Lessons from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed***

Paulo Freire's work on transformative education reflects the unjust socio-economic, political and cultural realities of Latin America in the 1960s (Garavan, 2010). A product of its circumstances and time, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (first published in English in 1970) reveals the writer's critical focus yet does not explicitly articulate gender or environmental inequalities within a movement for liberation (ibid.). Nevertheless, over fifty years after its publication, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a core text to aid socio-ecological transformation.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire emphasises the necessity of overcoming oppressive relationships and systems to liberate the oppressed and their oppressors, enabling both to become fully human (1996, pp.26-7). Focused on counteracting socio-economic and cultural oppression, Freire recognises humanity's dependencies upon, and interrelationships with, our natural

environment, suggesting that conquering oppression empowers 'human hands which work, and working, transform the world' (ibid.). This could imply 'a simple faith in the old modernist project of fashioning the natural world to enhance human progress' (Garavan, 2010), based upon unrelenting resource exploitation, environmental degradation and humanity's alienation from our environment (Urry, 2011). Yet, Freire displays an intrinsic awareness of socio-ecological interdependencies, stressing that the 'world and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction' (1996, p.32). Freire acknowledges the commodification and exploitation of natural resources for wealth accumulation, stating that the violence of oppression involves the creation of 'a strongly possessive consciousness – possessive of the world and of men and women' – without which 'the oppressor consciousness ... could not even exist' (Freire, 1996, p.40):

The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time – everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal. In their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop their conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power. Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more – always more – even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, *to be is to have* and to be the class of the 'haves'.

Freire powerfully illuminates ideologies and practices creating material divisions in society and connects exploitation of people and planet within capitalism. Human societies are completely dependent upon nature for basic needs like air, water, food, shelter and energy yet our interrelationships with nature are often ignored. A dominant exploitative consciousness regards environment and natural resources as free objects or 'gifts of nature to man' (Foster and Clark, 2009; Slevin, 2016), instead of important shared resources upon which we all depend. Commodification of natural resources is inseparable from the 'extractive imperative' (Arsel et al., 2016) which necessitates ever-growing resource extraction to facilitate escalating consumption patterns, thereby generating wealth for those who control capital. Viewing the environment as a 'social problem' (Macdonis and Plummer, 2012) enables analyses of socio-economic, political and ideological processes inherent to capitalism which have enabled new forms of accumulation and forged a disconnect between

humans and nature (Urry, 2011; Foster et al., 2010). Freire's conceptualisation of oppression enables the interrogation of ecological injustices along a spectrum which includes socio-economic, cultural and coercive forms of oppression, further uncovering the tyranny of damaging societal processes. Thus, Freirean-influenced socio-ecological education should make clear the inseparability of human and nonhuman natures, illuminate the role power and social inequalities play in shaping human/nonhuman interactions and examine ecological limits breached by human patterns of production and consumption (Pellow and Nyseth Brehm, 2013).

### **Towards a Pedagogy for Socio-Ecological Transformation**

Assessing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in this era of climate breakdown requires consideration of content and teaching and learning methods essential for socio-ecological transformation. Freire was sceptical of educational approaches which regard educators as experts whose role is to impart their wisdom upon students. Within 'banking' methods of education, students are regarded as empty receptacles waiting to be filled with the educator's knowledge; 'the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the [educator's] deposits' (Freire, 1996, p.53). A banking method of education is not conducive to transformative pedagogy, particularly with adults who have grown to know and understand the world in different ways and who bring to the classroom diverse experiences and insights. Rather, Freirean pedagogy involves 'problem-posing education' and obliges resolution of the 'teacher-student contradiction' through the creation of a non-hierarchical learning space in which educators and students become co-investigators in learning (ibid.).

Developing a Freirean-inspired pedagogy for socio-ecological transformation requires 'co-intentional education' through which educators and students ('leadership and people') become co-intent on unveiling reality, knowing reality critically in order to recreate knowledge: 'as they [educators and students] attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators' (Freire, 1996, p.51). The co-creation of knowledge inherent to co-intentional education emerges through 'invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other' (Freire, 1996, p.53). Furthermore,

Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent,

and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous (Freire, 1996, p.62).

### *Conscientisation*

Problem-posing education prompts students to 'feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond' to problems they face 'in the world and with the world' (ibid.) and begins with *conscientização* (conscientisation) as 'learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 1996, p.18). Freire later elaborated on conscientisation as critical awareness of the material, social, political, cultural and ideological conditions in which we find ourselves, conditions which almost always generate divisions that make it difficult to construct ideals of change and transformation (2001, p.55).

Freire outlined different stages of conscientisation, beginning with semi-intransitivity or magical consciousness, which is a fatalistic, disempowered and passive consciousness (Ledwith, 2005). At this stage, people exist in a 'culture of silence', whereby 'life is perceived in terms of fate or destiny and seen as beyond human control... the oppressed internalise the values of their oppressors, resulting in emotional dependency upon them and self-deprecation' (Mezirow, 1991, pp.136-7). Interpreting socio-ecological crises through the lens of magical consciousness might involve: acceptance of the status quo; assumptions that climate breakdown is naturally occurring rather than human-caused. 'Climate silence' and acquiescence as complex interactions between society and environment appear too challenging to comprehend.

Naïve or semitransitive consciousness is the next stage of consciousness which might imply awareness of climate breakdown and inform individual actions like 'meat-free Mondays' or 'bio-fuelling the Hummer' (Barry, 2017) but limited 'greening of business as usual' is 'insufficient to the scale and urgency of the deeper structural political economy transformation needed' (Healy and Barry, 2019). Denial or scepticism of climate breakdown might be regarded as a symptom of naïve consciousness, although powerful vested interests can take deliberate actions to minimise critical thinking and action around climate breakdown. For example, ExxonMobil is alleged to have given approximately \$30m to various groups to promote disinformation about global warming (Goldenberg, 2015).

Necessitating ‘rigorous critique’ of ‘dehumanising social, political and economic structures supported by ideologies’ (Mezirow, 1991, p.136), critical consciousness is the pinnacle of conscientisation. Only by recognising power, political economic drivers and the deep interconnections of socio-ecological relations, can we fully understand and respond to the socio-ecological challenges we collectively face (Osborne, 2017, p.844). A critical socio-ecological consciousness critiques the web of socio-economic, political, cultural and ideological forces which drive consumption and production of GHG emitting resources, broader environmental degradation and socio-ecological injustices, seeking to overcome this state of affairs to tackle climate breakdown and aid just transitions to healthier, fairer and sustainable societies.

### *Praxis*

Conscientisation involves people becoming critically aware of interlocking ‘structural forces of power’ which impact upon our lives, ‘as a precondition for critical action for change’ (Ledwith, 2005, pp.97-8). Action for change is explicit within Freirean pedagogy and to no longer be prey to the domestication of oppression, people must emerge from exploitative circumstances and turn upon them, which can only be done through praxis as ‘reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’ (Freire, 1996, p.33). Praxis is ‘transformation of the world’ through human activity, requiring theory and practice, reflection and action (Freire, 1996, p.106). Praxis ‘cannot be reduced to either verbalism [‘sacrifice of action’] or activism [‘sacrifice of reflection’]’ (ibid.); nor can praxis for socio-ecological transformation be devoid of theory and practice, reflection and action. ‘Critical consciousness is not liberating until it becomes a collective process for change’ (Ledwith, 2005, p.6) and it is only through praxis that learners engage in action to bring about social change (Mezirow, 1991, p.136).

Freire describes his approach as ‘the pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation’ and he identified two distinct stages (1996, pp.35-7). In the first stage, learners unveil ‘the world of oppression’ and commit to transformation through praxis; the second stage is a ‘pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation’, rejecting myths and structures which enabled oppression in the first instance (ibid.). A Freirean-influenced pedagogy for socio-ecological transformation begins with critical consciousness-raising, reflection and action, progressing to a stage of ‘permanent liberation’ underpinned by ideals of justice, respect equality, and sustainable living with each other and within planetary boundaries.



### *Codifications*

An integral aspect of teaching and learning for climate action is the use of codifications which are representations (e.g. photographs, sketches or even a word) of significant situations in people's lives (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1990, pp.42-3). Elements of a codification are arranged to embody important themes and contradictions in the lives of people and codifications open dialogue about the reality presented; educators support this process by 'asking questions, listening and sometimes challenging' (ibid.).

Within socio-ecological education, we might use representations of local floods, forced migration, poverty, fossil fuels or even a plastic bottle to aid decodification as analysis that 'takes place through dialogue, revealing the previously unperceived meanings of the reality represented by that codification' (Heaney, 1995). Decodification reduces a codification into its constituent elements and is the process by which learners begin to perceive relationships between elements of the codification and other experiences in their day-to-day life, and among the elements themselves (ibid.). An image of a plastic bottle, might for example, prompt discussion about issues like: over-use of single-use plastics; micro-plastics in wildlife, water and food; oil extraction, processing and socio-ecological impacts; ingestion of processed drinks as 'energy-fixes' which can exacerbate health conditions like heart disease, diabetes and obesity; class, poverty and differential health outcomes. A simple everyday item can enable exploration of matters that have social, cultural, environmental, health, economic, political and ideological implications, spanning micro, meso and macro levels of society.

### *Generative Themes*

Freire advocates the use of generative themes during consciousness-raising education; themes are grounded in people's experiences and established by studying students' lives and communities. Generative themes are codifications of complex experiences, resulting from the history and experiences of learners, which are likely to generate considerable discussion and analysis (Heaney, 1995). Generative themes arise from people's relationship with each other and the world; themes exist simultaneously across a 'range of spatial-temporal levels of scale at epochal, world, intercontinental, continental, national, regional, district, local, family, interpersonal and personal levels (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1990, p.39). Themes offer immeasurable possibilities for fostering critical consciousness through critically debating and analysing interconnected issues which may otherwise be dealt with in isolation; Freire uses the themes of development and underdevelopment as examples.

Generative themes can aid dialogue across numerous spatial-temporal levels of scale and within a pedagogy for socio-ecological transformation; there is no shortage of themes. For example, a theme of global inequality could link overconsumption patterns in the global North which produce extensive greenhouse gas emissions, with socio-ecological issues in the global South that have been greatly exacerbated by climate breakdown (including droughts, food shortages and poverty) (Islam and Winkel, 2017). A generative theme connected to climate adaptation might illuminate how poorer communities are more susceptible to climate risks (HM Government, 2017) and/or examine socio-economic inequalities which constrain the capacity of individuals, families and communities to respond to climate breakdown through measures like energy efficiency, retro-fitting homes, and alternatives to GHG emitting forms of transportation.

#### *Limit-Situations*

During the process of conscientisation, people become more aware of themselves and their way of being in the world and can overcome situations which limit them ('limit-situations') (Freire, 1996, p.80). Through examining contradictions contained within their themes, participants can encounter limit-situations in their personal circumstances which can be described 'as blocks to their further humanisation' (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1990, pp. 44-5). Freire emphasises that limit-situations are not impassable boundaries where possibilities end, but rather are the real boundaries where all possibilities begin (1996, pp. 80-1). Depending on how limit-situations are perceived, people can either passively accept limit-situations as insurmountable barriers or people can regard them as fetters, as challenges that can be tackled: 'as critical perception is embodied in action, a climate of hope develops which leads men [and women] to overcome the limit-situation'. Overcoming limit-situations can 'be achieved only through action upon the concrete, historical reality in which limit-situations historically are found' (ibid.).

As the most pressing limit-situation humanity has ever faced, climate breakdown offers us opportunities for critical reflection upon exploitative socio-ecological interactions and functions as a boundary where new possibilities begin – possibilities for a healthier, more equal and sustainable world – based upon hope, collaboration, co-creation of new knowledge and urgent climate action across all levels of society.

### **‘Creating our Vision for a Greener Future’: Developing a Pedagogy for Socio-Ecological Transformation**

Analysing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the context of climate breakdown establishes the value of critical socio-ecological teaching and learning as a form of climate action. Freirean pedagogy influenced ‘Creating our Vision for a Greener Future’, an innovative extracurricular initiative involving staff and students in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen’s University Belfast (QUB). While working as a Lecturer in Social Policy, author one (Slevin), introduced socio-ecological issues to the social policy curriculum. Following an energetic two-hour session about climate breakdown and sustainability with first year undergraduate students (28 February 2019), Slevin (an environmental sociologist with a background in adult education and community activism) invited students to collaborate with her to develop an accessible arts-based educational programme around climate breakdown. Four mature students volunteered – two social work students (Graves, Petticrew), a Criminology and Social Policy student (Elliott) and a Social Policy and Sociology student (Popoff). We were awarded funding from QUB’s Green Fund for ‘Creating our Vision for a Greener Future’ and our group of five women embarked on a special learning journey, united by a commitment to create awareness and influence action around climate breakdown. This account draws on data from a team reflexive session (1 August 2019) and an evaluation of one public workshop (7 November 2019).

Our concern was not about lecturing to people about climate breakdown or providing artistic experiences simply for the sake of art – from an early stage we shared a concern with developing an engaging, non-formal educational project on pressing socio-ecological issues. One team member explained her motivation was to ‘help educate people on the dangers of climate change and what we can do as individuals and as a society to reduce it’ (student one, Green Arts Team, 2019c). Similar motivations were held by other members, for example, ‘I was excited by the prospect of joining a group to educate people about climate change and devise creative ways how they can be proactive in making small changes to benefit the planet and effectively all his/her inhabitants’ (student three, Green Arts Team, 2019c). The foundations for our endeavours were based on critical teaching and learning initiated in the formal space of a higher education module, yet from the onset, we collaborated as a non-hierarchical team beyond the constraints of typical student-teacher relationships, becoming ‘co-investigators in learning’ (Freire, 1996). At the start ‘we had no idea that we’d do [what we did] ... within a few weeks everything did come together ... it

wasn't one person's idea, we all came together ... [gaining] confidence, learning, creating' (group reflective discussion, Green Arts Team, 2019c).

### *'Anna's Journey'*

Within his Freirean-inspired *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal asks if art should 'educate, inform, organise, influence, incite to action or should it simply be an object of pleasure?' (2007, pp. ix-x). In keeping with Boal's belief that 'theatre can... be a weapon for liberation' and present 'a vision of the world in transformation and ... the means of carrying out that transformation' (ibid.), we co-created a short drama, 'Anna's Journey'. We designed our play to communicate socio-ecological issues, prompt critical thinking and, hopefully, action among those who engaged with our wider project. Citing Marcuse (1978), Brookfield recognises that 'art cannot change the world' but 'it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world' (2005, pp.201-2).

