SECTION ONE

Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning

Reflective Practice and the Feminist Lens: The Other Side

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the recent promotion of reflective practice in teacher education and to draw on the thinking that has developed in adult education, particularly in feminist community education. It endeavours to unpack, briefly, the foundational theories that are promoted in teacher education and identify the failings inherent in these traditional constructions. Finally, it proposes a feminist reflective practice that draws on de Beauvoir's concept of the Other, as a key route to enabling educators to understand the multifaceted dimensions of inequality.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Critical Pedagogy, Epistemology, Feminisation of Education, Feminist Education, The Other

Introduction

The surge in interest in reflective practice in education is welcome on many fronts. It is now promoted as an essential element in the education of teachers in all aspects of the system. On the one hand, reflective practice as praxis, the cycle of reflection and action as proposed by Freire (1972) is a key element of conscientization and critical education. But on the other hand, it sets off a set of alarm bells when a process is embraced so wholeheartedly by professions and institutions which are basically conservative. Thus, I want to explore briefly the underpinnings of reflective practice to unpack those conservative leanings, in order to position feminist critical pedagogy as the key route to challenging those leanings.

In this article, I'll consider the ways which positions reflective practice in the context of feminist pedagogical practices. Through this lens, I'll look at the site of struggle between the wider social forces, particularly class, gender, ethnicity

on the one hand, and individualised, subjective practice on the other. In this, I'll endeavour to scrutinize the iterations of critical reflection, reflexivity and reflective practice and develop the core concepts that underpin my argument for a feminist critique in the discussion that is crucial to this scholarly project. That is, I propose to explore the Other side, (de Beauvoir, 1953) and propose that a feminist critique is essential in this discussion. I argue that the revelation of these Other sides is essential for those who experience oppression and subjugation, as well as the self-awareness of educators who live and work in this world. As such, the Other side enhances and extends the practice.

Foundations and New Ways of Knowing

When Dewey (1933) proposed reflection as a route to problem-solving in education, he was opening a new portal to the creation of knowledge with the potential to transform the experience of the educative process. In particular, the focus on experiential learning was ground breaking. Dewey argued that, however people arrived at new insights emanating from reflection, those insights lead to the newer position, more advanced than the starting point. And crucially, this advanced position is new knowledge. Reflection, in Dewey's terms, was both an intellectual process as well as an inductive logical process. That is, rational, logical argument, on one hand, leaving room for almost intuitive leaps, where suggestion and imagination play vital roles in arriving at that advanced state, (Dewey, 1933). Indeed, imagination is the great bulwark against narrow ways of knowing, (Finnegan, 2016). This proposal challenged the status of the scientific, positivist approach to creating new knowledge, which prevailed at the time and which prevails today in many disciplines, even in education (Connolly, 2016).

Dewey (1916) was the foundation for Schön's developments. His contribution placed reflection in the centre of practice, with his discussion on what practitioners can do, and, further, *ought* to do, allowing themselves to be surprised, puzzled or confused (Schön, 1983). Thus, the openness to uncertainty and vulnerability that Schön proposes is at odds with the ways in which many professions are framed. The status of professional development is gaining traction with Continuous Professional Development (CPD). But CPD is more likely to be undertaken to keep the professional up to date with new discoveries or new explorations, and the aim is to improve their practice, rather than to admit to uncertainty. Nonetheless, the promotion of reflective practice has the potential to interrogate this steadfastness. And, both Dewey and Schön have contributed to the understanding that reflective practice is a rich source of

new, self-created knowledge, challenging the view that knowledge is created in the vacuum outside of applied practice.

Interestingly, Freire's work in 1972, also promoted reflection as a prelude to action in his formulation of praxis. Freire contends that praxis is essential to create an alternative epistemological position, with the imperative to start with experience and continue with a critical inquiry into the social, cultural and political significance of the experience (Freire, 1972), notwithstanding the deficits that Freire acknowledged subsequently.

Thus, the foundations of reflective practice in education rest on the major contributions of Dewey and Schön. Reflective practice is viewed as intellectual and rational, rather than an emotional and consciousness raising process. In addition, it completely lacks gender and social analysis, thus promoting an individualistic model of teaching and learning.

The Warzone and Critical Pedagogy

Education is in the frontline of the warzone within conflicting social forces (Connolly and Hussey, 2013). The battle is between critical educators who maintain that critical pedagogy has the capacity to work towards the common good, democracy, social justice, civil society and social and personal emancipation, on the one hand, and the neo-liberal economic discourse which has deepened the ways in which education performs as an instrument of the social, cultural and economic elites on the other hand.

Bourdieu argues powerfully that education maintains the status quo, with his framing of capitals, social and cultural. He considers that the reproduction of the norms and values in society, essentially an exercise of power (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1990), continues the entire social system using education as the conduit. That is, inequality, hierarchy, poverty and all other oppressions are maintained through the education system in the wider picture, regardless of the commitment of individual teachers at classroom levels. When we look at main trends in education in Ireland, we can see that these aspirations for the public good are overshadowed by reductionist neo-liberal, economic agendas. This is particularly pertinent in the ideas that underpin the framing of further education which has been conflated with training (Government of Ireland, 2014). This inherent link with occupational training and education is evident in all aspects of the field, not just the specific programmes on professional development, such as law, business, medicine and engineering. The status of

these disciplines drives the curriculum in Higher Education, rather than any aspirations towards the public good, through social justice, community and democracy. That is, human and social development capacities are channelled into constricted lifeworlds (Williamson, 1998), as Further Education and Training (FET) loses Freirean philosophies and critical practices that developed in adult and community education. Freire's pedagogical approaches were firmly on the side of educators and learners as activists and agents of change, pitted against the deeply embedded structures of inequality (Freire, 1972). This is probably the greatest divergence between critical pedagogy and reflective practice. That is, that educators are part of the learning community, and that both the learners and educators are agents, potentially if not actually, in their own lives. The nexus between structure and agency is exemplified in groupwork for learning.

Groupwork and Dialogue

Groupwork in adult learning is framed in many ways, from the individualist, psychological perspectives to the more communitarian, cooperative ways. That is, groupwork is a key process in enabling people to become more agentic in their own personal and social lives, equipped to challenge social structures (Connolly, 2008). Praxis is allied to the connections between structure and agency. Without this framing of agency, the fundamental elements of action and reflection are meaningless. The practice of working with groups in adult education is a model of participative democracy. The ways in which this practice can encompass a diversity of positions is the first principle in creating a more tolerant learning environment. That is, this model can embrace differences rather than perpetuate homogeneity and narrowness. In addition, adult learning groups are in the front line of countering the industrial model on which schooling is based, with the passive, individualist acceptance of rules and regulations, learning by rote, sitting in rows, and working so hard for a perceived reward that education promises to everyone, but which only rewards those who have power and privilege in society already.

This necessarily infers the continuous, reiterative dimensions of reflective practice in the moment and subsequent to the moment, through writing, discussion and groupwork. However, a central concern about reflective practice persists in the concerns about groupwork and reflection, that is, that it cannot, of and in itself, interrogate gender, social and multi-cultural inequality, because it doesn't have the breadth of vision to encompass these inequalities. A feminist lens is a vital way of addressing this blind spot. Moreover, feminist theory is not

unitary, as a basic introductory text book can readily show. It would be more accurate to say that *feminist theories*, as the scholarships are multidisciplinary, multi-layered and dynamic, with constant dialogue and discussion, arguments, tensions and new positions emerging in the vibrant field (Braithwaite and Orr, 2017). This has the impact of unsettling, upsetting and problematising knowledge as we understand it, not only in terms of what is considered knowledge in the first place but also in addressing ways of knowing and ways of being in the world. This opens up conversations about epistemology per se, but pertinently for this discussion, in adult and community education as well. Thus, for this article, I'm underpinning my use of the concepts *feminism* and *feminist* with this understanding: living, breathing, questioning, transforming, and these dynamics are congruent with the field of adult and community education itself.

Feminised but Not Feminist

Clegg maintains that reflective practice is promoted and valorised in feminised professions such as education, counselling, nursing and social work (Clegg, 2010, p. 167). Quite often, feminised occupations are seen as feminist. However, these areas are more likely to promote traditional perspectives about gender, for example, that women are better at caring than men, and men are better at logical, rational work. It is notable that reflective practice is almost absent in traditionally masculinist or patriarchal professions, such as management, business, engineering and construction, with a reliance on professional identity and autonomy. But, notwithstanding this debate, the feminised applications of reflective practice is open to the inherent risk of self-monitoring and self-censoring within a closed circuit, re-enforcing the gender stereotypes, when it could, potentially, be the enactment of radical practice.

This is perpetuated through the internalised constraints that gender stereotyping imposes. These include the internalised norms and values of traditional gender dichotomies which bring lower terms and conditions in work, paid and unpaid. The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) clearly identifies the gender pay gap, which is narrower at the basic skills levels, but widest at the highest pay levels, which the Council attributes to the glass ceiling and indirect discrimination (NWCI, 2017). A further implication of the *feminised* but not *feminist* practice is the deepening of essentialist positioning. Feminised professions and occupations perpetuate the essentialist assumption of the way women ought to work together in the workplace, but which reverts to individualised private sphere work. In the workplace, women workers are

expected to be flexible and have the capacity to multitask, in work that centres on caring (Clegg, 2010) while in the private domain women do take most of the responsibility for housework and caring work, whether of children, spouses or elders (OECD, 2014).

Epistemology and the Wider World

Another issue that is raised by the feminist critique is the absence of content. When Schön proposed reflective practice, his intention was to challenge fundamentally the approach that prevailed - and still does - in education, the technical-rational perspective, that is, the positivist approach to the epistemology of learning and education, which renders it measurable, logical and neutral. This framing of knowledge limits it immeasurably, and promotes canonical knowledge to the detriment of lived experience and all of the arts, as well as innate and intuitive knowledge, what Thompson called 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 1996, 2006). Knowledge for political consciousness is missing from reflective practice, even as Schön proposed it, as reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Thus, for feminist practitioners, the promotion of reflective practice is problematic on two fronts, that of self-censorship and fragile identity on the one hand, but on the other, the absence of consciousness raising knowledge.

Thus, I argue that reflective practice has to address this fundamental inequality through the interrogation of the creation of knowledge. However, the danger is that in a field of practice that is predominately feminised, but not necessarily feminist, the new knowledge is framed as a kind of *women's ways of knowing* (Belenky *et al.*,1986) which was ground-breaking in its way and day, particularly with regards to the social aspect of the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge. However, I want to examine this difference between women's ways of knowing and feminist ways of knowing.

Feminist Ways of Knowing

Anne B. Ryan's significant and influential work reframes these assumptions about the essentialist nature of epistemology (Ryan, 2001). Her interrogation of the liberal humanist perspectives that are influential in adult and community education is vitally important, particularly when it comes to the theory of the person in adult education and how adult education can hope to bring about social change if it relies on these liberal humanistic philosophies.

This tenet is central in the argument that education can envision and work towards profound social change. On the face of it, starting where people are at, that is, the Freirean and Women's Studies approach, looks like the person-centred approach developed from Rogers' ideas, from counselling and therapy and which he applied to education and community (Rogers and Freiberg, 1993). Rogers' stance, though compassionate and caring, is underpinned by an inescapable individualism. This means that he adheres to the liberalism that is inherent in the quests for freedom, based on the ideas of freedoms that emerged during the Enlightenment, and include freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press. It also, incidentally, embraces the free market, and the rights to property (Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2012). Rogers joins Maslow in humanistic psychology with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1968) which again, promoted the individualism that inevitability followed from a narrow world-view of liberalism.

The Other

This belief and trust in individualism completely ignores the structural dimensions to inequality. De Beauvoir develops the concept of the Other to demonstrate the dominance of an androcentric social outlook, in which women are perceived not in their own right but only in relation to this androcentric perspective (1953). The importance of this concept is hard to overestimate in terms of enabling the understanding of persistent *second sex* status of women in social life. The Othering of women is not based on biological differences. Rather it is created out of the socialisation of one half of humanity, not only by the dominant other half, but by the whole of society, through the internalisation. *One is not born but rather becomes woman* challenges essentialism fundamentally, that is, the assumption that there are essential qualities of femininities, and by implication, essential qualities of masculinities, inextricably linked to biology. The internalisation of the social construction of gender means that it is monitored and controlled by heteronormativity, that is, androcentric social norms and values based on the idea of complementary - albeit primary and secondary - gender and sexual roles, which rewards compliance and punishes deviance. But further, de Beauvoir asserts that the quest for freedom and liberation is not to become more like the Subject, the masculine norm which is the opposite of the Other, but rather to fight for equality through discovering an alternative to heteronormativity in the public as well as the private domains. This has profound implications for feminist ways of knowing. By acknowledging that these assumptions are ubiquitous and so-called *common sense*, feminist ways of knowing avoids the risk that Belenky

et al. (1996) take, that of the ascribing essential, rather than experiential and constructive qualities to women's ways of knowing. De Beauvoir is clear that the lens provided by the concept of the Other enables the analysis of experience, and is the key to uncovering those ubiquitous assumptions.

