

# 50 Years of AONTAS: Developments in the Field of Adult Education in Ireland as Reflected in the Contents of *The Adult Learner* and its Antecedent Journals

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## Abstract

*Our article was commissioned by AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation in Ireland. Using a critical and independent ‘outsider’ perspective, we analyse and examine the contents of The Adult Learner journal (ALJ), published in Ireland by the Adult Education Organisers’ Association (AEOA) and later with AONTAS<sup>1</sup> between 1985 and 2017. We also include an analysis of an antecedent journal, A Review of Adult Education, first published by AONTAS in 1971 and briefly reissued in 1979–80. As well as identifying trends in content and authorship in all 39 journals across almost five decades, our analysis also provides a window into the establishment of AONTAS, its journals, editors and editorial boards. Like the 50-year retrospective review of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning (Harris and Morrison, 2011) this review sought to identify evidence in the journal of recurrent and changing issues in adult education in the context of massive political, economic and social changes that have swept across the island of Ireland, and the increasingly interconnected and networked world during this period. It also sought to identify suggested methods of addressing these issues through policy and practice developments. Whilst we identify some things that are well known to AONTAS, journal readers and sectoral insiders, other less obvious trends emerge through our systematic, longitudinal, comparative and critical qualitative and quantitative analysis.*

**Keywords:** Adult Education Organisers’ Association (AEOA), AONTAS, *The Adult Learner*

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1 ‘Aontas’ was not fully capitalised regularly before 1990 but is capitalised as AONTAS in its upper case, backronym form for consistency in this paper, other than when directly cited in its earlier form.

## Introduction

This article for *The Adult Learner* journal (ALJ) was commissioned by AONTAS, the Irish, membership-based National Adult Education Organisation advocating for and promoting the rights of all adults to adult learning, as part of their celebration of 50 years since the organisation was formed in Ireland in 1968.

Cherrstrom, Robbins and Bixby (2017, Abstract) in their 10-year content analysis of *Adult Learning* (an international adult education journal published in the US) noted that academic publications ‘provide insights into a discipline’s history, knowledge base, and research norms, and thus analysing publication activity provides learning about the field of study’. Cope and Kalantzis (2009) emphasised the importance of communities of practice, such as adult education, in which knowledge making takes place, joining the existing body of public knowledge and using the citation process to discuss, review, and verify. Within and through the ALJ, authors, collaborators, reviewers and editors have written, reviewed, evaluated, revised, edited, published and communicated with and beyond their communities of practice. Lowe (2012) considered that academic journal editors play critical roles in this process, as facilitators and gatekeepers of knowledge, acting as ‘arbiters of academic taste and fashion who ultimately decide which approaches to particular historical problems thrive within the academy and which are squeezed out’ (Lowe, p. 105). For this reason, some insights from past editors have helped to inform, shape and sharpen the current review and narrative.

### The AONTAS brief

AONTAS is the umbrella Irish adult education organization based in Dublin, Ireland. The word ‘*aontas*’ is Irish for ‘union’ but is also a backronym (AONTAS) for *Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach*, meaning ‘national adult education through voluntary unification’. The organisation formed in 1968 and adopted the then un-capitalised name ‘Aontas’ in 1969.

This paper is mainly informed by evidence in the 35 *The Adult Learner* journal (ALJ) editions originally published by the Adult Education Organisers’ Association (AEOA) and later with AONTAS between 1985 and 2017, as well as in five issues of an antecedent journal *A Review of Adult Education*, first published in 1971 and again from 1979 to 1980.

The AONTAS brief anticipated that our article would also include:

1. A summary overview of the establishment of both journals, enhanced and clarified by an email survey and some online interviews with key stakeholders, including former editors, editorial board members and AONTAS staff.
2. A detailed and critical academic analysis of emergent and recurring journal themes.
3. Recurrent issues and methods of addressing them in policy and practice.

Several research questions underpinning the study of *Adult Learning* (Cherrstrom, Robbins and Bixby, 2016) supported by the American Association of Adult and Community Education (AAACE) lent themselves in adapted form to the design of the current study. They are:

1. How do regular and themed issues compare?
2. Who authors articles?
3. What are the trends in article authorship, research themes, sources of data and academic formality?

As authors, we concluded that value could be added to our review process, as Harris and Morrison (2011, p.33) found in their 50-year review of the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* (AJAL), by using some direct quotes from the ‘visible, accessible and lasting voice of the adult education discipline [in Ireland] – the flagship of the profession.’ Where feasible, snippets of ‘researcher voice’ from original articles and personal communication from previous authors have been included.

In addition, within the limits imposed by considerations of brevity, we have taken the opportunity to draw some brief conclusions about ‘what is distinctive about adult learning research in Ireland and why engage in it?’ We also briefly ‘project forward’ to envisage a different future for adult learning research, policy and practice in Ireland.

This exercise was regarded by all involved as being critically important and timely, not only for AONTAS, but also nationally and internationally. In an interconnected digital world where all literacy and learning, lifewide and

lifelong, become critical for work, survival, mobility and wellbeing, adult learning policy, practice and research become even more important. However, they are also more difficult to advocate for, conduct and report on in previously 'conventional', sectoral and institutional ways, including through printed academic journals.

Neoliberal governments worldwide have greatly reduced funding and support for anything other than initial vocational learning. In this changed 'user-pays' context, many of the past imperatives, issues and approaches to adult learning across Ireland may have become redundant, and left many adults and ageing communities, including from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, disadvantaged and out of the 'adult learning loop'.

### **Methodology and literature review**

Our methodology was guided by several similar, recent academic content analyses and desktop reviews of adult learning and related journals, particularly the Harris and Morrison (2011) study. As in their study, there were sufficient papers (287 articles) in the ALJ published annually over an almost unbroken 35+ year period to potentially include tables and graphs of quantitative trends in five-year cohorts<sup>2</sup> of: authorship (e.g. by gender, location, nationality, institutional affiliation); main paper themes (anticipating multiple themes for many articles), research methodologies, learning sector(s) addressed, learning group(s) considered, data or literature sources, theoretical perspectives, as well as relationships to policy and practice. In the event, some aspects were too multi-faceted and heterogeneous to enable visual summaries of trends. This limitation also applied to the analysis of the 117 book reviews published in the ALJ over the same period.

The qualitative methodology was guided by the approach used by Cherrstrom, Robbins and Bixby (2016) in their 10-year content analysis of *Adult Learning*. The qualitative content analysis process from Elo and Kyngeäs (2008) which informed their 2016 study was adapted to inform the current review as summarised in Table 1.

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2 The first cohort included two years of data (1985–6). The last cohort spanned six years (2012–2017).

**Table 1. Qualitative content analysis process**

*After Elo and Kyngäs (2008) and Cherrstrom, Robbins and Bixby (2016), as applied to the current study*

Phases	Procedures	Processes	Applied to this ALJ Study
<b>Preparation</b>	Selecting the scope and units of analysis	Choose what to analyse and in what detail	Derived units from each article and book reviews data collection categories
		Sample six journals	
Organising			
Inductive	Open coding	Make notes and headings while reading text	Coded data in Excel spreadsheet
		Note enough headings to describe all aspects of content	
	Creating categories	Generate categories	Generated categories grouped under higher order categories where possible
		Group categories under higher order headings	
Abstraction	Formulate general description of topic by generating categories	Name each category with content characteristic words, including sub-categories	
Deductive	Developing structured analysis matrices	Constrained or unconstrained categorisation matrix	Develop unconstrained matrix
	Coding	Code according to categories	In Excel spreadsheet
	Category testing	Compare with similar studies in cognate fields	AJAL and AAACE reviews
<b>Reporting</b>	Derive categories	Demonstrate links between data and results	Create results tables and graphs, identify major findings and trends

A similar three phase ‘qualitative content analysis process’ (after Elo and Kyngäs, 2008) was employed during the research design, preparation, organisation and reporting phases. All categorised data were entered into Excel data spreadsheets. Frequency tables and cross tabulations were produced, from which time series analyses across seven five-year periods between 1985 and 2017 were conducted and graphs produced to summarise trends.

## Results

Table 2 lists the editors of AONTAS journals published in 1971 and 1978–9, and then in most years between 1985 and 2018. In total 39 journals were published. Because of a four-year publication gap post-1980 and a change in that interval of journal format and title, only the data from the 35 annual journals of the ALJ were included in the quantitative statistical analysis that follows. When undertaking this chronology by year it is pertinent to note that between 1990 and 1999 the journal was actually published late in the year *after* the publication year on the cover, and that there were no journals released with a cover publication date in 1972–78, 1981–84 or 2006.

**Table 2. Editors of Irish adult education journals 1971–2018**

Years (number of journals)	Editors & Affiliations	Notes
1971 (1)	Publications Committee: Liam Carey (AONTAS Chairman), Tony Brown, Kenneth Milne and Thomas Llewellyn. Published by AONTAS: Irish National Education Association.	AONTAS: A Review of Adult Education, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1971.
1979–1980 (3)	Noel Daly <sup>3</sup> , Health Education Bureau and Michael W. O. Murchu, AONTAS Director, Ireland. Published by AONTAS.	Called ‘AONTAS: A Review of Adult Education’ on the cover, but ‘Aontas Review: An Irish Journal of Adult Education’ within the journal.

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3 First AEO appointed in Ireland in a pilot scheme run in Co. Meath Vocational Education Committee.

<b>1985–1991;</b> <b>[1992*];</b> <b>1993–2003 (18)</b>	Liam Bane, Adult Education Officer, Co. Dublin Vocational Education Committee (VEC), Ireland. From 1985–1990 published by Adult Education Organisers’ Association; from 1991–2017 also published with AONTAS.	Called <i>The Adult Learner</i> : subtitled ‘The Journal of Adult and Community Education in Ireland’ (1995–2005); [*Tony Downes (AEO, Dublin VEC), Acting Editor, 1992]; with Editors from England and Scotland, 2000; with Eileen Curtis, 2003.
<b>2004–5;</b> <b>2007–8 (4)</b>	Eileen Curtis, Adult Education Officer, Co Kilkenny VEC, Ireland.	With Liam Bane, 2003: No issue, 2006. Subtitled ‘The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education’ from 2007.
<b>2009 (1)</b>	Ted Fleming, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland.	Also with Colombia University New York affiliation.
<b>2010–2017 (9)</b>	Rob Mark, Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland 2010–11; University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, 2012–14; Dublin City University, Ireland, 2015–17.	
<b>2018 (1)</b>	Rosemary Moreland, Ulster University, Northern Ireland.	

### **Journal chronology and format**

Appendices 1 and 2 provide a 50-year chronology of AONTAS, *The Adult Learner* journal and its antecedent journals, including key contextual developments beyond the journals themselves but identified within the journal contents.

The terms ‘South’ and ‘North’ in the appendices and throughout this paper refer to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland respectively. Appendix 1, ‘History of AONTAS and Journals of Adult Education in Ireland to 1980’ specifically covers the early development of AONTAS between 1966 and 1984, including publication in 1971 of the first edition of *A Review of Adult Education*, and three later (‘new series’) editions published between 1979–80.

The four editions of *A Review of Adult Education* (one published in May 1971; three published between 1979–80) with their relatively formal, academic articles and book reviews were more similar in layout and style to post-2004 editions of the ALJ. The 1979–80 editions also included AONTAS meeting and conference reports.

The format of the ALJ (including cover design) changed at least 13 times over the four decades from 1985. A small number of paid advertisements were included between 1989 and 1994. As the journal became progressively less learner- and practitioner-centred and more academic in focus post-2003 (as the later graphs confirm) the average length of articles increased, the layout became more formal in style and more articles were comprehensively referenced. As the total number of articles per issue halved (from a maximum of 15–16 articles in 1977–8, to 7–10 articles post-2007), the total number of pages in the journal doubled (from 49–70 pages in the first decade from 1985, to 100–163 pages in the most recent decade to 2017).

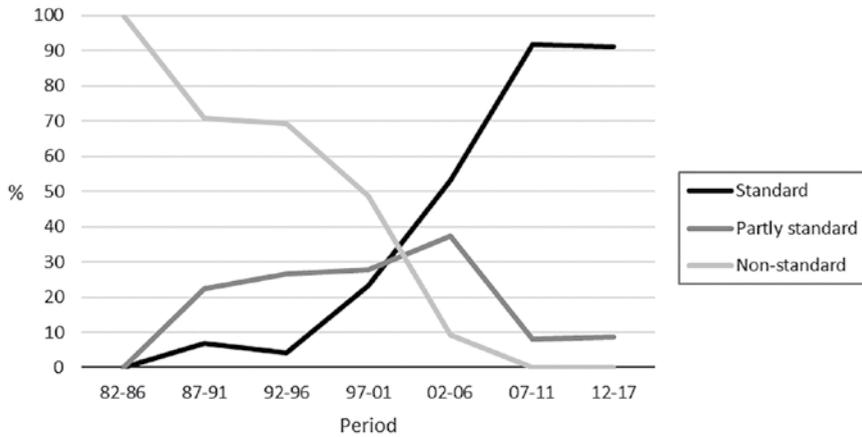
From 1985 to 2005 the ALJ comprised mostly, or in some cases entirely, short adult education practice or learner voice articles, typically with minimal or no referencing. The first, small number of journal articles in recognisable academic format appeared in the 1998 journal alongside otherwise very informal articles penned mainly by learners and Adult Education Organisers. Whilst there was some move from the 1989 and 1998 issues towards less articles and increased article formality during Liam Bane's extended editorship (1985–2003), it was only from 2003 (with Eileen Curtis as editor) that standard academic formatting, including citation and referencing, became the norm. After separate 'peer reviewed' and 'non-peer reviewed' (practice) article sections were created in 2007 all articles, on average, became longer and relatively formal, with significant increases in the average number of references cited per article.

Figure 1 summarises the proportion of journal articles by degree of academic formality<sup>4</sup> by period from 'non-standard', through 'partly standard' to 'standard'.

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4 Standard format articles included least five of eight standard academic journal components: abstract, introduction, literature review, method, results, discussion, conclusion, references. Partly standard articles included four or five components. Non-standard articles included three or less.

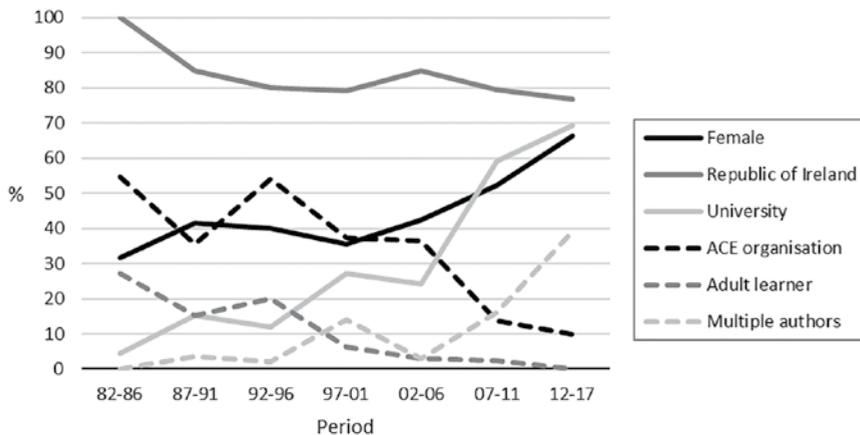
**Figure 1. Proportion of articles by degree of academic formality by period**



### Trends in authorship

There were gradual but significant changes in authorship of articles from the earliest journals (during the first five-year time period from 1985) to the most recent time period (2012–2017). Authors with an adult or community educational affiliation (as learners, workers or managers) decreased dramatically from 82% to 10%. Figure 2 illustrates these changes over 33 years.

**Figure 2. Author characteristics by period**



In summary over the three decades of the ALJ journal, the proportion of:

- Female authors doubled from 32% to 61%.
- Authors from the Republic of Ireland decreased from 100% to 77%.
- Authors with a university affiliation increased dramatically from 5% to 65%.
- Authors with an adult and community education worker affiliation decreased from 55% to 10%.
- Authors who were also adult learners (in the adult and community education sector) decreased from 27% to zero.
- Articles with multiple authors increased from zero to 39%.

Whilst both AONTAS journals consistently set out to span the Irish North-South divide, the proportion of ALJ authors from the North averaged only 6%, with two time periods (1985–86, and 2002–2006) having no Northern authors. There had been an incentive for community-based adult educators in the North, organised mainly under the banner of Workers' Educational Association (WEA) Northern Ireland until its financial collapse in June 2014, to look South as well as to Great Britain. Macintyre's August 1979 article about 'The Northern Ireland Council for Continuing Education' in the *Aontas Review* (pp. 31–35) acknowledged that 'in a community as small as Northern Ireland' there is a danger 'of becoming parochial, and in this article likely to be read mainly in the Republic, I would add that strengthening links with your institutions must surely be of mutual advantage' (p. 35). There were relatively few Northern members on the ALJ editorial board, with just one Northern member represented on a four to 12-member board (between 1979–80, 1991–95, 2007–2009 and 2013–17). However, in 2010 the ALJ editor, Rob Mark, was based at Queens University Belfast and in 2018 the editor Rosemary Moreland is from Ulster University in the North.

One observable tendency both in article authorship and involvement in the journal and AONTAS more broadly, has been for the National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth to 'punch well above its weight'. Maynooth appointed the first professor of Adult and Community Education in Ireland and for several decades has had a Department of Adult and Community Education whose staff, students and graduates have shared close links with AONTAS.

### **Trends in publishing and editorship**

Adult Education Organisers (AEOs) and their association, Adult Education Organisers' Association (AEOA), were also important in the life of the post-1985 journal. AEOA was publisher of the ALJ to 1990 and co-publisher with AONTAS from 1991. AEOs were frequently article authors and editorial board members during the first two decades to 2007.

The most striking change in journal editorial board composition occurred from 2007 as mainly adult education sectoral affiliation moved towards primarily university affiliation. Ted Fleming had been the sole editorial board member with a university affiliation from 1996 on a small (three to four member) board. Whilst the 2007 ALJ editor, Eileen Curtis remained an AEO with a Kilkenny Vocational Education Committee (VEC) affiliation, the number of board members in 2007 with a university or institute of technology affiliation increased from one to five. After 2008 the main editorial board connection to the adult education sector was via its AONTAS representatives. In the decade from 2003 the size of the editorial board tripled from three to 12 members and the scope of its sectoral and organisational representation greatly increased, consistent with the trend towards more diverse, relatively formal, academic articles from across and beyond Ireland.

During Rob Mark's editorship since 2010, the ALJ solidified as a substantial international academic journal, which Rob Mark (pers. comm.) perceived as:

Useful to many up and coming teachers, educators and support workers as well as those already working in the field. The journal has helped them articulate their purpose in so many different fields of practice and to work collaboratively across sectors.

The decision to divide the ALJ into refereed and non-refereed sections in 2007 and the inclusion in each journal post-2011 of a 'Call for Papers' and a 'Style Guide' were indications of an increasingly international journal focus, an academically strengthened and expanded editorial board and a simplified quality assurance process for expediting peer reviews. The move towards longer, comprehensively referenced and evidence-based articles in both categories coincided with increasing competition to be published in the journal. Peer reviewed articles outnumbered practice articles in all journals from 2010 with Rob Mark as editor, motivated by an increasing imperative from universities and academics to increase their proportion of higher quality, peer-reviewed publication outputs. In Rob Mark's words:

This also led to new kinds of submissions including research-based articles using a range of research methods. It also led to more research students seeking outlets for the publication of their research findings.

The editor regarded:

The availability of the journal as open access-free and accessible all over the world as a major strength. It enables AONTAS to assist educators and other workers in lifelong learning to develop their knowledge, skills and competences, not only in Ireland but also across the world and to become experts in the promotion of lifelong learning as a valued field of practice in the civic, social and economic development of nations across the world.