Our process of devising characters and narratives within the play entailed collective analysis of cross-cutting inequalities of class, gender, race and socio-environmental injustices across local and global scales. 'Anna's Journey' advanced from decodification to development of generative themes like global inequalities, unsustainability and climate breakdown encompassed within short scenes designed to prompt deep reflection. Each scene involved actors' performance and aural inputs which were enhanced by related images and brief research findings read by the Narrator and also displayed on an accompanying projector. For example, the play opens with Anna happily sharing her personal (over) consumption patterns of regular international travel, against a backdrop of images related to consumerism; the Narrator and an associated PowerPoint slide outlines how tourism accounts for about 8% of global GHG emissions, the majority of which are caused by high-income countries (Lenzen et al., 2018).

With a narrative that immediately connects individual choices in the Global North with global ramifications, scene one is in stark contrast to the experiences of Amelia (scene two) whose family were dispossessed due to Amazonian deforestation. Although this scene was created before catastrophic fires in the Amazon rainforest (August 2019), the play's use of imagery of land-clearing for meat-production illuminates some socio-ecological consequences of societies' hunger for cheap meat; associated research problematises rising GHG emissions, deforestation and global demand for livestock (Caro et al., 2018). Images as codifications are central to the play: 'the images worked well. For the

audience to see heart-wrenching images of the impact of climate hazards really enhanced the dialogue (student four, Green Arts Team, 2019c). People engaging with the play encountered auditory, visual and written codes associated with generative themes and were encouraged to decode codifications during discussions which followed each performance.

'Anna's Journey' is based on fictional characters yet presents real socio-ecological issues interwoven with societal processes of production and consumption. By presenting narratives of four characters (from Northern Ireland, Brazil, India and Mozambique), our play illustrates vast differences in life-experiences of indigenous peoples in the Global South and wealthy tourists from the Global North, pointing to intersectional inequalities on a global scale. It also elucidates socio-ecological consequences on countries which bear least responsibility for cumulative GHGs driving climate breakdown, using creative methods to make the global local and problematise societal interactions with our life-sustaining environment. An outcome of co-intentional, problem-posing education within our group, the play also functions as a non-formal educational tool for adults learning about climate breakdown and was incorporated within a series of public events on socio-ecological issues.

#### *'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' Events*

'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' was influenced by praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1996, p.33) and the development of 'Anna's Journey' demonstrates reflection and some action within the Green Arts team. Crucially, our endeavours were not limited to team members and we also engaged with our wider community, developing engaging educational activities to influence climate action within and beyond Queen's University Belfast.

In parallel with the evolution of 'Anna's Journey', author one worked with the Duncairn Centre for Culture and Arts in North Belfast to organise a participative evening of arts, music and talks around climate breakdown and sustainability. Seeking to inspire communities, develop audiences and the arts, the Duncairn aims to 'create a new arts-based model of engagement with disenfranchised, marginalised and disadvantaged communities in North Belfast' (Duncairn, 2019a). Our collaborative event was held on 12 April 2019 and involved a creative smorgasbord of activities such as: a quiz on socio-ecological topics by author one (designed to foster group work and set context for shared learning and discussions); talks about sustainability and climate breakdown by Prof. John

Barry (QUB) and Siofra Caherty (a fashion designer who makes products from recycled materials); a performance of 'Anna's Journey'; and music by Ger Wolfe and local musicians. Over 80 people participated in a stimulating evening of deep discussion and reflection upon climate breakdown and unsustainability: 'I feel this was a success. There was immense positive feedback from the audience' (Student three, Green Arts Team, 2019c).

Building on learning from the Duncairn event, we designed and facilitated a 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' workshop as part of QUB's Development Weeks (20 May 2019). This workshop created a space for participants to examine generative themes of climate breakdown, plastic waste pollution and species extinction in a hands-on stimulating way. Incorporating ice-breaker activities which utilised images as codes to spark dialogue around socio-ecological issues, the workshop included a participative quiz, a performance of 'Anna's Journey', group discussions and arts-based group work. Facilitated by our Green Arts team and colleagues Dr. Lucy McCarthy (Queen's Management School) and Dr. Nuala Flood (School of Natural and Built Environment), small group activities enabled participants to interrogate pressing environmental and social issues as a basis for their creation of a piece of art (visual, poetry, story-telling, etc.) to communicate their vision for a greener, sustainable future. Each small group chose to make visual art to communicate their visions for a greener future, utilising recycled waste and an array of arts materials to co-create pieces which they presented to other participants in order to share learning, deepen dialogue and prompt action.

Reflecting the influence of Freirean pedagogy upon our work, praxis is central to 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' and during a Green Arts team's reflexive session (1 August 2019) we assessed all elements of our project and agreed to continue collaborating. Subsequent events included three creative public workshops on climate breakdown held in Wholegreen, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal (Culture Night, 2019) and the 'Creating our Sustainable Future' workshop (7 November 2019) facilitated as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science. Building on learning from our previous public engagement events, 'Creating our Sustainable Future' was an exciting artistic adventure which prioritised collaboration and co-creation of knowledge about sustainability and climate breakdown using participative methods.

Held in QUB, activities included performance of 'Anna's Journey', an interactive quiz, a joint performance by the 'Change the World in Song' and 'Sing for Earth'

choirs and group activities during which intergenerational participants were asked to co-create their vision for a sustainable future through spoken word or recycled materials and arts supplies. As the workshop was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, we asked participants to complete an evaluation survey, undertaken by 30 respondents. All agreed with the statement 'I am inspired to learn more about this topic' (25 people strongly agreed); 20 participants strongly agreed 'I will use/share things learnt today' (10 participants agreed). Participants were also invited to make additional comments, providing valuable feedback on our pedagogical approach for socio-ecological transformation:

The programme was interesting. This is an amazing way at encouraging people to do something for the environmental sustainability. (Respondent 3)

Thoroughly enjoyed the quiz and creative opportunities to engage as opposed to the usual being talked at event. Really inspiring event! Loved the choir/drama. (Respondent 5)

Fun event, interactive. Would love to attend more activities love the choir as well. (Respondent 7)

I really enjoyed the play and found it quite moving. (Respondent 13)

Excellent Event. So glad I came. I want to learn more. (Respondent 14)

Very informative and well-presented info presented in 'easy to digest' and engaging format. (Respondent 22)

Brilliant evening and very different kind of event. I wouldn't change anything, enjoyed it! (Respondent 23)

Thanks very much. It was so informative. You made us feel very welcome. We all really enjoyed it. (Respondent 26)

### **Concluding Thoughts on Adult Learning for Climate Action**

Climate breakdown is real and already happening, producing myriad impacts for human and non-human species. Mitigating against climate chaos and adapting to socio-economic and ecological consequences of climate breakdown necessitates wide-ranging actions, which we believe begins with adult learning. Learning to understand the socio-ecological drivers of climate breakdown;

comprehending the human causes of threats we collectively face; co-creating new knowledge about how we might tackle climate breakdown; developing new ways of teaching and learning to affect transformative climate action; and engaging in praxis for multi-level changes to enable a healthier, fairer and sustainable future.

A pedagogy for socio-ecological transformation is a pedagogy of people mobilising for learning, reflection and socio-ecological action to aid just transitions to low carbon societies. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a vital resource for such endeavours and his attention to conscientisation is invaluable for considering how to tackle climate denial, silence, scepticism and other psychological defence mechanisms which can prevent us from responding to climate change (Adams, 2019). Freire's focus on overcoming oppression through collaboration, love and humility is important for collective action to tackle unprecedented challenges at micro, meso and macro levels. His writing on co-intentional, problem-posing education is a valuable example of how to develop teaching and learning strategies for socio-ecological transformation; similarly, his elucidation of praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1996, p.33) is a key component of radical climate action which can be fostered within non-formal educational initiatives like 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' (Green Arts Team).

'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' is one example of a pedagogy for socio-ecological transformation and we are conscious of limitations in terms of scale, reach and accessibility. Yet even such a small project can have impactful results, not just for those who collaborate as co-investigators but for people of all ages who participate in creative, non-formal learning activities. Positive outcomes of our project were recognised through feedback and the team being awarded a special 'Innovation for Engagement' QUB Green Award (4 June 2019); Slevin was also given an award under QUB's Staff Recognition Scheme (10 June 2019). Yet we did not co-produce 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' to win awards – our collaborative initiative is concerned with enhancing praxis around climate breakdown, deepening learning and action within and beyond our Green Arts team.

We are hopeful for possibilities arising from critical reflection and climate action garnered through innovative pedagogies for socio-ecological transformation. Other examples include new courses emerging within the formal education sector (e.g. QUB's new module on sustainability and climate change co-convened



by author one) and programmes and initiatives provided by established groups like Cultivate, Cloughjordan Ecovillage and the Organic Centre – teaching and learning inherent to social movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Youth Strikes for Climate.

To respond to climate breakdown with the urgency and range of actions required, we need to make learning about climate action and just transition accessible to people in every village, town and city; Paulo Freire's work can help us develop a pedagogy/(ies) for such socio-ecological transformation.

### References

- Adams, M. 2019. The climate crisis has arrived – so stop feeling guilty and start imagining your future. *The Conversation*. [Online]. [Accessed 12 March 2019]. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/the-climate-crisis-has-arrived-so-stop-feeling-guilty-and-start-imagining-your-future-111139>
- Arsel, M., Hogenboom, B., Pellegrini, L. 2016. The Extractive Imperative in Latin America. *The Extractive Industries and Society*. 3(4), pp.880–887.
- Barry, J. 2017. Bio-fuelling the Hummer? Transdisciplinary thoughts on techno-optimism and innovation in the transition from unsustainability. In Byrne, E., Mullally, G. and Sage, E. eds. *Transdisciplinary perspectives on transitions to sustainability*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Boal, A. 2007. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group Ltd.
- BP. 2019. *Statistical review of world energy*. [Online]. [Accessed 24 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy.html>
- Brookfield, S. D. 2005. *The power of critical theory for adult learning and teaching*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Caro, D., Davis, S. J., Kebreab, E. and Mitloehner, F. 2018. Land-use change emissions from soybean feed embodied in Brazilian pork and poultry meat. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. 172, pp.2646-2654.
- CDP. 2017. *The Carbon Majors' database: CDP Carbon Majors report 2017*. [Online]. [Accessed 21 February 2019]. Available from: <https://www.cdp.net/en/articles/media/new-report-shows-just-100-companies-are-source-of-over-70-of-emissions>
- Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAE). 2019. *Climate Action Plan 2019*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAE). 2017. *National Mitigation Plan*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Duncairn. 2019a. *Our mission*. [Online]. [Accessed 26 August 2019]. Available from: <https://www.theduncairn.com/about>

- Environmental Protection Agency. 2018. *We need to move away from fossil fuels, EPA emissions projections show*. [Online]. [Accessed 20 July 2018]. Available from: <http://www.epa.ie/newsandevents/news/pressreleases2018/name,64049,en.html>
- European Commission. 2019. *Causes of climate change*. [Online]. [Accessed 1 March 2019]. Available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/change/causes\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/change/causes_en)
- Fleming, T. 2007. Introduction. In: Connolly, B., Fleming, T., McCormack, D. and Ryan, A. eds. *Radical learning for liberation 2*. Maynooth: MACE.
- Foster, J. B. and Clark, B. 2009. The paradox of wealth: Capitalism and ecological destruction. *Monthly Review*. November 2009, pp.1–18.
- Foster, J. B., Clark, B. and York, R. 2010. *The ecological rift: Capitalism's war with the earth*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Freire, P. 1996. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.
- Freire, P. 2001. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Garavan, M. 2010. Opening up Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In: Dukelow, F. and O'Donovan, O. eds. *Mobilising Classics: Reading and radical writing in Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Geiger, N. and Swim, J. K. 2016. Climate of silence: Pluralistic ignorance as a barrier to climate change discussion. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. **47**, pp.79-90.
- Geiger, N., Swim, J. K., Fraser, J. 2017. Creating a climate for change: Interventions, efficacy and public discussion about climate change. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. **51**, pp.104-116.
- Goldenberg, S. 2014. Climate change: The poor will suffer most. *The Guardian*. [Online]. 15 July. [Accessed 22 March 2019]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/mar/31/climate-change-poor-suffer-most-un-report>
- Goldenberg, S. 2015. ExxonMobil gave millions to climate-denying lawmakers despite pledge. *The Guardian*. [Online]. 15 July. [Accessed 10 April 2019]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jul/15/exxon-mobil-gave-millions-climate-denying-lawmakers>
- Government of Ireland. 2015. *Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act*. Available from <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/46/enacted/en/html>
- Gray, S. 2016. *Local Authority Adaptation Strategy Development Guideline*. Report no. 164. Wexford: Environmental Protection Agency.
- Green Arts Team. 2019a. *Anna's Journey*. Unpublished performance script. 25 March 2019. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.
- Green Arts Team. 2019b. *Creating our Vision for a Greener Future: Session plan for Developments Weeks' workshop*. Unpublished 19 May 2019. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.

- Green Arts Team. 2019c. Creating our Vision for a Greener Future: End of project reflections. 1 August 2019. Unpublished. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.
- Healy, N. and Barry, J. 2019. From declarations of climate emergencies to climate action: Narratives and strategies of wartime and citizen mobilisations for rapid and just transitions. [Online]. *QPOL*. [Accessed 13 August 2019]. Available from: <http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/from-declarations-of-climate-emergencies-to-climate-action-narratives-and-strategies-of-wartime-and-citizen-mobilisations-for-rapid-and-just-transitions/>
- Heaney, T. 1995. *Issues in Freirean Pedagogy*. [Online]. [Accessed 9 January 2007]. Available from: [www.paulofreireinstitute.org/documents/Freirean\\_pedagogy\\_by\\_Tom\\_Heaney.html](http://www.paulofreireinstitute.org/documents/Freirean_pedagogy_by_Tom_Heaney.html)
- HM Government. 2017. *UK Climate Change Risk Assessment 2017*. [Online]. [Accessed 21 November 2018]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/584281/uk-climate-change-risk-assess-2017.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584281/uk-climate-change-risk-assess-2017.pdf)
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2018. *Special report: Global warming of 1.5°C*. [Online]. [Accessed 24 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>
- Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). 2019. *Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. [Online]. [Accessed 29 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment-report-biodiversity-ecosystem-services>
- Islam N.I. and Winkel, J.W. 2017. *Climate Change and Social Inequality*. DESA Working Paper no. 152. [Online]. [Accessed 20 March 2019]. Available from: [https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152\\_2017.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152_2017.pdf)
- Kirkwood, G. and Kirkwood, C. 1990. *Living adult education: Freire in Scotland*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Lallanila, M. 2018. *What is the Greenhouse Effect?* [Online]. [Accessed 21 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.livescience.com/37743-greenhouse-effect.html>
- Ledwith, M. 2005. *Community development – A critical approach*. Bristol. The Policy Press.
- Lenzen, N., Sun, Y, Faturay, F, Ting, Y., Geschke, A. and Malik, A. 2018. The carbon footprint of global tourism. *Nature Climate Change*. **8**, pp.522-528.
- Macionis, J. J. and Plummer, K. 2012. *Sociology: A global introduction*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Essex: Pearson Education.
- McGrath, M. 2019. Climate change: 12 years to save the planet? Make that 18 months.