Othering also serves as a vital concept in the analysis of other inequalities and oppressions: class, race, ethnicity, ability, culture. By applying the Other lens, it's clear to see androcentrism, but it also makes the Eurocentric, Western, Northern, able, classist, mainstream, normative, and so on stand out in stark relief. Gender, class, race, sexuality and ethnicity are dimensions of personal, individual identity, while simultaneously being a part of macro social categories which carry various weights, depending on the social power of the normative. This power and influence is not simply about individual agency, but rather it is conferred by the status of the social. While agency can be enhanced through education, it still has to acknowledge and battle against those structural barriers. The Other lens is a crucial educational and reflective means for connecting the personal experience of oppression and the social structures which perpetuate it.

Starting where people are at is just that: the start. The whole idea of starting from that point is to move beyond it and in particular, to transform the personal, the 'I', to the political, the 'we' is fundamental. This is the basis of women's studies, it is implicit in Freire's work and it and the *raison d'être* of critical adult and community education and hopefully, optimistically, it will count substantially in Higher and Further Education, while it may lag behind in training contexts.

The point about feminist ways of knowing is to insert it into the knowledge created through reflective practice. And it points up a glaring deficit, in addition to the absence of social and gender analyses, that of standpoint.

Standpoint theory, as explored by Harding, refers to the value of the knowledge derived from the experience of belonging to a sub-ordinate or marginalised group, particularly women, in the production of knowledge and the practice of power (Harding, 2004). While Harding acknowledges the controversies within the debates, it remains a clear position to shed light on all occurrences of inequality and inequity. Thus, the feminist standpoint is immeasurably valuable in reflective practice, succeeding in linking, not only the action or practice to reflection, but also, more importantly, the personal to the political.

Further, this focus on the personal and standpoint brings in another element, that of the self-awareness that is absent from other frameworks. This necessarily infers a significant shift from *reflective* practice to reflexive practice. Reflexive practice focuses on our being in the world, how we, as agentic practitioners in a stratified world, see that world. Reflexive practice has to encompass a consciousness raising element, rather than simply improve practice. Reflexive practice brings the critical into the process and the knowledge that is created in that critical process is thus closer to knowledge for emancipation. And this has implications for the models of practice that are created.

Models and the Missing Lenses

The existing models of reflective practice are derived from the work of Dewey, Schön in mainstream education and other professions, and Freire in critical pedagogy, adult and community education and community development. Brookfield explores his own model, in which he promotes the idea of four lenses in the process, namely, the autobiographical, the students', the colleagues', and finally, the theoretical lenses (Brookfield, 1995). Brookfield inserts criticality into this process, with the reflexivity that I have discussed above. And as an extremely influential adult educator, his work shaped the practice in very significant ways.

In addition, Kolb's reflective learning cycle is freely used in reflective practice, following a similar process, moving from concrete experience, to reflection, to conceptualisation, to action, (Kolb, 1984). Both follow the pattern of the description of the experience, followed by an evaluation, followed by an analysis, and finally, the plan for future practice. While both these contributors have added substance to the field, they are not alone.

Bolton argues that writing is a key element in reflective practice and the process of writing shifts reflective practice into a formative, tangible, creation. The result of written engagement provides a more profound and multi-layered account of thinking (Bolton, 2010). That is, it makes thinking overt and explicit, rather than an abstract, cognitive process that becomes evident in practice only, at best.

Hillier argues very cogently for the critical consciousness that critical theory generated, that fundamentally challenged traditional ways of knowing. And she highlights the role of that the women's movement in that elemental questioning. Further, when ethics are included in the process, she goes deeper still in the

interrogation, to urge practitioners to search for the real issues that are part and parcel of critical practice, taking culture, tradition, our socially situated selves into the picture and problematising the 'taken-for-granted' common sense and assumptions that characterises our everyday lives (Hillier, 2005, pp. 13–15). That is, Hillier acknowledges implicitly and explicitly the centrality of critical theory and the debt to feminist thought and, by implication, the Other side of our socially situated selves. And further, how our socially situated selves necessarily demands reflexivity. This brings us to the centrality of the feminist lens.

The Feminist Lens

The feminist lens extends everything, from the analyses of the self and identity to high art; from interpersonal relationships to the power relationships in globalisation. And all spaces along these spectra. In this context of reflective practice, it is the crucial missing link. If we adopt Freirean praxis in our critical pedagogy, we have to include the feminist lens. Freire was clear that his blind-spot was gender. He had a clear grasp on class oppressions, north-south colonisation and urban-rural divides but not gender. The feminist lens enabled his work to become clearer about whose side he was on, and it adds a dimension that it would miss others. And feminist pedagogy acknowledges the inter-relationships with his vision for education.

A feminist lens creates a fundamental disturbance in scholarship and in the social world. In terms of education, feminism had disrupted epistemology, ontology, research, practice and engagement, to name but a few dimensions. It has also disrupted the disciplinary demarcation and curriculum studies. It has created space for new areas of interest, particularly intersectionality and subaltern studies, as well as disability studies, equality studies and LGBTQ studies. And it has even disrupted the ways in which education is offered, particularly adult and community education, with the diverse, non-traditional emphasis in participation, dialogue and facilitation of learning.

With reflective practice, the model that the feminist lens reveals is congruent with the social movements that feminisms are based on. That is, it is firmly rooted on real experiences and real analyses of real oppressions and real commitment to profound social change for emancipation. A feminist lens starts with the interrogation of where you stand with regards to socially situated lives, in particular lives that are lived in oppression and degradation. It questions how this influences your practice and asks what your commitment to emancipation is? And how do you turn this into knowledge? Finally, feminist reflexive practice

asks you to reflect on the implications for your practice and to start a new cycle of reflection.

This model recognises the missing lenses in the work of Brookfield, (1995) Schön, (1983) Boud *et al.*, (1993), Bolton, (2010) and many others who are committed to improving education through reflective practice. It also compensates for all the deficits in previous models, even within critical pedagogy. It starts where the educator is at, the educator's standpoint, which is the starting point for Freirean and feminist education. It also recognises that both practitioners and learners ought to be equally open to the creation of new knowledge. Above all, this model contains the possibility of creating an environment in which real transformation can happen. This takes education out of the hands of the powerful and into the hands of the population as a whole for the public good and social justice. And of course, it is the model to open the possibility of creating a better world, for everyone.

Conclusion
In this article I endeavoured to address the recent promotion of reflective practice in teacher education. I have reviewed the foundations of reflective practice and shown how these foundations have persisted throughout the roll-out to the present day. I identified the missing lenses, particularly those overlooked by those who do not connect the personal with the political, but also missing in those models drawing on critical theory, but afflicted by gender blindness. And when the gender blindness is acknowledged and redressed, it opens the floodgates for other analyses of inequality. If this is to become mainstream in teacher education, it has to embrace the full scope that has been developed in adult and community education and to guard against practices that maintain the individualist status quo.

In writing this article I recognised my own ignorance and all that I needed to learn. In particular, I saw the hope and commitment to creating a better world by so many adult and further educators, as well as allies in mainstream education. I also learned about the ways in which the potential, as proposed by Dewey and Freire, were drained of criticality, with a reductionism that simplified it into a series of steps that kept everything in the classroom, echoing Murray's contentions about the limits to transformative learning (Murray, 2013).

My vision for feminist reflective practice is to have an impact in people's lives, to bring about real change to real experiences and to real social constraints. If

we are going to promote reflective practice as critical educators, it cannot be unquestioned or reduced to a series of simple steps. It has to have a real impact on practitioners as well as learners, but also on education as a social institution. And a feminist lens enables us to see the Other side, to review our blind spots and to develop our agency against the might of structural inequality.

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What Adult Learners with Dyslexia Can Tell Us about the 'Temperature' of Adult Learning

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Abstract

This paper draws on the qualitative findings of a PhD study which focused on the lived experiences of adult learners with dyslexia in Ireland. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 adult learners with dyslexia in 2014 and these findings, with particular relevance to adult learning in the recently restructured Further Education and Training (FET) sector, are discussed in this paper. The findings relate to the struggle the adults have experienced throughout their lives and the support and accommodations they need as adult learners. Finally, recommendations are made in relation to creating a more equitable FET sector for adults with dyslexia.

Keywords: Dyslexia, Further Education and Training, Adult Guidance Counselling

Introduction

Dyslexia is not a new phenomenon or condition. Knowledge about dyslexia within an Irish education context has increased over the years, with key publications such as the *Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia* (DES, 2001) and the follow-up report by McPhillips *et al.* (2015). Nonetheless, there are still prevalent misconceptions about dyslexia where literacy skills are being linked to intelligence, and many individuals with dyslexia experience social stigma (Evans, 2015; Riddell and Weedon, 2014).

The Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI, 2016) defines dyslexia as:

> …a specific learning difficulty which makes it harder to learn how to read, write and spell accurately. It is not caused by lack of education or by lack of intelligence. Adults will often have developed ways of coping with these

difficulties and even ways of hiding it. Dyslexic difficulties occur on a spectrum from mild to severe. (DAI, 2016, p. 2)

Additionally, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2011) offers a useful approach to understanding disability which can be described as a merger of the medical and the social models of disability. Consistent with this approach, dyslexia can be described as the result of dynamic interactions between biological, psychological and social factors (WHO, 2011). Based on this approach, adult guidance counselling can be described as one of the key support activities for adult learners, which was the particular focus of this study (Elftorp, 2017a). This approach also means that considerations of appropriate support for learners with dyslexia need to be multi-layered, particularly in the context of research which suggests that dyslexia is associated with poor educational retention, anxiety and low self-esteem (McGuckin *et al.*, 2013; Pino and Mortari, 2014; UCC and CIT, 2010).

This paper will outline the context of the study, the methodology used, the findings and a discussion of those findings in relation to previous research. Finally, a number of recommendations conclude this paper.

Context

In Ireland, Higher Education (HE) is gradually becoming more accessible to individuals with dyslexia and other disabilities (AHEAD, 2018). A number of national initiatives and an infrastructure to support access and participation in HE have been established, such as the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme and Disability Support Services (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018). This infrastructure has been put in place thanks to clear targets and a focus on 'widening' access to HE in public policy (Fleming *et al.*, 2017; HEA, 2015). However, such efforts have not been replicated in the FET strategy, and consequently, there have been no means to measure participation, no clear targets and no national approach or disability support structure established to date (McGuckin *et al.*, 2013).

It is estimated that there are nearly twice as many learners with disabilities in the FET sector compared to the HE sector (AHEAD, 2018; SOLAS, 2016) and these learners may have limited access to appropriate support. It is important to emphasise, however, the dispersed nature of FET provision as there are examples of good practice (McGuckin *et al.*, 2013). For example, the Adult and Community Education (ACE) strand of the FET sector have core principles

of learner-centeredness, inclusiveness and social justice, with the aim to foster empowerment and to recognise and accommodate diversity (AONTAS, 2010). ACE providers vary in relation to the specific courses and supports they offer to learners with disabilities such as dyslexia. Nonetheless, the structure of ACE includes aspects which may be particularly suitable for learners with dyslexia as many have previously negative schooling experiences (Riddick, 2012). The structure typically involves: individualised study programmes which are adopted based on the learner's needs; a welcoming and 'non-school' environment; and a culture which aims to ensure experiences of dignity and respect for the learners (AONTAS, 2010). Although this support structure has many advantages, this kind of embedded approach demands highly knowledgeable tutors, particularly in relation to dyslexia being a 'hidden' disability (Couzens *et al.*, 2015).

However, whilst ACE has a strong emphasis on the social and personal development aspects of adult learning, other FET programmes and the FET strategy are informed by a neoliberal agenda which focuses on employability and skills development (e.g. SOLAS, 2014; Action Plan 2018). As such, there appears to have been missed opportunities to adopt a social justice approach and to develop an infrastructure of disability support, during the restructuring of the FET sector in recent years.

In relation to the rights of adult learners with dyslexia, Irish legislation establishes that educational institutions are required to actively prevent discrimination and to provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that learners do not experience any disadvantage as a result of their disability (i.e. *Disability Act 2005; Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN Act); Equal Status Act 2000; Equality Act 2004; Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014*). All adult learners, regardless of the programme they are enrolled on, have the same legal rights. However, the State Fund for Students with Disabilities, which institutions can use to finance reasonable accommodations, is only available to HE and PLC students. Although the eligibility criteria for this Fund is due to be broadened, the recent review by the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2017) does not seem to have considered the exclusion of learners on Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 1 – 4 programmes. Furthermore, there is a legal requirement for public bodies to have an access officer with responsibility for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities (*Equality Act 2004*, Section 26(2)), but the visibility of 'access officers' and disability supports is poor in many Education and Training Boards (ETBs) (McGuckin *et al.*, 2013; NCSE, 2014). In light of this legislation and the gaps

identified in the FET provision, this study aimed to examine the experiences of adult learners with dyslexia. The next section outlines the specific methodology and methods used in the study.

Methodology

As the aim of this study was to investigate the guidance counselling needs of adults with dyslexia and four research questions guided the study. The overarching research question for this study was: What are the guidance counselling needs of adults with dyslexia? The three subordinate research questions were:

(1) How do adults with dyslexia experience and make sense of 'being dyslexic'?