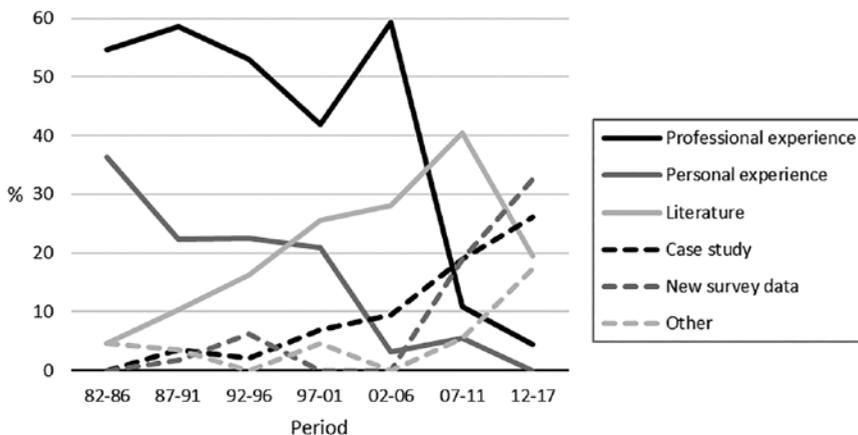
He optimistically suggested that:

There are of course still many challenges ahead, which those who publish in this journal are tasked with helping in the pursuit of promoting new knowledge and learning which will benefit all.

### Trends in data sources and referencing

The main data sources identified within articles followed the trends identified above, away from adult learner-authored and teacher-centred personal and professional evidence, towards more robust evidence and data from case studies and new surveys undertaken or reported by higher education students or academics. Figure 3 summarises how the main data sources changed.

**Figure 3. Main data source by period**

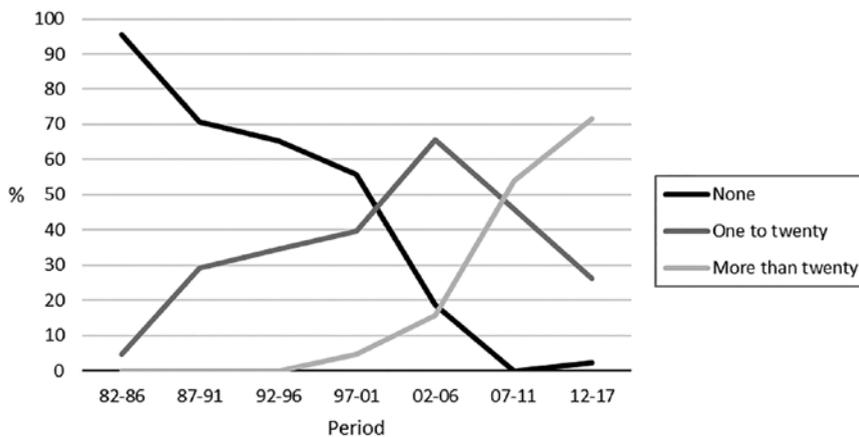


In summary, between 1985 and 2017 the main identified data source as:

- ‘Personal experience’ (as an adult learner) decreased from 36% to zero.
- Professional experience’ decreased from 53% to 4%.
- ‘Case studies’ increased from zero to 26%.
- ‘New survey data’ increased from zero to 33%.

Figure 4 illustrates the parallel, consistent trend from 1985 to 2017 towards an increasing number and range of references cited within each journal article.

**Figure 4. Number of references per period**



In summary, in the period from 1985 to 2017 the proportion of articles:

- With no references cited decreased from 95% to 2%.
- With 1–20 references cited increased from 5% to 26%.
- With more than 20 references cited increased from zero to 72%.

Self-citation in an academic journal is the referencing by articles published in the journal of articles previously published in the same journal. An increasing rate of self-citation might be regarded as both a sign of increasing maturity in a journal and an increasingly competitive publishing environment. Before 2001

there were only two instances of self-citation in the ALJ. In the decade since 2007 there have been 25 articles that make reference to previous ALJ articles with a total of 50 such references.

### **Article themes**

A total of 28 article themes (including an 'Other' theme category) were identified using both deductive and inductive categorisation methods as summarised in Table 1. A first theme was identified for all 287 articles (including an 'Other' main theme for 19 articles). A second theme was identified for 63% of all articles.

What was striking, beyond the general focus across the decades on 'adult and community education' (11% of first themes; 32% of second themes), was the very wide range of themes covered by the journal. Six other first themes were found in 5% or more (at least 13) articles, including: community development (8% of articles); policy or politics (7%); 'second chance' education (7%); literacy, basic education or language (6%); women (5%) and reflection (5%).

Given the very broad range of article themes identified, related themes and data were combined under three broad headings 'community learning' (20% of all first themes, 42% of second themes), 'teaching or learning' (18% of first themes, 15% of second themes) and 'academic' themes (11% of first themes, 8% of second themes). This very wide range is consistent with the eight diverse, cover-themed editions published between 1999–2007 (spanning the editorships of Liam Bane and Eileen Curtis) as well as the wide range and diversity of the strands within Irish adult and community education research, policy and practice. *The Adult Learner* used special 'cover-themed' articles for nine (one quarter) of its annual editions. A further nine (one quarter) of all editions incorporated one or more themes that were only evident on an analysis of its editorials.

'Community education' remained a consistent and recurring theme across four decades and spanning both journals, beginning with Tomas Roseingrave's (1971) article on 'Community Councils for adult education' and continuing in his 1979 article on 'Community development as a process of adult education'. Roseingrave (1979, p. 54) stressed that 'community development' in an Irish context had particular resonance since 'it seeks essentially in a positive and constructive way ... to overcome the causes rather than merely treat the effects of social dislocation, deprivation and underdevelopment'. As the practice

and policy of adult and community education shifted across Ireland over the decades, the journal was regularly used as a means of recording, interrogating and critically reflecting on those changes. There was a recurring focus towards critical sectoral introspection in many articles across the decades in the ALJ from 1985. These foci are exemplified by the 2003 journal theme ‘Adult Education: Where are we now?’

All members of the editorial board for the first (1985) ALJ issue were AEOs. In that issue the editor flagged that the journal title accorded ‘the adult learner’ primary importance and that ‘space would therefore be available for learner views in the journal’. By the 1990s the focus had shifted towards how practitioners and diverse stakeholders within the very diverse adult and community education sector in Ireland could or should respond to government policies in Green and White papers. At all times the emphasis in most articles has been on empowering learning through diverse communities and diverse learners. Whilst the direct ‘learner voice’ has largely been lost in the ALJ it continues to surface indirectly as evidence in some researcher narratives.

A category ‘equity group focus’ was created to attempt to capture the changing emphasis within many articles on provision of equity for particular learner groups. Whilst no focus was identified in 35% of (100) articles, the main equity focus in 16% of articles was on ‘community’; 11% on ‘second chance’ education for learners; 7% on ‘low literacy’; 7% on ‘women’, 6% on ‘unemployed’ and 4% on ‘migrants or refugees’. Seven other diverse equity target groups were identified in at least five of the 287 articles, including (in decreasing order) ‘learners’ (4%), ‘Travellers’, ‘men’, ‘older or retired’, ‘young people’, ‘rural or isolated’ (2% each).

It was striking that very few articles in the ALJ have made mention of the Irish language as an adult learner issue beyond a mention in the 1971 *Review of Adult Education* journal (p. 28) of the potential of ‘Gaeltacht Radio’ (which became *Radio na Gaeltachta*). Similarly, there have been relatively few articles across the decades devoted to adult learners with a disability or to the links between adult learning and wellbeing.

## **Insights into AONTAS history and development from antecedent journals**

### *The 1971 journal: 'A Review of Adult Education'*

Unlike the ALJ, the earlier antecedent journals (published in 1971 and 1979–80) contained a rich source of historical and contemporary information about what was then called 'Aontas'. The Foreword in the first (May 1971) issue of Aontas' *A Review of Adult Education* (p.5), referred to in short as the 'Review', considered that it marked:

A major advance in the development of a publications programme suitable to the needs of adult education in Ireland. The *Review* is a most important complement to the Newsletter which has become an established service to members of the Association. In many ways this is an exploratory exercise. We are seeking to create a style and a standard for the *Review* and to provide an authoritative forum for discussion of the major issues and developments in adult education, at home and abroad.

The *Review's* 1971 Foreword noted that it was being published at 'a time of great importance in Irish adult education', coinciding with the recent publication of the *Interim Report of the National Adult Education Survey*. It was anticipated that the *Review* would assist Aontas in leading constructive criticism and debate about that report as well as about 'policies, evaluation of needs and opportunities, assessment of programmes and projects, consideration of trends in educational methods and technology and expression of individual views'.

This first 1971 edition included six articles, three book reviews and six adult education abstracts derived from international adult education journals between 1968 and 1970. All articles were formally structured but lacked citation or referencing. The lead article, 'the challenge to AONTAS', was originally penned by Liam Carey as Aontas Chair for presentation at its first annual conference. He referenced a recent report on adult education by the Council of Europe and identified the need for 'up-to date, well assessed information' about who participates in adult education, why, with what expectations and motivations, and using 'which new methods and techniques' (1971, pp. 9–18). Carey identified that a key priority for Aontas in the 1970s would be 'to strive to eliminate the educational deficiencies of all of our people and at the same time to make a definite contribution, by way of pilot projects, to the fight against illiteracy throughout the world' (*ibid.*). Aside from encouraging

a specific a focus on functional literacy through ‘adult basic education’, Carey challenged Aontas to show dynamic leadership and initiative through adult and community education in a wide range of contexts across Ireland, Europe and the ‘Third World’.

Carey predicted that the most powerful medium for adult education of the 1970s would be television (1971, p.14), and elaborated on how Educational Television (ETV) might be developed to enhance adult education across Ireland. Maeve Conway-Piskorski’s article, ‘RTÉ Adult education’ was contributed in her role as Director of Educational Services, RTÉ.<sup>5</sup> Peter Lemass’ article, ‘Television in education’ further complemented Carey’s prediction, looking ‘at television, not just as an aid to the teacher, but as replacing him’ (p. 23). Other contributed articles in this first 1971 journal included ‘Preparation for retirement courses in Derbyshire’ by J. Lewis Jones; ‘Andragogy: A new science’ by Ger van Enckevort from the Dutch Centre for Adult Education. and ‘Community Councils for Adult Education’ by Tomas Roseingrave, National Director, Muintir na Tíre<sup>6</sup>. Roseingrave’s 1971 journal article is the first of many across the following decades that specifically identifies adult education as a powerful agent for social action and transformation, emphasising the critically important link between community development and adult education in Ireland.

*The 1979–80 journal: ‘A Review of Adult Education’*

Insights in this section are mainly drawn from Aontas’ ‘new series’ journal published in 1979 called ‘*Aontas: A Review of Adult education*’ but on the title page subtitled ‘*An Irish Journal of Adult Education*’, with the National Association of Adult Education as the publisher. It is pertinent to note here that the 1979 journal appeared in the same year that AEOs were appointed to each VEC, according to McDonnell (2003), becoming the ‘first dedicated staff working in Ireland on adult learning needs’.

Over one half (52%) of the pages of the 1979 *Aontas Review* were dedicated to Aontas-related reports. As in the 1971 journal, in place of an editorial, its joint editors penned a ‘Foreword’, which noted that there had been ‘considerable development of adult education at community, regional and national levels’ during the 1970s. McDonnell (2003, p. 48) independently noted that:

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5 RTÉ (literally Raidió Teilifís Éireann = Radio Television Ireland).

6 Muintir na Tíre (‘People of the Country’) a national Irish voluntary organisation dedicated to promoting the process of community development.

The period from 1930 to the 1960s in Ireland saw enormous expansion of VEC services. Vocational schools were built nationwide and alongside the activities of the daytime secondary school ran vibrant night classes where most of the adult programmes were offered. These evening classes became a hallmark of adult education in Ireland.

An article by Patrick Feehan from Pearse College (City of Dublin VEC) in the 1979 journal provides a succinct snapshot of how the need for adult education had become evident during the previous decades. Feehan noted that whilst prior to 1930, 'the majority of Irish people could only avail of primary education' (Feehan, 1979, p. 36), research in Ireland had recently identified four problems in adult education: large numbers of people were 'semi-illiterate' (p. 36); there was a demand for education for adults during the day; firms were seeking to improve the educational standards for their employees; and that early retirement 'means that some form of re-education or other work is required' (p.37). Feehan also noted the trend for women to work beyond home after marriage.

The 1979 publication was seen to coincide with 'increased participation' and 'broader choice' in Irish adult education programmes. The editors anticipated the new publication would 'provide a detailed account and analysis of Irish adult education and of relevant studies and developments. They also noted its indebtedness to Carroll Industries (the Irish cigarette manufacturer) for their annual grant from 1973 to 1978 that had enabled AONTAS to establish a full-time secretariat.

This first edition included Rex Cathcart's (Queen's University Belfast) article on 'the promise of recurrent education', comparing Irish adult education initiatives with those in Sweden and the Netherlands and an article by Paul Bertlsen of UNESCO Adult Education on 'the State commitment to adult education'. Fergus O'Ferrall penned an historical article on 'the role of Irish universities in adult education,' concluding that Irish universities were then 'a long way from fulfilling their responsibilities towards adult education' (p. 21). Eoin Murphy from Dublin Institute of Education wrote about 'the role of adult education in preparation for retirement', and Gerry McGann from a Vocational School in Monaghan explored whether 'there may be teaching without learning and learning without teaching'.

All five articles in the 1979 edition, like the seven and five articles respectively in the second and third (1980) editions of the *Aontas Review*, were written by well-credentialed stakeholders in formal academic style. Unlike in the 1971 edition, articles were generally fully and formally sourced and referenced. Although neither of the 1980 editions included a foreword or editorial to chart the future directions (or impending post-1980 demise) of the *Aontas Review*, Liam Carey's 'the history of AONTAS' in the 1979 edition provided a comprehensive account of the development of AONTAS before 1979. Liam Carey's view was that during the late 1960s, those involved in Irish adult education perceived that unlike many other like nations, Ireland had no 'effective network of communications between adult education practitioners, organisers, professors, agencies and researchers' (Carey, 1979, p. 10). Carey presciently contended that 'if adult educators in Ireland came together regularly we could pool and exchange our experiences and thus there would gradually emerge a more effective adult education provision in Ireland' (p. 11).

Liam Carey recalled (1979, p. 10) 'the first decisive step' towards a national adult education association in Ireland involved him contacting Sean O'Murchu, University College, Cork in early 1968, a discussion that led to a special seminar on 'Adult education in a changing Irish society' held in Dun Laoghaire in May 1968. The seminar resulted in a 12-person (2 female) committee that reported back to the first annual Adult Education Conference in May 1969 with a recommendation to form the National Association of Adult Education in Ireland to be called 'Aontas'. There was agreement that the new national association:

Should have a basic adult education philosophy ... expressed as the development of the full man, by man and for man. It implies also the development of the community, a serious and real commitment to the international peace and development. (Carey, 1979, p. 13)

Given that no AONTAS journals were published between 1972 and 1978, there is very little evidence within journals about the history of Aontas during the 1970s beyond Carey's (1979) recollections. Luke Murtagh (pers. comm.) identifies two important developments during this decade: the growth of women's groups and European Union funded anti-poverty community development initiatives. McDonnell (2003), writing as a policy analyst for AONTAS, fills in some of the missing contextual policy detail. McDonnell confirms that the Murphy Committee published a final report in 1973 on 'Adult education in Ireland'

(following an interim report in 1970). McDonnell (2003, p.48) regarded it as a 'radical' report that 'highlighted a serious literacy problem among certain adult groups, but little action was taken on the recommendations of this commission'. The Murphy report also acknowledged the role of Aontas, identifying that it had the potential to become an effective national organisation.

There is very little information in the journals examined about the history of Aontas between 1981–84, including why the *Aontas Review* was discontinued in 1980. What is known, again from McDonnell (2003, p. 48) is that:

Alongside formal education a new movement emerged [in Ireland] during the 1980s and 1990s. This was the growth of daytime education organised by community-based groups, known as 'community education'. A plethora of voluntary and community groups began to provide adult literacy, second chance education, personal development and other courses in response to local learner needs.

#### *The Adult Learner Journal from 1985*

It is in this growing 'community education context' encouraged and informed by AEOs that *The Adult Learner* journal was created in 1985. Liam Bane was editor for 19 ALJ editions between 1985–2003 (with Tony Downes as an 'acting editor' in 1992), during which two thirds of all ALJ articles were published. Liam Bane's recollections of the context in which the brief re emergence of the *Aontas Review* occurred in 1979–80 and the ALJ was created in 1985 are invaluable since they fill in some of the gaps in the history documented within the journals.

In 1979–80, the Department of Education appointed Adult Education Organisers (later called Officers). These were the first full time posts in Adult Education in the Republic of Ireland. I was appointed AEO for the area of South County Dublin. Unfortunately, the appointments coincided with the beginning of an economic crisis and there followed a time of severe financial stringency when funding for Adult Education activities was extremely limited.

We were employed by Vocational Education Committees and within our remit was the task of establishing an Adult Education service. The Organisers succeeded in meeting some of the more pressing needs, such as programmes for unemployed people and the establishment of Adult Literacy Schemes and community education programmes. (Liam Bane, pers. comm.)

Ted Fleming's (1989, pp. 2–7) article titled 'Back to the future: The first ten years of Adult Education Organisers' provides a comprehensive and critical reflection of this period. Ted Fleming, who had himself become an AEO in 1985, writing in 1989 as a Regional College Lecturer in Dundalk, recalled that 'on their appointment, AEOs very quickly discovered they had no budget'. Ted noted the relatively miniscule total adult education budget (estimated by him in 1989 to be 1/6 of 1% of the total education budget), and stressed that 'all the talk about what might be done or what should be done [in adult education] is basically aimless and flawed if we do not have a national policy on adult education towards which we can work. There is no policy. There is no direction.'

To return to Liam Bane's (2018) recollection on the event that led to the first ALJ being published in this same era in 1985:

An Association of Adult Education Organisers (AEOA) had been formed and at an AGM in 1984, I proposed that the Association should publish an annual journal. The primary motivation was to try and raise the profile of Adult Education and to showcase the interesting projects, programmes and initiatives which the Organisers had started or become involved in, working with part-time teachers, voluntary groups and other relevant agencies. The journal was to be financed by the members who paid five punts<sup>7</sup> each and other interested parties. To my knowledge, there was no such journal at the time and, as the title suggests, it was hoped that adult learners would become involved and submit articles for publication.

From the very beginning, the lack of sufficient funding was a problem and, as is evident from the earlier editions, this severely limited the scope, presentation and quality of the Journal. It was, then, a huge relief when AONTAS agreed in 1991 to finance the Adult Learner and also appointed an appropriate representative to join the Editorial Committee. The improvement in the presentation and quality of the journals which followed are plain for all to see. We were now in a much more comfortable environment. The so called 'Celtic Tiger' had made an appearance and we had entered a new era where Adult Education was in receipt of more adequate funding and was on a more professional footing. The Adult Learner too had changed and gradually became the adult academic journal as articles are of the more learned scholarly type. (Liam Bane, pers. comm.)

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7 Punt: the Irish Pound until 2002.

During Liam Bane's editorship most ALJ editions between 1986 to 2002 included an 'Ad Hock' section, anonymously and wittily penned by him in a wide variety of formats including poems and mock letters, typically with a humorous or ironic 'sting in the tail'. Bane first introduced Ad Hock, very much 'tongue in cheek' in the 1986 edition, as 'an important figure in adult education in Ireland', though the fictitious character reappeared under a number of subsequent guises.

Liam Bane's second (1986, p. 2) editorial noted that 'It is a policy of *The Adult Learner* to attempt to deal with issues that are topical and relevant to adult education and so, in this edition, we have contributions on the Green Paper (*Partners in education: Serving community needs*, 1985). Fleming (2004) suggested in an ALJ article from 2004 that aside from the Murphy report (Murphy, 1973), it was:

The Kenny Report (Kenny, 1983) ... the Green Paper (DES, 1998) and White Paper (DES, 2000) [which] set a more systematic developmental path for adult education. The development of AONTAS and NALA as national organisations contributed significantly to the way adult education has developed.