- BBC News. [Online]. [Accessed 25 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-48964736>
- Met Office. 2019. *How is our climate changing?* [Online]. [Accessed 8 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/climate-and-climate-change/climate-change/index>
- Mezirow, J. 1991. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. 2007. Adult education and empowerment for individual and community development. In: Connolly, B., Fleming, T., McCormack, D. and Ryan, A. eds. *Radical learning for liberation 2*. Maynooth: MACE.
- Monbiot, G. 2013. *Climate breakdown*. [Online]. [Accessed 8 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.monbiot.com/2013/10/04/climate-breakdown/>
- Monbiot, G. 2019. Out of the wreckage – a new politics in an age of crisis. *Imagine Belfast Festival of Ideas and Politics*, Queen's University Belfast. 26 March 2019.
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). 2019. *Responding to climate change*. [Online]. [Accessed 10 March 2019]. Available from: <https://climate.nasa.gov/solutions/adaptation-mitigation/>
- National Geographic. 2017. *Four ways to look at global carbon footprints: Cumulative emissions*. [Online]. [Accessed 5 November 2017]. Available from: <http://environment.nationalgeographic.com/environment/energy/great-energy-challenge/global-footprints/>
- National Institutes of Health (NIH). 2019. *Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Reduction*. [Online]. [Accessed 27 February 2019]. Available from: <https://nems.nih.gov/sustain/Pages/Greenhouse-Gas-Reduction.aspx>
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). 2013. *CO2 at NOAA's Mauna Loa Observatory reaches new milestone: Tops 400 ppm*. [Online]. [Accessed 21 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/news/7074.html>
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). 2019a. *Carbon dioxide levels hit record peak in May*. [Online]. [Accessed 21 July 2019]. Available from: <https://research.noaa.gov/article/ArtMID/587/ArticleID/2461/Carbon-dioxide-levels-hit-record-peak-in-May>
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). 2019b. *June 2019 was the hottest on record for the globe*. [Online]. [Accessed 24 July 2019]. Available from: <https://www.noaa.gov/news/june-2019-was-hottest-on-record-for-globe>
- O'Brien, K.J. 2017. *The violence of climate change: Lessons of resistance from nonviolent activists*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- O'Sullivan, K. 2019. Global loss of plants and animals affecting Ireland. *The Irish Times*. [Online]. 6 May. [Accessed 17 May 2019]. Available from: <https://www.>

- irishtimes.com/news/environment/global-loss-of-plants-and-animals-affecting-ireland-1.3882367#.XNBID79RHZw.twitter
- Osborne, T. 2017. Public political ecology: A community of praxis for earth stewardship. *Journal of Political Ecology*, **1**, pp. 843-860.
- Pellow, D.N. and Nyseth Brehm, H. 2013. An environmental sociology for the twenty-first century. *Annual Review of Sociology*. **39**, pp.229–50.
- Porritt, J. 2019. Keynote speech. *Climate Breakdown Belfast*. Clayton Hotel Belfast, 6 August 2019.
- Slevin, A. 2016. *Gas, oil and the Irish state: Understanding the dynamics and conflicts of hydrocarbon management*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Slevin, A. 2018. Climate change, Ireland and the Climate Emergency Measures Bill. *QPol*. [Online]. [Accessed 23 July 2018]. Available from: <http://qppl.qub.ac.uk/climate-change-ireland-climate-emergency-measures-bill/>
- United Nations (UN). 2019. *Global Environment Outlook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available from: <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-6>
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). 2018. The Paris Agreement. [Online]. [Accessed 26 July 2019]. Available from: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>
- Urry, J. 2011. *Climate Change and Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wall, B., Derham, J. and O'Mahony, T. eds. 2016. *Ireland's Environment 2016: An Assessment*. Waterford: Environmental Protection Agency.

# Paulo Freire, the Decolonial Curriculum and the Experience of the Professional Masters in Youth and Adult Education in Bahia, Brazil

GRAÇA DOS SANTOS COSTA, DAVID MALLOWS,  
PATRICIA LESSA SANTOS COSTA

---

## Abstract

*In this paper we situate a discussion of the decolonial curriculum within the context of a Brazilian postgraduate programme (MPEJA) focused on adult and youth education (EJA). We draw on the work of Paulo Freire in our discussion of decolonial thinking and its pedagogical representation within EJA in Brazil. We suggest that engagement with the programme provides legitimacy and visibility for participants, supporting them in revealing the diversity and specificity of EJA (Cardoso, 2017). MPEJA also counters decolonial thought through the possibilities it provides to EJA educators for reflection on their professional context and the socio-economic influences on the experiences of their EJA students.*

**Keywords:** Brazil, Freire, Adult Education, Curriculum, Professional Development

## Introduction

In this article we discuss the contribution of Paulo Freire to the field of pedagogy for decolonial thinking and constitutional democracy in Brazil. We locate the discussion of the decolonial curriculum in the experience of the Professional Masters in Youth and Adult Education in Brazil (MPEJA), a professional postgraduate programme for adult educators offered by the Bahia State University (UNEB) in the north east region of Brazil.

Bahia is a large state with a large rural population. The poverty rate of the state is among the highest in Brazil. In this context there is great need for adult education to support Bahians in meeting the challenges of navigating what is an increasingly complex and challenging society. Education credentials are highly valued in the Brazilian job market and act as gatekeepers to better

# Paulo Freire, the Decolonial Curriculum and the Experience of the Professional Masters in Youth and Adult Education in Bahia, Brazil

GRAÇA DOS SANTOS COSTA, DAVID MALLOWS,  
PATRICIA LESSA SANTOS COSTA

---

## Abstract

*In this paper we situate a discussion of the decolonial curriculum within the context of a Brazilian postgraduate programme (MPEJA) focused on adult and youth education (EJA). We draw on the work of Paulo Freire in our discussion of decolonial thinking and its pedagogical representation within EJA in Brazil. We suggest that engagement with the programme provides legitimacy and visibility for participants, supporting them in revealing the diversity and specificity of EJA (Cardoso, 2017). MPEJA also counters decolonial thought through the possibilities it provides to EJA educators for reflection on their professional context and the socio-economic influences on the experiences of their EJA students.*

**Keywords:** Brazil, Freire, Adult Education, Curriculum, Professional Development

## Introduction

In this article we discuss the contribution of Paulo Freire to the field of pedagogy for decolonial thinking and constitutional democracy in Brazil. We locate the discussion of the decolonial curriculum in the experience of the Professional Masters in Youth and Adult Education in Brazil (MPEJA), a professional postgraduate programme for adult educators offered by the Bahia State University (UNEB) in the north east region of Brazil.

Bahia is a large state with a large rural population. The poverty rate of the state is among the highest in Brazil. In this context there is great need for adult education to support Bahians in meeting the challenges of navigating what is an increasingly complex and challenging society. Education credentials are highly valued in the Brazilian job market and act as gatekeepers to better

employment. Many Bahians fail to complete their formal education, at primary or secondary level and seek adult education centres in order to earn school completion certificates. Adult education, though underfunded, provides adults with opportunities to gain the education credentials that they need to progress at work, and earn a better living.

However, adult education should also support the development of adults as autonomous subjects, able to understand their position in society and the forces that shape that, and to understand and see beyond those current circumstances. These ideas permeate all of Freire's work – his interventions in public policy, as well as his writing. Freire was highly critical of the processes and outcomes of the Brazilian education system. For Freire the primary goal of education was to enable individuals to become conscious of the forces that shape the circumstances of their lives, and to work to make positive changes to those circumstances. For this to be achieved, Freire believed that it was first necessary to achieve an in-depth understanding of the world that we inhabit, in particular the social and political contradictions within it. However, for Freire, just being conscious of the societal norms and structures that produce (and reproduce) each individual's experience was not enough. Instead, he argued that consciousness should lead to action against those elements that oppress and limit each individual's possibilities.

### **Paulo Freire's Pedagogy and its Contributions to Decolonial Thinking**

The initial understanding that underpins this article is of democracy as a political regime based on equal rights, freedom to participate in civil life, solidarity, transfer of power, transparency, tolerance and respect for diversity. In such a democracy, the sovereignty of the people is central (Arendt, 2008). And it is through education that human beings are able to fully realise their potential – making choices and taking action in order to preserve or change beliefs, values, and practices that impact on their ability to live an autonomous life (Teixera, 1998; Fernandes, 1989). The term decoloniality is used here to refer to the questioning of, and attempts to overcome, all forms of oppression against groups considered to be subordinate, those who, historically have been subject to mechanisms of control and denial of their existence and culture (Walsh, 2009, p.27).

Paulo Freire's work and political life are the antecedents in Latin America of decolonial thinking, based as they are on a pedagogy of political, epistemological, sociological and anthropological insights that structure what has become known



employment. Many Bahians fail to complete their formal education, at primary or secondary level and seek adult education centres in order to earn school completion certificates. Adult education, though underfunded, provides adults with opportunities to gain the education credentials that they need to progress at work, and earn a better living.

However, adult education should also support the development of adults as autonomous subjects, able to understand their position in society and the forces that shape that, and to understand and see beyond those current circumstances. These ideas permeate all of Freire's work – his interventions in public policy, as well as his writing. Freire was highly critical of the processes and outcomes of the Brazilian education system. For Freire the primary goal of education was to enable individuals to become conscious of the forces that shape the circumstances of their lives, and to work to make positive changes to those circumstances. For this to be achieved, Freire believed that it was first necessary to achieve an in-depth understanding of the world that we inhabit, in particular the social and political contradictions within it. However, for Freire, just being conscious of the societal norms and structures that produce (and reproduce) each individual's experience was not enough. Instead, he argued that consciousness should lead to action against those elements that oppress and limit each individual's possibilities.

### **Paulo Freire's Pedagogy and its Contributions to Decolonial Thinking**

The initial understanding that underpins this article is of democracy as a political regime based on equal rights, freedom to participate in civil life, solidarity, transfer of power, transparency, tolerance and respect for diversity. In such a democracy, the sovereignty of the people is central (Arendt, 2008). And it is through education that human beings are able to fully realise their potential – making choices and taking action in order to preserve or change beliefs, values, and practices that impact on their ability to live an autonomous life (Teixera, 1998; Fernandes, 1989). The term decoloniality is used here to refer to the questioning of, and attempts to overcome, all forms of oppression against groups considered to be subordinate, those who, historically have been subject to mechanisms of control and denial of their existence and culture (Walsh, 2009, p.27).

Paulo Freire's work and political life are the antecedents in Latin America of decolonial thinking, based as they are on a pedagogy of political, epistemological, sociological and anthropological insights that structure what has become known

in Brazil as popular education. However, Freire was not alone in criticising the educational system in Brazil. Teixeira (1998) characterized it as paternalistic and only capable of teaching the majority to obey, and just a select few to think and to govern. In this way he argues that education in Brazil failed to produce sovereign, autonomous citizens of the type needed for a healthy functioning democracy (Teixeira, 1998). We also draw on authors who discuss Freirean ideas of democracy and decolonial pedagogy, such as Walsh (2009) and Mignolo (2007). According to Mignolo (2007, p.27), the decolonial impulse relies on the 'energy of discontent and distrust' in order to resist the structures of oppression and inequality imposed by coloniality.

Freire's legacy is precisely to unveil the reality that oppresses and nullifies members of disadvantaged groups in society, and to announce the possibility of overcoming this oppression. By problematizing Brazilian society, he shows how second- and third-class citizens were produced (or produced themselves), in a context of formal democracy, contributing to, rather than solving, problems of inequality. The Brazilian population, particularly those who are illiterate, experience a kind of sub-citizenship, on the fringes, without the possibility of change or social improvement. He reveals, therefore, that the principle of equality of opportunity in education is ideological, in the sense that all societies mask domination through structured symbolic capital that denies individual autonomy in favour of a dominant ideology in which social differences are taken as natural, even by those classes who are most disadvantaged.

Freire's popular education, with transformation of the individual's circumstances through consciousness and action, is offered as one way of altering this reality. The importance of Freire's pedagogy is in its radical criticism of oppression and its potential to modify the structures that lead to social inequality. It is in this sense that we situate Paulo Freire's contribution to emancipatory education. His work provides the necessary ballast to produce the critical citizens that a democratic society demands – citizens capable of thinking about and participating in the development of public policies that meet their needs and support their aspirations. The inequalities that scar Brazilian society are increasingly evident due to the accelerated circulation of information, accentuating the lack of access of oppressed groups to the products of technological, social and educational advancement. Popular education is crucial in order to enable underprivileged groups to gain the knowledge they require to make decisions. Only in this way can they change their status as sub-citizens in a modern and globalised society.

Freire and his revolutionary pedagogy offer many ways of thinking about the contribution of the school system, and in particular its curriculum, to the reproduction of economic and cultural inequalities, and the continuation of social domination. The failure to value popular knowledge within the education system denies the lived reality of the subordinate class while paying excessive respect to the knowledge of the dominant classes. This contributes to the reproduction of inequalities. In educational terms this also means that pedagogies aimed at reducing inequalities are not valued.

Against this backdrop, Paulo Freire and his collaborators raise the flag of insurgency, and attempt to subvert this order, critiquing colonialist society, and the forms of knowledge and pedagogy on which it is based. Central to this thinking is a proposal for intercultural, dialogical popular education which leads to consciousness and action among the oppressed class. Freire's decolonial pedagogy, according to Mota Neto (2017), includes a proposal for the formation of 'subaltern' individuals, prepared to fight against the perverse logic of the modernity-coloniality dyad. Such actions should be based on ideals of freedom, justice, solidarity, and love.

### **A Decolonial Curriculum: Interculturality as the Materialisation of a Postcolonial Reading of the Curriculum**

Decolonial pedagogy can be affected in practice by thinking of the curriculum as a 'cultural policy', that is, a process of acquisition, construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of cultural values.