(2) What challenges and social injustices do adults with dyslexia experience in relation to their personal/social, education and career development?

(3) What factors facilitate the education and career progression for adults with dyslexia?

To address these research questions, a mixed methodology, underpinned by a critical pragmatic research paradigm, with two phases of data collection was employed (Midtgarden, 2012). The benefits of this methodology relate to the methodological pluralism which resulted in complementary and comprehensive findings (Perry, 2009). Pragmatism allows for flexibility and inquiries into practical and social problems and this study drew primarily on some of the more critical works on pragmatism by Dewey (1973), where human experience is the focal point. Therefore, it was important to gather rich contextual data in relation to the self-perceptions and experiences of the adults with dyslexia in this study.

The quantitative phase of the study included an online questionnaire to guidance counsellors working in the Adult Education Guidance Service in 2012 (Elftorp and Hearne, 2014). However, the weight of the study was on the qualitative phase, which explored the experiences of adult learners with dyslexia through interviews with 14 adults in various national locations during 2014. In total, ten men and four women were interviewed, aged 18 to 67, and their education level varied from QQI Level 3 to 8. A strength of this study is that the findings are context-rich and experience-near because, as one of the participants argued:

The best source of information is not from the tutors, it's not from the teachers, it's not from the education system ... It's from the people with dyslexia themselves (Ciaran, 40's)

Findings

Although the characteristics of the 14 adults with dyslexia in this study vary in terms of severity of dyslexia, gender, age and socio-economic background, a number of recurring themes were identified in their narratives. The particular features of their experiences are presented here under the two themes of Struggle and Progress and Support in the FET Sector.

Struggle and Progress

The most prominent theme in the narratives of all of the adults was a sense of struggle. In terms of the typical dyslexic symptoms, some of the adults in this study were keen to emphasise that although their reading was slow and laboured and they struggled with accurate spelling, they were still able to read and write at some level. As adult learners, dyslexia primarily translated into difficulties with note-taking during class and completing written assignments and examinations within the specified timeframe.

However, to a greater extent than the dyslexic symptoms, the term 'struggle' related to experiences of being subjected to pejorative labels such as 'slow' or 'stupid', segregated treatments and lowered expectations in their earlier schooling, all of which had a negative impact on their self-esteem. For example, one participant articulated:

There was one [teacher] that used to throw me a sewing basket and say 'here, do that! That's all you'll ever be able to do in your life! (Catherine, 50's)

For those who had negative experiences in school, dispositional barriers often impacted on their decisions to engage in education as adults:

I kind of stayed away from theory stuff you know. I actually have a massive fear of classrooms and stuff like that … It's like being at school all over like, you know. I'd be thinking that everyone is looking at me … eh, more … it's just pure shameful, like you know. And no one is probably taking notice of me, it's all in my own head you know. (Peter, 20's)

Poor educational retention also featured in the narratives of many of the adults as some had not completed education courses due to exam anxiety and difficulties in accessing accommodations:

> Then I had to sit an exam. And like that then, I completely panicked. So I rang up and said that I wasn't available to sit the exam and could I put it off. (Dolores, 50's)

Nevertheless, five of the adults in this study had completed the one-year Career Paths for Dyslexia (CPfD) Programme and found it to be hugely beneficial, particularly in relation to increased self-esteem and self-efficacy in their learning capability. The programme was described as a 'stepping stone' to further educational and career progression.

Another key to the progression of the adults in this study was a proper dyslexia diagnosis. This was instrumental for some in relation to both their emotional wellbeing and their educational progression. For some, receiving a dyslexia diagnosis after years of wondering 'what's wrong with me?', was a momentous experience:

> I remember when she told me I had it, it was like somebody hit me a kick in the stomach. And I actually couldn't believe the shock when she was telling me. I felt like getting sick. I remember feeling like getting sick. And then I just started crying and all of a sudden I felt this relief. (Catherine, 50's)

The diagnosis also increased the adult's levels of self-esteem as it validated their intelligence, personal strengths and ability to learn:

> For me, when I did that, it was to find out, you know, what can I do for the future? What can I do to help myself to minimise the effects of dyslexia? And where are my strengths as well? So I can focus on my strengths. (Ciaran, 40's)

Overall, the experiences of the adults in this study suggests that despite adverse and traumatic experiences of being labelled as 'stupid' or being pushed to 'the back of the class', positive experiences and a formal dyslexia assessment can help adults to successfully reframe their self-perceptions. However, in the context of FET, they may still require different forms of accommodations to support their learning, as presented next.

Support in the FET Sector

Whilst some of the adults in this study had accessed reasonable accommodations or had well-developed coping skills and compensatory strategies, others had not accessed support and were unaware of their legislated rights to reasonable accommodations. Their experiences indicate that the level of support on offer in the FET sector varies significantly. Whilst there were examples of good practice, the nature of support in most ETBs was informal and the provision of accommodations was generally at the discretion of individual tutors. Some adults in this study felt that there was reluctance amongst some staff to provide basic support and reasonable accommodations, such as access to lecture notes or assistive technology (AT).

In relation to the types of support the adults in this study had availed of, half of them had been advised to attend general adult literacy training through their local ETB's literacy services, both before and after being diagnosed as dyslexic, in order to improve their literacy skills. However, on doing so they experienced severely limited progress. This was a source of great frustration for some as it was experienced as 'another failure' and as a result some of them had 'written themselves off' as learners. In hindsight, some of the adults felt that general literacy training was a way of trying to 'fix' or 'cure' dyslexia. Instead of more literacy training, most of them wanted help to develop alternative strategies and skills which could facilitate independent learning and living:

> They're [adults with dyslexia] always going to have dyslexia. So even if they do learn to read and write, it's going to be a struggle for them to do it … So I think that what most people want is, they want to find ways to help them to live their lives. (Ciaran, 40's)

Some of the identified strategies in this study relate to technology, both general ICT (Information and Communications Technology) and specialised AT. Whilst AT can be expensive and time-consuming to learn, some technology is readily available in smartphones and laptops. For example, rather than trying to copy notes by hand from a slide or whiteboard during class, some of the adults took photographs of notes with their smartphones, and they used free text-to-speech software.

Other factors which facilitated a positive learning experience appeared to be linked to the types of supports available and the culture and attitude towards dyslexia in the particular FET institution. For the adults who had participated

in the CPfD programme, the positive attitude towards dyslexia and the rare experience of being in an environment where being dyslexic was the 'norm' was of great benefit to them:

> I just got that acceptance in myself then that 'I'm actually alright, I'm not stupid'. There are some very clever people here, you know … I had that embedded belief that I was stupid or wasn't going to get it. And then when I came here and got into the mix and everyone just accepted me for where I was at. (Ben, 40's)

Another positive aspect of the CPfD Programme was the holistic approach where the psychological and social aspects of dyslexia were acknowledged.

For those who had availed of adult guidance counselling, it was evident that the personal and social dimensions of the client-centred guidance were valued:

> She [adult guidance counsellor] does the whole lot … she would talk to me about how I'm actually feeling you know. When I'm not myself, what's my confidence like? (Ben, 40's)

Finally, one of the implications of dyslexia being a 'hidden' disability was that the adults in this study were continually faced with the dilemma of disclosure of their dyslexia. Whilst some of the adults were comfortable with disclosure, most of them found it emotionally difficult and spoke of high levels of anxiety and stress. In relation to FET settings, disclosure was sometimes associated with a 'fear' of being judged. However, although many felt anxious due to anticipated negative consequences, some regarded it as necessary to access appropriate support:

> Yea, I do feel a bit awkward and a bit uncomfortable. But I mean, even when I was telling them in the college … I said I have it, it didn't feel good, but like … it is something I have to do. (Phillip, 20's)

Whilst disclosure can be a prerequisite to accessing supports, it is not guaranteed as there may not be a formal support structure in place within the FET educational institutions.

Discussion of Findings

The findings are discussed in relation to previous research and with regards to implications for policy makers and stakeholders within the FET sector under

the two headings of *(Mis)perceptions of Dyslexia and Varied Levels of Support for Adult Learners with Dyslexia.*

(Mis)perceptions of Dyslexia

One of the key issues that emerged in this study were the adults' experiences of misrecognition and feelings of shame, anxiety and low levels of self-esteem amongst many adults with dyslexia. These issues appear to be partly related to a prevalent misconceived view that dyslexia is linked to intelligence (Evans, 2015; Riddick, 2012; Young Kong, 2012). This misconception also informs how both children and adults with dyslexia are 'labelled' by others, with examples like 'slow' and 'stupid' (Birr Moje *et al.*, 2009). To address this, the adults in this study suggested that a strengthened awareness of dyslexia is essential, not least in relation to ensuring that younger generations will not be faced with the same level of adversity they experience. The implications, therefore, are that training is needed for education providers to increase their level of understanding of dyslexia and the particular needs of learners with dyslexia (McPhillips *et al.*, 2015).

Another key issue for the adults who were diagnosed as dyslexic in adulthood relates to the necessity for them to reframe their negative self-perceptions towards a new type of learner identity. The importance of 'reframing' has been noted in a number of Irish and international studies (Claassens and Lessing, 2015; Evans, 2015; Young Kong, 2012). The factors which were identified in this study as facilitating this process included: dyslexia-friendly environments, recognition of personal strengths, and validation of intelligence and learning capacity. One example of good practice in the FET sector, which was identified in this study, was the CPfD Programme in Co. Kildare. Its holistic approach encompasses both educational and personal support including literacy training, emotional wellbeing, preparation for further study or work and peer engagement with other dyslexic learners.

The current findings also strongly suggest that a dyslexia diagnosis has the potential to be transformative as it provides a sense of recognition of intelligence and capability, and likely increases access to support and accommodations in educational institutions (Claassens and Lessing, 2015). However, the benefits of being diagnosed are often contingent on the individual developing a strong knowledge of his/her dyslexia and own personal strengths (Long and McPolin, 2009; Pino and Mortari, 2014). The implications, therefore, relate to the need for support post-diagnosis to ensure these positive outcomes are maintained

(Sandell *et al.*, 2013; Young Kong, 2012). However, the financial barrier to accessing assessment services, in combination with a prevalent diagnosis criteria for access to support, are significant social justice issues which need to be addressed within the FET sector (Elftorp and Hearne, 2014; Harkin *et al.*, 2015).

Varied Levels of Support for Adult Learners with Dyslexia

With regards to the levels and types of support learners with dyslexia in the FET sector appear to be at a particular disadvantage compared to those in primary, post primary and HE due to the lack of a national approach and commitment to supporting these learners (McGuinness *et al.*, 2014). Whilst there are examples of good practice where a high level of disability support is offered through a special disability support office and by tutors, the findings suggests that support provision in the FET sector is more often left to the discretion of individual tutors, who may have insufficient knowledge about dyslexia, or may be reluctant to accommodate adult learners with dyslexia (McGuckin *et al.*, 2013; NCSE 2014).

From the findings of this study, it is evident that the varied level of support in FET institutions has negative implications for learner progression, leaving some learners feeling discouraged and anxious, or dropping out of their courses and thus perpetuating the cycle of incompletion and failure. Similarly, poor retention rates amongst students with disabilities have previously been linked to limited support provision, in Ireland and internationally (McGuckin *et al.*, 2013; Pino and Mortari, 2014; UCC and CIT, 2010). Guidance counsellors have an important role in supporting learners with dyslexia who struggle. For example, guidance counsellors may need to advocate on behalf of learners with dyslexia or enable them to confront discrimination and to assert their rights and entitlements (Blustein *et al.*, 2005).

In relation to effective accommodations for learners with dyslexia, many provisions incur little or no financial cost, such as additional time to complete an assignment or exam or allowing the learner to use mobile applications to support their learning (Nguyen *et al.*, 2013; Pino and Mortari, 2014). As such, education providers could potentially comply with their legal obligations with little additional resources and these accommodations may also be of benefit to individuals who struggle with literacy but who score outside the cut-off points for a dyslexia diagnosis (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). Nonetheless, a further expansion of the Fund for Students with Disabilities to include learners on QQI

Levels 1 – 4 could increase access to more specific accommodations and AT in the FET sector. However, the literature suggests that best practice should also involve an embedded approach, whereby the inclusion of learners with dyslexia is 'everyone's job' not just that of an access officer or a disability support service (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018, p. 6).

Conclusion

So what can we learn from adults with dyslexia about the 'temperature' of adult learning? Taking both the identified gaps in provision and the individual positive experiences into account, it may be fair to call it 'lukewarm'. Whilst the core principles of both ACE and adult guidance counselling are person-centred and focused on the promotion of social justice, there are a number of key issues which need to be addressed. Based on the findings of this study, the following three recommendations are put forward:

1. Training and continuous professional development for FET staff is needed in order to strengthen their understanding of dyslexia, their knowledge about their obligation to support dyslexic learners, and awareness of how to support them within the classroom (Elftorp, 2017b; McCarthy *et al.*, 2018; McPhillips *et al.*, 2015).