There was no journal published in the year of the Kenny Report in 1983. The 1998 ALJ editorial and several of its solicited articles were penned 'Anticipating a Green Paper' released the same year. Ted Fleming, a regular journal contributor and later editorial board member and editor provided a keynote paper for this 1998 edition about adult and community education (ACE) providing the means and structures to allow ACE to pursue an agenda of democratic participation and discourse. The year the White Paper (DES, 2000) was released coincided with the *Reclaiming Common Purpose* Special Millennial Issue (cover date 2000, but actually published a year later in October 2001), which was issued jointly with the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in the UK as well as with *Concept* in Scotland. An article titled 'Arts and culture in the Green paper' in the 1999 edition (actually published in October 2000) about arts and education for adults referenced both the White and Green papers.

The White Paper (2000) on *Adult Education: Learning for life* was particularly important since it marked the adoption, after an extensive national consultation process, of lifelong learning as a governing principle of education policy in Ireland. It defined adult education as 'any systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training'.

The 2003 the ALJ returned reflectively and critically to the 'Community Education' theme. This final edition edited by Liam Bane (with Eileen Curtis as incoming editor) returned to the theme in the context of the then recent appointment of the first Community Education Facilitators. The 2003 editorial reprinted a quote from Ted Fleming in the first ALJ edition from 1985 about developments: 'taking place too fast in adult education to allow time for reflection and debate', and the need to again cast a 'critical analytical eye ... on the concept, practice and the taken for granted assumptions of advocates of community education' (ALJ Editorial, 2002, p. 7).

These unexamined assumptions included several of the issues identified by Ted Fleming in 1985 in his 'Community education: Reflection' article (Fleming, 1985, pp. 9–16). Fleming identified at least three paradigms of community education: the *liberal paradigm* oriented towards the transformative capacity for free will exercised by the individual adult consistent with governments providing programme choice; the *reformist paradigm*, acknowledging the limiting restraints on free will exercised by dominant interests and the need for the state to intervene on behalf of disadvantaged individuals, and a *radical paradigm* (usually driven 'by a Marxist perspective') calling for a restructuring to produce changes to social forces in order to free individuals. He stressed that each of these paradigms lead to different forms of community education and called for a more critical form of practice amongst adult educators.

Consistent with this ongoing discourse about adult education theories, there were continuing debates about the appropriateness of applying liberal and radical theories to transform adult learning, adult learners and the community. Frequently cited US-based adult education theorists largely matching the paradigms above included Mezirow (1973), Freire (1972) and Knowles (1973). Fleming (1996), when theorising from an Irish perspective, acknowledges the impact of working alongside some of these US-based theorists.

### **Book reviews**

A total of 117 Book Reviews were included in the ALJ between 1985 and 2017. Where book author gender could be identified, overall (including multiple authors) there were 46% female and 54% male book authors. This proportion increased from 33% female during Liam Bane's editorship to 52% female during Rob Mark's editorship. Whilst 47% of reviewed books had a single named author, 23% had two authors, 9% three authors and 5% four to five authors. Another 16% of reviewed books had an institutional author.

Just over one half (51%) of reviewed books were published in the South, with only 2% published in the North. 'Elsewhere in the UK' accounted for 28% of authors, 11% were from the US, 3% from Europe and 4% from elsewhere. Books reviewed from the South peaked at 68% of those reviewed during Eileen Curtis' editorship and decreased to 30% under Rob Mark. Only four books from the North were reviewed, three of them during Rob Mark's editorship.

The main aggregated themes of reviewed books were: 33% 'community learning', 15% 'academic', 12% 'teaching and learning' and 41% 'Other' themes.

Editors and editorial boards have played a big part in identifying books for review in the journal. Ted Fleming, as a Board member from 1996–2008 and Editor in 2009 noted that he:

Was pushing an agenda always, and much of this is in the published material, including book reviews for practitioners to encourage up to date reading; as well as articles that I thought should push the discourse of the field in a more theory-informed practice and a critical perspective on theory, policy and practice. (Ted Fleming, pers. comm.)

## **Discussion**

### *Strands in a rope: Recurring content themes in the ALJ*

An academic journal series can be compared to a twisted rope, where the articles provide some consistency and strength over time in terms of format, content, themes and style. As a journal's editors, articles and article themes change over time new strands are added, and the nature of the rope inevitably changes and transforms. The history of the organisation that publishes a journal is retained within past journals – the previous strands of the rope – and the wider context in which papers were solicited, edited, published and read by its academic community.

During the past decade most journals and contributors working in the higher education sector have been subject to increasing pressure from their institutions to publish articles of higher quality, preferably in peer reviewed higher status (usually international) journals with more highly credentialed editorial boards. The journals have in turn sought to attain higher status in relation to other journals in the same field to attract the best international papers from the field. To return to the rope analogy, these pressures have resulted in tensions, which have tended to produce a very different 'rope', including for journals like *The*

*Adult Learner* (and *AJAL* in Australia), whose contributors, readers and other community education stakeholders have not all been academics. Whilst the 2007 decision to retain a non-refereed section was something of a compromise, the formality of the non-referred 'strands' in the journal also changed and arguably strengthened as a consequence.

These changes in the case of the ALJ have made the journal far more prone to publication pressure, dulling the potential for the adult learner voice, AEOs and Irish scholars to be heard first hand or at all, as they were in earlier decades. Nor is the journal able to react as quickly and nimbly to forthcoming or recently released government papers and reports as it was in previous decades.

The contents of the ALJ had tended over the previous two decades to be influenced by the process whereby the Irish government published discussion/consultation papers as 'Green Papers', followed by 'White Papers', which present government policy on the basis of which 'Bills' are prepared for enactment as 'Acts of Parliament', but that influence has waned in the last decade.

#### *ALJ impact*

Currently, over 1,000 articles in the field of adult education are being published globally each year, with only 10 per year on average in the ALJ from Ireland. In terms of annual published research output, USA, India, Japan, Brazil and Canada are some of the leading countries in adult education research. In terms of international journal impact and quality (as measured by Scimago scores to 2017: Scientific Journal Rankings, 2018), *Adult Education Quarterly* based in the US (0.57), the UK-based *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (0.48) and the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* (0.3) are all in the second quartile (Q2), well above the UK-based *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* (0.11, Q4). Neither of the two Canadian adult education journals nor the ALJ are listed or ranked.

It is perhaps as important to make comparisons with like journals published in the UK, Ireland's nearest neighbour during the same period of analysis. Two journals have been published in the UK under the auspices of the former NIACE: *Adults Learning* (geared primarily towards policy makers and practitioners) and *Studies in the Education of Adults* (geared towards researchers). The ALJ Editorial Board and AONTAS, despite operating in a much smaller environment in Ireland, have sought to cover both these bases in one publication.

To rank and judge the ALJ (or any other adult education journal) solely on these (or other) quantitative, external criteria at any point in time risks unfairly imposing a set of criteria that were never an important part of the journal project. As Ted Fleming recently reflected:

From the point of view of assessing [the ALJ] from outside, the size of the country with an open flow of people, ideas and publications, the ‘market’ for an Irish journal is and was always limited. Ireland is about the size of greater Manchester. This has consequences – some limiting and others more freeing. (Ted Fleming, pers. comm.)

Such criteria discount or miss the many other reasons why a journal may have been valuable to its readers, contributors and adult learners as the context for adult education policy, research and practice changed. Our evidence that the ALJ changed and adapted to these rapidly changing contexts and circumstances over the decades forms an important part of our conclusion. As Ted Fleming recalled:

In the early decades Ireland was a different place. The first three PhDs in adult education were sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church, in a clear attempt to *Rerum Novarum*<sup>8</sup> the entire education system and bolster against Communism. These contextual issues are important and the struggle to overcome them and work in a new secular environment was significant. (Ted Fleming, pers. comm.)

In 2018 the ALJ continues to adapt to meet the growing need for evidence-informed policy and practice, but at the same time serve as an increasingly highly respected publication outlet for increasingly international, university-based researchers. That these researchers are increasingly ranked according to publications they achieve in higher status, peer reviewed, international journals creates an obvious tension for the ALJ Editorial Board, given the need for AONTAS to focus primarily on its national mission. It is also pertinent to note that *The Adult Learner* journal’s transformation into a freely accessible online access journal has coincided with a time of increasingly limited funding for not-for-profit bodies from neo-liberal governments. This presumably makes

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8 *Rerum Novarum*, issued as an encyclical in 1891, discussed the relationships and mutual duties between labour and capital as well as government and its citizens. It is regarded as a foundational text of modern Catholic social teaching.

production and publication of the journal more difficult, particularly in hard copy.

Ireland is a relatively small island (population 4.8 million in the South, 1.8 million in the North) that arguably punches well above its population share, including in the field of research and practice of adult education and community development. Unlike in many like countries, the South still retains a relatively high number of academics (particularly at Maynooth University, Department of Adult and Community Education) whose main research field is in adult education. Furthermore, unlike in most other non-Nordic nations, community development practice in Ireland has a long history of government support.

### **Conclusion**

The *AONTAS Review of Adult Education* (1971 and 1979–80) and *The Adult Learner* journal (ALJ) (1985–2017) were published in Ireland during several decades of rapid and profound social and economic change, as the country moved away from an earlier, dominant religious paradigm, which had previously influenced the direction of practice of education and lifelong learning. The most recent ALJ editor, Rob Mark, reflected that during these decades:

The country, which in its early days reflected the values of a socially conservative Catholic State, has grown to take its place as a progressive and pluralistic country in the modern world. Since the 1990s the social, cultural and economic makeup of the country has been in transformation. A closer analysis of the contributions to the journal shows the emergence of a new understanding of lifelong learning focused on issues of exclusion and those affecting adult and community education from a wider perspective at local, national and international level. (Rob Mark, pers. comm.)

We conclude from our journal analysis that the ALJ has been transformed over the past three decades from a voice mainly for and by adult learners and practitioners to a substantial, increasingly international, Irish academic journal amongst relatively few others in the field. It has used a diverse range of single-themed editions (as well as multiple themes within other editions) for one half of the past three decades to strategically shape and inform Irish adult education policy and practice.

While AONTAS has striven to be relevant to and representative of all parts of the island of Ireland, in reality its reach and likely relevance to adult educators (including through the ALJ) in the North have tended to be relatively small. Nevertheless, the proportion of Northern Ireland-based authors has increased from zero during 2002–6 to 7% during 2012–17. In the same 15-year period the proportion of authors from elsewhere in the UK has declined from 15 to 4%, and the proportion of authors from elsewhere in the world has increased from zero to 13%.

AONTAS remains an active and effective national body and publisher of the ALJ, firmly committed to retaining, supporting and strengthening ‘bottom up’ forms of community education that empower and transform communities, rather than ‘top-down’ provision mainly to equity target groups from largely individual deficit and client-based models. The ALJ remains an important source of future thinking in the context of what Finnegan (2016, pp. 46–56) describes as continuing ‘crisis, austerity and shifts in policy’ impacting on and calling for a reimagining of ‘a *range* of possible futures’ for Irish adult education. Finnegan identifies ‘a deep reservoir of collective knowledge’ within adult educators:

On how to build educational relationships which are democratic and egalitarian and considerable expertise in creating curricula in a dialogical way so that people can find their voice and name their world.

Neoliberalism and outcomes-based assessment have arguably further narrowed the educational imagination and led to a deep crisis in democracy well beyond Ireland (Finnegan, 2016, pp. 55–6). In this challenging Irish and global context, *The Adult Learner* journal has served as (and remains) one of several important ways of creating this dialogue between the ‘vibrant practitioner networks, active trade unions, community groups and others meeting in open fora to discuss and debate what might be possible’ (*ibid.*). Reflecting on and critically reinterrogating the past, including the role of AONTAS and its antecedent journals, particularly the *Adult Learner*, over five decades, as the field of adult education continues to transform and be transformed by and for communities, forms an important part of this ongoing dialogue.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. History of AONTAS and journals of adult education in Ireland to 1980

Year	Journal developments and wider historical context
1966	<i>After the Second Vatican Council, under the directorship of Fr. Liam Carey, Centre for Adult and Community Education, Maynooth College, the Dublin Institute of Catholic Sociology (est. 1950) was reconstituted to 'Dublin Institute of Adult Education'.</i>
1967	Liam Carey returned from Colombia University aware that many like nations already had national adult education associations and determined to set up an Irish equivalent.
1968	Liam Carey contacted Sean O'Murchu, Department of Adult Education, University College, Cork, leading to an 'Adult Education in a changing Irish society' seminar in Dun Laoghaire, May 1968 and a 12-person (two female) Committee of a National Association of Adult Education.
1969	National Association of Adult Education Conference, Athlone, May 1969: agreed the Association title should be 'Aontas'; adopted a basic education philosophy expressed as 'the development of the full man by man and for man', implying 'the development of the community' and 'a commitment to the international peace and development'.
1970	AONTAS: the Irish National Association of Adult Education established; Aontas constitution ratified as 'The Book of Words'; 1970 conference: 'Adult Education in the 70s'; Aontas affiliated to the European Bureau of Adult Education and initiated self-funding to analyse adult education in European countries;
1971	Aontas publishes <i>A Review of Adult Education (one edition)</i> ; <i>First home for Aontas at Dublin Institute of Adult Education (until 1974)</i> ; <i>secretariat at 62/63 Eccles St, Dublin 7</i> ; 1971 Aontas conference: 'Social change, community development and the European Economic Community'.
1972	1972 AONTAS conference: 'Community adult education'.
1973	Murphy Report (1973) recognised Irish adult literacy difficulties; 1973 Aontas conference: 'Lifelong education'; Ireland joined the European Economic Community.
1974	Aontas moved to Irish Farmers Association offices, soon after to 62 Waterloo Road, Dublin. Carroll & Co funded Aontas 15,000 Pounds per year over five years to: establish a secretariat, undertake an adult education research project and sponsor an international conference in Ireland. Sean O'Murchu, UCC appointed first full time Aontas Director.
1975	<i>No contextual matters reported in journals.</i>
1976	<i>No contextual matters reported in journals.</i>

<b>1977</b>	NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency) set up by Aontas volunteers concerned about adult literacy and numeracy difficulties in Ireland.
<b>1978</b>	Aontas' original 'Book of Words' constitution redrafted; 'International conference on workers' education' coinciding with annual meeting of International Federation of Workers Education Associations, Dublin.
<b>1979</b>	<i>Aontas Review: A Review of Adult Education</i> Vol. 1, No. 1 & Vol. 1. No. 2 including Liam Carey, 'History of Aontas'; Aontas offices at 14 Fitzwilliam Place, Dublin.
<b>1980</b>	<i>Aontas Review: A Review of Adult Education</i> Vol. 2, No. 1.

## Appendix 2. Chronology of the Adult Learner journal, 1985–2018

Year	Published, Vol./No. (Editor) cover themes, journal and historical developments
1985	5/86, 1-1 (Liam Bane: LB) First issue: <i>The Adult Learner, Journal of the Adult Education Organisers' Association</i> identified 'the adult learner' of primary importance in journal; 32% of 127 journal subscribers with a religious affiliation.
1986	9/87, 1-2 (LB) Diverse contributions 'on issues topical and relevant to adult education'; largest number of articles (16) but shortest journal (49 pages). Most issues from adult learners and practitioners.
1987	10/88, 1-3 (LB) First article in standard research format; fewer articles, more structured.
1988	5/89, 1-4 (LB) Three main themes: 'Adult education and the institutions' and 'Adult education in unemployment centres' (each 5 articles), 'Community education projects' (3 articles); expansion of Educational Opportunities scheme.
1989	1-5 (LB) Emphasis on 'developments in adult and community education over ten years; with 'invited contributions from North and South'; Ted Fleming 'Ten years of Adult Education Organisers' article; first advertisement; editor noted the wilting of the adult education flower that blossomed 'after the Great Education Famine of these later years'.
1990	10/91, 2-1 (LB) Information included on 'literacy and third level [accredited] courses'. 14% of 87 journal subscribers with religious affiliation; International Literacy Year, with additional one million pounds added to Adult Literacy & Community Education Fund.
1991	11/92, 2-2 (LB) Published jointly by AEOA & AONTAS; journal a 'genuine all Irish production', editorial board expanded to include the North: 'there is more that unites than divides us'; 'an Education Act is in the air'; several advertisements included.
1992	10/93, 2-3 (Tony Downes as acting Editor) Five articles on national debate about the Green Paper, <i>Education for a changing world</i> ; very delayed journal publication due to Postal Strike and Green Paper publication.
1993	10/94 (LB) Editor identified a lack of structured government response to adult education and opportunity prior to White Paper to develop and implement policy with European Community partners on importance of adults learning; first article about men's learning.
1994	10/95 (LB) Core journal theme around 'community development'.

<b>1995</b>	10/96 (LB) Subtitled <i>The Journal of Adult and Community Education in Ireland</i> (to 2005); mostly 'by adult learners for adult learners', with 'invited contributions from many areas ... to give a flavour of ACE in this country at this time'; 'Thoughts on the White Paper'; 'Charting our education future' in editorial.
<b>1996</b>	10/97 (LB) European article emphasis during 'European Year of Lifelong Learning'; editorial 'welcome to the transnational journal'; nine articles mainly by non-Irish authors.
<b>1997</b>	10/98 (LB) Core journal theme around 'Adult education and social exclusion'; first serious article about the 'sensitive question of Traveller participation'; year 'The Celtic Tiger began to roar'; 1997–2002 'years of significant growth and development' (in 2004 editorial); appointment of first Junior Minister for Adult Education.
<b>1998</b>	10/99 (LB) Editorial and solicited articles anticipating the <i>Green Paper on adult education: Adult education in an era of lifelong learning</i> (DES, 1998); fewer, longer, well referenced journal-style articles.
<b>1999</b>	10/00 (LB) First theme reflected on the cover: <i>Adult education and the arts</i> ; 25 Adult Guidance Services began.
<b>2000</b>	9/01 (Mae Shaw, Jane Thompson & LB) <i>Reclaiming Common Purpose: Special Millennial Issue, in collaboration with Adults Learning</i> (NIACE, UK), Concept (Community Learning, Scotland) & <i>The Adult Learner; publication of Learning for life: White Paper on adult education</i> (DES, 2000).
<b>2001</b>	12/01 (LB) <i>Acknowledging difference</i> ; five of the seven articles in formal journal style; examines the issue of racism towards refugees and asylum seekers in an Irish context, referencing the 2000 White Paper.
<b>2002</b>	12/01 (LB) <i>Partnership: Ideal and real</i> ; article by Helen O'Connell on Adult education and partnerships: 'a Martian leaving Ireland in 1989 would not recognise a society altered so fundamentally' in recent years.
<b>2003</b>	11/02 (LB & Eileen Curtis: EC) <i>Community education</i> ; reflective articles by Liam Bane and Berni Brady; Community education article urging more 'listening to the voices'; more formal articles and referencing; appointment of the first Community Education Facilitators; 'European Year of the Disabled' provoked Marie Clarke's article 'Lifelong learning for all or some'.
<b>2004</b>	9/04 (EC) <i>Adult education: Where are we now?</i> Editorial notes 'provision dominated by an economic imperative and a service driven by labour market demands'; edition dedicated to recent death of Tony Downes.
<b>2005</b>	9/05 (EC) Citizenship and participation; journal subtitle <i>The Journal of Adult and Community Education in Ireland</i> ; European Year of Citizenship through Education.