It can also be seen as 'contested terrain' (Giroux, 1999), a place of struggle, resistance and transformation, in which ideas are problematised, rather than passively accepted. Every curriculum represents certain concepts of gender, class, ethnicity, race, religion, etc. 'The curriculum is thus an intentional selection. A selection that follows a certain logic, even if this is not made explicit' (Pedra, 1997, p.51).

Thus, this space of knowledge / power called the curriculum works to create particular forms of knowledge and social identities (Silva, 2007). In this understanding, the knowledge transmitted within the educational space ensures, implements and transforms concrete social relations.

As a cultural artefact, and a powerful instrument for the construction of individual and social identities, the curriculum should be rethought in order

that it is focused on the understanding and transformation of the world inhabited by the individuals who are subjected to it. In his writing, Freire denounced the curriculum dominant in the Brazilian education system as a legacy of the colonial past. He proposed instead a curriculum for liberation, based on breaking with past understandings through critical awareness and a reinvention/reimagining of the world.

For Freire there is no such thing as neutral education. He argues that the curriculum should be seen as the continuous construction and reconstruction of meanings of a given reality, and that the basis for this constant development should be dialogue. The pedagogical relationship should be, above all, a horizontal one, based on dialogical relationships between those involved in the educational process. From this perspective, learning can be seen as an act of discovering and understanding lived reality, the actual situation lived by the student, and only makes sense when it results from a critical approach to that reality. Thus, both educator and learner educate themselves through the dialogue, problematising the world around them that they establish. This dialogue is central to an educational process which works against student passivity, encouraging them to seek liberation and independence – the transformation of their reality.

In his book *Education as a Practice of Freedom*, Freire emphasises his defence of ‘a society that is increasingly decolonized, that increasingly cuts the chains that made it, and that make it remain the object of others, which they are subjected to’ (Freire, 1967, p.35). Central to this process of decolonialisation is the emancipation of individuals. All people should be seen as producers of knowledge and this knowledge should be valued. He emphasises that the reading of the world precedes the reading of the word and highlights the importance of respect and appreciation of the experience of those being educated, which should be seen as the object of their education. Within this perspective, it is essential to build emancipatory curricula and pedagogical strategies, emphasising activity and participation, valuing the subjects and their knowledge in the educational process.

The basis for this is respect for the cultural rights of the popular levels of knowledge. According to Scocuglia (2005, p.87) there are three elements to these rights. Firstly, the right to know what they do not know, that is, the right to appropriate the knowledge that has been denied and appropriated by the ruling / dominant layers of society. Secondly, the right to know better the knowledge

they already have from their daily life experiences. And thirdly, the right to construct their own knowledge from their values, interests, practices and their culture. At the heart of such rights is interculturality. The basis for a decolonial pedagogy requires a constant political, ethical, historical, social and epistemic dialogue with the construction of different pedagogical processes and practices (Walsh, 2009, p.26). The materialisation for the realisation of such rights is interculturality in response to the colonial project. The basis for a decolonial pedagogy requires constant political, ethical, historical, social and epistemic dialogue, with the construction of different pedagogical processes and practices (Walsh, 2009, p.26).

Interculturality here should not be understood as being about human interrelationships in isolation from broader issues. Instead, it should be understood as a phenomenon that plays out within systems, structures and power relations. A commitment to intercultural education implies a commitment to enhancing the culture of dialogue and coexistence between different cultures:

Interculturality seeks to develop an equitable interrelationship between cities, people, knowledge and culturally different practices; some interrelationships that stem from the conflict inherent in social, economic, political and power asymmetries ... It is about actively promoting exchange processes that allow the construction of spaces for encounters, between different beings and knowledge, meanings and practices (Walsh, 2009, p.45).

Thus, to think of an intercultural curriculum that is based on guidelines of decoloniality implies a reconfiguration of the knowledge and actions of the pedagogical actors; actors who strive for the maintenance of the reality of subordination, or simply accept it without question, do so through pedagogical practices that foster submission through a transmissive, linear and authoritarian logic. It also implies defending the creative power of learners and stimulating their criticality, articulating the relationship between knowledge, culture and aesthetics to issues of power, politics and meaning (Silva, 2007).

In this process, the educator must engage in a constant process of invention and reinvention of the means that facilitate the problematisation of the object to be unveiled for, and apprehended by, the students. Thus, the reinvention of a democratic curriculum represents the constant struggle for decoloniality, understood as recognition of the various subjects who inhabit the curriculum.

Decoloniality recognises the importance of unofficial 'other' knowledge. It means building, implementing and evaluating curricula that promote insurgent practices of resisting, (re) existing and (re) living (Walsh, 2009).

The translation of decoloniality in the curriculum is affected by interculturality. Intercultural education goes beyond a naive view of one-off cultural celebrations, or the inclusion in the school year of a specific day to address the issue of diversity. Intercultural education implies enhancing the culture of dialogue and coexistence between different cultures. It is an attempt to promote dialogical and egalitarian relations between people and groups that belong to different cultural universes, by recognising and discussing the conflicts inherent to this reality. The project of intercultural education is not a response to diversity – a move to assimilate everything that is different from the so-called normal standards – it is a direct challenge to segregation and, consequently, a direct challenge to social inequality. Such a proposal does not ignore the power relations present in social and interpersonal relations. It recognises and assumes conflicts, and seeks the most appropriate strategies to confront them (Candau, 2002).

Thus, thinking of a curriculum for youth and adult education, within the logic of decoloniality, implies working with an insurgent, flexible, curriculum that translates the multiple realities that are present within the educational space, and which awakens and mobilises knowledge to transform reality.

### **Adult Education in Brazil**

Between the years of 1964 and 1985 Brazil was governed by a military dictatorship. In 1988, as part of the transition from this authoritarian regime to democracy, a new Constitution was passed. This identified citizens' rights and established the responsibility of public authorities to guarantee access to services that would guarantee that these rights were respected. The right to education for all was one of those rights. Soares (2015) explains how the adoption of this new constitution brought changes to the way in which adult education was conceived in public policy in Brazil:

In the years following the Federal Constitution of 1988, we had a period of transition between the concepts of compensatory education that guided the old supplementary education and the establishment of a new configuration of education for young people and adults as a right (Soares, 2015, p.253).

Youth and Adult Education (EJA) is a teaching modality described in subsequent law, and aimed at people who did not have, for some reason, access to regular education at the appropriate age. Soares (2015, p.254) points to the adoption of the name EJA as a sign of a change in conception from adult education as compensation to education as a right. This aligned Brazil with international policy discourse through the reference to adult education, while also recognising the needs of another group excluded from access to education, young people outside the formal school system. The inclusion of Youth in EJA was also in recognition of the make-up of the population accessing its services. Di Pierro, Joia and Ribeiro (2001) describe this as being made up of three main groups:

those who start schooling as working adults; teenagers and young adults who entered regular school and abandoned it some time ago, often motivated by entering work or due to migration; teenagers who have recently entered and attended regular school, but have accumulated large gaps between their age and expected grade.

However, while the right to education for adults and young people was guaranteed in the constitution, in practice only limited progress has been made in providing effective answers to the needs of adults in Brazil (Silva de Alcantra, 2016, p.86). And these needs were and remain considerable. Nationally, the rate of illiteracy among the adult population was estimated at 7% by the Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2017). In Bahia, a poor state, out of a population of just under 15 million people there are over 1.5 million aged 15 and over who cannot read or write. And while there have been improvements in the public-school system, serious issues of quality and access remain. In 2018 only 62% of the school population completed lower secondary education (ISCED level 2) and just 43% upper secondary (ISCED level 3).

The Bahia State University (UNEB) has played an important role in addressing the legacy of educational underachievement in Bahia through its research, teaching and outreach focused on the education of adults. Created during the administration of Governor João Durval Carneiro (1983-1987), today UNEB is the largest state public university in Bahia. It has 24 campuses across the state and has a history of pioneering work for social justice policies for marginalised populations. Working with the state, municipalities, employers and social movements, UNEB has been an active partner in the development of EJA in Bahia in the areas of teaching, research and outreach since 2000, through its

Center for Youth and Adult Education. It has also provided support to successive regional and national adult education initiatives.

It is in this institutional scenario of struggles, resistances and, above all, of the achievement of reparation for societal ills, that we situate our discussion of EJA. We see EJA as an intervention designed to help correct historical distortions in the field of education, distortions that have denied or reduced access to meaningful education, with consequent impacts on individuals and the societies they live in. We also see EJA, and its central demand for the right to education, as inextricably linked to social movements, to the struggle for social justice and the exercising of active citizenship.

### **The Experience of the Professional Masters in Youth and Adult Education (MPEJA) in Brazil**

Building on the impact and the knowledge created by this work, in 2013 UNEB proposed and gained approval for, the first Masters Level program for EJA in Brazil – the Professional Masters in EJA (MPEJA). MPEJA, aims to fill a gap: the training of professionals to work in EJA. Many authors have identified the lack of professional development in EJA as an issue to be debated (Haddad and Pierro, 2000; Arroyo 2006; Dantas, 2019). According to Guidelli (1996, p.126):

The education of young people and adults has been seen throughout its history as a teaching modality that does not require, from its teachers, study or specialization, as a field eminently linked to goodwill. As a result, educators trained in the area are rare.

This lack of recognition of EJA as a specialised area, its lack of identity, and its subsequent invisibility, has impeded the development of a coherent system of initial and continuing professional development for EJA professionals. The majority of those working with EJA students were initially trained as schoolteachers. For Arroyo (2006) teachers who lack preparation for the EJA classroom are unlikely to be able to respond adequately to the peculiarities inherent to EJA – the differences in the experiences, needs and profiles of the subjects of EJA, as compared with the students that they are accustomed to teaching in schools. For Arroyo there is a danger that such teachers will see their students through their truncated, incomplete school trajectories, denying the ‘particularity of their social, ethnic, racial and cultural condition.’ Understanding of the subjects of EJA, their needs and their social conditions, should be ‘the reference point for the construction of EJA’ (Arroyo, 2006, p.23).



In this context any initiative to support the development of the professional knowledge and practice of EJA teachers is also an act of rebellion – recognising EJA as a distinct teaching modality with its own curriculum and pedagogical approach. In this sense commitment to EJA can be seen as an act of rebellion, a form of resistance, a struggle to create a type of teaching of educational experience which has been assigned little value historically in Brazil (Haddad and Pierro, 2000).

The UNEB MPEJA was conceived as a response to this lack of recognition of EJA as a specific education sphere. Through its teaching, but particularly through the research and outreach activities of its students and staff, MPEJA provides a space for the continuing education of EJA professionals, in which they are supported in reflecting on the relationship between theory and practice in their own contexts. As noted above, UNEB is closely engaged with social inclusion activities through programmes of outreach and joint actions with the community. These have enabled the creation of internal and external networks for the production and dissemination of knowledge, making MPEJA a privileged locus for dialogue around practice and policy in EJA in Bahia.

The MPEJA's entrants are teachers from the municipal and state networks in all regions of Bahia. Since 2013, 177 people have enrolled on the MPEJA. Lopes (2019) carried out research with MPEJA graduates, exploring, among other things why they had joined the programme. A dominant theme within the response of the participants was that they had great affinity and practical experience in EJA. They liked EJA and were committed to working to improve it, and yet felt ill-prepared to resolve the issues that they confronted there. Their motivation in joining the MPEJA was to learn more about EJA in order to respond to the realities of their professional context. 'I thought precisely about the search for answers to my questions in the face of the school reality I experienced from EJA' (HC quoted in Lopes, 2019). Another participant spoke about 'fixing' the problems identified in her research (JP quoted in Lopes 2019). Indeed, a number of the responses suggest a desire to understand the demands and reality of EJA subjects, the adults and young people in and out of the EJA classroom, but also to begin the search for the resolution of specific problems in the school or the school system.

Lopes also notes that MPEJA graduates felt that their participation in the MPEJA could increase their visibility and influence in their school and the surrounding area:

When I joined MPEJA, my expectations were to expand knowledge about EJA and, above all, the desire to be able to contribute to the training of subjects who work in the school management of EJA in my municipality, without losing sight of the needs arising from the observations and experiences in the classroom (AF quoted in Lopes, 2019).

This visibility, they felt, would increase their chances of being able to improve the EJA offered to adults.

### **The MPEJA Curriculum**

Cardoso and Passos (2016) suggest that the learning process for EJA students should prioritise the contextualisation of the reality lived by those students, allowing them to ‘think about their identities and subjectivities, their ways of being and being in the world, reading and modifying that world’. The curriculum of the MPEJA is designed to allow participants to reflect on and act within their professional context.

The common core of the MPEJA is composed of the following taught modules: philosophical and historical foundations in EJA, legal foundations and public policies of EJA in Brazil, educational concepts and curricula in education in EJA, citizenship, ethical inclusion in EJA. Participants specialise in one of three areas: 1) Education, environment and work, 2) teacher training and public policies, or 3) educational management and information and communication technologies. The MPEJA also offers a number of optional taught modules including: theoretical and methodological foundations of Freire’s conception of education, social movements and education in EJA, anthropological foundations and race relations in education, digital inclusion and EJA, processes for acquiring mathematics in EJA and applied research, development and innovation. The taught modules all take a decolonial perspective, encouraging participants to deconstruct their understanding of their current context and generate and mobilise knowledge to transform that reality.

MPEJA students also take part in thematic seminars, guided research, and supervised teaching practice. Each participant is required to complete a project in which they design, carry out and evaluate an educational intervention conceived to resolve an identified problem. These are theoretically grounded, but with an empirical basis in EJA practice. They are expected to be oriented to the production of knowledge with results relevant to the understanding of the practical context of EJA leading to new products, processes or services.

Analysis of the dissertations produced by participants in the MPEJA, during the period from 2015 to 2017 shows that participants have considered the administrative, financial, and political systems that govern EJA in Bahia in all their dimensions. Professional development of teachers, curriculum, and the use of technology are common areas of focus. Within the majority there is also a focus on unveiling the characteristics of the subjects at whom EJA education is aimed, giving voice and agency to the young people and adults (Dantas, 2019, p.36).

By centring their research on their own professional contexts, the MPEJA students reveal, and reflect on, the multiple realities of EJA. In so doing they describe the difficult situation of EJA in Bahia. One dissertation, titled 'Don't close the EJA of my school' (Rodrigues, 2018), denounces the policy of reduction of the offer of EJA in the city of Salvador. Rodrigues draws on administrative data to highlight that one in four EJA centres had closed in the period with a loss of 44% of EJA classes across the city.