2. In light of how important a dyslexia diagnosis can be for the educational progression and emotional wellbeing of individuals with dyslexia, children's 'right' to assessment (EPSEN Act 2004) should be extended to adults. Due to the cost of a dyslexia assessment, funding should also be made available for adults with suspected but undiagnosed dyslexia. However, standardised internal needs assessments for those with a previous diagnosis should give access to support and accommodations in FET institutions (see proposed approach by Harkin *et al.*, 2015 in relation to HE).

3. Clear guidelines should be developed for providers of FET which outline a national approach to ensuring that learners do not experience any disadvantage as a result of their disability (Equality Act 2004). Such guidelines could be based on existing good practices, which employ an embedded approach and collaborative support structures (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018; McGuckin *et al.*, 2013).

4. Finally, the restructuring in the FET sector in recent years can be seen as an effort to dislodge old perceptions of the FET sector as the 'Cinderella sector' (McGuinness *et al.*, 2014). However, in order to do so, and to 'raise

the temperature' of adult learning for all learners, there also needs to be an infrastructure put in place to ensure that learners with dyslexia and other disabilities are accommodated and sufficiently supported.

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Assessing the Health of Community Education: The Experience of Change from the Perspective of Community Education Practitioners

SUZANNE KYLE

Abstract

This paper examines the changing adult education landscape in Ireland from the perspective of community education practitioners. It draws on qualitative research which highlights the challenges faced by practitioners in terms of their practice, their relationship with adult learners, and their sense of professional identity. The findings of the study indicate a tension between current adult education policy and the principles and practice of community education. The paper highlights the role community education plays in addressing social and educational exclusion and recommends that practitioners are recognised as key partners in adult and further education policy development.

Keywords: Community Education, Discourse, Status, SOLAS, ETB's, QQI, SICAP, social inclusion

Introduction

Community education provision is 'amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of Adult Education in Ireland' according to the *White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life* (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 112). Such an acknowledgement, along with the fact that a full chapter was devoted to this area of adult education provision, inspired much hope for community education providers across Ireland at the time of its publication. However, since the collapse of the Irish economy in 2008 and the imposition of harsh austerity measures, community education has been experiencing considerable temperature fluctuations. This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the many significant changes brought about by the recent establishment of the following bodies: SOLAS (the new further education and training body); sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs), replacing

thirty-three Vocational Educational Committees (VECs); and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), a merger between four qualifications bodies including the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

Assessing the current temperature of community education involves an examination of contemporary policy, principles and practice, as well as the extent to which these are impacting on community education practitioners and their engagement with adult learners and local communities. This paper is based on a study which sought to do just that.

Social Inclusion

The 'Matthew' effect of accumulated advantage exists in adult education in Ireland, where those engaging in lifelong learning are largely drawn from higher socio-economic groups (AONTAS, 2016). Those who arguably would benefit most are least likely to participate. This highlights the need for an inclusive approach which tackles entrenched inequality in Irish society. Inclusion, as a feature of community education, does not mean increasing engagement in existing societal structures, or what Freire called integrating perceived 'marginals' in to the 'healthy society' that they have forsaken (Freire, 1970). Fejes cautions against this 'them and us' approach to adult education in which those who do not participate for whatever reason 'become constructed as "others" who are in need of normalisation through social policy' (Fejes, 2008, p. 89). A more radical approach focuses on an emancipatory practice which acknowledges inequities inherent in existing structures and tackles structural inequality and political decisions which favour one group of people over another (Hurley, 2014).

Social Justice Ireland highlights the role of community education in this regard recommending that:

> The further adult and community education sector achieves parity of esteem with other sectors within the formal system. This is particularly important given that is it expected to respond to the needs of large sections of the population who have either been failed by the formal system or for whom it is unsuitable as a way of learning. (Social Justice Ireland, 2015, p. 198)

Responding to such educational needs involves sensitivity to context (Russel, 2017). The recent changes to the adult and further education landscape are contextualised within a society experiencing increasing pressures as a result of

austerity, the ever widening gap between rich and poor (Social Justice Ireland, 2016), severe and disproportionate cuts to the community sector (Harvey, 2012), and a prioritisation of skills development over a broader view of education as a tool for strengthening democracy. The phasing out of government support for community development has compounded such challenges for community education providers. This phasing out began with the first wave of closures of community development projects (CDPs) in December 2009, when 14 of the 180 CDPs were informed of their closure by a Christmas Eve fax message from the Department of Education and Skills. In the following year, most of the rest of the projects were transferred to local partnerships (University College Cork, 2015). The Community Development Programme was replaced with the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP). Access to funding for this involves a competitive tendering processes for management of community development budgets, resulting in the co-option of the sector (Fitzsimons, 2017) and a reduction in community autonomy over project activities.

A recent ESRI study, which evaluated the impact of SICAP, emphasises the importance of community development in adult education, finding that outreach and involvement through local community groups had the greatest record in terms of engaging the most marginalised people. It also highlighted significant disquiet about the current policy approach, which has moved away from acknowledging community work and community development as an internationally recognised approach to social inclusion (Darmody and Smyth, 2018).

A key feature of the current SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy is its prioritisation of adult education as a tool for skills development. This has also created a challenge for community education providers who view the purpose of education more broadly. This concern is acknowledged within the FET strategy itself:

> Interviews with stakeholders revealed important challenges in combining the maintenance of the inclusive ethos of the community education sector (for example), and at the same time matching the needs of employers. (SOLAS, 2014, p. 26)

Quality Assurance in Community Education
There is no argument between policy makers and practitioners about the need for quality in community education. Numerous quality assurance resources

have been produced and utilised by the sector over the years (Fitzsimons, 2017), for example the *Guide to Best Practice in Women's Community Education* (AONTAS, 2009). In recent years, significant reform has taken place in the area of quality assurance in adult education, most notably since the establishment of QQI. However, it is worth bearing in mind the view that much reform in education 'emerges out of a struggle between groups to make their bias (and focus) state policy and practice' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 65) and that quality is interpreted differently depending on values, judgement and cultural context of the interpreter (Fitzsimons, 2017). The extent therefore to which new QQI quality assurance and programme validation policies amount to an improvement in the learning experience and outcomes for people who are socially excluded is open to debate.

The White Paper acknowledged the role of the community sector in 'curriculum planning and design and in decisions regarding pedagogical approaches' (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 118). However, the temperature of community education in terms of its capacity to participate in this work, and to continue to offer 'quality assured' accredited courses will be more measurable over the coming years, as community education providers manage the challenges of 'reengagement' with QQI and navigate new programme validation policies and procedures (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2017). Furthermore, the current QQI fees structure will add a significant burden to an already struggling sector. Such fees amount to a double, hidden cut where funding provided to community groups by one government department is being taken back by another agency of the state. Such concerns are adding to a climate of uncertainty for community education providers who wish to autonomously continue to develop and deliver programmes leading to QQI awards, as many had done in partnership with FETAC.

Discourse

An examination of policy in adult and community education would not be complete without an acknowledgement of the influence of discourse in its development. Discourse involves the production of knowledge through language, or the practice of 'producing meaning', which enters in to and influences all social practices (Hall, 2006). This is in line with the ideas of French theorist Foucault, who highlights the disciplinary and regulatory power of discourse (Edwards, 2008). Italian philosopher Gramsci calls this influence 'common sense', or a collective knowledge that becomes accepted as beyond question, and therefore a powerful force in shaping society (Crehan, 2016).

Bernstein suggests that discourse can provide 'the means whereby external power relations can be carried by it' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 4) and therefore promotes the importance of analysing the structure of discourse. Doing so, in the context of current policy will highlight the predominant use of certain language such as the term 'further education and training' which has replaced that of 'adult education'. Where this former term had originally been used to describe a specific type of provision within the broad adult education sphere, it is now being used to name the entire sector (Murray *et al.*, 2014). Murray suggests that the use of specific types of terminology in adult and further education policy and practice represents an 'attempt at legitimising a particular approach or philosophical position in relation to learning and professional practice' (Murray, 2014). This approach, which is primarily concerned with the acquisition of skills, shies away from questions about systemic change and an analysis of the structures which perpetuate inequality (Ryan, 2014). Where acquisition of skills leading to employability is the primary goal of educational policies, the learner becomes perceived as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market place (Doyle, 2017).

Economic historian Karl Polanyi challenges these contemporary 'common sense' notions of market driven societies through an examination of the social and economic history of mankind. He found that the market economy, rather than being an inevitability, is an entirely unprecedented venture in the history of the race and that 'gain and profit made on exchange never before played an important part in human economy' (Polanyi, 1957, p. 45). He makes the crucial point about the changelessness of man as a social rather than an economic being, a point that is frequently raised in contemporary discussions about the purpose of education.

'Activation' is another term to become more prevalent in recent policy discourse. The phrase 'social inclusion' has been replaced with that of 'active inclusion' and, as previously mentioned, the Community Development programme was replaced with the Social Inclusion *Community Activation Programme.* It is accepted in social sciences that our values enter in to all our descriptions of the social world, and that most of our statements, however factual, have an ideological dimension (Hall, 2006). The concept of 'active inclusion', rather than being informed by practice on the ground, emerged on the European arena in 2005, under the UK's EU presidency (Durnescu, 2015). Implicit in such terms as active inclusion and community activation is an underlying assumption that if people are not contributing in an explicit way to the economy, they are in

need of 'activation'. This assumption disregards the other familial, community or societal roles they may be fulfilling.

The FET strategy defines active inclusion as 'enabling every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society and this includes having a job' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 7). Furthermore, the ESRI report *Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future* states that the 'main priorities and rationale of provision are to promote economic growth and development and to address social exclusion arising from economic inactivity' (McGuinness *et al.* 2014, p. 111). Rather than acknowledging the complex societal and political factors which contribute to social and economic exclusion, this language suggests only a sense of personal culpability. Not only does the use of such language indicate an ideological position on the part of policy makers, it also influences how policy makers respond to the needs of people who are socially excluded.

Methodology

The study on which this paper is based was framed within an interpretive paradigm, through which the researcher strives to understand and interpret the world in terms of its people (Cohen *et al.*, 2005). In keeping with the community education aim of providing a forum for the voices of otherwise silenced people (Connolly, 2003), and bearing in mind the difficulty for the sector in developing a collective voice (O'Neill and Cullinane, 2017), the purpose of this study was to give voice to participants. A qualitative methodology therefore was chosen, drawing on the Freirean principles of dialogue.

The chosen data collection technique was semi-structured interviews. Such an approach is ideal for interviewing participants who are articulate, are not hesitant to speak and who can share views and ideas comfortably (Creswell, 2015), as was the case with participants of this research.

The study is also influenced by critical theory, the intention of which is to emancipate the disempowered, redress inequality and to realise a democratic society based on the promotion of individual freedoms (Cohen *et al.*, 2005). The research is characterised by joint efforts and commitments of participants and researcher to change practices (Charmaz, 2005) .

Community education is characterised by considerable diversity in terms of personnel, structure and funding. In order to reflect this diversity, three

categories of community education practitioner were interviewed for this study: 1) community based practitioner, 2) community education tutor, and 3) community education staff employed by an ETB. The breakdown was as follows:

Category of practitioner	Number of practitioners interviewed
Community based practitioner	6
Community education tutor	3
ETB employed community education practitioner	4

Of the four ETB employed participants, three were Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) and one was a community education resource worker. The participants represented diverse geographical locations as they were based in a number of different counties including Limerick, Waterford, Kerry Wexford, Dublin, Kildare and Galway.

Convenience sampling was used and participants were chosen on the basis that they had at least five years' experience working in the area of community education. This experience allowed for detailed exploration of the key themes (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Data analysis involved detailed examination of the data and a dissection of the text in order to identify key concepts. These concepts were then coded and clustered in order to allow patterns and key themes to emerge (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Findings

The study highlighted the role that community education plays in addressing the complexities and issues associated with poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. It also built on previous studies acknowledging the wider social, personal and intergenerational benefits of community education. However, a key theme to emerge was that policy developments have indicated a lack of acknowledgment of this and that community education is in danger of losing its identity within the current policy framework.

The contributions from participants highlighted frustration and anxiety associated with increased social problems as a result of austerity, budget cuts,

increased bureaucracy, and labour market activation policies at the expense of an acknowledgement of the broader purpose of community education. A sense of professional dissonance among research participants is also evident within the study.