<b>2006</b>	NO ISSUE
<b>2007</b>	9/07 (EC) Changes and demands since the 1980s; first peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed (practice) sections; much longer articles with heavy referencing (30 total average references per article); editorial stresses 'our dialogue and demands are more sophisticated', with 'many more learners, practitioners and academics involved'; journal responds by 'documenting and offering a critical analysis of that change'; establishment of AONTAS Community Education Network.
<b>2008</b>	9/08 (EC) Editorial stressing importance of 'theorising our practice'; equal lowest number of total articles (6, as with 2007); 'concern about a 'post-Celtic tiger era' and return to the cutbacks of the 1980s with Ireland in recession.
<b>2009</b>	9/09 (Ted Fleming) Inclusion of 'Comment' section, whose NUI authors point to 'a growth in critical, learner-centred education and the use of group learning in recent times'; lowest number (2) refereed articles. Ireland in Depression.
<b>2010</b>	9/10 Rob Mark (RM) Editor notes inclusion of 'a wide range of topics'; 2010 and 2011 journal record length (163 pp.); European Year for Combating Poverty & Social Exclusion.
<b>2011</b>	9/11 (RM) Editor notes several of the articles inform the current debate about 'community education' with publication of AONTAS 'Community education: More than just a course'; first inclusion of formal 'Call for papers' and 'Style guide'.
<b>2012</b>	9/12 (RM) Broad emphasis on 'older and intergenerational learning' in European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations; publication of AONTAS 'Sowing the seeds of social change', editor reminder of the importance of 'reaching out to disadvantaged and marginalised sections of society' and addressing 'barriers to second chance education'.
<b>2013</b>	9/13 (RM) Section 1 theme from 2012 onwards, 'Perspectives on community and lifelong learning' and Section 2 theme 'Case studies on improving practice'; journal's open access policy makes it easily accessed and more widely read; doubling of editorial board members from 6 in 2010, to 12 since 2013.
<b>2014</b>	9/14 (RM) General theme 'meaning of lifelong learning'; appointment of AONTAS as National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning.
<b>2015</b>	9/15 (RM) General theme 'community and lifelong learning'; record number of article submissions; adult education budget up to 7.6% of education budget (from 0.16%, 1988).
<b>2016</b>	9/15 (RM) <i>Celebrating the contribution of Berni Brady</i> , Director of AONTAS since 1993; Niamh O'Reilly appointed as AONTAS CEO; article by Fergal Finnegan on democratic adult education and neo-liberalism, calling for 'future oriented debate'.

<b>2017</b>	10/17 (RM) General 'quality in adult learning' theme as 'the quality industry' has added 'an ever increasing bureaucratic load'; record average number of total references (35) for all articles during both 2016 and 2017.
<b>2018</b>	(Rosemary Moreland) call for 2019 papers: 'A reflection on the impacts of adult learning policy in the 21st century'.

# Reclaiming University Adult Education: A Freirean Approach to Widening Participation and Tackling Educational Inequality

ROSEMARY MORELAND, ERIK COWNIE

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## **Abstract**

*University Adult Education previously played an important role in enabling non-traditional adult students to access third level study. Renewed government efforts in the United Kingdom to tackling educational inequalities focus primarily on schools, although the widening participation strategy places an onus on universities to play their part. This paper highlights research with learners engaging in university Adult Education and examines their learning journeys. The paper argues that resourcing universities and colleges to provide educational pathways for adults to re-engage with education has wider long-term and inter-generational benefits for families and communities and thus makes an important contribution to tackling educational inequalities.*

**Keywords:** Adult Education, community, widening participation, educational inequality, lifelong learning

## **Introduction**

Attention to adult learning has waxed and waned over the centuries. It has always been something of a 'poor relation' in the education system, having broader definitions and more funding available when the economy is booming. However, in times of austerity, this sector shrinks dramatically and definitions about what counts as adult learning shrink accordingly, often being reduced to what some may term 'really useful knowledge' i.e. training and skills for employment. We do not dispute the need for everyone to have access to the kind of learning opportunities which they deem to be most suitable to their needs. Indeed, the opportunity for individuals to gain skilled employment is a key benefit not only to those individuals but their families, communities and wider society.

The purpose of this paper, however, is to argue that adult learning should not be relegated simply to skills focused training for those with low levels of qualifications. We contend, rather, that Adult Education in its broadest forms and settings is an important tool in tackling the systemic problem of educational disenfranchisement by young people in areas of social and economic disadvantage and should be encouraged and supported, regardless of financial constraints. Specifically, as our background and current experience is in higher education, we argue the need for universities to take seriously their duty to be accessible to all citizens. To that end, higher education needs to reach out proactively to under-represented communities and recognise this as an important part of their work. Our paper draws on qualitative data we have collected from adult learners with whom we have engaged in many different settings. It is our intention in this paper to allow the voice of the adult learner to be heard, in terms of the benefits (and challenges) which education has presented to them. We hope that these anecdotal but wide-ranging experiences contribute to the rich tapestry of adult learning data in Ireland, the UK and further afield, which can lend its weight to the case for sustained and adequate funding for adult learning.

### **Barriers to learning**

The links between educational underachievement and poverty in the UK are widely acknowledged (House of Commons, 2014; Leitch *et al.*, 2017; Machin, 2006; Nelson *et al.* 2013). Raffo *et al.*'s (2007) detailed review of the literature in this field highlights that whilst there is broad agreement of the links between education level and poverty, the causes and therefore the necessary responses to tackle this issue are widely debated. Thus, Francis and Wills (2012) argue that whilst family background is still the highest predictor of educational achievement, current solutions focus primarily on market solutions such as increasing consumer choice. Demie and Lewis (2011, p. 245) additionally link educational achievement with poverty and class and argue 'Social class has been shown to have significant effects on educational outcomes and future life chances even when educational achievement is high'.

Considerable efforts have been made across the education sector as a whole to understand and improve the educational outcomes of young people, and in particular, those experiencing multiple deprivation (Hillman and Robinson, 2016; Bowes *et al.* 2015). Demie and Lewis (2011) however, contend that there is a dearth of research examining the barriers to learning for white working-class young people. Their study highlighted low aspirations, alienation from the curriculum, lack of parental engagement, marginalisation of their culture, lack

of adequate housing, low levels of literacy and language deprivation as the main barriers to educational achievement for white working-class children. From an adult learning perspective, their study is interesting for the insight it provides into parents. The barriers highlighted by the young people in their study are indeed the same barriers which hinder working class parents from engaging in adult learning, or even with their child's learning. Numerous studies have identified the role of class as a determinant for participation in Adult Education (Thompson, 1980; Ward and Taylor, 1986; Martin, 1999). In their paper on education to promote social justice, Francis and Wills (2012) suggest the need for culturally relevant curricula that develops higher order thinking skills, in line with Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy. They also point to the responsibility of teachers (and schools) in challenging stereotypical professional low expectations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, whilst recognising the limitations of their role in the wider structural inequality of the system. In addition to the focus on educational under-achievement in schools, the barriers to learning have also been considered with regard to improving access to third level study for under-represented minorities. Since the focus in Northern Ireland (NI) is predominantly on students from the lower socio-economic groupings, this strategy encompasses those who have had a break in learning, as well as those progressing directly from second level education.

### **Widening access and participation**

Widening access and participation is the key strategy across the UK that seeks to encourage students from backgrounds that are under-represented in Further and Higher Education, to progress onto third level study. Similar policy intentions are reflected in the Republic of Ireland, for example, in the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019* (HEA, 2015) which aims to support increased access and participation in higher education by targeting specific groups including mature students and students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

At a UK regional level, the Department of Employment and Learning (NI) aims to encourage and support those 'who are **MOST ABLE** but **LEAST LIKELY** to participate ... to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to and to benefit from, the higher education that is right for them' (DELNI, 2012, p. 2). Much of the emphasis however is on raising aspirations and attainment of young people in secondary schools which traditionally have a low rate of pupils progressing to higher education. Whilst there is clearly a need for such targeted interventions, we contend that a long-term strategy to tackling educational underachievement

must also target adults who have left school with few or no qualifications and who have been conditioned to believe that education is not for the likes of them. The *Access to Success* report highlights characteristics deemed necessary for learners to be successful, including ‘the aspiration to improve their educational level, confidence in their ability to do so, and the drive and determination to succeed in higher education’ (DELNI, 2012, p.24). These concur with a number of studies, including those focusing specifically on adult learning (Knowles, 1984; Chao, 2009; Merriam *et al.*, 2007). Although the DEL strategy acknowledges the need to target adult learners, particularly those already in the workforce, their assertion that the characteristics outlined above are largely determined at an early age, lead them (and therefore Institutions of Further and Higher Education) to focus primarily on younger students and increased intervention in compulsory education. Field’s (2003) research into participation in Adult Education in NI suggests that the majority of adult learners tend to be those who have already succeeded in the education system. A recent study of adult participation in lifelong learning in Ireland (CSO, 2018) found similar results, demonstrating that, across the island of Ireland, significant challenges remain in terms of attracting non-traditional adult learners into further and higher education.

The current research focuses on adults who have neither engaged previously in adult learning nor possess the characteristics deemed necessary to be successful learners. We contend that programmes underpinned by a radical Adult Education perspective, which respects the capacity of the learner to understand and make sense of their lived experiences, can lead to the development of such attributes. We further argue that it is the value placed on the learners’ lived experiences which ultimately enables them to engage and succeed in accredited learning.

### **Benefits of adult learning**

Whilst adult educators and adult learners across the decades have long known and often espoused the benefits of adult learning, the small scale and frequently anecdotal nature of much of the evidence has resulted in policy makers paying scant regard to the evidence and under-resourcing of such programmes. Indeed, we would contend that there is a lack of political will to support critical education that enables adults to question the status quo, to challenge structural inequalities and to engender social transformation.

However, there have been several recent large-scale studies which provide

evidence of the wider benefits of adult learning, beyond those of facilitating individuals to gain qualifications and employment. Field's (2012) review of lifelong learning concludes that overall, there is evidence to support the view that there are economic and health benefits to participating in Adult Education. Marmot's (2015) argues that education can play a key role in improving health and well-being. This view is further supported by the UNESCO's (2016) *Third Global Report on Adult Learning*, which presents compelling evidence on a world-wide scale of the ways in which adult learning specifically impacts positively on health. The Learning and Work Institute's (2017) report on the benefits of adult learning in the UK indicates how engaging in adult learning improves not only health and economic opportunities for the adults engaged in learning, but can have significant impacts on the next generation, on their immediate family and friendship circles, as well as their wider communities.

In the UK, Ireland and indeed across most of the Western world, Adult Education has been pulled in many directions, often depending upon policy agendas. Indeed, for many years, the skills agenda has dominated the discourse with the major funding focus on providing programmes to up-skill the unemployed to (re-) enter the workforce. This narrow agenda operates within a deficit model of society, whereby those with few or no qualifications are deemed in need of training or education, in order to fulfil their designated role within society, as a responsible citizen. Other community based non-accredited programmes may enable those who are on the margins of society e.g. those with addictions, mental health issues, homeless, to develop resilience and the ability to cope better with their problems – another version of the deficit citizen model. Approaches to adult learning which espouse Freire's (1970) consciousness-raising and collective transformation are frequently under-resourced and ultimately axed, when the opportunity arises. In NI, two prime examples of this are the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Ulster People's College. The WEA, which has a long history of Adult Education in the UK since it started in 1903, was first established in NI in 1910. Although it still operates in other regions of the UK and is committed to bringing learning to those who are most disadvantaged, the NI branch fell victim to funding cuts in 2014 and ceased operating (WEA, 2018). The Ulster People's College was established as a residential Adult Education college in 1982, to help tackle problems of socio-economic disadvantage and address cultural/political division. It similarly faced a funding crisis in 2011, resulting in its insolvency. Both organisations provided accredited Adult Education programmes, which created pathways to higher level study. Their closure leaves a huge gap in Adult Education for social change in NI.

## University Adult Education

Universities across the UK and Ireland have long established traditions of providing Adult Education (Durucan, 1986; Fieldhouse, 1996; Jones, Moseley and Thomas, 2010; Kelly, 1962; McIlroy and Spencer, 1988; Slowey and Schuetze, 2012) and NI is no exception to this. Whilst Queens University Belfast had a long-standing extra-mural department, which provided evening classes to adults, as a new university, Ulster University's contribution to Adult Education initially took the form of an Institute of Continuing Education (Hawthorne-Steele, Moreland and Rooney, 2015). Rogers (2014) makes a critical distinction between the extra-mural tradition, which was largely unaccredited community-based courses, organised by university departments, as opposed to the more recent continuing education tradition. The latter is viewed as a forerunner to the widening participation model, which sought to open the doors of universities to non-traditional students to gain access to courses of study already on offer within the university.

In his analysis of the demise of university Adult Education in the 1990s, Rogers (*ibid.*) suggests three main factors contributed to this. Firstly, an increased appetite for accredited Adult Education, which enabled those in employment to improve their career prospects (continuing professional development), coupled with economic pressure to up-skill the workforce in a rapidly changing technological environment (Further Education and Training). Both these strands of Adult Education remain core foci of government agendas and much of the literature in the field today. Secondly, changes in the education landscape with the creation of Colleges of Further Education, polytechnics (which later became new universities) and the development of distance learning contributed to a greater choice of sites for adult learning. In the UK, the *Further Education Act* (1992) relegated all pre-university level qualifications to the business of Colleges of Further Education, effectively cutting off the life-blood of many university Adult Education departments.

This policy was intrinsically linked to Roger's (2014) second point, the internal hostility faced by university adult educators from other departments across the university. Rogers (*ibid.*, p. 17) claims that this stemmed largely from the alternative educational paradigm operating within the extra-mural tradition, which 'did not encourage simply academic study but also frequently direct action based on sound understandings of the issues and contexts involved'. He suggests that traditional academics were reluctant to engage in community-based programmes, because these often pushed them into areas beyond their

expertise, and forced them to confront their limitations and accept instead that knowledge is contested and can arise from many sites of authority (Baumann, 1992). The constructivist view of knowledge and notions of university civic engagement are becoming much more widely accepted within mainstream sites of academia. There nevertheless remains a staunch core, whose views remain similar to Roger's (2014) earlier experiences of working in Magee University College's Institute of Continuing Education. Rogers (*ibid*, p. 18) cites the example of 'a major programme for the unemployed in Derry/Londonderry, some of them second and even third generation unemployed, the new University of Ulster Registrar of the day told us in no uncertain terms that a university was no place for such people.' Despite its shaky foundation, and notwithstanding changes in administration and geographic location, adult and community education has maintained a strong foothold in Ulster University academic life, predominantly through the remnants of the previous Department of Adult and Continuing Education (now housed within Youth and Community Studies) and more visibly, in the Centre for Flexible Education. Across both these units lies a strong commitment to recognising and valuing learning in its many forms and settings; providing educational opportunities for non-traditional students and particularly those from areas facing high socio-economic disadvantage; and perhaps most pointedly, understanding that learning opportunities need to start where the learners are, both geographically i.e. in their communities and in a format, structure, time, venue that suits them.

### **Background to the study**

For 15 years, the Community Development team at Ulster University have delivered the BSc Hons Community Development, a part-time professionally endorsed degree for those currently working or volunteering in the field of community development. The team have always been committed to ensuring that entry to the degree remains open to those who do not have traditional entry requirements e.g. GCSEs and A level or equivalent. To that end, the team facilitated entry for non-traditional students, via Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), as it is known in the Republic of Ireland. Whilst this initially involved applicants seeking individual guidance to complete an APEL portfolio, entry via the APEL pathway became so successful that the team devised an APEL short course, to enable a group of potential degree students to come together, share experiences and gain the information required to complete their APEL entry portfolio.

The APEL course has been delivered over 12 weeks one day per week and over one full week. It runs on the university campus and enables prospective degree students to gain an experience of third level study. As university students, they gain access to all of the university systems and tutors help to familiarise students with the software and systems that they will use when they commence their degree. Thus, students are given a tour of the library and inducted into the technology that will enable them to gain access to learning materials provided by the course team. The APEL course enables adults who have been away from formal education for some time to gain confidence in themselves and their capacity to learn. The programme adopts a Freirean pedagogy, whereby the tutors create a shared learning space, encouraging learners to work collectively, learn from and support each other. The APEL Community Development Pathway was granted external recognition by way of an Adult Learner STAR Award in 2016.

This ethos of collaborative learning, respect for the different perspectives that learners bring and recognition of the different places where they may be on their learning journey are core to the BSc Hons Community Development. We recognise that our learners do not cease to be non-traditional students upon entry to the degree. There is therefore a strong element of pastoral support throughout the programme; a good balance between traditional assessment e.g. essays and written work and other forms of assessment e.g. reflective practice, oral presentations, class debates. The team have successfully maintained 100% coursework assessments for this programme throughout its history and have ensured that formal examinations have not been used as a method of assessment. This is an ethical choice based on several key factors. Firstly, we acknowledge the huge stress and anxiety which such forms of assessment usually cause, particularly for those who have perhaps failed exams in the past. Of equal importance are our misgivings on the use of examinations as a method of assessment, which are in fact geared more towards memorising and regurgitating information rather than demonstrating an understanding of key concepts.

In addition to the degree and APEL programmes, the Community Development team have been committed to widening participation to non-traditional students via a range of other short courses, operated through the Centre for Flexible Education at Ulster University. We have developed these in collaboration with or at the request of community organisations, to meet a specific need or demand. One such programme is the Unblocking Potential,

developed in response to requests for a short course, like the APEL programme, that could enable adults to gain access to university courses other than Community Development. The Unblocking Potential programme was designed to encourage adults of any age, who had left school with few or no qualifications, to 1) re-engage with education; 2) understand the barriers which had hindered their progress in the education system; and 3) raise their self-confidence in their ability to learn. This enabled participants to develop learning and study strategies, which best suited their circumstances and raised their aspirations to further study. Viewed as a first step back into education, a particular feature of this programme is that it runs in a community venue. Recognising how difficult it is for adult returners to come into an educational institution, no matter how grand the building nor how awesome the latest technology, we believe it is important to provide students with a safe comfortable space, where they can begin a learning journey with others from their community. Teaming up with our colleagues in the Centre for Flexible Education, students can avail of bursaries to cover the costs of the course, thus removing the financial barrier. This course has been running over four years now and has been delivered across 10 different community venues. The need for this kind of programme has been recognised more broadly within Ulster University and we are working with our colleagues in the Centre for Flexible Education, to discuss how the Unblocking Potential programme could form a core part of a university-wide access level programme.

The following section outlines the methodology used for our research with students engaged in the programmes highlighted above. We will then present our findings and discuss how these contribute to our understanding of overcoming barriers to adult learning.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to better understand how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can best support and engage with non-traditional adult students, i.e. students who have previously left school with few or no qualifications and/or come from a background where there was little expectation of progressing to third level study. The adult students who form the respondents for this research were part of three distinct groups:

1. A 2017 cohort of 36 Unblocking Potential (UP) students provided narrative-testimonies of their experience in formal and informal education.

2. A 2017 cohort of 25 APEL students provided narrative-testimonies of their educational journey from primary school to the HE access course they were currently undertaking.
3. 33 graduates from the BSc Hons Community Development were interviewed as part of our 10-year review of the programme, in 2014.

The approaches adopted in this research are qualitative, are grounded in the pluralist tradition which encourages critical questioning and reflection, and primarily involved analysing the written narrative-testimonies of our UP and APEL students and conducting telephone interviews with our former (graduate) BSc Hons Community Development students.

The narrative-testimony approach was selected because, in our view, it best captures the personal and temporal aspects of experience and includes in its analysis the nexus that exists between individual experiences and social, economic and cultural contexts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In such approaches, knowledge is created through the testimonies of lived experiences and the meanings attached to these experiences. In such ways, the ambiguity and complexity of human existence can be more fully illuminated (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Similarly, the one-to-one interview method (for our graduate students) was selected because of the opportunity to hear the voices of those who had successfully completed the journey from non-traditional, adult-returning student to BSc graduates.

Both approaches are grounded in the social constructivist school of thought where: subjective meanings, lived experiences and sense of identity are valued; knowledge and the learner are seen as interdependent; and learning is rooted in experience, culture and context (Bruner, 1986).