In addition to the nearly one hundred dissertations so far defended by the MPEJA graduates, each the fruit of applied research, the results have been presented in academic and policy conferences, and published in scientific journals in Brazil and internationally, giving greater visibility to EJA. This also increases the visibility of EJA among policy makers at local level – in schools, as well as within municipal and regional education departments – and increases the influence of the generators of this knowledge, the MPEJA students.

### **Conclusion**

In *Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, Paulo Freire highlights the importance of working with teachers and learners in EJA, as the former has the ability to arouse critical awareness in the latter by fostering understanding of his colonized, oppressed condition:

what is proposed to such an educator is the search for the best way, the best aids that enable the person who seeks to learn to read and write, to play the role of subject of knowledge in the process of the development of their literacy. The educator must be an inventor and a constant reinventor of these means and ways with which to facilitate more and more the problematization of the object to be unveiled and finally apprehended by the students. [...] the important thing is the exercise of a critical attitude towards the object (Freire, 1978, p. 13).

In its structure, and in the practice of those who work on it, MPEJA is epitomised by what Sordi and Ludke (2009, p.32) call 'circularity of knowledge'. They argue that 'it is not a matter of transferring knowledge from top down, but of circulating between two (or more) knowledge-producing sources, each enriching in its own way the construction of knowledge about it'. Within MPEJA knowledge is shared horizontally, through dialogue, with all participants becoming part of a culture of promotion of meaningful learning.

From a decolonial perspective, we can say that the research activity, and its ensuing dissemination, promoted within the scope of the MPEJA enables participants to renounce and denounce the reality as experienced by the subjects of EJA. It allows for them to reveal the diversity and what Cardoso (2017) refers to as the specificity of EJA:

In the spaces in which EJA takes place, the subjects are multiple, and live among diversity, and although some have similar profiles, it is necessary to pay attention to the specificity of their life trajectories, which are always unique and characterized by potential that may not immediately reveal itself (Cardoso 2017, p.169).

This increase in awareness, of consciousness, of the specificity of the life trajectories of the subjects of EJA supports MPEJA participants in seeking, testing and proposing solutions and alternatives.

The involvement of teachers of EJA in MPEJA is an important driving force of the search within the university for critical reflection, for the exercise of questioning of the standard educational models and their role in the education of young people and adults. They aim to understand the school curriculum in the varied learning spaces that make up EJA in Bahia, as well as the role of the educator in meeting the needs of the participants in programmes of EJA.

The MPEJA counters decolonial thought through the possibilities it provides to EJA educators for reflection on their professional context and the socio-economic influences on the experiences of their EJA students. The theoretically based, practical interventions carried out by participants impact the way they work with others in improving the education they offer. In line with decolonial theory, teachers require the space to understand the reality of and the influences upon their working context in order to imagine, plan for, and implement differentiated pedagogical practices.

It is important to deepen research and reflection on the teacher education process that the MPEJA offers to these educators. What is the impact on their practice? To what extent has it influenced teachers in the state of Bahia to promote critical awareness and decolonising pedagogical tools? This is the focus of studies currently underway, which we hope will unveil how Freire's practice of a decolonial pedagogy can renew EJA in Bahia. It is a complex context, full of the needs, but also the possibilities and expectations of EJA students. Hence the importance of rethinking teaching practices, curricula and other elements of the system of EJA in a reflective and collective way in light of the rich legacy of popular education promoted by Paulo Freire.

### References

- Arendt, H. 2008. *Homens em tempos sombrios*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Arroyo, M. G. 2006. Formar educadoras e educadores de jovens e adultos. In: *Seminário nacional sobre formação do educador de jovens e adultos*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2006.
- Azevedo, A. R. 2018. *Não feche a EJA da minha escola. Políticas de permanência e ações de resistência ao fechamento de turmas/escolas da rede municipal de Salvador e suas implicações: o que dizem e o que fazem os educandos e educadores?* Unpublished dissertation. MPEJA: UNEB.
- Cardoso, M. B. C. 2017. Formação de educadores na educação de jovens e adultos: alinhando contextos e tecendo possibilidades. *Revista Terceira Margem Amazônia*, 2, pp.1-349.
- Cardoso, M. A. and Passos, G. A. L. 2016. Reflexões sobre a Educação de Jovens e Adultos e a formação docente. *Revista Educação Pública* (Rio De Janeiro), 16, pp.1-7.
- Dantas, T. 2019. A formação de professores em EJA na perspectiva da inclusão social. *Revista de educação, ciência e cultura*. Canoas, 24(1).
- Di Pierro, M.C., Joia, O., and Ribeiro, V.M. 2001 Visões da educação de jovens e adultos no Brasil. *Cad. CEDES*, 21(20).
- Fernandes, F. 1989. *O desafio educacional*. São Paulo: Cortez.
- Freire, P. 1987. *Pedagogia do oprimido*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. 1992. *Pedagogia da Esperança: Um encontro com a Pedagogia do oprimido*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. 1996. *Pedagogia da autonomia: saberes necessários à prática educativa*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. 1978. *Cartas à Guiné-Bissau: registros de uma experiência em processo*. 2nd ed. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. 2014. *Pedagogia da tolerância*. 2nd ed. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Freire P., 1967. *Education, the Practice of Freedom*. London: Writers and Readers

- Publishing Cooperative.
- Giroux, H. A. 1999. Cruzando as fronteiras do discurso educacional. Porto Alegre: Artmed.
- Guidelli, R. 1996. A prática pedagógica do professor do ensino básico de jovens e adultos: desacertos, tentativas, acertos. São Carlos: UFSC.
- Haddad, F. and Di Pierro, M., 2000. Escolarização de jovens e adultos. *Revista brasileira de educação*, **14**, maio-ago.
- Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 2017. Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua. IBGE: Brasília
- Lopes, N. 2019. Gestão dos egressos em universidades públicas: uma proposta de acompanhamento e de relacionamento do egresso do Mestrado Profissional em Educação de Jovens e Adultos. Unpublished dissertation. GESTEC: UNEB.
- Mignolo, W. 2007. Delinking: the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies*, **21**,(2-3).
- Moraes, M.E. N. 2019. Aprendizagens significativas na EJA: aula de campo para o ensino de Geografia. Unpublished Masters dissertation. MPEJA:UNEB.
- Mota Neto, J. C. Paulo Freire e Orlando Fals Borda na genealogia da pedagogia decolonial latino-americana. *38ª Reunião Nacional da ANPEd*. São Luís/MA. 01 a 05 de outubro de 2017. UFMA.
- Pedra, J. A. 1997. Currículo, conhecimento e suas representações. Campinas: Papirus.
- Scocuglia, A. C. 2005. As reflexões curriculares de Paulo Freire. *Revista Lusófona de Educação*. [Online]. [Accessed 23 April 2020]. Available from: <http://www.scielo.mec.pt/pdf/rle/n6/n6a07.pdf>
- Silva de Alcantra, M., 2016. Juvenilização da Educação de Jovens e Adultos em Abaetetuba: Representações sociais e projeto de vida escolar Universidade do Estado do Pará :Belem. [Online]. [Accessed 23 April 2020]. Available from: [http://cse.uepa.br/ppged/wp-content/uploads/dissertacoes/10/marivane\\_silva\\_de\\_alcantara.pdf](http://cse.uepa.br/ppged/wp-content/uploads/dissertacoes/10/marivane_silva_de_alcantara.pdf)
- Soares, L. 2015. Formação de educadores na educação de jovens e adultos. *Educação em Revista Belo Horizonte*, **32**(4), pp. 251-268.
- Sordi, M. R. L. and Ludke, M. 2009. Da avaliação da aprendizagem à avaliação institucional: aprendizagens necessárias. Avaliação: Campinas. [Online]. [Accessed 23 April 2020]. Available from: [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S1414-40772009000200005&script=sci\\_abstract&tlng=pt](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S1414-40772009000200005&script=sci_abstract&tlng=pt)
- Silva, T. 2007. *Documentos de identidade: uma introdução às teorias do currículo*. 2nd ed. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica.
- Teixeira, A. 1998. *Educação e universidade*. Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ.
- Walsh, C. 2009. Interculturalidade, crítica e pedagogia decolonial: insurgir, reexistir e reviver. In: CANDAU, Vera Maria (Org.). *Educação intercultural na América Latina: entre concepções, tensões e propostas*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras.

# Spanning Third-level Institutions and Boundaries: The Higher Education Institutions Further Education and Training (HEI FET) Forum

HEI FET FORUM – ANNE WALSH, JANE O’KELLY, MICHAEL KENNY

---

## **Abstract**

*The HEI FET Forum was established in 2012 for the eight Higher Education Institutions who provide initial teacher education qualifications for those wishing to work as accredited teachers in the Further Education and Training (FET) Sector. Its remit is to advance teaching, learning and research in the FET sector and to widen the Forum’s engagement with stakeholders across FET. The article describes the origin and purpose of the Forum and its aims amongst others to promote and strengthen the professional development of practitioners, and design and conduct relevant and useful research for the sector.<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** Further Education and Training, Engagement, Initial Teacher Education, Teaching, Collaboration, Research

## **Introduction**

This article provides the background canvas to the founding and development of the Forum of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who deliver initial teacher education programmes that are recognised by the Teaching Council of Ireland for Further Education and Training (HEI FET) student teachers. During 2012, a number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with Teaching Council approved teacher education programmes for FET came together to form the Higher Education Institutions: Further Education and Training Forum (HEI

---

1 The HEI FET Forum acknowledges the expertise and professionalism of the FET sector and aims to foster and progress a partnership approach and dialogue between educators, learners, providers and policymakers. The content of this article draws heavily on a presentation by Dr Anne Walsh titled ‘Developing Professional Practice in FET Teaching – HEI FET Forum Evolution’ at a HEI FET Forum conference at Maynooth University, 2018.

FET Forum). Since then the eight HEIs have worked together, drawing on their own resources, to coordinate delivery and to build capacity among their respective programmes and within the FET sector to enhance programme quality. The Forum is unique in that it brings together a range of HEIs that do not normally cooperate across programmes. The unifying ethos of these universities, institutes, and colleges is a commitment to adult and community education. Each HEI has a history and/or legacy in this area and an allegiance to the people who work and learn in this space. Part of this connection is a shared participative, liberal approach to redressing social exclusion and an appreciation of the importance of adult and community education as a social good.

The Forum is a national network focused on the continued enhancement of teaching and learning in the Further Education and Training sector. It aims to support the sector through collaborative working approaches and the development of communities of practice. In particular, the HEI FET Forum aims to share knowledge and practice in the further education and training sector with regard to qualifications for teachers, tutors and other facilitators of learning in Further Education and Training and promote awareness about initial and continued professional development for practitioners and new entrants to the sector.

Forum membership comprises eight Higher Education providers: NUI Galway (NUIG); Marino Institute of Education (MIE); Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MI); Maynooth University (MU); Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT); Dublin City University (DCU); National College of Ireland (NCI); National College of Art and Design (NCAD).

Its vision is to enhance and contribute to the quality of teaching and learning, engagement, pedagogy and research in Further Education and Training and contribute to the continual improvement of the quality of teaching and learning by drawing on the combined expertise of its members.

### **The Backdrop to the HEI FET Forum**

The need for teacher qualification education for FET was driven by Section 38 of the Teaching Council Act, 2001, and Regulation Five (Further Education) of the Teaching Council Registration Regulations, 2009. Regulation Five, relating to Further Education is the requirement that from 1 April 2013, applicants for registration must have attained, inter alia, a Council approved further education teacher education qualification (The Teaching Council, 2011). Aside from local



legislation, the need for the professionalisation of educators continues to gain prominence globally with teacher education as a profession that is monitored by external accreditation bodies in many countries. The teaching profession demands responsibility and accountability. Having pedagogical competence and its practices are seen as vital, not only to facilitating learning, but equally to the quality of wider teaching, learning and educational activities.

For providers, not only was this a call to respond with appropriate programme offerings, but it was a responsibility to offer prospective trainee teachers the opportunity to acquire the mandated qualification, a qualification underpinned by quality and teaching competence. The Teaching Council (2011) issued guidelines around general programme requirements and learning outcomes that were seen as important to a teacher education qualification (TEQ). This included learning outcomes related to professional conduct, communication, teaching, learning and assessment, subject knowledge, curriculum design, group management, lifelong learning and a knowledge of the education system. Broadly the aims of the teacher education programmes were to provide student teachers with the theoretical knowledge, pedagogical skills and professional competencies required to successfully teach and facilitate learning in the further education sector; to develop competent teachers whose teaching practice is underpinned by ongoing reflective learning and by the core values of the teaching profession; and to engender a sense of collegiality and relationship building within the further education sector.

Participation in TEQ programmes encompasses certain learning expectations around pedagogy, psychology of learning, curriculum design and development, assessment, quality assurance and lifelong learning. In turn, it suggests certain assumptions around the application of learning to the professional development of the teacher and teaching practice. Across the FET landscape other noteworthy and influential changes were emerging: legislation resulted in the establishment of SOLAS and dissolution of FÁS and VEC giving rise to Education and Training Boards; a FET strategy was published, articulating commitment to creating a responsive, innovative, flexible and relevant sector; and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was also established.

### **The Evolution of the HEI FET Forum**

The inception of the HEI FET Forum has its roots in a casual conversation in NUI Galway in 2012. NUI Galway hosted the first Forum meeting, followed by Mary Immaculate, Waterford Institute of Technology, National College of Ireland, Maynooth University and currently DCU. The first major development

to emerge from the Forum was the initiation of an annual colloquium or conference that provides a platform where trainee teachers, graduate teachers, practitioners and key stakeholders come together to discuss a broad range of related matters. The inaugural colloquium was successfully held in WIT in 2015 and laid the foundation for a useful space in which providers and practitioners share experiences and concerns, and where the resultant networking provides a solid basis for collaboration.

Such events are important. Loughran (2010), for example, draws on research to highlight the importance of practitioners, such as trainee teachers and graduate teachers, sharing experiences with others to ensure that the 'tacit becomes explicit' and that insights into knowledge of teacher practice, which underpins professional identity, become visible (Northfield and Loughran, 1996, cited in Loughran, 2010, p.210).

A key feature of the work of the HEI FET Forum is its spirit of collaboration amongst the providers of teacher education qualification (TEQ) programmes for FET. The HEI FET Forum sees this as enhancing and contributing to the quality of the programmes, and ultimately to the quality of teaching in FET; a way of attempting to get under the skin of sticky points that all providers experience. By sharing experiences of provision, by comparing challenges and issues, and by continuously probing the relevance of curricula, providers are constantly seeking to improve their offerings, making teacher education relevant to practitioners and learners in the FET environment. Additionally, collaboration has resulted in joint research proposals (under the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning) and participation in EU projects.