Community Education and Social Inclusion

A dominant theme to emerge was that community education has a wider focus and broader outcomes than labour market activation. All participants highlighted the role of community education in increasing community and civic engagement, reducing isolation, the promotion of interculturalism, improving mental and physical health, and progression to further education and training. The following comments from participants illustrate these points:

> I think the more we support adults in education, the better the chances are for their children and grandchildren, for the next generation, so that investment pays dividends for the next generations coming. It's so short-term or short-sighted of us to ignore. (Community based participant)

> Getting a job isn't the end game. It's getting out of the house, it's getting off medication for depression, it's being able to raise their children, it's all sorts of other outcomes that are hugely valid and also save the country a serious amount of money. (ETB participant)

> I think here in [names city] … where there have been lots of divisions between communities … having people learning together, has had a positive effect, in terms of cross-city, local development. (ETB participant)

> [The adult learner] was doing a nails [beauty therapy] class … she's [now] on the parent's council, she's organising an event for the school, that's how lots of groups operate. (ETB participant)

The role of community education in terms of tackling intergenerational inequalities and reducing the costs to the economy associated with poverty was also promoted:

> [The] women say it encouraged their own children to continue their education or to do their lessons or their exams. (Community based participant)

There's a lot of talk now about … pumping money to the health system and I often think to myself 'well what about prevention?', I often think community education actually plays a part in that.(Tutor participant)

I see it hugely as a gateway to further education.(Tutor participant)

However, it was clear from the study that when community educators seek to contribute such perspectives they are often met with a neo-liberal outlook which is difficult to challenge (Fitzsimons, 2017). One participant sums this sentiment up as follows:

There isn't that vision of education that would enable the community education sector to be valued as having a real contribution to make to the quality of life, within the current discourse. (Community based participant)

This discourse was highlighted by participants who struggled to align it with their own values. For example, the term 'learner-centeredness' arose as a discussion point in the study. It is defined by one participant as follows:

It starts off with outreach, it starts off with talking and listening to people, what they want. The second thing then, is designing the programme around the learners. (ETB participant)

However, concern is expressed about the change in the interpretation of the term:

That understanding of learner-centred has changed … from the learner being the starting point, the centre, the one that determines, to being the learner as the individual, moving up through a system of education ... about the progression of the individual learner … I think it's related a lot, to the labour market activation, job readiness, employability. (ETB participant)

Definitions of this term are considered within the literature. Where current policy discourse offers a view of learner centeredness as being either equated with consultation, or independent learning and having access resources, Murray (2014) suggests that learner centeredness is an exercise in democracy and equality, which ultimately benefits society by encouraging active, and most importantly, critical citizenship.

Despite the fact that the term 'learner-centred' is not defined within the FET

Strategy, there is a statement that further education and training is 'both learner-centred and participative in its pedagogical approach' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 22). A contradiction, however appears within the Strategy when it aims to 'implement a new integrated FET planning model to ensure relevant learner centred, flexible and employment-led provision' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 140) .

Bureaucracy

In times of cutbacks there is very often a rush by policy makers to impose strict 'value for money' rulings where education and learning becomes downgraded as something to be measured and transferred (O' Brien, 2016). A significant development in FET provision in 2017 was the roll out of a new information technology system the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS). One element of this new system is data collection which requires learners to provide detailed personal information (DDLETB, n.d.) if they wish to participate in adult and further education programmes. The research uncovered much disquiet about the use of this new system in community education which, by its nature is different to more structured, institution based provision, as can be seen in the comments below:

> You know systems abhor the nuances or the exceptions. (ETB participant)

> I think some of the other questions in terms of the jobless household questions or your education level … I think that's going to have a huge impact on … who actually engages with courses and how many courses we'll actually be able to run. Because by the time we do all the paperwork, you're going to have to add on hours to each course to get that done which means there'll be less courses overall. (ETB participant)

The potential implications for engagement were also expressed as follows:

> I think the implications are that people just won't engage … it puts people off. (ETB participant)

> It won't happen … they won't give them, they are so afraid of giving out the information, like what do they need the PPS number for? Again is it, to be able to count how many people are coming off the social welfare, or to go back and say 'well, you're on disability and you shouldn't be on this, and you should be available for work, and you shouldn't be doing this course'? They want you to educate them but yet if they're on social welfare they should be available for work. You know some of the things are a contradiction to each other. (Community based participant)

The challenges of quantifying the impact of the use of such data collection were also expressed as follows:

> I think the ones who actually come and refuse, you get some idea, you can quantify that. I think there's another group of people that will hear on the grapevine that if you're going up there they want to know this, this and this. (ETB participant)

A recent study highlights similar concerns among Adult Education Officers (AEOs) of ETBs, and raises a concern about the viability of such new policies and the 'lip service to social inclusion' (Russel, 2017, p. 50). The creation of the Community Education Facilitator role, following the publication of the *White Paper*, was an acknowledgement of the importance of engagement with local communities in order to promote educational inclusion. However, a side effect of such aforementioned new policies is that the possibilities for community engagement have been dramatically reduced, as one participant highlights below:

> I'm in the office more. I'm sitting in front of a computer more. I'm inputting data, I'm writing less qualitative reports. I'm doing more quantitative reporting … I'm more embedded in the ETB structure, by virtue of changes around reporting and funding. (ETB participant)

The demands of accreditation are also highlighted and how they can create a tension between theory and practice:

> You lose something in the formal aspect because … it's top down. You can't use their own experience in the way that you could if it wasn't formal. [With non-accredited courses] you have the freedom to do what interest them so you can go where they go rather than have to keep pulling them back and saying 'no we have to do this because it's the requirement'. (Community based participant)

> You spend your entire course producing evidence to show learning outcomes … there's absolutely no hope of them having progression because there's been no proper engagement. (Tutor participant)

This concern has echoes of Chomsky's warning about 'subtle mechanisms which contribute to ideological control … [such as supporting and encouraging people to] occupy themselves with irrelevant and innocuous work' (Chomsky, 2003, p. 239).

Professional Identity and Status

Despite the increased standing of FET in recent years, the study uncovered disquiet about the diminution of recognition for community education within the new policy framework. A symptom of this is evident in discussions about the current status of community education practitioners, with one participant stating:

> In the last number of years, I would have had a huge voice at the table … I'm now not even consulted about anything. (ETB participant)

This notion of reduced status for community education practitioners emerged during the study. The selection of quotes below is drawn from the data and offers an insight in to how participants believe community education practitioners are perceived:

the flaky edge

the awkward ones that want bespoke systems

on the boundary or the margins

so low down the pecking order

the poor relation

bottom dog

the great unwashed

wishy washy

It'll never be centre-stage

a bit of a pain in the neck

A bit 'out there'

This lack of recognition has impacted on notions of professional identity and the ability of participants to work in a manner consistent with their values and educational philosophies:

> I just don't think there's enough respect for community ed and how powerful it can be as an instigator of change. I think we don't get the credibility because … we're not the job activation people. (Tutor participant)

> The social inclusion stuff over here is just a by the way, it's not headline, it's not PR. (ETB participant)

Traditionally a fundamental feature of the community education practitioner role has involved authentic engagement with participants and local communities. As with CEFs, however, the evidence suggests that maintaining this focus has become increasingly difficult:

> People have said to me recently, it doesn't feel like a community education centre because people are in their offices, closed doors, don't want to be interrupted because they've all their reports to do. (Community based participant)

Further evidence of this sense of professional dissonance among practitioners is evident in the following contributions:

> Learner engagement … all of that kind of work has gone off the radar entirely … My contact now with learners would be through class visits … it's the quick chat, but they see you in kind of a cigire [inspector] role anyway when you're coming in like that. (ETB participant)

> Things are changing at such a rapid rate. We had a full afternoon with tutors recently, we talked about PLSS … about FARR [Funding Allocations Requests and Reporting] … about DCS [Document Centric Solutions], their pay system, about reg forms, we talked about attendance forms. At no point did we talk about curriculum development, or learner support … when we're brought together as an ETB staff it's about systems, it's about procedures … Any time I've ever been at anything regionally as a cohort of staff it's been about systems. (ETB participant)

> This idea of education for emancipation, it's gone … You know, the whole idea of equality and of transformative learning, that discussion, people are very awkward around it. (ETB participant)

This sense of a challenged professional identity indicates a tension between the 'why' of the role, particularly in relation to broader social concerns, and the current focus of the 'how' – methodologies, progression routes etc. (Finnegan, 2016). This space for reflection and professional development is limited as a result of practitioners' precarity, funding requirements and resource shortages, factors which impact on any discussion around development (O'Neill and Cullinane, 2017).

Conclusion

Despite the challenges highlighted within the study, there is cause for optimism. There is evidence indicating a recognition of community education in recent documentation. For example, the role of community education in supporting SOLAS to meet its objectives, in terms of removing barriers to FET, was highlighted in a recent study, commissioned by SOLAS themselves:

> A suite of measures which are focused around outreach to communities, and particularly vulnerable groups should continue through existing mechanisms and institutions … Stakeholder organisations, such as the voluntary sector … have unique and valuable insights into the needs and concerns of these groups.(Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017, p. 55)

Additionally, within the *FET Strategy*, two of the most widely identified recommendations, within over 150 submissions to the consultation, are that SOLAS and ETBs should facilitate the delivery of community education through community groups, and that SOLAS should measure outcomes that relate to personal development as well as employment (SOLAS, 2014).

This point is reinforced by the Community Education Facilitators' Association (CEFA):

> Community education has stayed close to the grassroots communities irrespective of the institutional configuration under which it receives its funding. What is important is that its role be recognised, its contribution valued and maintained in the midst of the crisis. (CEFA, 2014, p. 5)

Furthermore, community education is closely aligned with development education and can support the government in reaching its target towards the fourth UN *Sustainable Development Goal* (SDG) which is focused on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNDP, 2015). Under the *National SDG Implementation*

Plan Ireland has committed to ensuring by 2030 that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development (Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, 2018). Working in partnership with community education providers will support the advancement of this target.

That the community education budget under SOLAS has not been reduced and is currently ring-fenced is also a cause for optimism. However, the FET strategy states that the budget will only be maintained until 'such time as the information exists that will allow for the establishment of a new funding model based on appropriate metrics' (SOLAS 2014, p. 26). What constitutes 'appropriate' will depend on value judgements and perspectives of those involved in policy development in this area. Consequently, the effectiveness of that system will be contingent on who is tasked with its development, and the motivations behind it. Bearing in mind Freire's caution against marginalising certain groups from decision making in the area of education policy, this study argues that community education practitioners should be central to this process:

> One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action programme which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a programme constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. (Freire, 1970, pp. 83–84)

A commitment on the part of policy makers to tackling social and educational exclusion will be evidenced if there is dialogue and the full participation of community education practitioners, among others, in relation the development of adult and further education policy.

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'Tracing Our Roots: Imagining Our Future': Lessons to Learn from the Life Histories of Adult Educators in the Republic of Ireland (1970–2010)

CATHERINE MAUNSELL

Abstract

This article seeks to provide a contextual backdrop to this edition's focus on analysing the changes from the perspective of policy and practice since 2010, through presenting the findings of an in-depth analysis of the life histories of six adult educators, working in the field of adult education in the Republic of Ireland in the decades leading to 2010. Through the reflections of these six adult educators, this article offers the opportunity to trace the roots and legacies of the field and imagine the future, as they had envisioned it, at that given juncture in time.

Keywords: Adult Educators, Life History

> Our understanding of contemporary education in Ireland is greatly informed by gaining some insights into contexts and changes in the past. (Raftery, 2009, p. 9)

Introduction

Acknowledging the extent to which adult education has experienced significant change, nationally and internationally, in the recent past, this article contends that before we turn our gaze to imagining the future, we would be wise to trace the roots of adult education in Ireland at the turning point of 2010. The findings from a study of the life histories of six adult educators, captured at that moment in time, affords a valuable opportunity to reflect on the legacy of adult education in Ireland before discerning the best actions going forward.

In the context of the Republic of Ireland, and indeed internationally, it is unequivocal to state that the role and function of adult education has changed over time. Peter Jarvis, an eminent adult educator writes that 'the concept of education will always be relative and reflect the social conditions of the time

of definition' (Jarvis, 2010, p. 25). Changing population demographics and the ever increasing pace of technological developments warranting continuous updating of skills and training are some of the main challenges facing the discipline, in both a national and global context, in the 21st century.

While consensus on the value of adult education and lifelong learning has been one of the most remarkable features of the education policy discourse, both in the Republic of Ireland and internationally, it is contended that the field of adult learning and education at policy, structural and implementation levels remains fragmented and is somewhat of a 'Cinderella' character within the Irish education system (Fleming, 2012). If we accept, as given, the central role of adult education in meeting the needs of individuals in contemporary society, then such fragmentation needs to be challenged further and deeply. One further challenge, that may be seen as underpinning many of the others in the literature is that, within the lifelong learning agenda and discourse, the role and place of adult learning and education continues to be underplayed (Maunsell, Downes and McLoughlin, 2008; Holford, Riddell, Weedon, Litjens and Hannan, 2009; Downes, 2014). What then of the role of adult educators?

The Role of Adult Educators

On examination of the literature on the role of adult educators, it is clear that whether one perceives oneself to be an adult educator is a matter of context. There is no accepted taxonomy that includes all those engaged in facilitating adult learning. Even the term 'adult educator' is not universally accepted (Youngman and Singh, 2005). Usher and Bryant (1989, p. 2 as cited in Merriam and Brockett, 2007, p. 16) suggest that a spectrum exists in terms of practitioners' 'consciousness of having an educational role in working with adults. This continuum ranges from the full-time "professional" educator of adults [to] the individual whose vocational and non-vocational activities have repercussions for adult learning.'