### **Data analysis**

The telephone interviews were transcribed to facilitate detailed qualitative analysis. The interview transcripts and the written narrative-testimonies were analysed by coding the data, categorising emergent themes and testing the validity of developing patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This recursive process is commonly referred to in the literature as content analysis (Stemler, 2001), thematic analysis (Kvale, 1996), or recursive comparative analysis (Cooper and McIntyre, 1993). To protect the anonymity of our current and former students, the following general descriptors have been assigned to

the opinions expressed in the transcripts and narrative-testimonies: UPS = Unblocking Potential student; AS = APEL student; GS = graduate student.

### **Findings and discussion section**

The following section presents and discusses the qualitative data from our three student groups and is based on their narrative-testimonies of their time at school, their re-engagement with learning, overcoming the barriers they faced entering HE and their accounts of the impact of successfully completing their undergraduate degree. To capture the sense of journey these students have experienced, the data is presented in the above chronological order.

### **Memories and legacies of school**

The data across the three student groups show that although some recall their school lives 'fondly' and spoke about 'encouraging teachers' and 'supportive parents', a far greater proportion recounted their time at school in negative terms. For these students, memories of school are dominated by 'feelings of fear' and the 'stigma of being poor':

I can still remember my first day, half of the class was standing crying [UPS].

I constantly felt on edge and I was aware of the authority the teachers possessed [AS].

I remember the feeling of fear in Primary school, of being afraid of getting something wrong [GS].

Education for a lot of lads in my school in the 1980s wasn't a priority ... social deprivation, unemployment and, in some cases, prison was all a lot of them had to look forward to [AS].

My friends and I came from a deprived housing estate ... we were labelled as scum ... we were seated at the back of her class and had to learn ourselves [AS].

Some pupils from families on the 'social class ladder' looked down upon other pupils who were not as well off financially as they were [UPS].

It was also frequently claimed that, because of social class labelling and, in some cases, gendered assumptions, many teachers had 'very little or no expectations'

for the young people in their care. Moreover, these low expectations were often matched by the low aspiration of some of these students' parents:

I remember telling our careers advisor I wanted to be a pathologist and he told me that career would not be for someone from my background [AS].

I didn't really get on with the teachers and felt like they had given up on me. One told me 'you will not make anything of your life' [GS].

My form teacher told me 'Computers for boys – Home Economics for girls' [UPS].

There wasn't as much encouragement and influence from my parents and wider family [AS].

I wish my parents had believed in me more, valued education and pushed me to achieve [AS].

These, in some cases decades-old, recollections remain, of course, monotonously consistent themes in studies which have since regularly investigated the deprivation-underachievement nexus, e.g. Raffo *et al.* (2007), Francis and Wills (2012) and, more recently, Leitch *et al.*'s (2017) NI-based research which all highlighted limited familial support, low levels of educational aspiration among young people and their parents and low expectations on the part of some teachers as key inhibitors of attainment among working class school children. These same studies also concur that the most profound legacy of such experiences is, often, a long-term debilitating impact on an individual's self-confidence and self-esteem.

Many of the adult-returning students in this research who recalled an unhappy and unproductive time at school accepted that they 'had very little interest in school', and 'did not properly apply themselves'. However, several expressed 'deep regrets' about 'leaving school without any qualifications whatsoever' and spoke about 'carrying this sense of failure ... throughout [their] ... adult life':

Sometimes I didn't want to even bother at all [GS].

I was bored, unchallenged and lacked interest [AS].

I wasn't too bothered if I passed or failed my GCSE's, as I was under the impression that it wouldn't affect me getting work [AS].

[School was] ... a complete disaster that would impact the rest of my life [AS].

I am bitterly disappointed that I left school without any qualifications [GS].

If I had the opportunity to go back to school now, I would jump at it [UPS].

### **A local (re-)engagement with learning**

For many of the three student groups, the catalyst for their re-engagement with learning was the community-based access programme Unblocking Potential (UP). Although several respondents reported feeling 'extremely apprehensive' and 'very nervous' about returning to education, the consensus among these students was that such anxieties were significantly alleviated because the UP course was run in their own communities:

My life was in a real rut and I thought my whole life was just parenting [AS].

I suppose I thought if I don't go now, I might not get another second chance [AS.]

I was so unsure ... I even said to my husband 'what the hell am I doing?' [GS].

First night ... I could hardly walk into the class ... nerves nearly got the better of me [UPS]

[My friend] says 'come on, its only two hours in the community centre' [AS].

To be honest, no, I would not have gone had it not been local and not with friends and people from here I already knew [UPS].

These students also spoke about how the course was structured 'to suit the needs of ordinary people' and those with 'parenting responsibilities'. Opportunities for peer learning and peer support were also highlighted:

First session ... they just made us feel relaxed and told us they would support us [UPS].

Wasn't what I expected ... very informal ... serious but informal [UPS].

Cost [for travel] is a factor ... and so is time away from the kids ... took me less than five minutes to walk there [AS].

They even got us to agree start and finish times to suit the ones with young children [UPS].

Very clear instructions ... no problem if you didn't understand ... you just asked [AS].

Because most of us knew each other ... we kept in touch during the week and helped each other with the homework tasks [GS.]

We all spoke about our hopes and fears ... hearing the whole class one-by-one repeat my concerns really made me think 'wow, nobody is brimming with confidence here' ... it is such a relief to hear that you are not the only one going 'crikey, am I up to this?' [AS].

Some students contrasted the UP course with their time at school and others claimed that it helped them process the negative experiences of their early education:

The difference this time was, unlike school, we all wanted to be there ... we all wanted to learn [UPS].

Not at all like school ... [we were] made to feel equal to the tutors [AS].

Helps you understand how your early learning experiences impact on your attitudes to learning as an adult [AS].

The community [UP] course changed everything for me ... made me see that I wasn't stupid ... and could even think about applying for University [GS].

Such responses concur with Knowles (1984, p. 47) who argues that learning environments most conducive to adult learners should cause 'adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported' and that there should be 'a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers'.

### **Overcoming the barriers to HE**

Upon successful completion of the Unblocking Potential (UP) and/or APEL access courses, a significant majority of these adult students applied for entry onto the BSc Hons Community Development course. The broader literature highlights that the world views of adult learners are formed by internal and

external influences and past/present educational experiences; and that these views in turn form a push/pull dynamic between the adult learner's motivation and their barriers to learning (Chao, 2009). The adult learners in this study claimed to have been primarily motivated to do so for two main reasons: firstly, 'to get the chance to go to Uni after messing up at school'; and secondly, to 'be a positive role model' to their children:

It would be amazing to have a degree in 3 years' time, something I never thought I would do in my lifetime [AS].

More than anything, I wanted to be a good example to my kids ... show them that school and education and learning are important [GS].

However, despite being sincerely motivated, many students highlight a range of barriers (perceived or otherwise), which they had to overcome as they entered HE. Without question, the most frequently cited barrier was their lack of confidence. The consensus here was that 'encouragement', 'small wins' and 'peer support' were the key factors in overcoming the 'whole self-confidence issue':

My biggest fear is confidence ... I get nervous talking under pressure and I end up rambling on [AS].

It can be very stressful meeting new people ... you don't want to make a fool of yourself [UPS].

It took time, but I learned to rebuild my confidence. I find it amazing that I was able to put my foot back into a classroom [AS].

I fear that my bad experiences in school will make me disheartened during the [degree] course [AS].

I felt confident to be there in that classroom. I have now become involved in a better education system [GS].

Doing this course has helped to build on my confidences and help me be involved in a classroom setting again [UPS].

Just a little 500-word essay ... tutor says 'well done, great work' ... I am thinking 'wow, maybe I can do this' [AS].

We all pull together ... tutor says 'it's ok to help each other' ... everyone helps everyone [AS].

As Merriam *et al.* (2007) have argued, adult learners are more likely to overcome, or at least mediate, barriers around re-entering education when attempting to do so also involves: the opportunity to make friends and meet other people (social relationships); a desire to serve their community (social welfare); and an ambition for employment enhancement (professional advancement).

Students in the current study also mentioned fears of 'not fitting in' because no one in their family had ever gone to university and the challenges involved in 'juggling study and family commitments'. Fears of failure and 'letting people down' were also cited:

At the start, I was thinking will other students even accept me ... I always just thought university was only for people with money [GS].

Even the thought of it (HE) is quite daunting ... I have some worries about juggling work, children and the degree all at once [AS].

Being a carer for my mother can mean my life can be hectic at times [UPS].

This will be challenging as I have two jobs and I am a single parent [AS].

I fear that I will start to doubt myself ... this is something I have thought about and to fail would be a massive knock [UPS].

A big fear for me would be letting myself down and other people around me [AS].

### **Transformative learning**

According to the accounts of many of these adult-returning students who subsequently successfully completed their BSc Community Development degree, their learning journeys has had a transformative impact on their personal and professional lives:

It was a great time in my life and I met some amazing people. In many ways a whole new world of possibilities was presented to me all because I was encouraged to believe in myself [GS].

I'll tell you this ... I am a very different person now ... a million miles away from the boy who left school with absolutely nothing [GS].

Never thought I'd say this, but I hope to become a Sports Psychologist [GS].

Beforehand, I never felt capable ... doing the degree has transformed my confidence ... I see posts advertised now and think 'why not? I could apply for that' [GS].

The degree was just the start for me; I became hooked on University study and have recently completed a MSc in Human Rights and Criminal Justice [GS].

I am in the same post but feel so much more confident in my ability ... I feel as though I am taken more seriously; and in truth, I take my role more seriously [GS].

These data chime with Learning and Work Institute (2017) report on the benefits of adult learning in the UK which found that adult learning not only improves the life-chances of the individual learner but also their immediate family, friendship circles, and their wider community. In addition, it is clear that these graduates are now fulfilling Gramscian (1971) roles in their own communities as 'organic intellectuals' – utilising their newfound skills and knowledge to the betterment of their, often acutely deprived, neighbourhoods and encouraging learning therein.

Moreover, and from a Freirean perspective, these data also evidence the patent benefits of the culturally relevant and dialectical pedagogies in the Unblocking Potential, APEL and Community Development degree and the development of higher order critical thinking skills among these adult-returning graduates. In such ways, these adult learners concomitantly embrace and embody Freirean notions of critical pedagogy.

These respondents also spoke about the transformations their learning journeys have made in terms of their family and community lives. Here, these students talked about: 'setting a really good example around education' for their children; making their home 'more conducive to learning and studying'; and 'making a difference' in their 'own areas' by applying their new skills and knowledge 'to the betterment' of their communities and 'encouraging other people' therein to avail of the opportunities within community-based Adult Education.

I now instil values in my children that education is continual and that there is no expiry date for learning [GS].

I'm now able to set a really good example to my 8-year-old daughter - I want to show her through studying myself, how important it is to reach your full potential [GS].

Best thing is now I feel confident to guide and help my kids with their homework [GS].

My community has lots of problems ... doing the degree (in community development) has helped me to help my community [GS].

Lots of people round now realise that they messed up at school ... I am involved in lots of local education projects [GS].

I hope to continue working within my local community and make as much positive change and influence as possible [GS].

The data we have analysed here speaks to several ongoing debates around the long-term impact of educational inequality and the best methods to create a more inclusive educational landscape for adult-returning students, their families and communities.

The decades-old accounts of unhappy and unproductive times at school and the somewhat predictable long-term consequences in terms of self-confidence and self-esteem paint a particularly depressing picture and highlight that such experiences come with a substantial social cost. Moreover, it is clear that firstly, for many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds little has changed (Leitch *et al.*, 2017) and secondly, these negative experiences play an important role in the inter-generational transmission of educational failure and more generally, significantly inform familial attitudes towards learning.

### **Conclusion**

In terms of creating an inclusive educational landscape, this paper makes clear that there are patent benefits for everyone of HEIs re-engaging with non-traditional, adult students in their own communities and on their own terms. In order to do this successfully, those providing adult learning opportunities must adopt culturally relevant and dialectical pedagogies. They should also be cognisant that the motivations and barriers to their learning are, as Chao (2009)

argues, created, formed and changed in three spaces - the cognitive, emotive and environmental dimensions.

The narrative-testimonies of our adult students ably demonstrate the social value and transformative nature of such learning on personal, familial and community levels. The historiographical presentation of these testimonies evidences the impact of learning approaches grounded in the principles of critical pedagogy. In other words, these learners' own words illuminate their nascent recognition of: 1) the inherently political nature of education; the relationship between social justice and learning; and 2) the emancipatory capacity of such learning to awaken their critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Moreover, many of these adult learners have also returned to their communities to articulate the needs of working-class people, encourage other adults therein to re-engage in education and their children to follow the example they now set.

On a broader, macro level, a decade of austerity in the UK and Ireland and recent shifts in both jurisdictions towards a yet more commodified HE sector have relegated the importance of (properly funded) community-based programmes aimed at widening access for non-traditional students – including adult returners. Thus, the current landscape for such inclusive interventions is challenging to say the least. Despite recognition by the DELNI (2012) report of the role that environmental factors play in creating barriers to education and its clear identification of the need for HEIs to engage in community outreach, the political vacuum in NI has created a stagnation and lack of clear strategic direction.

In a recent timely and thought-provoking paper, Aideen Quilty and her colleagues at UCD outlined 'a vision for social justice within education' and further called 'all education actors' within the university and community sectors to 'imagine a new educational landscape' a landscape which should 'span multiple entrance and progression pathways, inclusive pedagogies and attractive physical and social environments' (Quilty *et al.*, 2016, p. 41). It is our hope that this paper, which gives expression to the voices and lived experiences of our adult students, makes a modest contribution in terms of realising such a landscape.

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# Existentialist Theory in the Pedagogy of Paulo Freire: Its Implications for Adult Education Policy and Practice in Ireland

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## Abstract

*This paper examines and critiques existentialist interpretations of being within Paulo Freire's educational theory. The principle supposition of the paper is that through engaging in adult education, the adult learner can heighten their understanding of their lives, metaphysically. The paper also posits that adult education can develop the will; this notion is vitally important as it is by the will which the individual human being loves and according to that love, decides. This has major implications for the adult learner socially, politically, and spiritually.*

**Keywords:** Paulo Freire, ontology, metaphysics, existentialist, adult education, adult literacy

## Introduction

This paper analyses existentialist theory in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. In Freire's work a relationship exists between materialist dialectics, epistemology, and metaphysics. Freire used a Marxist analysis of contrasting social relations in his writings. He also embraced Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical conclusions, one of which upholds the idea in absolute human freedom. Therefore, Sartre's work is prominently featured in the paper. Sartre's philosophy of being and existence cannot only be understood through a rational lens. It must be understood by way of the lived experience. Freire's philosophy of education incorporates both concepts. That is the primary philosophical position of this paper. The lived experience is very interesting for our discussion as we will take some anecdotal examples from work which has been done with adult literacy learners. This will help to explore certain philosophical suppositions as we encounter them and, in the process, make links between the three main bodies of thought under discussion: existentialism, Freire's pedagogy, and adult literacy education and

adult education. The penultimate subsection of this paper – *Freire's Theory of Conscientization: An Existential Philosophy?* – is a more detailed attempt to draw out and re-invent (as Freire urges us to) the existentialist elements in his educational theory as they relate to the lived experience, educationally speaking. We will see how the existentialist elements in that process form the necessary, ontological conditions, for conscientization (Freire's social theory of consciousness raising) to occur. Once that metaphysical process has occurred praxis, or, the 'reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed', can happen (Freire, 1970). However, the discussion on praxis, and how it is relevant for adult learners and adult educators, will not be exhaustive. For the moment we are content with examining the moment of becoming as prescribed by existentialist ontology and adopted by Freire in order to form his notion of being.

The paper is arranged by examining some of the main tenets in the body of thought known as existentialism. As we consider this theory we will take note of how Freire's concept of being has been shaped by it. We will also highlight how his pedagogy has been moulded by that thought and this will be the ground for any assertions and suppositions made along the way. The conclusion will present some recommendations for adult education policy and practice in Ireland.

### **Existentialist Philosophy: A Preliminary Sketch**

A foundational precept in existentialist thought is that an individual's existence precedes [his/her] essence. This may indicate that someone can simply make of themselves what they will without being influenced or persuaded by any structural and social dimensions. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that human beings are born into an often-hostile world where social structures have a huge influence in how they live their lives. It is important to acknowledge that the individual is born into a complex world with complex social structures, thousands of years in the making. These social structures have come about through the force of traditions, values, conflicts, and social actions. It is in such an environment which the individual begins to discover themselves and finds meaning by free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The central notion in existentialist thought is that people are looking to reveal who and what they are as they navigate through their lives, in the process making choices founded on their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives (Barrett, 1990).

The proponents of the philosophy of existentialism have developed two main sub-divisions of this thought with both theistic and atheistic forms (Kaufman, 1991). Personal choice becomes unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth in the atheistic form, whereas personal choice is made against the background of an objective truth in the theistic form. (The distinctions between each, and how they impact our inquiry, will be touched on later). However, an existentialist could also be an agnostic relativist. Although not central to this discussion, it is interesting to note that Freire's politics (and as a result his pedagogy) were influenced by a faith rooted in Catholicism (Kirylo and Boyd 2017). However, Freire urged the church not just to embrace personal piety, but to take prophetic action. Freire's spirituality was founded in the belief that God commands all people of goodwill to endeavour to create a vision of a new humanity given by God.

The philosophy of existentialism proposes that human life is a process which is not fully satisfying because of the adversity and personal pain which comes about because of the absence of fulfilment, power, and control a person has over his/her life. The philosophy of existentialism is an avenue by which an individual can search for true self and true personal fulfilment in life. Most fundamentally, it is the capricious act that existentialism deems the most abhorrent – that is, when an individual or society attempts to appoint or insist that their beliefs, values, or rules be wholeheartedly acknowledged and obeyed. Existentialists consider this to be very damaging for a person. The result is that the person becomes whatever those in power desire. Thus they are dehumanised and reduced to being an object. Existentialism posits that a person must decide what is to be believed about their relationship to the world/society in which they find themselves in, as opposed to any arbitrary religious or secular world values.

### **Being**

The inquiry into the enigma of what it is to be human can be summed up as Socrates when he advised 'know thyself'. Although succinctly put by Socrates, therein lies the problem. De Montaigne (2009, p. 67), has this to say on the nature of the problem of understanding what it means to be: 'if my mind could gain a foot hold, I would not write essays, I would make decisions; but it is always on apprenticeship and on trial'. The contradictory and illusive nature of a person's being is nicely summed up by Pascal when he tells us that: 'we burn with the desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereupon to build a tower reaching to the infinite, but our ground cracks and the earth opens up to abyss' (Paschal, 1970, p. 71). The human quest and desire

to come to a greater or ultimate self-understanding, is for existentialist writers, a mistake; the essence of existentialist thought is that we must understand 'man in his particularity' (Cooper, 2008). Wilhelm Dilthey (2004, p. 54), posited that to understand *being* one must pay attention to other individuals by the 'reliving and reproducing of experience - *their* experience; by feeling together with others and being sympathetic to their emotions; understanding being is the project of unification between the knowing object and the object known'.

The effects of the Second World War on people and on society have had a major influence on existential thought (Barrett, 1990). At that time Europe underwent a devastating period in which it experienced economic and spiritual destruction (Davies, 1996). As a result, Western thought which had evolved to the promise of an 'infallible contract based on abstract powers such as Mind, the Absolute or Reason' now seemed illogical (Cox, 2008, p. 17). In his treatise *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre highlighted the flexibility of existential thought by interpreting the world and human reality as insecure. He attributed this to the idea of the human being as being 'thrown into the world' - the individual in his/her world is now left to fend for himself/herself against a determinism which may scupper his/her projects (Sartre, 1947). Additionally, Kierkegaard (1998, p. 38) chose to understand existence in terms of possibility by telling us that 'despair, which controls existence, is the sentiment of the possible'. This is an interesting idea for adult educators because we encounter people at very sensitive and, we might say, metaphysically, challenging times in their lives. For Sartre, the possibilities of existential choice are endless. However, they are relative. All existentialist thinkers consider existence as something which pushes forward with risk, negation and limitation (Cooper, 2008). In the existential interpretation of being included in these risks is the individual's descent into inauthenticity and alienation, his/her deposition from a person to a thing (Heidegger, 2008; Sartre, 1947). Counterbalancing this are the theological forms of existentialism. In the theological forms of existentialism, people are 'provided' with an escape (Kierkegaard, 1998; Tillich, 2000). The outlet for escape, which, is solidified by faith, is provided by the promise of extrinsic aid from God (Westphal, 1998). Conversely, Sartre maintains that the 'other is the hidden death of my possibilities' (Sartre, 2008). (This Sartrean idea is the antithesis of a theistic existential interpretation of being; certainly it is antithesis to the Christian idea of faith in the person of Jesus Christ as the God man). Buber (2002) on the other hand believes that coexistence is not anonymous. He sees co-existence as being founded on inter-communication between individuals. It is this relationship which shapes the

human being's authentic experience. This aspect of existential thought has profound implications for both the adult learner and the adult educator due to the inter-communication spoken of above. In his educational theory, Freire asks for attention to the inter-communication between people, in the dialogue which exists between the educator and learner (Freire, 1970; 1972; 1974; 2005). This suggests that a foundational aim of adult education should be to create a dialogue with adult learners. Dialogue is just one example, but it is this type of connection that exists between existential thought and Freire's pedagogy.