### **HEI FET Forum Objectives**

The five core HEI FET Forum objectives (HEI FET Forum, 2017) are a series of signposts that drive the Forum's commitment to professional development, research, policy and advocacy, engagement with practitioners, and pedagogy in FET. The Forum connects with SOLAS, the Teaching Council of Ireland and Education Training Boards of Ireland (ETBI) through regular meetings, research and collaboration. The Forum is committed to the delivery of high-quality practitioner orientated professional development initiatives and programmes that prepare practitioners for working in the sector and that support responses to societal, economic and industry challenges as well as research that develops and contributes to an emergent field of enquiry in FET. The Forum is engaged in policy and advocacy activities that are underpinned by relationships with

key national and international stakeholders and advisory bodies with a view to contributing to national policy. These activities are informed by engagement with practitioners through advocating interaction with practitioners in FET and through collaboration at a national and regional level with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Further Education Network (FEN), Further Education Support Services (FESS) and other relevant FET practitioner bodies and networks. Finally, the Forum members are dedicated to recognising existing excellence in teaching practice in FET and promoting models of adult learning theory, philosophy and pedagogies in FET teaching and learning activities.

These objectives were articulated further in the Forum's strategic plan for 2017-2019 and frame its journey for purposeful projects. Gathering information, assembling a repository of research data and outputs, building relationships with key stakeholders, involving practitioners, and promoting effective pedagogies for FET learners are all undertaken through collaboration with stakeholders. For providers, their responsibility in the professionalisation of FET teachers is complex and multi-layered. Overall, the Forum is focused on enhancing the learner experience through enabling teacher competence within an increasingly diverse and widening participation agenda.

### **Tensions for FET TEQ Providers**

However, despite the provision of teacher education programmes for further education teachers, persistent tensions remain. Criteria for entry to the diploma, degree and postgraduate programmes offered by HEI providers can preclude entry to those without the mandated entry requirements. Tensions arise when individuals who have been teaching for many years are not eligible for enrolment because of a lack of these requirements. Members of the Forum are committed to capturing experiential learning through a recognition of prior learning (RPL) process and working with national stakeholders to streamline this process.

Carrying out research into the area of professional development for FET teachers allows the Forum to gain insights that provide a basis for a deeper understanding of the experiences of qualified and trainee teachers. Recently conducted research by the HEI FET Forum members in 2018, explores how graduates and current participants of FET teacher education programmes experience their complex working lives and how their careers as trainee and qualified teachers are progressing after graduation. Findings from the research focused on graduate employment in the FET sector demonstrated that 72% are

working in the sector: 33% in full time employment, 42% in part-time, 10% on a panel and 15% in precarious or irregular employment. Graduates felt that there was a perceived disparity between the value of qualifications for second level teachers as opposed to recognised qualifications for teachers in Further Education and Training.

These findings – contrasted with the explicit and implicit value of the professionalisation of teachers, the value of excellent teacher competence and the realisation of the centrality of worthwhile outcomes of learning and achievements for learners in the FET sector – challenge all of us to give voice to the role of practitioners in the sector. Given the spectrum of educational contexts across the FET landscape, effective pedagogies advocate alignment with the pedagogy of the adult learner where relevance to the learner is central, where principles such as a learner-centred approach takes precedence, where embedding a collaborative and a co-operative approach to learning is espoused, where self-directed learning practices are fostered, where enquiry-based learning is promoted, and where modelling best practice continues to be interrogated. Again, Loughran draws on research to identify a range of themes around which professional practice is developed (Berry, 2004, cited in Loughran, 2010, pp.209-216).

These themes include understanding teaching beyond the technical by interrogating the problematic within teaching to reveal teaching as educative rather than training; self-understanding and awareness by probing who we are as teachers and how we teach; and collaboration by planning teaching and reviewing practice with colleagues to avoid professional isolation.

Central to one's identity as a teacher is the idea of reflection. Only the teacher can digest, as it were, the pedagogical content presented to create meanings that shape his or her actions and identity as a teacher. Coupled with learning from their practical placement experiences and the collegiality of communities of practice, self-awareness through deep reflection allows teachers to gain agency in framing and reframing their identities as teachers.

However, as Karl Popper (Popper, 1979 cited in Swann, 2012, p.25) warns us, 'we become conscious of many of our expectations only when they are disappointed, owing to their being unfulfilled'. Research lends detail to the complexity, layers and oftentimes unpredictability of the knowledge, skills and competence that teachers are expected to possess. It gives voice to qualified and emerging FET

practitioners in articulating how effective teaching in FET can be realised and how teaching careers in FET may be consolidated and professionalised.

The problem is that much of the work of FET practitioners is invisible to outsiders. Hidden from others in an educators' responsibility to facilitate learning is the ability to manage the diverse needs of learners, communicate with learners and relevant others, and reflect on their practice to ensure ongoing strengthening of their teaching competence. A triad of professional competencies comprising knowledge of teaching methodologies, knowledge of learners and their development, and knowledge of curriculum and subject, makes teaching a complex job (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Integrated throughout these competencies are the ethical values of professional conduct such as respect, care, integrity and trust.

Accordingly, in order to gain an understanding of and insights into the assumptions of professional development, it is necessary to understand how student teachers and graduate practitioners experience their learning, how they use their learning and how they engage with their learning as they become professional educators. Research seeks to explore those aspects of participation with a view to gaining insights into how teachers nurture and develop their professionalism. For example, as articulated in 'Key Competences for Adult Learning Professionals' (Buiskool et al., 2010) and 'The Future of Education and Skills 2030' (OECD, 2018), competence identification, competence assessment, competence modelling, learners' needs, sectoral diversity and employment conditions underpin the principles of development that are needed to meet future challenges that are, today, unknown. Pressing these points home to relevant stakeholders unlocks potential new ways of doing and learning and continues the journey towards the achievement of excellence in teacher education; it supports both providers and FET practitioners.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching will always be a dynamic and complex role with diverse and competing demands. Along with a changing FET landscape, drivers of global change such as rapid technology advancements, individual empowerment, work uncertainty, jobs that haven't yet been invented, diverse sources of knowledge production, shifting demographics and changing societal and economic environments, impact on the needs of individuals, teachers and learners alike. These needs include adapting, developing, maintaining, transferring and even transforming their knowledge and know-how; it is paramount for developing

global competence and shaping agency in a rapidly changing world. Equally the standards for continuous learning are higher than ever; knowing what, knowing why, knowing how and knowing who, continue to challenge educators and learners. Giroux (2019, p.17) points out that 'Democracy and politics itself are impoverished in the absence of those vital public spheres such as public and higher education that provide the conditions for students and others to recognize how to use the knowledge they gain, both to critique the world in which they live and, when necessary, to intervene in socially responsible ways in order to change it'.

Enabling the development of skilled educators for the FET sector continues to be predominant for the members of the Forum. Forum members advocate for excellence in teacher education to ensure that opportunities for teachers and learners alike are optimised. The Forum provides a space for discussion that promotes innovation, that informs policy, that collates the voice of trainee teachers and practitioners and that seeks to enhance the role of FET teachers as they continue to develop their professional skills. One of the many ways in which this will be accomplished is through a commitment to dialogue and critical pedagogy in teacher education and supporting learner needs, as well as intentional and cooperative research such as that undertaken collaboratively by the HEI FET Forum in partnership with stakeholders.

Coolahan (2007) quotes Feerick in terms of teacher education

'as a process of lifelong learning and career development for the individual teacher. At a more structured level there is a need for a continuity of purpose between initial training, induction and ongoing professional development. Of central importance in this context is the creative and reciprocated collaboration between the university, the school and other stakeholders in the education process. New types of working are necessary which prepare new teachers to respond flexibly to new teaching scenarios and which support the teacher to be a key actor in his/her own professional development' (p.33).

The teaching profession across a continuum of education and training is continually evolving and encompassing new research findings, changing demographics, real and existential threats to our societies including political upheaval and climate change, emerging theory and the requirements of individuals who engage in lifelong learning to meet a wide range of desires,

needs and ambitions. The strong relationship between FET stakeholders and their partners in tertiary education and training is built, in part, on a shared understanding of Freire's concept of teacher-student interaction: 'through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become responsible for a process in which all grow' (1970, p.80).

### References

- Buiskool, B. J., Broek, S.D., van Lakerveld, J.A., Zarifis, G.K. and Osborne, M. 2010. *Key competences for adult learning professionals*. Zoetermeer: European Commission.
- Coolahan, J. 2007. A Review Paper on Thinking and Policies Relating to Teacher Education in Ireland prepared for the Teaching Council of Ireland. [Online]. [Accessed 2 February 2020]. Available from: <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Research/Documents/A-Review-Paper-on-Thinking-and-Policies-Relating-to-Teacher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf>
- Darling-Hammond, L. 2006. Constructing 21st-century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*. 57(3), pp.300–314.
- Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Giroux, H. 2019. Authoritarianism and the Challenge of Higher Education in the Age of Trump. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. 18(1), pp.6–25.
- HEI FET Forum. 2017. HEI FET Strategic Plan 2017 - 2019.
- Loughran, J. J. 2010. *What expert teachers do: Teachers' professional knowledge of classroom practice*. London: Routledge.
- NUI Galway. 2012. Professional Diploma in Education (Further Education) -- NUI Galway. [Online]. [Accessed 6 November 2018]. Available from: <http://www.nuigalway.ie/courses/adult-and-continuing-education-courses/professional-diploma-in-education.html#d.en.20961>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2018. *The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030*. OECD Publishing, p.23.
- Shor, I. 2004. EDUCATION IS POLITICS Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. In: McLaren, P and Leonard, P. eds. *PAULO FREIRE A critical encounter*. London: Routledge, p.34.
- Swann, J. 2012. *Learning, teaching and education research in the 21st century: an evolutionary analysis of the role of teachers*. London: Continuum.
- The Teaching Council. 2011. Further Education: General and Programme Requirements for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Qualifications, (March), pp.1–19. [Online]. [Accessed 23 October 2018]. Available from: <https://www.teachingcouncil>.

ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Further-Education-General-and-  
Programme-Requirements-for-the-Accreditation-of-Teacher-Education-  
Qualifications.pdf

Walsh, A. 2018. Developing Professional Practice in FET Teaching – HEI FET Forum  
Evolution. In: *HEI FET Forum Annual Conference, Maynooth University*, 17  
November 2018. Unpublished.



# The Educational Ontology of Paulo Freire and the Voices of Irish Adult Educators

ALEX MCKILLICAN

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper harnesses the teachings of Paulo Freire in order to give a voice to Irish adult educators. The ontological aspects of Freire's theory are central to this task. Freire's ontological understanding of the human experience finds its fulfilment in his theory of conscientization. The two pillars of conscientization are personal and collective awareness. And it is the personal awareness aspect, as it relates to the pedagogy of the adult educator, which we are most concerned with here. The paper highlights how the voices of adult educators should be considered as an ontological 'layer of data' which can contribute hugely to the discourse on adult education in Ireland.*

**Keywords:** Critical Pedagogy, Ontological, Conscientization, Metaphysical, Existentialism

## **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, p.58).

In recent years the voices of adult learners have, rightly, been to the fore in the discussions relating to adult education in Ireland. This is a very good and necessary thing. However, we should embrace what the adult educator has to say about adult education. At a time when the growth of an audit culture in education is limiting educators to 'hold tightly to the familiar and cleave to the immediately applicable', the voices of the educators are more necessary than ever (Finnegan, 2016, p.49). It is important to listen these voices as these key stakeholders in adult education have much to say about the educational relationship with the learner and other aspects of adult education and how it impacts on society, the learner, and the educators themselves. After all, adult education speaks to people's highest aspirations (Fleming, 2004).

The ontological aspects in Freire's writings were used to inform the epistemological element of the research. By 'ontological aspects', we mean those parts of Freire's theory which deal with the nature of being. These phenomena were used then to 'inform the epistemological element' of the research. They helped the study to utilise the voices of adult educators to become themselves part of the emerging theory of knowledge. This was done in an attempt to examine those aspects of adult education practice which can only be considered in a metaphysical way, without the constraints of scientism and the technocratic biases which that process incurs. It is of great importance that adult education practice be examined in a metaphysical way, as it is the metaphysical realm of life that perhaps can tell us most about the human experience and what it is to be human, helping us to transcend what is physical or natural. The I-thou relationship is the most obvious of these phenomena. In explicitly 'adult education' experiences I can give anecdotal examples of parents reading to their children, an adult literacy learner being able to send his wife a birthday card ('for the first time in 32 years of marriage'), and other examples of how developing education can enhance someone's experience of the world.

The subjects of this research were adult educators who are at present practising in Ireland. The pedagogy of the adult educator was under investigation. The two primary aims of the research were:

- To investigate the use of Freirean concepts in the practice of Irish adult educators in order to highlight the metaphysical aspects of adult education practice
- To suggest principles which will be useful in investigating Irish adult education practice

When discussing the findings, in light of Freire's theory, there will also be a consideration of how the opinions and views of adult educators can contribute to the current discourse in Irish adult education. The central idea of this paper is that, through their ongoing practice, adult educators have a vital ontological layer of data/knowledge which can help to provide the necessary balance to the discourse of adult education in Ireland. This is an urgent need as current policy within the area is heavily influenced by technocratic and neo-liberal concerns. This phenomenon has the result that the functional and vocational aspects of engagement in adult education are put to the fore, while personal, subjective and inward effects of education in the life of the adult learner are, to a large extent,

ignored. Adult educators know themselves that engagement in adult education can have dramatic effects on the life of the adult learner – effects that can only be considered in a metaphysical way. Although not part of the discussion here, this philosophical position has consequences for adult education in the current political and social climate and in the sharp division between liberal and conservative ideas which have permeated their way into many aspects of life. However, at present we are solely concerned with highlighting the voices of the Irish adult educators and what this means for policy and practice in adult education Ireland.