While studies exploring the professional identities of teachers in formal education settings and higher education are more plentiful, similar explorations in terms of adult educators' identities have not been undertaken to any large extent, though there are some exceptions (Cf. Dominice, 2000).

Methodology

Given that the voice of the adult educator has been relatively absent in research undertaken and published to date, and certainly within an Irish context, the

present study, therefore, was an attempt to address this lacuna in the literature and to elicit and disseminate perspectives and voices not previously well articulated heretofore.

Mode of Inquiry: The Life History Approach

A qualitative research paradigm was adopted (Cf. Denzin and Lincoln, 2018), while the particular research methodology employed was that of life history. The life history approach aims to connect participants' accounts of their experiences to the historical, social and political contexts in which their professional lives were embedded (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000; West, Alheit, Andersen and Merrill, 2007; Merrill and West, 2009).

The research lens of this study thus focused on participants' professional lives, their becoming, being and envisioning as adult educators in the Republic of Ireland over the decades from 1970-2010. Participants' perceptions of the legacy of adult education and vision for adult education into the 21st century are the specific foci of inquiry of this article.

Participant Profile

The participants in this study were six adult educators, who, at the timing of the interviews in 2010, had been working in the field of adult education for all or most of their working lives, hence, the timeframe of 'a working life' of forty years for this study, from 1970-2010.

These six adult educators, three of whom are male and three female, while drawn from diverse disciplinary backgrounds had shared the profession of adult educator for some three decades at the least, with most of the sample having worked in the field for over four decades. At the time of interview, the participants were working across a range of adult and community education contexts: adult basic, vocational and training, community and/or higher education and were engaged in a wide range of professional endeavours *inter alia*: teaching, facilitating, advocating, networking, fund-raising, writing, researching, community development, activism, administration and policy development.

Sampling in this research study was purposive and criteria based. The sample was selected on the basis of two of Miles and Huberman's (1994) sampling approaches, namely criterion sampling and logic of maximum variation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) such a sampling strategy increases the possibility of accessing an array of multiple perspectives on a topic.

The Research Process

Qualitative in-depth interviewing is the primary method of generating data in this research study, through which the interviewer asks specific questions to obtain knowledge of the interviewee's world that relate to the study's research questions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale (1996, p. 19) proposed that 'the research interview is a specific form of conversation' and furthermore suggested (*ibid*. p.1) that 'if you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them'.

As this research study involved interviewing colleagues in the field of adult education, Rubin and Rubin's (2005, p. 14) concept of 'conversational partnerships' seems an appropriate approach to the research relationships. This approach acknowledges the partnership between the interviewee and the interviewer and allows for a congenial and cooperative experience to develop as both 'work together to achieve a shared understanding'.

The research, undertaken in partial fulfilment of a post-graduate qualification received ethical clearance from a University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were ascribed an initial/pseudonym to protect identity, their real names and identifying information are not included in any documents related to the study.

Some Issues of Sampling

In the first instance, the relatively small sample size of six participants in this study limits its generalisability to other populations, fields or time periods. Thus, while the limitation of small sample on the generalisability of the findings is a valid one, nonetheless, the richness of the data collated through the use of life history methods has compensatory potential and such a methodological approach was best matched to the overall objectives of the study.

A second issue relates to the inherent bias that occurs when non-probability sampling is employed, as was the case in this study. This approach it is accepted can lead to what are termed 'cohort' effects coming into play. This study, however, does not claim that these participants are the only adult educators who might have a perspective to offer to this study rather, that given that they have matched the set criteria, their perspectives can shed light on a sparsely researched field.

In a related vein, doing research in my 'own backyard' as it is referred to by Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 25) also raises a number of issues in respect of the

freedom with which participants will disclose to somebody they know already, and or who works in their field. It is my view, that participants had the necessary assurance as to the ethical standards being applied to data collected through the interview process to speak openly about their life histories as adult educators.

Findings from the Study

This section sets out the findings arising from the research process undertaken for this study. A decision was taken to select and prioritise particular aspects of the data, particularly those which related to the two broad themes of adult educators' perceptions of the legacy of adult education and their vision for adult education into the future.

Perceptions of the Legacy of Adult Education

In their responses to the question on what they perceived to be the legacy of adult education, participants in this study cited changes in the ethos of the education system and the learning environment or culture that is created.

> Well, schools generally are a million times better institutions than they were in my time. They're not the violent, horrible places that they were and that says a lot. There is a far better relationship, far more genuine relationship between teacher and student. (Participant D)

Participants noted that in their view the learning environment has become more learner-centred. The concept of not just accessing the 'voice' of the learner, but holding it as central to the learning process, was perceived to not be as alien as might previously have been the case.

> I would certainly say the awareness that this must be learner-centred, genuinely learner-centred. That they must be a part of everything we do. They must be a part of the decision making. (Participant E)

Infrastructural developments were also acknowledged.

> Money/Investment - which were not there in the 1980s. There was nothing. They definitely needed money and that did develop structures. That was hugely important. (Participant F)

Progress in the field of adult education in Ireland in terms of both its conceptualisation and how it had come to be were also acknowledged.

Certainly we've moved a long way. What was adult education when we started? Adult education was the night classes. There wasn't even the notion of adults studying in the daylight. (Participant E)

The transformative power of adult education, drawing on the seminal writings of theorists such as Freire (1972) and Mezirow (1991, 2000), were also reflected in participants' interviews.

I think adult and community education has allowed those people who have been so disenfranchised because of the injustice of poverty … has allowed such people to find their voice. And I think people who live in communities that have been designated as disadvantaged are suddenly, through education, highly articulate, or more than able, not only to name their experience but to engage in a critical analysis of their experience with some theoretical reflection and also then to engage in the praxis of transformation. (Participant B)

A further legacy noted was the embedding of lifelong learning not just in terms of the political and/or educational discourse but also in the realities of individuals' lives, and particularly in terms of those who, heretofore, would have been at risk of educational disadvantage and the consequent marginalisation that that engenders.

Hopefully some of that is wearing off on the young population so that when they get to be young adults or adults, even in this community, that they would want to actually have some of their adult education, whether it's their degrees or whatever, more within their own local context but it wouldn't be because the first chance was so bad. It's because maybe the first chance was better so maybe that would influence a different way of maybe conducting adult education, or at least you'd use these models that we've been talking about with people who aren't so disenfranchised. (Participant C)

Speaking to the legacy of adult education Participant A, encapsulates a range of advancements within the timeframe 1970-2010. Taken as a whole, reference is made to the scope of adult education, the role of the individual learner, the widening network, the professionalisation of the field, the body of knowledge available and the concept of adult education as a right.

We have at least established, in every area that we possibly can, the idea that learning is lifelong process, it is untenable now to think that learning ends

anywhere … I think that is the huge legacy. And I think lots of people have taken advantage of and been advantaged by their engagement with the world of learning. And I think lots of people on the ground … are better connected to each other at that human level and at that support level than there were before … there are people around who see themselves now as involved in community development and that their task is to support each other in learning. You know that was a very thin group of people thirty or forty years ago. And people have been successful in being qualified and trained and finding work and jobs as well, so there is a profession now of adult educators and even though they can be whacked or fragmented they're there. There is a body of knowledge, there are people, there are students, there are successes and all that had to be struggled for … There are people who now know that it is their right, even though the state hasn't acknowledged it yet, people know they have a right to learn. (Participant A)

A Vision of Adult Education

Arising from the invitation to envision adult education into the future, participants' responses were predictably diverse. Participant A was clear that before we can move on, in to the future we, as a society, must first undertake a clearing of the ground or catharsis in relation to the 'hurt' caused to individuals through their engagement in the education system.

We have yet to become preoccupied with how vicious our school experience is or has been. Really it is the next one … because it is not a taboo anymore. (Participant A)

This response may be located in the growing body of literature, both biographical and academic, on the adverse impact of the educational system on individuals.

Participants also envisaged a range of systemic changes necessary – particularly relating to the education system as a whole, and the position that adult education holds in relation to compulsory formal education within the lifelong learning continuum. This theme mirrors the discourse on the place of adult education within the lifelong learning framework.

And it's also maybe about creating a system and programmes of the realisation of adult education from the bottom up, as distinct from what we have now got, our White Paper that's written by the more centralised Department of Education. (Participant C).

The related concepts of participatory democracy and learner empowerment were explicitly viewed by four of the six participants as lying at the very heart of the realisation of the other objectives in adult education.

> And that is where the vision should start: educate everybody to participate fully in this society and then we can engage in the niceties and the added extras. That would be my vision … and what I'm talking about here is absolutely realisable, if there was a commitment. (Participant B)

> If you could have the decentralisation of education at all levels but where education is viewed to be a social good that ought to be encouraged in the context of local democracy. (Participant C)

A further theme emerged when participants engaged in imagining the future of adult education, related to embedding adult education more fully within a human rights and human rights education framework.

> That's, I think, a new way – when I say 'new' I mean new in the sense of, it's not that new but maybe it's 20 years or something like that – of language and practice and State obligations, so the persuasion or the motivation for the State to maintain an interest in adult education in a way that is more emancipatory, respect I think is growing in that context, which is great. (Participant C)

One participant also envisioned that we need to build and strengthen the connection between the day-to-day practice of adult education and the broader landscape of learning for life. To not lose sight or 'vision', as it were, of the bigger picture that ultimately adult learning and adult education have fundamental value.

> You're trying to get a message across to people - it isn't just the functionality of literacy, it's not just talking about the spelling and the breaking up of the words. It's like if you want to teach someone to make a boat you don't actually just give them the pages with the instructions, you give them the love of the sea. I think that's what we need to get that message out there and it's visionary. I think, at the moment, that what the country lacks, is any kind of vision. (Participant F)

While Participant E invites us to remember the past in any exercise of envisioning or create the future of adult education.

A vision? I don't know. Well, you know, all I could say is they must keep going back. You go forward but go back, back to the future. I just hope they never lose where it began, the initial, what the whole thinking was which began it all.(Participant E)

An exercise endorsed by O'Sullivan (2008) who called for us to turn theory on ourselves as adult educators. Such an invitation to reflect on the learning from the past in a sense can ensure that each generation of adult educators are not working from what Participant D refers to as 'a blank canvas'. For this participant, however, the lens rather than turning to the past needs also to face towards the future given the ever changing contexts of our modern world (Cf. Inglis, 2008).

We are constantly harking back to the past and we think in terms of incremental changes rather than operating on a blank canvas. The world has changed utterly and new approaches are required to address new challenges. (Participant D)

So what then did participants perceive to be these 'new' challenges in 2010 and to what extent are they ir/relevant in the current milieu of adult education a decade later?

Challenges Going Forward
A range of challenges for the future were referred to by participants in relation to how we come to conceptualise ourselves as a society broadly, and the structures and resourcing mechanisms in place in the adult education sector. Having dedicated professionals working in the field also emerged as a challenge going forward in realising the 'vision/s' elaborated upon in the previous section.

One participant, taking a broad overview, makes reference to the role that adult education can play in terms of re-imagining our lives.

We really have to learn how to move forward from here as well, in a different way. (Participant A)

Coherent and integrated structures were also seen as a prerequisite and were perceived as posing a particular challenge to current practice:

There has to be a plan and there is no plan. There are 25 different plans and there's jockeying for position between the people with the different plans (Participant D)

And using the imagery of the helicopter as providing an aerial overview, this participant calls for sustained and continuing leadership, within government structures, dedicated to the adult education sector.

> There is a need for somebody in the helicopter being able to see all the bits and pieces and for some clear direction being given. The first thing, however, is that the person in the helicopter must understand the system. (Participant D)

> We're looking for people with vision, who'll move outside the box, who won't say, 'Oh, that's not my job, I'm not doing that. (Participant F)

While others referred to the need for the streamlining of structures in terms of interagency networking regarding learner and programme databases so as to address the perennial challenge of duplication within the system.

In 2010, the 'hoary chestnut' of the provision of adequate and ring-fenced financial resources was perceived by most participants as the fundamental challenge to moving forward in the field of adult education.

> It's probably time for a new *White Paper* and I would say that before they begin it, the absolute campaigning should be we want on the table the percentage of the education budget that's going to be there to resource it. (Participant B)

While two participants made explicit reference to the need for predictable, dedicated funding at the service level, as opposed to funding dedicated to prescribed programmes. The grounds for this refer back to the diversity of learners' needs and it was perceived that if the criteria for funded programmes were overly restrictive, then this poses challenges for adult educators, in terms of resources being available to meet the particular needs of adult learners from diverse backgrounds.

Challenges pertaining to human resources were identified particularly in terms of the context of adult learning, the complexity of the practice and professionalisation within the field.

> It's something about this kind of warm relational context, coupled with the formality of the content. So how do you marry those? Well one of the ways you marry them is to have highly professional people. (Participant B)

While acknowledging the crucial role that volunteers contribute to the sector, the need to have an adequate body of trained and dedicated personnel was perceived as a key challenge to future growth and development within adult education. In the context of increasing moves across Europe towards professional standards for adult educators, Nicholl and Edwards (2012) in cautioning against normative discourses of professional development that such moves should be grounded in 'detailed empirical research on the pedagogies of professional development and practice in adult education' (p. 233).