Sartre (1947) was of the opinion that we as individuals can transform human life into the possible; everything which is true and which has a human action, he posits, equates to the subjective environment of a human being. He proposes that many theories concerning the nature of human kind are inherently ostentatious. He holds that many theories ignore what is of most importance: the uniqueness of a human being. He does this while contending that an existentialist view permits a redefinition of the human condition. For this to occur, it is necessary for the individual to pay attention to certain experiences which have shaped their attitude to their world and their view of it. An individual's very existence is moulded, influenced, and directly informed by prior experiences, and unless an individual is aware of this they will continue to base their decision making on experiences invented and given value to by others (Sartre, 1947). This idea has a resonance for the practice of adult education. As adult educators, we know that many learners who return to education suffer from the very thing that Sartre warns against. Prior experiences, in every area of their life, can handicap the learner's attitude towards their place in the educational experience. Indeed, prior experiences can sometimes objectify the learner in the educational experience. Many adult learners can be reminded of this to begin to guide them on a path of critical self-understanding. However, this is something which must be treated with sensitivity and must have some strategic value in terms of learning.

Realising that decisions are moulded by previous experience highlights for an individual the 'possibility of choice' (Sartre, 1947). Sartre sees this process as stepping out from the 'herd' as being gradual. For Sartre the individual is now equipped with a completely new and subjective world view. Sartre (1947, p. 45), says, this new world view, this 'revolutionary way of living', is pockmarked with difficult choices where decisions must be made. However, this new way of existing, he maintains, proves to be difficult since most people's view of themselves comes from attitudes created by other people. Their entire notion

of themselves is based primarily upon past experiences which have been manufactured by others who wish to keep a position of power (Sartre, 1947). Certainly, thinking critically requires more than just an individual's perspective on their humanness – 'when we say every man chooses himself, we do mean that every man must choose himself, but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men' (Sartre, 1947, p. 49).

If we apply, as is appropriate here, an ontological appraisal, we can view Buber's I-Thou construction of the human relationship as being one in which a *being-for-itself* begins to impact on, or inhabits, the world of another *being-for-itself*. According to Levinas (1991) before a relationship is developed, I exist in my own world and the other is a stranger, someone over whom I have no power (Levinas, 1991, p. 39). Sartre (2008) also acknowledges this initial forming of relationships when he says that it is through the body that we first constitute the meaning and limits of our relationships with others:

Not that the body is the cause or the instrument of my relations with the other. However, the body constitutes their [the relationships] meaning and marks their limits. It is as body-in-situation that I apprehend the other's transcendence-transcended, and it is as body-in-situation that I experience myself in alienation for other's benefit. (Sartre, 2008, p. 383)

This is a highly technical description of human contact and communication. According to Sartre (2008) transcendence is the essential characteristic or activity of *being-for-itself*. The for-itself, in this context the educator and adult learner, are not in the world as objects are but as a transcendence or transcended subjects. In our attempt to understand and appreciate more fully our educational relationships with adult learners, we must believe that all educational relationships are deeply personal. In fact, they could be seen as sacred. The educational relationship adult learners may be viewed as a relationship that can transcend the world of objects - this includes our physical bodies - in order to be aware of the world and to act upon it. Understanding this dynamic is helpful for us because it helps to minimise the negative effects which issues of power may have on the educational relationship. By 'issues of power' we mean those which may arise because, for example, of administrative, teaching, or assessment procedures and differences or commonalities between the educator and the adult learner in terms of class, educational background, or any other social connections we may share with learners. We can postulate that an understanding of the adult learner as a *being-for-itself*, who is attempting to

navigate their way (by way of adult education) through a sometimes socially (and economically) hostile world, should be *a priori* in the pedagogy of the adult educator.

Freire (2005) informs us that the adult educator is in a position of great power in the educational relationship. This is a power which is complex, subtle, and potentially very influential on the development of the adult learner:

We [educators] deal daily with relationships, between things, between objects, between words in the composition of sentences and between these words themselves in the structure of the text. As soon as we begin to know that not only that we live but also that we know we live and that, therefore, we could know more, we who practice-in-the-world begin the process of learning about the practice itself. (Freire, 2005, p. 136)

It is important to acknowledge that these Freirean considerations of power in the educational relationship have a reflexive dynamic for our present discussion, and, therefore, on any hypothesis that is presented in this paper.

### **‘Existence Precedes Essence’**

In his explanation of existence precedes essence Sartre tells us that:

[A person] first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in his world and defines himself afterwards. If man is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. (Sartre, 1947, p. 27)

The idea that our existence precedes our essence is both common to atheistic existentialist philosophers and Christian existentialist philosophers. Sartre (1947, p. 25) neatly summarises this commonality by saying: ‘what they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that existence comes before essence, or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective’. The Judeo-Christian concept of the human person acknowledges that people have been created by a loving god. However, the atheistic concept of the human person is that they simply exist – the human person was not created by some supernatural artisan. Sartre’s own meditations on this are very illuminative. He speaks of the craftsman who makes a paperknife. This paperknife has been made by the craftsman who had a conception of it. In other words, you cannot make something without knowing what it is for. In this case, the knife’s essence precedes its existence. What is its essence? It is the sum of the formulae and the

qualities which made its production and its definition possible. If we take this argument one step further we can see that believing in God is not acceptable for Sartre because God is a supernatural artisan. When God creates he knows exactly what he is creating. Therefore, the conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of a paperknife in the mind of the artisan. Sartre concludes that if God really exists the individual is not free anymore because someone has made you the way you are. The moral implications for this are such that now the created person is not responsible for his/her actions.

The idea that 'man makes himself', whereby the individual becomes something, is common ground – be it from an atheistic, relativistic or theistic aspect – in existentialist thought (Heidegger, 2008; Kierkegaard, 2004; Nietzsche, 1974; Sartre, 2004). Existential thought teaches us that people find themselves existing, and thus must form an essence for themselves, the individual must begin from the subjective (Meyers, 1989). Macquarrie (1973) suggests that human beings are unique on earth because the human being can be further defined. Crucially, man (to use Macquarrie's term) already *is*, man already *is* aware, and most importantly of all man is aware of who and what he may become: 'Man is a self-reflecting animal, in that he alone has the ability to objectify himself, to stand apart from himself, as it were, and to consider the kind of being he is, and what it is he wants to do and become' (Dobzhansky, cited in Macquarrie p. 70). This idea of a person as a self-reflecting animal charged with the choice of deciding who and what he/she becomes is central to our understanding of the adult learner. It is vitally important to attempt to deconstruct this phenomenon as a way to understand the educational journey of the adult learner from a perspective that is under-developed in the discussion of adult education.

Sartre (1947) says a human being has a kind of freedom which is radically exclusive to the individual. It is a freedom which is free from outside influences. However, not many individuals pursue the kind of freedom which Sartre maintains is in our reach. He suggests the very values which shape an individual's life are furnished through free choice. The existentialist perspective is that we invent our own nature. We are projected into existence at first having no pre-determined nature (Heidegger, 2008). It is only afterwards that we build our nature and essence through our deeds (Warnock, 1970). Adult educators would do well to keep this in mind as the educational process is profoundly meaningful for the adult learner, metaphysically speaking. This also presents a question for the adult educator: can this understanding of being be applied, pedagogically, to the adult learner? The answer to this is a resounding 'yes'.

## **Freedom**

Proponents of existentialist theory place the idea of human freedom at the centre of their philosophical concerns (Sartre, 2004; Heidegger, 2008; Tillich, 2000; Kierkegaard, 2004; and Buber, 2002). They are concerned with the environment of men and women. They are interested in how the world shapes the behaviour of people. Here we can see a connection between existentialism and historical materialism. These two conceptions are reflected in Freire's work. Cooper (2008) suggests that the environment in which existentialists are concerned with is the world of human beings and there is a focus on men and women's place in the world. Warnock (1970) states that existentialists are concerned with how to gauge what freedom to choose entails for human beings; existentialists concentrate on meaning and aspiration, and see these conditions as those which make up human existence, as opposed to those which make up scientific and metaphysical truths.

Sartre (1947) informs us that there are absolutely no limits to the freedom which a person can acquire, neither transient nor godly, there is nothing that subjugates freedom. The individual is solely and entirely responsible for his/her own actions, notions, with circumstances being absolute. Sartre (2008) suggests that humans are essentially free. However, this freedom may not necessarily imbue pleasant feelings in the individual who now realises he or she is free. For Sartre this type of freedom carries with it a stern undertaking, which is further enhanced by the realisation that morality is nothing more than an invention. Thus, these 'agonies of choice and freedom' give new meaning to the respecting of others and to the respecting of the self (Sartre, 2008, p. 455). Sartre's doctrine of freedom is as revolutionary as it is radical, suggesting that men and women acquiesce unconditionally when taking responsibility for their own lives. Additionally, Sartre says there must be no faith in divine sponsorship; all pretexts are unacceptable whereby no divinities are the cause of man's state, no intrinsic impiousness, no genetically passed on traits or environment, no race, no class which one belongs to, no parent, no misleading education, and no childhood trauma - man is free (Sartre, 1947). Sartre's emphasis on personal choice in the face of freedom is radical (Flynn, 2006). The choice, and how that choice is shaped, is borne from an existential inner calling which we all experience.

## **Authenticity**

The meaning of existence in existential thought is directly informed by the idea of authenticity (Cooper, 2008). In existential thought the kind of ownership

that an individual gives his or her life is the measure of either an authentic or inauthentic life. A person, after all, creates his/her own image (Sartre, 1947). In existential thought authentic existence comes about only through considered and rigorous honesty with oneself in the face of an objective world. Logically, inauthentic existence is born and shaped by outside forces, be they situational and circumstantial, precepts of values, political or ecclesiastical, or any external influence. Sartre has written: 'you are free, therefore choose - that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do. No signs are vouchsafed in this world' (Sartre, 1947, p. 34). Like other existentialists, Carl Jaspers sees authentic human existence as being constantly involved in 'situations' (Jaspers, 1971). Jasper's writings are influenced by many areas of the humanities including psychology, history, and literary theory. His theories form a synthesis of these influences. For Jaspers self-realisation only occurs through involvement with one's own self-made world (Jaspers, 1971). The goal for Jasper's philosophy was to aid the individual in achieving *Existenz*, a state where the individual is 'genuinely oneself and is making sense of one's life' (Mautner, 2000). Sometimes human beings discover themselves in situations which are unexpected. Jaspers calls these *Grenzsituationen* (Jaspers, 1971). This term has been translated as a 'limiting situation', a 'borderline situation', and an 'ultimate situation' (Mautner, 2000). According to Jaspers *Grenzsituationen* is something which cannot be dealt with rationally. A very specific example of *Grenzsituationen* is the inevitability of one's death. Jasper's says that we cannot deal with this process unless we become the *existenz* we potentially are, and we become ourselves by entering with open eyes into boundary situations (Jaspers, 1971). Mentioning Jasper's *Grenzsituationen* here allows us to re-enforce the position that an individual's ontological understanding of himself/herself can be heightened by learning or developing a new skill. Taking the opportunity to momentarily speak of my practice in adult literacy, I am reminded of the elderly adult learner who told me how he wanted to learn how to read and write before his death. Was the desire to develop this new skill an attempt by him to abseil more freely down the sheer face of [his] mortality? Somehow, I think so. This is also a reminder to me of the woman who shared with me that, because of her developing literacy skills, she could now 'see her future'. We thus content that developing literacy in adulthood has influence over, and can shape, burgeoning *Existenz* in the individual. It can also help to shape the evolution of someone's existence; I am here further reminded of the adult literacy learner who once shared with me that because of his improving literacy skills, he was 'now able to write his wife a birthday card for the first time in 32 years of marriage'.

Literacy, therefore, can be used as a powerful ontological tool that can help one bear witness to their own existence. The anxiety which is produced in some adults because of their poor literacy skills is, we can say with confidence, an existential one. Literacy is unique to [the] human being (Ong, 2002). As such, it is interesting that Paulo Freire (1970) calls literacy development an ‘ontological vocation’.

The authentic individual is one who had found themselves no longer able to ignore the existential anxiety which they felt in their lives. This process must have been driven by a profound willingness to change and become something new. Can an existentialist approach to living provide the individual with an opportunity of lasting secular or spiritual liberation? In his attempt to surmise the meaning of authenticity in existentialist thought Macquarrie says that ‘to exist as a self is to stand in the possibility of becoming at one with oneself, of fulfilling oneself or of being divided in oneself, separated from what everyone knows how to call [his] true self. In the language of existentialists, these two possibilities are to exist ‘authentically’ or ‘in-authentically’ (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 75). Additionally, Heidegger (2008) propounds that existing authentically may only be achieved through an individual reaching an understanding of themselves and this calls for a rigorous and honest approach in how and why they come to know themselves better. He suggests that one must realise that human reality is characterised by a uniqueness inherent to the individual and the process of life is full of possibility which may be fulfilled, and that life is underlined by concern, not the everyday concern of good citizenship but the kind of self-concern which leads to an authentic life. May we apply this understanding of being to the process of engaging in adult education? Surely, because engaging in adult education promotes *being-there*. We know, for example, that when we read poetry we are sometimes brought face to face with our primordial selves. It is no coincidence that Heidegger (1980) referred to language as the ‘house of being’. As such, literacy serves humans not just in a functional/everyday sense, but also serves to heighten the very sense of our being and has profound implications for adult education policy and practice.

As an advocate of a critical approach to the education, Freire’s pedagogy was of the inquiring kind and of the kind that came to realise individual strength could be forged from a subjective perspective and belief. A belief which was an existentially informed belief (Mayo 1995). In the following discussion *Freire’s Theory of Conscientization: An Existential Philosophy?* Freire’s individualistic approach to the teaching of adult learners will become evident. We will discover

how his belief in a critical approach to education is centred on empowering the individual. Through that process, the opportunity for a kind of educational awakening within the mind of the individual occurs (Freire 2005).

### **Freire's Theory of Conscientization: An Existential Philosophy?**

Social analysis was an important part of how Freire set out his critical pedagogy. Acknowledging and encouraging the reflective aspect of the learning process, and how that can lead to action, was the basis of his theory. This process Freire referred to as praxis. However, this raising of the consciousness, cannot, we can postulate, occur until an individualised and internal transformation takes place. In considering whether Freire's theory of *conscientization* is an existentialist philosophy, we first must examine that aspect of his educational theory. We can then analyse conscientization in a more detailed way by applying an existentialist lens and it is much of Sartre's existential ontology can aid us in this task. In doing so, it is hoped that an original interpretation of 'conscientization' will emerge.

The basis of Freire's theory of conscientization is dialogue: 'Dialogue is an encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world, dialogue is an existential necessity' (Freire, 1970, p. 69). Through dialogue human beings emerge out of their submersion and gain the faculty to intervene in their reality. This happens due to *conscientização* (Freire 1970). Conscientização, usually referred to as conscientization, is the strengthening of the attitudes and awareness of all emergences:

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

In the same way a person's ontological and historical vocation may be hampered by socially manufactured constructs. One's understanding is 'therefore, on one level, conscientization, or the process of becoming aware, which provides a space in which one's perception of reality may change' (Blackburn, 2000, p. 17). Conscientization is more than a mechanically driven intellectual process – it is the essence of a dialectical process which manifests action. Conscientization

leads to reflection, which leads to action, which brings us to liberation (Freire, 1970). In the same way that existential philosophy calls for an individual to rigorously assess their own lives to come to an authentic awakening, the Freirean theory of conscientization asks the individual to become aware of social, political and economic contradictions which are present in society (Freire, 1970; 1974).

### **Generative Themes: A Methodology for Conscientization**

Freire presents conscientization as a dialogical methodology whereby the discovery of themes unique to a group or individual may be 'harnessed to stimulate an individual's awareness of themselves' (Freire, 1970, p. 78). He views these generative themes as constituting *thought-language*, and as such referring to the existential reality of the individual. Freire (1970) considers the human being as an 'un-completed being' and treats his/her actions and self as an object of his/her reflection. In examining the human being in his/her existential reality, Freire draws our attention to the world of an animal. Freire talks of animals living submerged in a world in which they can give no meaning, and how they experience no tomorrow and will neither experience a today. An animal's life is ahistorical: 'the ahistorical life of an animal does not occur in the world. The world for the animal does not constitute a 'not-I' which could set it apart as an 'I' – animals cannot commit themselves' (Freire, 1970, p. 79). In opposition to animals' experiences, humans are aware of their activity in the world in which they exist and are also aware of how the world impinges on them. Freire stresses that when he uses the term exist, he is keen to highlight this term as emphasising the 'deeper involvement in the process of becoming' (Freire, 1970, p. 48). People infuse the world by way of their actions which they reflect on it. A person's world is structured historically, whereby a person's existence may be re-created (Freire, 1970). People are conscious beings. They exist in a dialectical relationship which is influenced by the determination of limits and their own freedom. The influence of historical materialism is evident here in Freire's theory. To overcome this tension, known as *limit-situations*, he insists that humans must place action upon 'concrete-historical reality' (Freire, 1970, p.81). Limit-situations are 'historically found' and as reality is transformed, situations are superseded.

Adapting an aspect of Marx's theory Freire compares the existence of an animal as opposite to the existence of a human being. Freire states 'an animal's product belongs immediately to its physical body, as opposed to man who freely confronts his own product' (Marx, cited in Freire, 1970, p. 81). Indeed, human

beings create culture and history through action. Through this hypothesis Freire's 'man' is a being of praxis. Moreover, praxis is the source of knowledge and creation for human beings (Freire, 1970).

How does Freire apply *generative themes* as a methodology in his educational theory? Generative themes are codifications of complex experiences in the life history and circumstances of the learner: 'in a literacy programme generative themes can be broken down into generative words, tri-syllabic words broken down into syllabic parts and used to generate other words' (Freire, 1970, p. 91). However, Freire points out that this scheme is most useful in languages which are phonetically based, for example, Spanish and Portuguese. Freire is concerned with what he calls a dominated consciousness, a consciousness which lacks a critical understanding of itself, and, due to its limit-situations cannot know reality. To truly know reality, there must be a new starting point, whereby the total vision of context in order to separate and isolate constituent elements exists, and where a clearer perspective of the whole can be experienced. This understanding of being has major implications for adult education policy and practice in Ireland.

### **Conclusion: Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Our examination of existentialist ideas in the educational theory of Paulo Freire has been relatively straightforward. We have seen how Freire uses these ideas to form much of his ontology. However, the task of practically applying those ideas to adult educational theory is more challenging. It is challenging not least because we live and work in a time where scientific enquiry, and the resulting scientism which it produces, is dominant in educational and social research and practice. This has come about because of neo-liberalism's impact on economics (Connolly 2006). The impact this has on adult education in Ireland is that it promotes much theory which is dominated by technocratic concerns.