### **The Research Paradigm: Ontological and Epistemological**

#### *Considerations*

The task of ‘disclosing’ the voices of adult educators, in a formal ‘scientific’ sense, was not a straightforward one. Difficulties arose by the framing of key questions in the process. This is where ontology and epistemology assisted because ontology and epistemology are concerned with the fundamental issues: *What* is there to study? *How* can we know about it? *How* do we find what we are looking for? Ontology focuses on the types of things that are a part of the world, how they exist in the world and how they should be researched and studied (Mautner, 2000). Is, as Blackburn (2000) suggests, the social world best seen *via interaction* between individuals, or, do we begin our inquiries with theories of social behaviour or build theories as the research develops? This research embraced the former position and so the existentialist elements in Freire’s theory are the ontological keystone of the project. The idea here was not to examine the voices of adult educators through any type of rational lens, but to allow the emotive aspect of their opinions to come to the fore. And the philosophy of existentialism – and how Freire used it – validates the impassioned aspects of the adult educators’ experiences. It is those experiences that shape their pedagogy and their philosophical perspectives, which in turn impacts their practice. This phenomenon formed an epistemology, or body of knowledge, which facilitated building theory relating to Irish adult education practice. Twinned with this was the recognition that ontology is the metaphysical study of *being/existence* and so permeates all aspects of the adult educators’ lives, not just their practice in adult education.

In conducting the research, it was important to consider epistemology as the study of knowledge of the social world:

In the debate about ontology and epistemology it is necessary to absorb one thing; knowledge is frail. It is the job of the researcher to make it clear that

in any approach to research (especially one of an interpretive nature), the researcher should maintain that he/she knows it is difficult to be clear about anything – and he/she should not be over confident in conclusions, but be tentative (Thomas, 2009, p.85).

It is hoped, therefore, that knowledge treated in this manner serves to make any conclusions or discussion more reliable, subjective, and trustworthy. A solid theoretical backbone to the research, both ontologically and epistemologically, is even more necessary considering that the research is highly interpretive in both its inquiry and its analysis (Grayling, 1996). This is helpful as it allows the subjective influence (the voices of the adult educators), which are the philosophical *locus* of this research, to be brought to light.

### **The Research Themes**

Paulo Freire's work is informed by aspects of existential theory. He used existential thought to inform the ontological aspect in his theory of adult education (Roberts, 2002). In terms of ontology, three main underlining precepts are identifiable in Freire's work; and they have been used in this research to investigate the above aims of the research. The precepts also informed the questions which were used to interview the adult educators. The precepts, which became research themes, are: 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre, 1946) which leads to 'conscientization' (Freire, 1970); engaging in adult education as [an] 'ontological vocation' (Freire, 1970); and a 'dialogical rejection' of subject/object dichotomies (Freire, 1970). No detailed exposition of those themes needs to be presented for our task in this paper. But, we need to recognise that they are concepts which hold within them a perspective which suits the highly interpretive nature of the research paradigm and overall approach to the research. Using these aspects of Freire's theory allowed for a deeper discussion with adult educators about their experiences of adult education.

### **Research Objectives and Research Questions**

Before examining the questions, which were distilled from the research themes and subsequently used to formulate the interview schedules, it is necessary to briefly consider the objectives of the research. In doing so the complexity of the task when dealing with this type of data (people's subjective thoughts and opinions) will become evident. According to Verma and Beard (1981, p.184), the statement of [a] supposition is a

'tentative proposition which is subject to verification through subsequent investigation. It may also be the guide to the researcher in that it depicts and

describes the method to be followed in studying the problem. In many cases suppositions or hypotheses are hunches which the researcher has about the existence of the relationship between variables’.

If a supposition does indeed make claims with regards to the relationships between variables, and is the key to the researcher as to how the original idea might be tested, we have, in this study, postulated that the ontological elements in Paulo Freire’s educational theory represent a variable which have influence, and can be explored, in the pedagogy of Irish adult educator. We have endeavoured, therefore, to discover whether that is so for this sample of adult educators. The findings of the research, as will be considered below, support the premise that it is possible to present an ontological appreciation of the voices of Irish adult educators from a Freirean perspective.

The findings support the fact that the adult educators are, at the very least, interested in continuing to develop a deeply critical approach to their educational relationship with learners and are interested in, and have much to say about, the metaphysical aspects of adult learning. And giving a voice to the adult educator is very prescient considering today’s somewhat uneasy political, social and philosophical climate.

The research objectives of this study are:

- To advocate concepts which will contribute, positively, to further investigations into Irish adult education practice. These concepts include: (1) The application of an ontological appreciation of Freirean pedagogy, as a research ‘optic’, by the wider academic community in the attempt to further understand the pedagogy of adult educators; (2) *Transformative learning* in interpretive research, such as this, should be conducted where the meaning of experience, for both the researcher and the research participants, continually informs the research strategy; (3) Application of Freirean pedagogy which is seen through an ontological lens should be used and developed as a way to give a ‘voice’ to the Irish adult educator. This could be used to generate other strands of research within adult education.
- To explore the application of Freirean pedagogy, which is seen through an ontological lens in the reflexive examination of the work of Irish adult educators.

As discussed above the research questions which were developed for this study stem from engagement with Freirean theory. The questions are:

- As an adult education provider how do you view adult education?
- What in your opinion does it mean to engage in education in adulthood?
- In what terms do you view your work with adult learners?
- Do you think adult education is a human right?
- How do you view your relationship with your learner?
- Do you think the learner can educate the adult educator?

### **Research Context, Analysis of Data and Theory Development**

As this investigation is a piece of critical educational research, every element of the research design followed an *anti-positivist* paradigm (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2008); we are not interested in objectivity, predictability, controllability or the construction of laws and rules of behaviour concerning the pedagogy of the adult educators. The design of this research was, however, influenced by an *interpretivist* paradigm. It was considered more interesting, from a human perspective, for the researcher to attempt to understand, describe, and interpret Irish adult education practice through the thoughts and opinions of its actors – Irish adult educators. The data collection for this research was carried out in regional Educational and Training Boards (ETBs) which are in the mid-west and south region of Ireland. The subjects of the research are professionals who are engaged in the provision of adult education. They are both tutors and managers of adult education programmes. Protective pseudonyms have been used to disguise the identities of the participants.

### **The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire**

Paulo Freire was inspired by many thinkers. Building on the theories of a diverse number of intellectuals in his own theory, he was influenced by the Socratic Method whereby dialogue is used as an epistemological tool and not a methodology (McLaren and Silva, 1991). Freire's work was also shaped by Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, Marx, Engels and Sartre (Dale, 2003). Freire understood humans as both *thinking* and *being*. His ontological understanding – his interpretation of existence, reality and being in the human condition – is dualistic. This is the theory of reality as being composed of two exclusive elements which, for Freire, translated as consciousness and thinking and

matter and being. It is important to consider now which is primary and which is derivative: consciousness and thinking or matter and being? To answer this, we can map Freire's ontological interpretation of the nature of being. Freire is 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 broken into subjective idealism and objective idealism. At this point Freire's ontology becomes related to the political world of the adult 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). It is important at this juncture to be reminded of the fact that the political world which Freire theorised about was a very different place to the Ireland of 2019. Most educators would accept, to (broadly) varying degrees, that educational opportunities in the area of adult education in contemporary Ireland cannot be compared to the Brazil under military dictatorship in the 1970s. Freire, as stated in the quotation in the introduction, advises not to use his theories unless we re-invent those theories.

He saw the world as being interpreted by historical, economic and social forces (Freire, 1970, p.72). Here, the influence of the theories of Marx in Freire's work becomes evident. The influence of Marx and historical materialism on Freire can also be demonstrated by Freire's exploration into the duality of the concept of humanisation. Freire says, 'concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition [sic] of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality' (Freire 1972, p.26). According to Freire, this duality may be transcended by applying a dialectical understanding in our attempt to make sense of the world. This is accomplished through a critical understanding of language. He propounds that language and its dialectical relationship with thought and world and the dialectical inter-relations of language itself – ideology, social class and education – break down the duality of the situation so that a new understanding of the world emerges. When taking a closer look at some of the transcripts from the adult educators, this type of understanding is evident.

When developing his ontology – Freire's understanding of how we 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).

Dialogue is the human phenomenon to which Freire's ontology is anchored (Freire 2005, pp.72-74). Freire explains how dialogue is ontological in nature when he says: 'Revolutionary leaders and educators do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation', but in order to come to know through dialogue with them, both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation – the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist' (Freire 2005, p.146). Therefore, Freire sees the human being as having a body which is conscious, and it must be understood as such. For Freire (1970) education was a means to liberate. He asserts that liberation should come about through a uniquely human dialectical process; Freire's 'dialogical rejection' of subject/object dichotomies. He believes, however, that it is the opposite which is actually happening in the educational process, proposing that information is not passed on but deposited; here the learner is an object, and the educators are the subjects. Freire believes that in such a situation men and women become uncreative:

Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently, receive, memorize and repeat. They do have the opportunity to become collectors and cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is men themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. Knowledge emerges only through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 1970, p.53).

Freire (1974) stresses the importance of developing a critical perspective while engaging in adult education. Indeed, a constant theme in both Freire's practical work and his theory is the significance of how engaging in adult education programmes relates to the world around us. Even when aesthetic moments arrive during engaging with texts, for example, the learner must remain critical: 'Education is joyous to the extent that it becomes an active, dialogical, critical process, texts can become 'beautiful' when critically engaged. Unless it is critical, education cannot become an act of 'knowing' (Freire 2005, p.111). Holme (2004) advises that in order to engage in education in a full sense, adult learners need to unveil the meanings of educational content and texts in order to consider the socio-economic influences that are to blame for them suffering from educational difficulties in the first place. Freire forced adult education



into the consciousness and vocabulary of western educators (McLaren, 2005). He engineered an appreciation of adult education which underlined the relationship between low levels of education and the 'uselessness of endlessly obsessing with the mechanistic side of education' (Freire, 1970, p.41).

So, considering education as Freire saw it can be understood as a counteraction against a central problem with the idea of functionality: meaning that this is a functional pedagogy which defines itself in the educating of adults in order that they might participate effectively within society. Feeley (2007) suggests, it is not concerned with examining the social inequalities which are to blame for the unequal dispersion of educational opportunities that places the adult learner in the adult education class. A functional approach to education naturally reproduces unequal relationships: 'The *denunciation* of dehumanizing, countering, oppressive aspects of everyday reality was inextricably linked to the *annunciation* of the path to transformation. This dual relationship was pertinent for oppressor and oppressed alike, both of whom are dehumanized by a continued, unequal relationship' (Freire, 2007, p.26).

In addition to his belief that functional literacy reproduces unequal relationships, Freire considers that 'although the subject of humanization has always been humankind's central problem, humanization has now taken on something with all the hallmarks of a concern which can no longer be simply ignored' (Freire, 1970, p.28). This concern for humanisation results immediately in the identification of dehumanisation. Thus, the individual begins to recognise and examine the amount to which dehumanisation has taken place. The individual may now ask if humanisation is a real possibility. Furthermore, Freire believes an examination of history, in objective terms, together with humanisation and dehumanisation, are a possible outcome for the individual who is an 'uncompleted' being aware of their incompleteness. Freire states: 'considering that both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first (humanization) is the people's vocation' (Freire, 1970, p.31).

Humanisation brings us immediately to the identification of dehumanisation, not merely as an ontological outcome (or some 'result' of our *being*), but as a retrospective and historical actuality (Freire, 1974).

## **The Ontology of Freire**

Much of Freire's ontology was influenced by the philosophy of existentialism. In existentialist thought, the subjective experience of the human being is at the centre of enquiry into the human experience. It considers the human being not just as a thinking being, but as an acting, living, and feeling human individual. In existentialist thought the body is not distinct from consciousness or being: 'to distinguish between a mind and a body or between the mind and the world, to make the 'I think, therefore I am' of the mind a certainty and to doubt the body, would be to follow the Cartesian mind body dualism' (Earnshaw, 2006, p.136). According to Sartre, 'consciousness exists its body' (Sartre, 2008, p.329). For Sartre there is no duality. There is also no duality between mind and body in Freirean ontology (Freire 1970). (It is this appreciation of the act of engaging in education that this paper embraces. And some of the comments from the adult educators below compound this idea). Engagement in adult education is an act made manifest by the body and mind (the consciousness) together. Therefore, educational engagement should be viewed as an inter-dependent relationship between the world of ideas and the historical/material world. Sartre (2008) maintains that when we talk about our bodies a problem arises, for we are confusing our inner intuition i.e. our experience of our bodies through our senses, for example, pleasure and pain, with the data that comes from other areas in life such as clinical and biological environments. This, for Sartre, is not a good thing as this leads to a conflation of the senses and external and physical experiences (Cox, 2002). Sartre (2008) believes that we do not actually experience our bodies in this way. Rather, he says, we 'live our bodies' (Sartre, 2008, p.302). Sartre (2008) hypothesises that consciousness is 'in' consciousness. Although consciousness can reflect on itself, he maintains it dissolves the Cartesian duality by asserting that it is by our senses that we exist in the world (Earnshaw, 2006). This cessation of Cartesian duality is so meaningfully expressed by Gabriel Marcel when he says: 'I *am* my body' (Marcel 2009, p.12). Another writer and theorist to express an anti-dualist understanding of the relationship between our minds and our bodies – an appreciation which for us is important as it relates to the experiences of adult education both for the adult educator and for the adult learner – is Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty constructed an anti-sceptical account of reality which is not dualist and has its foundations in perceptual experience. According to Cooper (2008) the originality of Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of the world we as human beings experience is on account of the focus he accorded to the role of the body in the construction of the spatiotemporal world; for Merleau-Ponty, a human

being's 'primary mode of knowledge is in the hands' (the body) (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.143). However, running parallel to this notion of the body is his idea of consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not a matter of 'I think that', but rather is a matter of 'I can' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.137). As such, Merleau-Ponty insists that we must 'exercise our operative intentionality' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.144). This 'I can' idea (this *upsurge* of being, we may say) is an interesting notion for our attempt to examine the voices of the adult educators from an ontological perspective. Embracing this perspective, we can form the premise that being involved in adult education – either as a learner or educator – presents an individual with the opportunity to further 'authenticate' one's existence. Therefore, I wish to draw a subtle distinction between what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'lived' body and the 'objective' body.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) the 'objective' body (the material body of bones and flesh) has a 'merely contingent' relation to its owner. However, it is the 'lived' body – the body of the 'I can' (to borrow Merleau-Ponty's phrase) – which is not separable even in thought from one's existence. We can postulate then that engagement in adult education – whether as a learner or educator – can enhance the 'I can', as an ontological phenomenon of being which re-aligns the workings of our 'objective' and 'lived' bodies to our minds and consciousness. Adult education, therefore, can be, and is, a kind of ontological tool. Education, and our mechanical and intellectual engagement in it, is informed by the senses. Therefore, it helps adults to realise their metaphysical potential-in-the-world. In fact, we may even surmise that it can provide the individual with another opportunity to come face to face with his or her incarnate self.