Finally, concerns were raised by participants as to the impact of how adult education will respond to the changing world in which we live, particularly in terms of the impact of the economic climate and the growing neoliberal agenda.

> The tension I think now is that we would go back to a form of adult education where it is absolutely skills-based and focused on connection between this industry and what you're learning, again the dominance of the economic concerns and how to keep alive that holistic model and also the transformative education model that we've been speaking about. (Participant C)

The general concern, reflected therein, being, that the dual mandate regarding the purpose of adult education, particular to the Republic of Ireland (Mark, 2007; Maunsell *et al.*, 2008 and Holford *et al.*, 2009) would be eroded given the, then, vista of increasing financial cutbacks.

Conclusion

While there is little doubt, at the time of writing this article, that the range of reports, structures and the weight of government activity provide evidence of the pursuit of an agenda for lifelong learning, what has changed?

Recent statistics showing increases in the participation rates in lifelong learning in Ireland are a welcome development (European Commission, 2017; SOLAS, 2018). When analysed deeper, however, Ireland's participation rates remain lower relative to the EU-28 average and lower rates of participation amongst certain vulnerable groups persist. Given the robust evidence-base on the positive impact of lifelong learning in addressing personal, social and community inequalities, O'Reilly (2018), referencing the OECD (2018) roadmap for 'inclusive growth', calls for state investment to prioritise widening, as well as increasing, participation in adult learning to ensure parity of access to lifelong learning.

While nationally and internationally, adult education may be seen to be held as 'a public good worthy of public investment (UNESCO, 2016, p. 129), with Budget 2018 showing modest increases in areas of relevance to adult education (AONTAS, 2018), nonetheless, it would appear that the main competing perspective in Ireland remains 'not so much ideological as simply giving financial priority to adult education over other areas' (Maunsell *et al.*, 2008, p. 5).

Returning then to the role of the adult educator, von Hippell and Tippelt (2010), drawing on research with German adult educators, highlight the potential of adult educators' contribution to increasing participation in adult education. In politicising their role, Nesbit (2006) contends that adult educators 'have a responsibility to raise important and challenging questions and to build upon their students' lived experiences about how inequalities play out in communities, lives, and workplaces' (p. 184). The findings of Youngman and Singh (2005, p. 9), add further to this debate in that they argue for 'adult educators themselves to be proactive in shaping national and institutional policies and in promoting their interests.' While Irish sociologist Tom Inglis (2009, p. 114) centralises the role that adult educators can play in bringing about this shift in society when he speculates as to 'how adult educators and community leaders can help create a mature, learning society?'

In conclusion, this article places at the fore the argument that participation by and input of adult educators is fundamental in addressing the gaps perceived internationally between policy and its implementation in the field of adult education (UNESCO, 2010). If this view is, as it would appear to be, so central and accepted a position held by the body proper within adult education internationally, then the findings from the research study forming the basis of this article strongly endorse Youngman and Singh's (2005) contention that 'the voices of adult educators need to be given greater prominence in national and international discourses on adult education and learning' (p. 1).

When taken together, these six adult educator's life history accounts of the legacy of achievements in the field, their vision for change and their perceptions of the challenges inherent in such change, one might contend that the adult educators who participated in this study viewed themselves as agents of change and therefore intrinsically saw both their roles as adult educators and the field of adult education itself as the means by which the goal of 're-visioning' our society may be achieved.

> What I think adult education is, adult education then is the system that is put in place to help us learn our way out into beyond. (Participant A)

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Positive Youth Development and Resilience amongst Early School Leavers

DAN O'SULLIVAN

Abstract

This study examines Early School Leaving (ESL) and resilience in young people aged 15–20. It explores effects of negative internalised stereotypes on Early School Leavers (ESLs). Three Positive Youth Development (PYD) programmes were used to challenge these stereotypes in one Youthreach centre. 19 participants recruited from a Youthreach centre participated in the programmes including: Research Action Project (RAP), GAISCE, and Canoeing Skills. A cycle of discrimination, depression and drug use were important issues affecting the lives of ESLs.

Keywords: Early School Leaving, Resilience, Positive Youth Development, Youthreach

Introduction

Working with Early School Leavers (ESLs) for nearly ten years has caused me to try to gain a better understanding of the causes and effects of ESL. During this time, I observed a tendency among ESLs to conform to certain stereotypes. They seemed to have a warped sense of identity, which accentuated the negative. They lacked hope for the future, and so took no action to improve their situation or prospects. Brown (2005) comments, 'trainees often present with a profound sense of rejection, alienation, low self-esteem and behavioural problems'. When stereotypes are internalised, they may cause people to behave as if the stereotypes were true, regardless of whether or not, this is the case. At the beginning of every year, when meeting my new learners for the first time, I ask 'why is it you are all here in this room here today having left school, what is it you all have in common?' The inevitable answer provided is 'we are scumbags'. Changing this perception is the challenge for ESL educators. ESLs may believe that they have failed as a result of flaws in their character and because they

are unworthy or bad. Fannon (1952) discusses how an inferiority complex in oppressed people manifests with belief that the oppression is justified and the dominant narrative is correct. Stokes (2003) refers to this phenomenon as a 'morbid stereotype', while Lamont (2000) refers to this as the narrative of the 'working class loser', Durkheim (1893) refers to it as 'anomie'.

ESLs typically come from at risk groups within society and have experienced significant adversity, O'Mahoney (1997) and Leonard (1998) suggest that there is a strong correlation between ESL and criminality in later life. Haase (2010), Comiskey (2003) and the HSA (2008) suggest a correlation between ESL and substance misuse. Mc Garr (2010), NACDA (2014), Stokes (2002) and Barnados (2009) suggest a correlation between anxiety, depression, and lower level of mental health and well-being and ESL. ESLs who experience these difficulties need to develop life skills that can help them to deal with and overcome these issues. Resilience, which might be defined as the ability to adapt to adversity, is a key trait that can help young people from falling into a cycle of negative psychology and avoid internalising the negative stereotypes that they are subjected to.

Resilience

In environments where young people feel safe and supported by their families and wider community, they are more resilient, 'our results indicated that the combination of high home support, community support and buoyancy was associated with the most adaptive student outcomes' (Collie *et al.*, 2016 p. 13). The environment in which a young person develops plays a crucial role in their capacity for resilience, 'a social-ecological perspective of resilience would thus entail consideration of how the environment supports and/ or hinders resilience-related processes leading to well-being across various domains of a young person's life' (Lal *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). The social ecology of a young person also plays a major role in their general health and wellbeing. Schools make up part of a young person's social ecology and therefore play a valuable role in developing resilience, 'if school experiences and teacher pupil interactions can boost resilience, schools become a key site to compensate for resilience resources that are missing in students' lives' (Liebenberg *et al.*, 2016, p. 142). The school is important for young people to develop resilience therefore the teachers who work in the school and the relationships they cultivate with their students are also useful in developing resilience.

The value of transformative youth-adult relationships is that they offer the most vulnerable youth a resource for well-being. When these relationships facilitate access to pro-social expressions of personal talents, the result is likely to be adaptive behaviour among youth who face multiple risk factors (Ungar, 2013, p. 334).

Forging relationships of trust is important when dealing with at risk youth, trust and respect help young people believe in their own self efficacy. To the individual ESL represents a terrible waste of potential. The human cost is lack of opportunity, 'education is a powerful predictor of adult life chances and those who leave school with little or no education have access to fewer opportunities in later life' (Barnardos, 2009). Lack of opportunity suffered by ESLs can have more serious implications that continue throughout a person's life by lower levels of general and mental health and increased likelihood of criminal involvement, 'Early school leavers have lower levels of general health, report more anxiety and depression and have a higher mortality rate' (Mc Garr, 2010, p. 13). Lack of opportunity, poorer mental and physical health and an increased likelihood of involvement in criminality are the costs of ESL to the individual who may have left school due to circumstances over which they have no control.

Personal development and the development of self-esteem are core values in Youthreach as are the development of independent young people who can set goals and commit to them. Though Youthreach seeks to develop practical and vocational skills, this is not the sole purpose of the programme and employment and practical skills are important to ESLs and the societies in which they live. Though they are not, and should not be, the sole focus of the ESL centre. Youthreach could itself be considered a Positive Youth Development (PYD) Programme: 'the report praises the positive atmosphere of centres, and the considerable time and effort devoted by Youthreach staff members to getting to know learners individually—their background, their parents and families' (Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate, 2010, p. v). Multiple studies confirm the importance of confidence building in PYD, (Campos, 2004; Lerner *et al.,* 2002; Lofquist, 2009; Cherubini 2014; Scales 2010; Scales *et al.,* 2011). Confidence is fostered in young people through positive thinking, treating them with respect and through the completion of tasks and goals. Young people learn that if they can do it once, they can do it again. When young people become experienced at a task their confidence grows. ESL is a symptom of social reproduction. It can damage individuals, their communities and society. The following interventions were conducted to examine their effect on resilience in ESLs.

The Interventions

Three PYD programmes offered three sets of challenges: The Research Action Project (RAP), GAISCE, and Canoeing Skills. The RAP programme involved participants researching a problem affecting their own lives and initiating a positive action to deal with the problem. The RAP programme was designed using Young People at Risk (YPAR) methodology to allow young people feel empowered to raise consciousness about social issues affecting them. This programme was of 26 weeks' duration.

The GAISCE programme involved participants meeting the requirements of the bronze GAISCE award are to commit 13 hours of community involvement, of physical recreation, of developing a special skill and a further 13 hours of either community involvement, physical recreation, or developing a special skill. The award is completed with an adventure journey in which they complete a thirty-kilometre hike over two days. GAISCE, the President's Award is the equivalent of the Duke of Edinburgh Award in the Irish Republic. GAISCE is a charity organisation run by the Office of the President, the skills the programme seeks to build in young people are: goal setting and achievement, communication, determination, collaboration as part of a team, positivity in the face of adversity, and leadership. This programme was of 26 weeks' duration.

The Canoeing Skills programme challenged the participants to learn the techniques and safety skills to safely navigate moving water as part of a group. Canoeing Skills challenged young people to navigate moving water as part of a team. As part of the Canoeing Skills programme participants had to complete two certificates: River Safety and Rescue 1 (RSR1) and Level 2 Skills leading to a level four QQI component certificate in Canoeing Skills. This programme was developed by Canoeing Ireland as part of the National Adventure Sports framework. This programme was of 8 weeks' duration.

Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM)

Participants were asked to fill out the CYRM psychometric measure before beginning any of the PYD interventions. Their scores were recorded in an excel spreadsheet. After the completion of each programme participants were again asked to fill out the CYRM and their scores were recorded and entered into an excel spreadsheet. Their initial scores were subtracted from their later scores and the variance was recorded. Only 15 of the 19 participants had CYRM scores recorded at the end of their participation as they had left the centre and could not be contacted. The 15 participants had their initial score subtracted from their final score and the variance for all participants increased by 81 CYRM

points for the group as a whole. This represented a nine percent average increase in resilience for the group as a whole as the total group resilience increased from 965 to 1046. The percentage increase per group was calculated by dividing the total variance (81) by the total score for the group from test 1 and multiplying by 100. The percentage average increase in resilience for all participants was 8%[1].

Table 1. Variance in Resilience

ALL	Helen	Tommy	Mark	Harry	Josephine	Eugene	Sara	Joe	Darren	Charlie	Morgan	Clare	John	Evan	Polly	Total
Test 1	66	70	57	73	61	64	75	51	63	68	64	69	49	64	71	**965**
Test 2	66	86	62	67	64	69	74	67	68	80	66	77	75	53	72	**1046**
Variance	0	16	5	-6	3	5	-1	16	5	12	2	8	26	-11	1	**81**

Participants were grouped according to the number of PYD interventions they took part in which created 3 categories for analysis: 1 PYD (as participants in this category had only participated in one programme), 2 PYD and 3 PYD. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook one PYD programme was 9%. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook two PYD programmes was also 9%. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook three PYD programmes was 6%.

Table 2. Participation in Programmes and Resilience

3 PYDS	Helen	Tommy	Mark	Harry	Total			
Test 1	66	70	57	73	266			
Test 2	66	86	62	67	281			
Variance	0	16	5	-6	15			
2 PYDS	Jessica	Eugene	Sara	Joe	Darren	Charlie	Morgan	Total
Test 1	61	64	75	51	63	68	64	446
Test 2	64	69	74	67	68	80	66	488
Variance	3	5	-1	16	5	5	2	42
1 PYD	Clare	John	Evan	Polly	Total			
Test 1	69	49	64	71	253			
Test 2	77	75	53	72	277			
Variance	8	26	-11	1	24			

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1   Rounded to the nearest whole number

Participants were then grouped according to the PYD programme they took part in which created 3 categories for analysis: RAP, GAISCE and Canoeing Skills. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook the RAP programme was 9%. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook the GAISCE programme was 10%. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook the Canoeing Skills programme was 7%.