The overarching aim of the paper was to engage in a different way with Freirean theory; in attempting to do that we temporarily set aside the lens of post-modernism, at least from a cultural point of view. This paper has attempted to disclose the specificity of knowledge relating to adult education practice as espoused by Freire. The philosophical position of the paper is to uphold those elements of the theory which promote the subjective values of both adult learners and adult educators, and not any kind of meta-narrative. Our discussion above has also shown us that deconstructing (to a certain extent) the educational relationship between adult learner and adult educator is

worthwhile. Some may see this as an attempt to examine the social order in this area of education when in fact it should be something which, potentially at least, can go deeper still. The learner and the educator are two subjects who come together in a world of objects. The resulting I-thou relationship has the potential to bring the two persons to a state of being which could be described as antediluvian or primordial. This idea is a neglected idea in adult education theory, certainly in an Irish context.

We have also posited that the adult learner who engages in education does so not just for vocational reasons, but also for reasons which can only be examined in a metaphysical light. This yearning in the human person is not new. It can be traced back to Aristotle who said:

All men by nature reach out to know. Humans operate within a sphere of action that pertain to them alone: the sphere of deciding how to act in the case of things that could be otherwise, deciding by using language and deliberation, rather than acting from intrinsically guided forms of communication. (Aristotle in Lane, 2014, p. 56)

In reaching out to know all men and women form an intention – an ontological concern, we might say – which is at once a grasp and a yearning. This paper values the idea of the individual narrative in educational research. We begin to see that the discourse on adult education in Ireland could begin to incorporate this type of enquiry more seriously, not just from an anecdotal perspective which we are all very familiar with. More research should be done which applies a discourse analysis approach to the deconstruction of data (gathered from semi-structured and unstructured interviews) from adult learners and adult educators of their thoughts and ideas of the adult education and adult learning. Future research could use a highly reflexive hermeneutic which would support any theory generated from a literature review and subsequent data collection. It is legitimate to examine more complex and subtle areas of Freirean theory in order to create a research paradigm which attempts to examine the ontological and metaphysical nature of adult education. We can contend that an application of Freirean educational theory – one which is, therefore, constructed from the existentialist aspects of his work – can greatly contribute to the current discourse on adult education, in Ireland.

This application of *Freirean existentialism* has major implications for future research. Specifically, adult education policy development must not fall into

a pedagogical malaise whereby we solely acknowledge the economic benefits of adult education. In tandem with this concern, discussions such as the one in this paper, should be promoted as they will enhance the communicative, humanising, and transformative aspects of this area of education. These considerations can form a lens through which we can begin to consider our practice in adult education as a moral, and, even as a spiritual duty. By doing so we are confronted with the metaphysical nature of the adult education process. This complex process of teaching and learning, and the effects on our being which that procedure produces, can open new and innovative ways of research. If there is one outstanding principle which our discussion has attempted to highlight, it is that adult educators must not see the adult learners as objects among other objects in-the-world. Rather they must see learners as subjects confronted with other subjects in-the-world. This can happen through authentic dialogue, and this can be done by the educator dialogically rejecting any subject/object dichotomies present in the educational relationship. This paper has interpreted the world as an objective reality; a reality which is entirely independent of the existent (the subject), but which is a world that is capable of being known (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Dialogue is the foundation of our pedagogy. Freire explains how dialogue is a powerful tool when he says:

Educators do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation', but in order to come to know through dialogue with them, both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation - the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist. (Freire, 2005, pp. 72–74)

Being inspired by this thought, we must move away from the functionalist perspective that has dominated adult education research and policy making in recent years. We must aspire to the type of education which speaks to peoples' highest aspirations (Fleming, 2004). Therefore, we must develop a more heightened, caring, vocational, and critical approach to our educational practice and our educational relationship with adult learners.

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# A Tale of a Discursive Shift: Analysing EU Policy Discourses in Irish Adult Education Policy – From the *White Paper* to the *Further Education and Training Strategy*

DENISE SHANNON

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## **Abstract**

*This article discusses some of the main findings of a Critical Discourse Analysis of two landmark documents in Irish adult education: Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) and the Further Education and Training Strategy (SOLAS, 2014) (from here on referred to respectively as the White Paper and the FET Strategy). The diachronic approach taken by this inquiry permits an exploration of the ways in which language in policy documents has changed over time, particularly in terms of how policy addresses educational inequality. It is in this way that the notion of a discursive shift could be explored, setting this change in language in starker relief. Policy as discourse shapes the formation of this inquiry so the article briefly explicates the approach taken to a Critical Discourse Analysis. Considerations of methodological nationalism widened the focus to consider the influence of European Union (EU) policy discourses specifically in Irish policy formation and these discourses in the statecraft of the EU and nation states. It is from this perspective that the Irish story is also a European one, so the article analyses how the White Paper and the FET Strategy were framed by the EU policy discourses of ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘skills’ respectively. As part of this analysis, this article considers the significance of the redefinition of the notion of ‘inclusion’ to ‘active inclusion’ and the sharpening of ‘evidence based’ discourse in policy resourcing of adult education provision. Finally, the article briefly elaborates on the authors’ experience of this research and the value of Critical Discourse Analysis as a normative force and a tool for advocacy.*

**Keywords:** Adult Education, Discourse, Hegemony, Lifelong Learning, Neoliberalism, Policy, Skills, EU, Nation State

## Introduction

The education system is ... the product of conflict between the dominant and the dominated ... It is an arena of conflict over the production of knowledge, ideology and employment, a place where social movements try to meet their needs and business attempts to produce hegemony. (Carnoy and Levin, 1985)

The EU is often seen as an important influence and actor in shaping global education policy. Its interactions see nation states acting as 'norm-advocates' in national policy using discourses which are mediated through EU education policy space (Klatt, 2014). While the subsidiarity principle means that the field of education falls under the competence of the member states, at the time of writing of the *White Paper*, the EU had gained incremental legislative ground for its role in adult education policy. The Treaties of Maastricht 1992 and Amsterdam 1997 enabled permeability in policy formation between education and vocational training, and the monitoring of member states national employment policies. The Luxembourg Process (named following its adoption at the Jobs Summit Luxembourg in 1997) saw education emerge in EU employment policy in the form of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning was viewed as a way to 'transform passive labour market policies into active policies for human resource investment' (EC, 1997 p. 15). It can be said that this coupling of labour and education policy was symptomatic of the shift from Keynesian and welfare state economics of post war international politics (where education is a right and is provided by the state) to the Washington consensus of post-cold war (where education is a service to the consumer that is provided by the market). The resultant proliferation of neoliberal ideas promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) influenced this changing paradigm in policy development, with the origins of lifelong learning arising from economic rather than educational roots. Notably, Jarvis (2007) contended that learning to do without welfare is what lifelong learning was really about:

Far from being ambiguous lifelong learning has emerged as a key instrument of globalisation emerging in discourse at the same time and placing the responsibility for learning on the individual to acquire and chose to lifelong learn with the connotation of irresponsibility for those who do not, and those who cannot, acquire that learning. (Jarvis, 2007, p. 68)

Lifelong learning as a concept was particularly linked to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and EU which informed

the discourse of their policy documents from the early 70s onwards (Finnegan, 2008, Barros, 2012). The EU's most widely distributed policy concerning education entitled *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (EC, 2000), provided lifelong learning with its first formal definition in EU policy terms. From a nation state perspective, this shift in international education policy formation can somewhat explain that while there was no formal EU policy definition of lifelong learning at the time of the writing of the *White Paper*, lifelong learning had already crafted a niche in Ireland's economic policy (DTET, 1997). Irish policy makers embraced the concept of lifelong learning to develop common strategies for employment and education policy, realising unprecedented dialogue under the theme of lifelong learning (Fitzsimons, 2017). Ireland was one of the few nation states that applied the principle of lifelong learning to its policy making and to what is viewed as its seminal policy document for adult education, *Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000). Drawing from the *EU Council Conclusions on a Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (EC, 1996), it was as Lambeir described, 'the magic spell in the discourse of educational and economic policymakers' (2005, p. 350).

The writing of the *FET Strategy* was preceded by a global financial crisis in 2008. This crisis saw flagship policy documents issued in relatively quick succession from the European Commission Directorate General (DG) for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. 'Skills' replaced 'lifelong learning' in the titles of these documents: '*New skills for New Jobs-Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs*' (2008a) and the '*Agenda for new Skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment*' (EC, 2010a). They manifested consensus in approach towards economic recovery informed by key actors including the OCED, International Labour Organisation (ILO), G20, and the United Nations (UN). 'Skills' were framed not only in terms of the individual and the workforce, but also in terms of a 'global race for talent' (EC, 2010a). The *FET Strategy* mirrored these policy concerns around high rates of low qualified, mismatches between skills in the labour market, developing labour market intelligence and providing the right mix of skills (EC, 2008a). The concept of skills replaced lifelong learning as common ground in EU and national policy and was propagated as 'the major structural challenge of the decade' (Panitsides and Anastasiadou 2015).

## **Statecraft**

A formalisation of EU and nation state interactions through a new form of governance called the Open Method of Coordination (OMC)<sup>1</sup> saw a by-passing of the subsidiarity principle through this new governance arrangement (EC, 2006). This enabled a more coherent EU and nation state policy focus on the part to be played by education and training as the source of economic prosperity. It can be said that the OMC was a move beyond Weber's (1978) conceptualisation of the legitimate and territorially bound authority of the state as an entity and legislative authority. This meant that interactions between the EU and the nation state were, to a certain extent, no longer bound by such bureaucratic principles. It is with this view that one can observe more broadly the processes of policy formation in terms of EU to nation state interactions. Where political agents like those lobbying for policy formation act strategically to pursue particular agendas. What is useful when analysing policy as discourse is how these interactions effects the privileging of some political strategies over others to meet these agendas through what Jessop (2007) calls 'strategic selectivity'. As generators of 'strategic selectivity' the EU and the nation state adopt strategies that aim to impose unity and coherence to government activities. An important added dimension to this consideration is Jessop's concept of 'discursive selectivity', which acknowledges the role of discourse to influencing 'strategic selectivity'. In this way one can see how discourse, in the pursuit of 'strategic selectivity' draws on social imaginaries such as globalisation, lifelong learning, skills and the knowledge economy to give coherence to policy visions and goals. Laying the foundations for this inquiry's argument, it can be said that the EU and nation state's selection of some strategies over others are 'discursively -selective', whereby policy formation is shaped to be contingent with these agendas (Milana, 2014). As will be discussed later, it can be seen how these agendas manifest as primarily about pursuing economic objectives rather than objectives for a more equal and inclusive society.

## **Visions and simplifications of a complex hope**

Hegemony is defined in the Gramscian sense 'as a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class' (Mayo, 1999, p.35). Hegemony, developed through our social interactions (in work, education etc.) sees a naturalising of our social relations and ideologies that are

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1 The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is an approach to political coordination and draws on tools such as indicators and benchmarks as well as on comparison of best practice, monitoring and peer review (Keogh, 2004).

largely discursive (Fairclough, 2010). Hegemony and its power lie in its shaping of our consciousness. It is through this, that our conception of a 'common-world view' is made and therein the values of our shared worldview. This 'everyday thinking', made up of a tapestry of stories, create a narrative providing simple explanations for the way the world is or the way it must be (Hall and O'Shea, 2013). For Gramsci, education is one of the many ways this 'common-sense' can be disseminated to maintain a particular world view and exercise hegemony. Linking class dimensions to this dynamic, he viewed the limiting of access to 'powerful knowledge' as confining people and communities to the 'margins of economic and political life' (Mayo, 1999, p. 8). Fleming (2004) usefully describes adult education as being at the interface between the needs of the economy and the needs of society. As a policy object, it is at this interface that adult education and its work is found. Its policy terrain can be seen as an ideological one whereby hegemony legitimises certain values and beliefs through discourses of 'common sense' that shape its purpose and formation. Often described as 'second chance' the Irish state has taken an increasingly functionalist view of adult education in terms of its contribution to economic and political order without any consideration for its civic role and its potential for critical action or radical change as proposed by Freire (Grummell, 2007). Critical education, concerned challenging dominant ideas through a process of critical thinking and dialogue, can uncover how society and social structures shape one's everyday reality and concern oneself with how this reality could be different (Fitzsimons, 2017). Critical pedagogy and Freire's concept of 'praxis' engages students in a learning process that is not imposed but enables learners to be self-determined whereby they can realise their power as critically engaged citizens who question the process of education and the process of democracy (Giroux, 2010). This process, as described by Freire, is a coming into consciousness, a state of 'conscientization' where one is enabled to see beyond the veil of 'common-sense' to the social, political and economic contradictions (Freire, 1970). And so, it is from this perspective that the challenge for adult education in policy can be seen as a 'complex hope'. This complex hope is one which recognises the historical and structural inequalities that need to be overcome (Grace 1994, in Thrupp and Tomlinson, 2005). This inquiry found when analysing EU and national policy discourses, ambitions for social justice and the notion of social justice itself has become ever more contested. This has seen sharpening in policy formation and therein policy language in how social justice is realised; from social justice discourses drawn from the notion of the social contract and driven by the 'common good', to discourses of social justice

realised through the 'market state', whereby individuals are responsible for themselves as human capital (Thrupp and Tomlinson, 2005).

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Social representations of the world through language and discourse is the major concern of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It aims to reveal the ideological work in texts like policy and how they work to represent a world view, relate information, identify and prioritise problems and frame solutions to those problems. The use of CDA is not about an ideological position, nor is it claiming absolute truth, but rather uncovering power dimensions in policy language and how its values are articulated in policy formation. In this way it can reveal how language and discourse is used in policy to resource or not resource, to select and deselect, to legitimise and delegitimise. And so, when one is analysing text one is alternating between what is 'there' and the discourse types(s) that it is drawing upon (Fairclough, 2001). What is for consideration here, is how discourses like globalisation, lifelong learning and skills can work in policy to represent complex social realities while acting as social constructions in policy formation for its problems and solutions. These discourses provide selective representations, simplifications and condensations of 'highly complex economic, political, social and cultural realities, which include certain aspects of these realities and exclude others, highlight certain aspects, and background others' (Fairclough, 2010, p.507). Fairclough contends that texts inevitably make assumptions: 'what is 'said' in a text is 'said' against a background of what is 'unsaid', but taken as a given' (Fairclough, 2003). Existential assumptions assume that globalisation exists and that there is a 'knowledge-based economy'; propositional assumptions convey for example that globalisation is a process and that it is linked to economic progress; value assumptions assume that globalisation, adaptability, efficiency and flexibility are desirable or, for example, that a lack of these attributes is a risk to the economy and society.

Fairclough (2003) links the notion of 'common-sense' assumptions in text to hegemony. These assumptions within policy texts have their foundation in a 'world of texts' as Fairclough puts it. For this analysis one can see how 'lifelong learning' and 'skills' in national policy draws explicitly and implicitly from a wider world of texts including those from the EU, OECD etc. And, as no form of communication in texts like policy is possible without some 'common ground', power and hegemony lie in its capacity to shape the nature and content of this common ground. This makes assumptions and implicitness important to the notion of ideology (Fairclough, 2003). It is from this perspective that one can

critically analyse how ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘skills’ act as common ground in the *White Paper* and the *FET Strategy*. And is particularly relevant when considering how these discourses can act as common-sense in policy formation which allows them to be judged in terms of their social effects rather than their truth values (Fairclough, 2010, p. 32). It can be said that these discourses work in policy to create a fatalistic ‘no alternative’ and conceptualisation of social justice within goals of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005).

### **The White Paper to the FET Strategy: From Lifelong Learning to Skills Discourses**

#### *The White Paper: A vision for lifelong learning*

Lifelong learning in the *White Paper* gave the context for adult education's recognition and development for the future (Fleming, 2001). It was this recognition that makes it a landmark document for those working in the field, particularly in terms of critical adult education and community education (Connolly, 2008). Its wide-ranging consultation process gave visibility to the work of adult and community education which up to this time was an invisible part of adult education provision (Fleming, 2001; Fitzsimons 2017). Positioning adult education within the broader realm of lifelong learning discursively served to determine the *White Paper's* shape and purpose from the outset. This enabled it to frame its policy significance ‘beyond the sectoral concerns of adult education only’ (DES, 2000, p. 30). As ‘common ground’, lifelong learning acted to rhetorically resolve its social justice goals with its economic ones, and the role of lifelong learning rather than adult education to realise these policy goals. Drawing on a discourse of change it positions lifelong learning as a response to this as a ‘new departure’:

This is truly a new departure by the State in shaping its educational thinking ... to one in which lifelong learning becomes the overriding principle. (DES, 2000, p. 24)

Visions for lifelong learning in the *European Council Conclusions on a Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (1996) were mirrored in the *White Paper*. Human capital and social justice discourses were combined in its vision statement and linked to the notion of the knowledge society (Fairclough, 2000). The visions of the *White Paper* draw from knowledge society discourses to shape its ambitions towards a well-developed education system. This education system is one that can produce a workforce that is ‘adaptable and willing to learn new skills’ (DES, 2000, p. 9) and can act as ‘a major selling point in the new knowledge society’.

### **Educational inequality in the White Paper**

Vivid images of adult education in the *White Paper* can be found where it describes learning in the home, literacy within formal education, community education, and self-funded education. The structural and intergenerational features of educational inequality, including the impact of a parent's education on the educational attainment of their children are recognised in the *White Paper* from the outset:

We know that increasing children's participation and benefit from education is heavily dependent on also enabling parents to support their children's learning. (DES, 2000, p. 9)

The *White Paper* links consistent poverty, the role of education in addressing poverty, and in particular, the role that Adult Education can play in addition to school in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty:

Parental levels of education exert a critical influence on children's participation in education and their school performance ... adult education particularly the community education strand can play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. (DES, 2000, p. 49)

Learning within the space of the home, intergenerational learning and familial learning is explicitly linked to the literacy attainment of children:

Children who 'come home to a house which does not encourage reading, or the development of reading skills is at risk of underachieving in school'. (DES, 2000, p. 91)

The engagement of the lifelong learner in lifelong learning is described as voluntary and self-motivated, contending that 'the learner rather than the provider is at the centre of the process' (DES, 2000, p. 32). It aims to:

Secure the learner-centred aspect of adult education in the approaches and policies it proposes ... it transforms power relationships between the provider and learner in favour of the learner. (DES, 2000, p. 32)

However, manifestations of a transfer in power relationship are not evident for educational initiatives working with the 'low skilled'. Access, eligibility and financial support to attend programmes like the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) are subject

to the discretion of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. Eligibility is dependent on one's social welfare payment status and on condition that the course will improve chances of getting a job:

To continued welfare payments will be subject to their satisfying the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs ... that the persons concerned are still available for and actively seeking work, and that the course is likely to improve their chances of gaining a job (DES, 2000, p. 98).

Subject to the discretion of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. (DES, 2000, p. 97)

A dedicated chapter for community education and its referencing throughout the *White Paper* pays particular attention to its capacity to reach 'large numbers of participants, frequently in disadvantaged settings' (DES, 2000, p. 110). The *White Paper* describes community education as 'pioneering new approaches to teaching and learning' (DES, 2000, p. 110) and as 'one of the most dynamic and distinctive elements of the adult education sector in recent years' (DES, 2000, p. 16). It outlines the role of adult education and community education in particular as having a 'crucial role' in addressing educational inequality (DES, 2000, p. 49). Observing the *White Paper's* lexical appreciation for the complexities and implications of educational inequality one would expect a commitment to resourcing of these crucial learning spaces with an all-encompassing approach. However, these commitments are outlined on conditional terms:

Community Education Providers will access funding through a competitive bidding process ... the level of funding available will require that criteria for a rigorous prioritisation process are developed, and that joint frameworks for accountability and quality assurance form an integral part of the approach. (DES, 2000, p. 117)

Tracing social justice discourses through the *White Paper* one finds visible tensions. These tensions are most evident where the resourcing of these learning spaces is deliberated. Government commitments to resourcing learning spaces that address educational inequality (community education, literacy, part-time self-funded education) avoids commitment, deferring to the principle of lifelong learning and its systemic approach.