So, how does this highly technical understanding of the human experience relate to Freire's ontology? In every step of their quest for freedom it is necessary for people to view themselves as men and women involved in the ontological and historical vocation of evolving fully into a complete human being: 'reflecting and taking action now, become vital when one does not erroneously attempt to dichotomize the content of humanity from its historical forms' (Freire 1970, p.48). And this idea is developed further here when we see the human being as a being which is yet incomplete. Because of this incomplete state the individual is the only being who treats not merely his/her actions and deeds, but his/her very self as the qualifier of reflection. Through this ability he/she marks himself/herself out of all the other animals as animals cannot separate themselves from their routine and are therefore incapable of contemplation and reflection (Freire, 1970). This comparison of Freire's is not to be viewed as a naïve and superficial

distinction. It is by examining this distinction that we see the parameters which shape and delimit the action of every individual in his/her *life space* (Roberts, 2002). (Adult education can play a major role in this experience). Animals are unable to define objectives or influence their modification of nature with no meaning beyond themselves. An animal is basically a 'being-in-itself' (Heidegger, 2008; Freire, 1970; Sartre, 2008). Richard Shaull supplements this Freirean interpretation of the distinction between man and the world of an animal by saying that 'a human being's ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in doing so moves towards ever new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively. This *world* to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a *given* reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved' (Shaull cited in Freire 1970, p.14). Human beings who are attentive to their activity in the world, and who carry out the objectives which they select – including their relations with the wider world and with other human beings – colour the world by means of their imaginative presence. Indeed, humankind's existence is unlike the existence of an animal; it is historical. People not only live but exist; 'animals live out their lives on an a-temporal, flat, uniform prop; humans exist in a world which they are constantly recreating and transforming' (Freire, 1970, p.80).

### **Conscientization**

What follows is a brief description of the Freirean 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). Human beings, according to Freire (1974), 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 except in a biological sense. The essence of the human is to be in a continual non-natural process. In other words, 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 invites the individual to become aware of social, political and economic contradictions (and non-contradictions and opportunities)<sup>2</sup> which are present in society (Freire, 1970; 1974).

### **Examinations of the Findings**

What follows is not an exhaustive list of the contributions from the adult educators, but rather a sample of those offerings. The chosen pieces serve as vignettes, which, it is hoped, demonstrate the deep level of thinking and feeling of the adult educators for adult learners and adult education.

**Nessa:** Well, partly I view adult education in a functional sense. Obviously, people are here to improve their vocational skills. But I think it [adult education] is connected to them [the adult learner] in a more inward way. Education, and their lack of it, relates to feelings about themselves – their feelings of failure... of inadequacy about a bad experience in the past. Even I think their feelings about themselves as a person. They... feel inadequate. Education, and the lack of it in an everyday sense, makes them feel inadequate. It can be quite disturbing to them. It shakes them up. So, I view adult education as both a human right on one level, but I view it as something deeply personal to the adult also. Education is growth. The educational process is far reaching.

**Aidan:** I view adult education, and indeed my role as an adult educator, as being a much bigger thing than just teaching someone to improve their skills or to get a job. If adult education was just about skills, important as that is, the focus would be entirely on the technical aspect of the content and other practical stuff. But I view adult education as being much more than that. Because it taps into their whole life... and that is my starting point... before they ever put pen to paper or discuss assessments or module descriptors.

---

2 The author believes that the phenomenon of conscientization can positively support existing structures also; conscientization could positively compound aspects of the values and traditions of western society. But, that is to be examined on another occasion.

I view adult education as possibly representing someone's 're-starting' [sic] point. Education can help someone go somewhere in an inward way.

**Vincent:** I think adult education is so important in the adult and I try to instil this into my learners also. Adult education and community education, it is important to remember, is not a charitable thing. I mean to say this – adult education is a 'right'. But it is more than just a 'right'. Think for one second. Take any of the arts – like science, music, or poetry – all the things that make life worth living. Life is not just about an income. OK, if someone's educational standard is very low they are probably going to have a low income also. Education can also affect their social life. I view adult education as impacting all areas of an individual's life. And I know from previous learners that when a learner does begin to engage in education they grow... they encounter more potential in themselves.

**Magda:** Developing education in adulthood can be daunting at first for the adult learner. I have seen it myself. I have seen over the years the change in body language even. When learners come through that door – not all learners mind you, but most – when they come through that door their shoulders are slouched, they are timid; their voices even can seem meek. But here is the power of adult education in adulthood. Eventually, because education is a hard road, the fact that they are developing their skills they are also, literally, beginning to come out of their shells. An adult learner even begins to carry themselves more proudly.

**Nessa:** You know education in adulthood can be a very personal thing. And, by that I mean... for example, I will never forget a woman I had as a student. She was in her 40s. She had two children when she was no more than a baby herself. She had no education, and no real help from her husband, I might add. She raised those two children and they turned out OK. Now, I knew this woman to see, after all Westtown (pseudonym) is not a big place. She always looked as if life had got the better of her, y'know. Well, anyway didn't she walk in here one day [sic]. I began to take her for one to one tuition. She was weak but was determined. That was a number of years ago now – today that woman has studied for an arts degree. Now, my point about adult education being a personal thing is this. Yes, she happens to be studying for a degree but when I see that woman now – she no longer looks as if life has gotten the better of her. She now has gotten the better of her own life. That's what education... developing your education as an adult... can do. Education in

adulthood I think is a spiritual thing as well as anything else. By spiritual I don't necessarily mean religious.

**Aidan:** I view my work with adult learners as having a process to it. When I start working with new learners, I generally tell them a little about myself... some different experiences... they usually respond to this. I centre my work on sharing. I think if you can get to know each other as adults and on an equal level; then that is where the work can begin. I always view my work as having a strong element of sharing to it. But that sharing has a cut-off point – I would never discuss anything that has got to do with private things in our lives.

**Nessa:** Actually, there's no getting away from it... I view my relationship with my learner as being deeply connected to my own life. I think my own personal life experiences and the courses that I did... I think all of that was contributing to me saying 'you know... better learning takes place if we can be human with each other and if we can understand each other... and then if we can understand each other and if I can ... you know... not 'step' into your life but at some level I can listen to your life and share parts of my own. It's a kind of journey.

**Vincent:** 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 educator] don't know everything. They are adults... they know the body language and they see... that's the way they look at things in their life... they will figure out if you are real.

**Magda:** 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. However, although you need to respect privacy you are there primarily to get through the work. I respect my learners deeply as I was one of them.

### **Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

As alluded to in the introduction, the voices of adult learners have had an impact on Irish adult education from both a pedagogical perspective and, to a certain degree, a policy development perspective. Vital as that is, the voices of adult learners were not our concern here. The priority here has been to engage in a theoretical way with the voices of Irish adult educators. By applying a Freirean lens to the vignettes reproduced above we can at least bring these opinions

into a theoretical realm and in the process add not just to the significant body of Freirean educational theory, but also to contemporary discourse on Irish adult education. The overarching theme which the voices of these educators presents us with could be translated as a type of caution. And that caution is to step back from the technocratic and political concerns of adult education and to keep a focus on those aspects of adult education which permeate the ontological experiences of the adult learner and, indeed, the adult educator. The following comments may serve as recommendations for policy, practice and future research or they may simply be observations.

When considering the views of the adult educators we may suggest that adult education policy development must not fall into a pedagogical malaise whereby we solely acknowledge the economic benefits of adult education. In parallel with these concerns, perspectives on adult education, such as presented here, should promote the communicative, humanising, and transformative aspects of this area of education, particularly as they effect the personhood of the individual. Adult education teacher training programmes should include a focus on becoming/being a reflexive educator. Therefore, distinct policies need to be embraced within the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which highlight the need for continuing professional development and in-service training for all adult educators.

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 functionalist aspects of adult education development while highlighting and encouraging the 'consciousness raising' (ontological) aspects of adult education. The educational relationship between the adult educator and the adult learner *must* be thought of as having a mentoring aspect to it. This should be reflected more in the discourse on Irish adult education and in programmes of initial teacher/tutor training. Adult educators (if not already doing so) should embrace the understanding of their pedagogical experience – 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.

This research has shown how an ontological appreciation of the voices of adult educators can help an adult learner to bear witness to the primordial recollection of their being; this understanding of the impact of adult education development



on the consciousness of the adult learner should have profound implications for adult education research and practice.

As has been advocated throughout this paper, the application of Freirean ontology to examine the voices of adult educators could be utilised by the wider academic community in the attempt to further understand the pedagogy of adult educators. This has application in the examination of the adult educator/adult learner educational relationship. This in turn will have significant implications for the further understanding of the democratising effects of adult education in society. This type of research promotes and upholds the notion of *transformative learning*. Interpretive research of this kind should be conducted where the meaning of experience, for both the researcher and the research participants, continually informs the research strategy.

Making recommendations for policy, practice and future research was and is the most challenging aspect of how to reframe and re-imagine Paulo Freire's theories in an Irish context. Although we were able to make some solid recommendations, that aspect of this research is still in development. But, what we can say with confidence is that adult education discourse in Ireland is dominated by perspectives that have been informed by the application of critical theories of human history, society and the human condition. These ideas have their genesis in Marxist theory, namely dialectical materialism. This suits the dominant idea of the unequal sharing of power in society especially by structures which are patriarchal in nature. But, critical theories are in many ways an over-simplification of society and the human operating and living in society. We must be careful not to blindly accept the Marxist view that human beings are simply computers made from meat. Although Ireland is now a secular country with the formal and informal separation of church and state having taken place, as individuals we are still hard-wired, as it were, to be Christians. In our personhood, our language, our laws and our institutions we are still living down-stream from Christianity. And so the findings in this study suggest that adult education practice is something which is far more sensitive to aspects of the human condition which would better be examined by applying a Judaeo-Christian lens, regardless of the metaphysical truth behind that historic event. The opinions of the adult educators strike at the heart of what it is to be human and to be sharing the world with other people. Adult education research should not only embrace those aspects of Freire's theory which focus on the socio-economic, functional or political aspects of education, adult education research should also focus on those elements of Freire's theory that allow us to

formally analyse aspects such as how adult education can bring us to a closer understanding of ourselves in our relationships with other people. Research should focus on how we engage with and act in the world as a subject in relation to other subjects in a world which is scaffolded by an objective moral truth.

As an element in this, the voice of the adult educator can be used as an ontological layer of data in order to enhance and more deeply understand practice. This would influence further exploration of the role of the educator and adult education within society and in our communities. The voice of the adult educator could be used to counterbalance the dominance of scientism in educational research and policy. An example of this in adult education is the recent emphasis on accreditation at all levels. Accreditation brings with it a technocratic coldness that dilutes the more human aspects of the education process. Everything is being measured and pathways are being created where pathways don't necessarily exist. Adult education may become overburdened by this, particularly basic education and community education, which are very delicate and complex phenomena within the adult education arena.

As is evident in this research, adult educators do not overly politicise their practice. This is an important notion because this view would counterbalance the dominance of critical theory in adult education and its ongoing critique of things that were thousands of years in the making – namely institutions such as the family, the church and the state, and the relationship of the individual to those phenomena in our lives. Notwithstanding some current difficulties, the Irish and European individual, and his and her relationship between his and her private and public self, has been finely crafted for two millennia by these institutions and we should, therefore, be careful to not discard these things – the very fabric of Western society.

Finally, the paper has highlighted how the voices of adult educators can be very valuable in the current climate of epistemological flux in educational and social research and can constructively contribute to a balanced dialogue between both sides of the social, educational, and political spectrum in Ireland.

### *References*

- Blackburn, J. 2000. Understanding Paulo Freire: reflections on the origins, concepts and possible pitfalls of his educational research. *Community Development Journal*. 35(1) pp. 3-15.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. 2008. *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.

- Cooper, D. E. 2008. *Existentialism*. London: Blackwell Publishing.
- Cox, G. (2002) *Sartre: a Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum.
- Dale, J. A. 2003. Freire, Aristotle, Marx and Sartre: a critique of the human condition. In: *Mid-west Research to Practice Conference in Adult and Continuing Education*. [Online]. IUPUI. [Accessed 24 April 2020] Available from: <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/310>
- Heidegger, M. 2008. *Being and Time*. Translation by Macquarrie, J., and Robinson, E. London: Blackwell Publishing.
- Holme, R. 2004. *Literacy: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Earnshaw, S. 2006. *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum Publishing.
- Feeley, M. 2007. Redefining Literacy from an Egalitarian Point of View. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*. Dublin: AONTAS, pp.15-28.
- Finnegan, F. 2016. The Future is Unwritten: Democratic Adult Education Against and Beyond Ne-liberalism. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*. Dublin: AONTAS, pp.46-59.
- Fleming, T. 2004. *The State of Adult Education*. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*. Dublin: AONTAS, pp.9-18.
- Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Freire, P. 1972. Cultural Action for Freedom. *Harvard Educational Review: Monograph Series*, Number 1.
- Freire, P. 1974. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. London: Continuum.
- Freire, P. 2005. *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*. Translation by Macedo, D. Cambridge MA: Westview Press.
- Freire, P. 2007. *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. London: Macmillan.
- Grayling, A. C. 1996. Epistemology. In: Bunnin, N. and Tsui-James, E. P. eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Marcel, G. 2009. *Being and Having: An Existential Diary*. Translation by Farrer, K. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Mautner, T. 2000. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Penguin.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translation by Smith, C. London: Routledge.
- McLaren, P. 2005. *Red Seminars: Radical Excursions into Educational Theory, Cultural Politics, and Pedagogy*. New York: Hampton Press.
- McLaren, P., and Leonard, P. 1993. *Paulo Freire: a Critical Encounter*. London: Routledge.

- McLaren, P., and Silva, T. T. 1991. Language, Experience and Pedagogy: a Tribute to Paulo Freire. *Access*. **10**(1), pp.38-48.
- Roberts, P. 1998. Extending Literate Horizons: Paulo Freire and the Multi-dimensional Word. *Educational Review*. **50**(2), pp.105-114.
- Roberts, P. 2002. *Education Literacy and Humanization: Exploring the Work of Paulo Freire*. London: Bergin and Garvey.
- Sartre, J. P. 1946. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Sartre, J. P. 2008. *Being and Nothingness*. London: Routledge.
- Thomas, G. 2009. *How to do your Research Project*. London: Sage.
- Veiga, C. 1993. *From Conscientization to Empowerment*. London: Sage Publications.
- Verma, G.K. and Beard, R.M. 1981. *What is Educational Research? Perspectives on Techniques of Research*. Aldershot: Gower.