Table 3. Variance in Resilience Per PYD Programme

RAP

	Clare	Mark	Josephine	Timmy	Harry	Eugene	John	Sara	Helen	Joe	Charlie	Evan	Total
Test 1	69	57	61	70	73	64	49	75	66	51	63	64	762
Test 2	77	62	64	86	67	69	75	74	66	67	68	53	828
Variance	8	5	3	16	-6	5	26	-1	0	16	5	-11	66

GAISCE

	Charlie	Helen	Tommy	Mark	Sara	Josephine	Morgan	Joe	Total
Test 1	68	66	70	57	75	61	64	51	512
Test 2	80	66	86	62	74	64	66	67	565
Variance	12	0	16	5	-1	3	2	16	53

Canoeing Skills

	Charlie	Helen	Polly	Tommy	Mark	Harry	Darren	Morgan	Total
Test 1	68	66	71	70	57	73	63	64	532
Test 2	80	66	72	86	62	67	68	66	567
Variance	12	0	1	16	5	-6	5	2	53

Table 4. CYRM Scores for Each Positive Youth Development Programme

	All	RAP	GAISCE	CANOE SKILLS	3 PYDS	2 PYDS	1 PYD
Test 1	965	762	512	532	266	446	253
Test 2	1046	828	565	567	281	488	277
Difference	81	66	53	35	15	42	24
Percentage	8%	9%	10%	7%	6%	9%	9%
Participants	15	12	8	8	4	7	4

Participants in the GAISCE programme had cumulatively the largest percentage improvement in their CYRM scores outperforming the group as a whole by two percent. Participants in the RAP programme had the second largest cumulative improvement in CYRM scores and the largest individual improvement. Three participants showed a drop in their resilience scores and one showed

no change at all. Two of these participants were cohabiting and had unstable living arrangements. The remaining participant also had quite an unstable living arrangement. The participant who showed no change was related to the cohabiting participants and challenging family circumstances might account for the CYRM score. Participants who took part in three programmes experienced a smaller increase in their resilience scores than the participants who took part in two. This might suggest that that there is a diminishing return in resilience with PYD programmes as students become fatigued with the process and that living circumstances can have an impact on resilience.

The single greatest increase in resilience came from a student who participated in the RAP programme. The next three highest reported increases came from students who participated in one or more programmes. The highest normally distributed improvements in CYRM came jointly from two learners who participated in all three programmes and a learner who participated in RAP and GAISCE. The second highest normally distributed improvement came from a learner who participated in GAISCE and Canoe Skills. Participation in the GAISCE programme seems to have had the greatest impact on CYRM scores, followed by RAP and Canoe Skills. The GAISCE and RAP programmes were completed over a twenty-six-week period and the Canoe Skills programme was completed over an eight-week period. It might be possible that the Canoe Skills programme could be equally or more effective than the other two programmes given a greater period of time in which to run the programme. This would also suggest that to maximise the resilience building potential of PYD programmes they should be designed as long term programmes. The quality of the interventions may also have been a factor in the variance in CYRM scores between programmes, the Canoeing Skills programme did not formally contain any aspect of service learning though this could be integrated in future programmes.

Key Themes that Emerged from the Research

Three key issues that arose as a result of the interventions are: drug use, depression and discrimination. There is likely a cyclical relationship between these three themes which is shown in figure 1 below and dubbed the D Cycle. Action research was an appropriate research methodology to use as participants could then confront the problems they were experiencing and take action to improve their situations. Mini-research projects of participants in the RAP programme and their findings, actions and outcomes are examined. Each of the three PYD programmes are compared and discussed with relevance to their

ability to promote resilience in ESLs. All of the mini-research projects had a corresponding action. Presentations and information sheets were prepared and distributed by the learners and many learners made presentations for the first time. The more relevant an issue was to the Youth Researchers the more time they devoted to the project.

Figure 1. The D Cycle
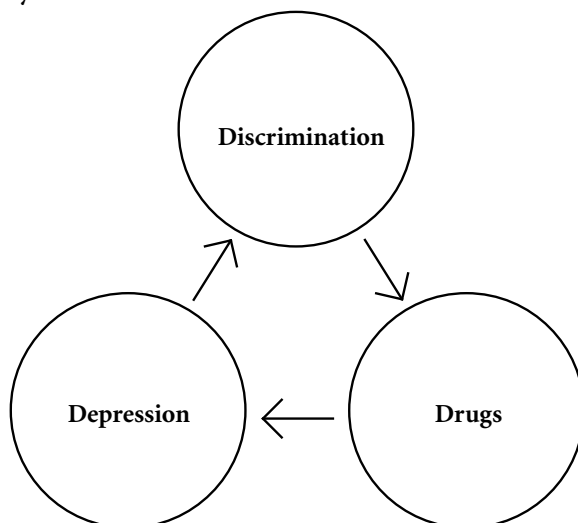
They responded well to doing research into problems affecting their own lives. Learners also seemed to become most engaged when they had real life experience of the problem they were researching. The learners in the centre worked towards the Leaving Certificate Applied qualification which involves continuous assessment of key assignments that must be completed, these assignments are often done in isolation and having a mini-research project to work on gave these assignments a unified purpose and provided scope for cross-circular integration. Students had a unified purpose behind their work when analysing data in spreadsheets, and writing their reports, rather than completing their key assignments by following a series of unrelated worksheets. Participants had an amalgamated objective relating to a real world problem that they were trying to solve which gave relevance in their learning to their own lives. The programmes were also designed to expose participants into new settings and activities in which they could establish relationships with new people. The programmes also required participants to engage in peer support in order to complete tasks. These aspects of the programme design were incorporated to overcome isolation and alienation and in doing so combat depression. The

programmes also had elements of outdoor education and thrill seeking in their design to offer an alternative to the 'buzz' of drug-taking.

Discussion

The D Cycle, discrimination, depression and drug use are challenging problems affecting the lives of ESLs. The RAP programme identified drugs, depression and discrimination as issues for ESLs. The personal reflections of participants and the RAP programme confirm this. There is likely a cyclical effect in this regard as discrimination and the narrative of the 'working class loser' when internalised can lead to depression and drug use is a likely response to this depression. There is a correlation between cannabis use and ESL though this does not imply causality. Truancy or continuous absence is a likely predictor of ESL. The research indicates that a high number of ESLs have been in care (17.9%) and that they may suffer from emotional hunger as a result. Gordon (2017) remarks that the principal focus for the ESL teacher is the creation of a connection with the young person. The research confirms that through the mentorship of an adult, ally boundaries can be crossed into contact zones where social capital can be developed through mutual process with ESLs and in these spaces their access to developmental assets can be expanded. The research indicates that taking action on an issue affecting one's own life can help a young person to take power over it.

ESLs respond well to PYD and PYD can be used in the design of educational programmes designed to overcome marginalisation in ESLs. The research suggests that the three Ds of the D cycle can be successfully challenged by Bowers *et al.*, (2010) five Cs of PYD. The five Cs of PYD are: competence, confidence, connection, caring and character. Competence is the ability to master the other domains. Confidence relates to self-worth and self-efficacy. Connection relates to positive proximal relationships so that family supports, peer groups and school and community groups provide a sense of belonging. Caring means compassion, empathy and concern for others. Character is a moral dimension in which the young person demonstrates a moral code that is suited to membership of their social ecology so that they can determine the difference between right and wrong subject to the accepted social norms. Bowers comments on the relevance of connectedness during adolescence, 'as youth transition to new learning environments, experience new social situations, and autonomy becomes an important developmental goal, many adolescents may begin to doubt their academic and social abilities and, as well, may feel less connected to both parents, peers, and the larger ecological context'

(Bowers *et al.*, 2010, p. 733). The five Cs model is used by PYD practitioners to integrate young people into their social ecologies while promoting traits in them that have a positive effect within the communities, schools, and groups to which these young people belong. The five Cs is a useful model in the design and implementation of PYD programmes and this research indicates that they can be used to disrupt the D Cycle and establish what (Merton, 2004, p. 5) refers to as a virtuous cycle of achievement.

Recommendations

Challenge the Dominant Narrative

ESL teachers should actively fight against the notion that ESLs are the Cinderellas of education. The personal anguish I experienced when I realised that most of the learners I was responsible for in Youthreach would describe themselves as 'scumbags' was distressing. Disputation is important to challenge the belief and the resulting behaviour or consequence. When the belief is disputed a new more positive understanding of the situation can emerge, e.g. there are a lot of people in this school that have problems reading and writing some of them have dyslexia or a similar learning difficulty. It doesn't make them stupid. Seligman (2002) refers to energization as a way of turning the negative belief into a positive, e.g. I am not stupid, I am just not good at reading and writing but I can be a good listener and contribute to class by saying things and making good points and I can work on my reading and writing. Service learning and the principles of YPAR used in the GAISCE and RAP programmes offer the opportunity to challenge this narrative as young people are given the opportunity to contribute positively to their communities. ESL teachers can also actively use disputation to challenge internalised beliefs of ESLs.

PYD as Proactive Health Promotion

A proactive approach to health promotion through outdoor education and PYD should benefit ESLs, as this research has shown. Third level graduates in Outdoor Education are often regarded like ESLs as the Cinderellas of education. The Leaving Cert points required to gain entry into these degree programmes are significantly lower than the points required for entry into a traditional education degree. The cost of outdoor activities can be quite prohibitive for Youthreach centres and might only last for a day. Graduates of Outdoor Education programmes might provide invaluable resources to Youthreach centres as they are qualified in a range of outdoor activities and are also the gatekeepers to a wide range of activities and opportunities not usually available to ESLs. They have the potential to be prosocial nodes for ESLs to connect to; Youthreach centres should actively recruit these types of graduates.

External Links

Greater links with national governing bodies for outdoor sports should be sought out by Youthreach centres. National governing bodies such as Canoeing Ireland, Climbing Ireland, Irish Sailing Association and Cycling Ireland to mention but a few have access to equipment and instructors that can deliver these programmes. In the case where ESL centres have hired Outdoor Education graduates they already have qualified instructors on staff with links to these organisations. Where possible equipment and instructors can be shared and costs of delivering such programmes can be greatly reduced so that while a centre may have an annual day trip to an outdoor activity centre, this might be changed into an eight-week course. This may present timetabling difficulties but during the programme students participation was dependent on their ability to stay up to date with their assignments and this seemed to work well. Regional equipment stores and licensing agreements for equipment should be entered into between Youthreach centre coordinators regionally. An important factor in the funding these organisations receive is outreach to disadvantaged groups which opens up an opportunity that centre coordinators can exploit.

Adventure sports provide opportunities to develop prosocial links as demonstrated in this research. Young people can experience a 'buzz' that they might otherwise seek from illicit substances. They provide an opportunity for young people to find a sense of belonging and connect to prosocial nodes as well as providing an escape that is more socially acceptable and certainly a healthier alternative to substance abuse. ESLs trapped in a cycle of negative psychology experiencing anhedonia might be reinvigorated by the thrill of adventure sports. Young people can experience adversity through adventure sports as part of a team, learn how to deal with setbacks through expedition and become more resilient. Young people can learn essential life skills like risk management, safety procedure and learn that through hard work and dedication anything is possible. Fear is intrinsic to adventure sports, managing and overcoming fear is important to the young people in crisis. Dealing with big emotions and being supported by adult allies and other team members while doing so creates a sense of belonging and fraternity in young people.

Service Learning

Service learning was a feature of YPAR and the RAP project, and the GAISCE programme that was undertaken as part of this research. Service learning improves young people's self-conception of their value and worth and allows them to contribute to their communities. Service learning is a way of integrating

learning with community work so that young people can see themselves as contributing to their communities. Scales (2011) comments on the importance of service learning, 'if a programme succeeds in raising youth assets, it is, by definition of the asset framework, having an impact beyond youth themselves: Asset scores for youth in a given programme are not likely to increase absent an impact on the broader ecology of young people's families, schools, peers, and communities'. Young people who feel that they can exercise a positive influence over their communities, raise the level of developmental assets in their community are becoming pro social nodes themselves.

Conclusion

It is well recognised in the literature, as discussed above, that ESLs need greater emotional support from their teachers than their counterparts in the mainstream, though there is no specific training for Youthreach staff in how to provide this. The internalisation of negative stereotypes has a demoralising effect on ESLs, challenging this dismal internalised narrative requires a catharsis, an experience from which a new truth emerges and the ESLs self-perception undergoes a paradigm shift to a more positive self-perception. Positive health promotion and positive self-perceptions for learners should be key values in Youthreach centres. External links provide scope for ESLs to engage in developmental activities and build positive purpose led relationships within their communities. Service learning provides an opportunity for young people to see themselves as contributors to society, this is important to alienated youth as it allows them to form connections and develop a sense of purpose and belonging. For some ESLs trapped in a dismal cycle of negative psychology, a clinical therapeutic approach might be necessary to break the cycle.

Young people who attend second chance education institutions like Youthreach are under the false perception on entry into Youthreach centres that they are 'scumbags and knackers'. They can present with challenging behaviour and a range of learning difficulties. The role of teacher in a Youthreach centre is a difficult one, however, if we can challenge this false perception so that by the time a young person completes the Youthreach programme they have changed this dismal self-concept, then their time in the centre will have been a success.

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