Lifewide education poses particular systemic challenges ... the appropriate resourcing of different learning sites ... economies of scale and quality assurance issues will always require some selection and designation of providers ... requires ease of movement and progression between learning sites based on parity of esteem between providers. (DES, 2000, p. 32)

A balance must be struck between the need to support innovation and empowerment through local initiatives, particularly in disadvantaged areas, and the need for systematic and strategic investment. (DES, 2000, p. 117)

This inquiry found that lifelong learning in the *White Paper* was a malleable term that was tailored to serve a policy agenda. It sharpened an alignment for the purpose of adult education with the human capital agenda and became a policy term for a 'new educational order' (Field, 2006). It facilitated an unbalanced compromise which was played out in its visions for lifelong learning and social justice without having to really commit to addressing educational inequality at all. It can be said that this was a moment of appropriation, whereby these learning spaces were enveloped the discourses of lifelong learning and its systemic approach.

### **The FET Strategy: A vision for a skills equation**

The *FET Strategy* and its policy vision for the reform of the adult education field 'marked a major shift in the way adult education was framed in Irish policy' (Finnegan, 2017). Further Education and Training (FET) replaced 'adult education' as the umbrella term for the field. This was a shift and narrowing in policy view of the work of adult education to a 'training/ reskilling paradigm' (Murray, 2014, p. 113). To use the words of Taylor and Henry (1994), observing a similar policy umbrella in Australia, the formation of FET has a 'stretched nature sheltering as it does a fragile consensus, in turn sheltering a number of disparate and not necessarily compatible interests' (cited in Taylor, 1997, p. 30). Skills replaced lifelong learning as the 'common-sense', shaping the policy formation of the *FET Strategy*. Its policy vision coherently centred on the metaphor of the 'skills equation'. Employers and their needs were placed at the heart of this 'skills equation' with 'skills matching' to address the needs of employers and the provision of skills that are 'genuinely valued':

Skills development and wellbeing lie at the heart of the *FET Strategy*. Employers lie at the heart of skill needs, while the learner lies at the heart of the FET service. (SOLAS, 2014, p. 4)

The *FET Strategy* presents ‘skills’ as the policy panacea for the social and economic challenges faced by the Ireland in the wake of the economic crisis. In a similar way to lifelong learning in the *White Paper*, skills are poised as the answer to an internationally shared reality. Described as the ‘global currency of 21st Century economies’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 64), the policy goal aims for ‘greater alignment between FET provision and FET-related employer skills needs’ to ‘withstand disruptive global, national or local business forces’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 19). From the outset it explicitly links the purpose of skills with the development of human capital and the wellbeing of the economy:

Skills as a resource for economic growth

Skills as drivers of employment and growth

Skills as drivers of productivity increase

Skills and ‘smartening’ of the economy

Skills as a driver of social inclusion and social mobility

Skills as an insulator from unemployment.

(SOLAS, 2014, pp. 4–5)

### **Educational inequality in the FET Strategy**

It is not without significance that education inequality *FET Strategy* is described in terms of ‘learning failure’ and Further Education and Training as a way to ‘remedy past deficiencies’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 22). Describing the unemployed as ‘inactive’, it is a discursive shift from the *White Paper*, taking a narrow policy view of the adult learner and their life experience. The *FET Strategy*’s policy formation around educational inequality positions ‘skills’ as the driver to ‘social mobility and social inclusion (SOLAS, 2014, p. 4). Viewing the adult learner in terms of their skill attainment, it aims towards the construction of the ‘employable citizen’. The *FET Strategy*’s concerns about ‘skills depreciation’, the difficulty in realising a ‘skills match’ and the limitations of skills themselves in realising ‘better social or economic outcomes’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 78) are not considered in terms the complexity of how educational inequality is experienced, or how social mobility is realised. While this can be seen as a discursive shift from the concept of ‘lifelong learning’, the simplifications one can associate with skills discourse are not dissimilar. Skills can be seen as underpinning an evolution in

policy thinking and formation around how social justice is achieved. Common-sense ‘employability’ and ‘skills’ discourses colour visions for a ‘smart economy’ and are reconciled with a new hybrid and neoliberal version of inclusion known as ‘active inclusion’.

### **From Social Inclusion to Active Inclusion**

‘Active inclusion’ replaced the concept of ‘social inclusion’ in the *FET Strategy*. It can be said that the concept of ‘active inclusion’ represents an evolution of the notion of ‘social inclusion’ to a more defined neoliberal view, whereby the inclusion of the citizen into society means their ‘integration into the market either as consumers or producers’ (Gaventa, 2010, in Mikelatou and Arvanitis 2018, p. 501). This represents a discursive shift, not only in terms of its marginalisation and silencing of social justice discourses, but a hybridisation of those discourses with economic discourses. Social inclusion as a concept is understood as the inclusion of a citizen into society, whereas active inclusion can be understood as an individualised and targeted welfare intervention (Kunzel, 2012). Active Inclusion in the *FET Strategy* is explicitly drawn from the *European Commission Recommendation on Active Inclusion of People Excluded from the Labour Market*, (EC, 2008b). It seeks to combine three pillars. The first outlines the individual’s right to resources and social assistance to live in dignity. The second addresses the issue of ‘inclusive labour markets’ which urge member states to provide for active labour market measures that will raise the employability of the workforce, raise the quality of jobs at the bottom of the labour market and review tax incentives and disincentives for those on low incomes. The third, outlines the need for access to quality services such as housing support, affordable childcare and health and care services. Importantly, the Recommendation outlines that these three pillars should be implemented at national level with the right policy mix (EC, 2008b). However, the decentralised and discretionary nature of policy implementation at national level has seen few countries go beyond a strictly labour market and welfare intervention. Policy research on the application of active inclusion across the member states (which does not include Ireland) show that ‘labour activation’ and ‘enabling’ policies which favour improving individual’s capacities can co-exist (Kunzel, 2012). And while the *FET Strategy* acknowledges that those with low levels of education are more likely to experience in-work poverty and precarious employment, its application of ‘active inclusion’ takes a predominately labour activation approach. In addition, there is an absence of policy considerations for realising an ‘inclusive labour market’ as an evolution to the ‘inclusive society’ which should see some policy attention on the notion of sustainable

employment and the quality of jobs at the bottom of the labour market. Most pointedly, its application of active inclusion reveals a strategic use of evidence and ‘evidence based’ discourses to serve its policy narrative for ‘employability’ which fails to address complexities of how social and educational inequality is experienced.

### **Evidence based is a discourse like any other**

Ball (1993) contends that policy making is not a rational and scientific process but an ideological one based on ideas and assumptions about how society should be organised, and resources allocated. It can be said that ‘evidence based’ policy making and ‘outcomes based’ funding was an evolution to the *White Paper’s* ‘rigorous prioritisation process’ and ‘accountability’. Bringing us back to the notion of a ‘complex hope’, Head (2013) contends that distinctions must be made between evidence that can be ‘deployed directly’ to solve technical issues and how policy addresses what requires more complex problem solving around structural and social inequality. It can be said that term ‘evidence based’, purports to position policy making as a neutral process whereby it is working ‘in a neutral, rationalist, and a political fashion’ to solve social problems and that this use of evidence is different to the way policy was made before (Newman, 2017, p. 213). With regard to linking research and evidence for policy formation, Connolly argues that ‘validation of knowledge creation is still as site of struggle’ whereby positivist research is asserted as ‘the only valid source of information and knowledge on which decisions and policy should be based’ (2016, p.95). Newman (2014) considers how evidence-based policy making is damaging to policy making because it creates a ‘hierarchy of evidence, which favours some forms of knowledge over equally valid forms’. This creates a ‘powerful metaphor in shaping what forms of knowledge are considered closest to the truth in decision making processes and policy argument’ (Newman, 2014, p. 218). The *FET Strategy* drew heavily and strategically from its SOLAS commissioned research; *Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future* (ESRI, 2014) and the National Economic Social Council (NESC) *A Strategic Review of the Unemployed* (NESC, 2013). It used this research to underpin its policy argument for skills and employability, contending that this was a departure from what was done before which it contends was ‘determined more by legacy than by evidence-based needs’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 8).

Community education is described in the *FET Strategy* ‘as a critical access point for many adults who left school early and/or who have personal, familial, or communal experience of socio-economic exclusion’ (SOLAS, p. 96). The

ESRI consultation found that ‘across the stakeholder groups there was strong recognition of the need for these forms of provision’ (ESRI, 2014, p. 84). The measurement of outcomes that relate to ‘personal development as well as employment outcomes’ were one of five ‘most-widely mentioned strategies flagged by over 150 submissions to the DES led consultation process’ (ESRI, 2014, p. 84). This pointed to a significant concern about the narrowness and formation of data collected for validation of outcomes. In this regard, *FET Strategy* does not reflect the outcomes of the ESRI consultation, which outlined the ‘need to think ‘creatively’ about measuring outcomes and the need for measurement to be ‘non-threatening’ to potential participants’ (ESRI, 2014, p. 77). Its research also outlines that there is a need to ‘ensure *appropriate* (italics in original) metrics are developed’ (ESRI, 2014, p. 84), and ‘the importance of avoiding the unintended consequences of accreditation’ (ESRI, 2014, p. 121). The NESC (2013) in its principle findings, responds with recommendations to address these widely expressed concerns from the consultation:

SOLAS should adopt a holistic view of what constitutes success for unemployed learners and support the collection of data on learners’ views as well as ‘hard data’ on qualifications and outcomes ... there are significant ‘softer’ achievements such as increased confidence, more developed group skills and social skills, and that the option of non-accredited learning can be important for particularly disadvantaged groups ... there are models to evaluate social return on investment that are particularly useful for these types of programmes. (NESC, 2013 p. 80)

Community education is strongly expressed in the *FET Strategy* as a ‘vital link’ in addressing educational inequality, yet in the consultation its proposed future funding model will be based on ‘outcomes’. There are no assurances given that the new funding model will reflect the concerns and recommendations of the research, stating that ‘until such time as the information exists’ it will sustain funding and review the budget for community education on an annual basis (SOLAS, 2014, p. 26). This language acts in a similar way to the *White Paper*, with the use of evidence-based discourses emerging as most pervasive in policy formation for educational inequality. It appears most vividly where the *FET Strategy* points to concerns raised by the NESC review which found that there was ‘variable quality across the FET sector around the matching of individuals to the most suitable and meaningful education and training programmes’ (NESC, 2013, p. 82). The NESC review outlined that one of the strongest messages coming from their consultation was the role of guidance as a determinant of success for the FET sector:

The role which good guidance plays in ensuring that unemployed people identify courses for which they are motivated and capable of completing ... when unemployed people do not complete courses, resources are wasted and other learners, providers and the unemployed themselves are negatively affected. (NESC, 2013, p. 82)

It recommends that:

It is important that protocols and procedures are further developed ... on a priority basis for LTU (long term unemployed) enrolling on FET. (NESC, 2013, p. 82)

While the NESC research identifies the role of guidance as a determinant of success, the *FET Strategy* maintains that the NESC research indicates that any improved protocol procedures between the Department of Social Protection (DSP), Adult Education Guidance Services and the ETB would 'not be sufficient in itself to deliver improved outcomes for learners' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 82). And that 'an evidence base is needed on the role of guidance in FET' to match learners to the most suitable and meaningful education and training programmes. Drawing from the NESC research it outlines a number of areas that require improvement in terms of meaningful provision, including the limited employment outcomes arising from programmes such as the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI):

- The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) has only one-in-five advancing to employment.
- Generally, little is known about what the unemployed (and the 20% unemployed) use BTEI for, i.e. how long they stay on it, what awards they achieve, what employment impacts the awards have etc. (SOLAS, 2014, p. 83)

While these programmes may have realised limited employment outcomes, the NESC research also identified significant educational outcomes which were ignored by the *FET Strategy*. VTOS sees 'two in five use it to progress to more advanced education' (NESC, 2013, p. 30). And the BTEI Programme, which works with adults for whom 60% have achieved less than upper secondary education, sees 'continuing with BTEI (45%) or some form of additional education/ training (13%) as the dominant outcomes' (NESC, 2013, p. 43). Taking a narrow employability rather than a wider educational policy view *FET*

*Strategy* not only fails to recognise the educational gains of these programmes, but also fails to consider these successes in terms of the reality of the labour market; that those with the lowest skills are at the greatest risk of being the working poor. When tracing evidence-based discourses in the *FET Strategy*, no real policy value is given to the capacity of guidance, or initiatives such as VTOS and BTEI to make real educational gains for adults that may mitigate against these risks. In a similar way to the *White Paper*, the use of evidence-based discourses are most pervasive in policy formation around educational inequality. However, it can be said that the *FET Strategy* demonstrates a ‘discursive shift’ in the use of evidence-based research in policy making pointing to a political and value-based use of research to align with a policy narrative. Its use emerges as more about reconciling these different value perspectives and its merits as political rhetoric rather than any bureaucratic aim (Ball, 1993).

### **Conclusion**

For this inquiry, the *White Paper* (2000) and the *FET Strategy* (2014) as two points in time offered a unique opportunity to analyse an evolution from a discourse and language perspective. It enabled considerations of the notion of a ‘discursive shift’ in how language in policy determines a space for the social justice work of adult education. In this way the implications of lifelong learning and skills discourses in policy could be set in starker relief; demonstrating how these discourses work, and how they now work ever more sharply to supply simplifications and condensations of complicated realities in policy formation. These unified coherent strategies in policy obscure the diversity, breadth and imagination of adult education in pursuit of visions that are shaped by globalised imaginaries. Milana (2012) outlines that while adult education practice is locally implemented, adult education as policy object is impacted upon by the discursive patterns of globalisation, and therein a neoliberal ideology, substantiated through EU and nation state policy interactions. A policy-as-discourse analysis can uncover how discourses can work to construct policy problems, while also shaping the solutions to problems (Milana, 2012; Bacchi, 2009).

There is no doubt that the *White Paper’s* continuing value as a policy document is its expansive reflection of the consultation process that shaped its formation. Its voices enabled imaginaries and discourses of the social justice kind to shed light on the work of adult education and its complex hope. As an evolution, the *FET Strategy* offers a ‘featureless map’ (Finnegan, 2017). That said, however, it can be seen from this analysis that ‘lifelong learning’ and the economic lens

it brought to the formation of policy in the *White Paper* sowed the seeds for the 'skills equation' in the *FET Strategy*. Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which helps us understand the pervasiveness of hegemonies' economic determinism, is not without hope (Gramsci, 1971). His vision for a 'counter-hegemony' or alternative vision for society has insights that can be drawn on for the workings of resistance which can challenge the simplifications inherent in this economic policy lens. This counter-hegemonic work can reveal what brings certain policy discourses to prominence, their contradictions, redefinitions and silences (Thrupp and Tomlinson, 2005). It is with this perspective, that policy can be seen as an outcome of ideological struggles between the different political actors whereby there is a privileging of some political strategies over others in pursuit of 'strategic selectivity' (Jessop, 2007). Analysing policy as discourse can enable 'policy insiders' and 'policy outsiders' both within and between the EU and nation states, to work with a social justice agenda and engage in 'policy activism' (Yeatman, 1998). The EU and the nation state are not monolithic, which can allow for alternative conceptions for the formation of education that can be counter hegemonic (Borg and Mayo 2006). Jessop's theory of the state as a social relation offers light and possibility to these interactions whereby policy actors can work to engage in a 'war of position' on the economic determinism shaping adult education policy. As Gramsci indicated, it is through these social relations, that much, though not all, of the present hegemonic relationships are developed and contested, and given the incompleteness of these arrangements they can allow spaces in which counter-hegemonic action can be waged (Mayo, 2013).

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# Transforming the Lives of Early Childhood Teachers, Autistic Children and their Families: Findings and Recommendations from an Evaluation of a Programme of Continuing Professional Development

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## **Abstract**

*In response to the exponential growth in the prevalence of autism in Ireland and 95% of all children availing of the universal free pre-school scheme, AsIAM delivered a continuing professional development (CPD) programme, to 311 adult learners. The paper reports on a multi-method evaluation of the impact of the programme on early childhood teachers’ capacity to effectively include and support autistic children. The findings underline the importance of government investment in lifelong learning and the potential of a focused CPD programme to transform both participants’ professional lives and the experiences they provide for the children in early learning and care services. Recommendations for future policy development are also suggested.*

**Keywords:** Autism, autistic, inclusion, early learning and care, additional needs, impact, evaluation, continuing professional learning, lifelong learning, professional education continuum, adult education

## **Introduction**

In accordance with the recently expressed preferences of individuals with autism in claiming their identity, the term autistic child/person is adopted in this article (Sinclair, 2013). The National Council for Special Education’s (NCSE) policy advice on the importance of supporting autistic children across the education system, was welcomed by the Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton T.D. who noted that: ‘education is key to giving every child an equal opportunity

in life' (Bruton, 2016). The benefits of appropriate education provision for autistic children across the life-span are well-documented and in particular the importance of high-quality early intervention to ensure children and families are supported to achieve optimal outcomes right from the start (Ring *et al.*, 2016; Government of Ireland (GoI), 2018). At a time when 1 in 65 children in Ireland receive an autism diagnosis, high-quality early intervention remains critical (NCSE, 2016; Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018a). Effectively meeting the needs of autistic children requires teachers to understand the social, communication, inflexibility of thought and behaviours and sensory differences associated with autism (Egan, 2018; Feeney, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2018; Long, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2018; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018b). The Government continues to invest in early childhood education in Ireland through the introduction of the entitlement to two years of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme in 2016 and the implementation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), aimed at providing both universal and targeted supports for children with additional needs at pre-school level (Inter-Departmental Group (IDG), 2015; AIM, 2018). In January 2017 the number of children accessing the ECCE scheme surpassed the 100,000 mark for the first time, with 95% of eligible children attending a service under the ECCE scheme (Zappone, 2017). This increased uptake of ECCE places combined with the increased prevalence in children being assessed as having autism, highlighted an urgent need for increased supports for children in early learning and care (ELC) services and their families. Ensuring that early childhood teachers have the requisite knowledge(s), practices and values to confidently support autistic children and their families is therefore imperative (Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018b; Urban *et al.*, 2011).

However, while acknowledging recent government investment, Ireland has been criticised as one of the countries where less than 0.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) is spent on developing ELC provision, in comparison to other countries such as Norway and Sweden, where expenditure is 1.7% of GDP (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2017). This lack of investment has impacted negatively on the professionalisation of the early childhood teachers in terms of poor remuneration; lack of status/prestige; a lack of clarity in relation to a recognised knowledge base and an absence of a code of practice. The lack of clarity in relation to the professional education continuum (PEC) for early childhood teachers has led to a lack of coherence in the qualifications profile of the sector (Early Years Education Policy Working Group (EYEPW), 2017). Critically therefore early childhood teachers may not have the requisite knowledge(s), practices and values to provide effectively for

autistic children in the early years at this critical phase in children's learning and development.

*AsIAm* was founded in 2015 as a not-for-profit, charitable organisation to provide an information and support service to the autism community in Ireland. *AsIAm*'s aims are delineated with reference to four key headings: Educate; Empower; Advocate and Community (*AsIAm*, 2018). Based on its concern to educate and empower autistic children and their families, *AsIAm* developed a specific CPD initiative: *Teach Me As I Am Programme*, for early childhood teachers focused on enabling them to support autistic children and their families effectively in ELC settings. The continuing professional development (CPD) programme was delivered to 311 early childhood teachers in 2018 and this paper reports on the evaluation of the programme by the authors. The findings confirm that high-quality CPD programmes have the potential to transform both the lives of early childhood teachers and autistic children.

### **Background – Teach Me As I Am Programme**

Initially *AsIAm* consulted directly with 246 early childhood teachers through the online closed forum 'Preschool Practitioners and Providers in Ireland', which is a forum to support early childhood educators in sharing ideas and practice. Early childhood teachers were invited to complete a survey with open and closed questions. The survey invited participants to outline their current knowledge and experience in working with autistic children and specific areas they would like to see included in the proposed CPD programme.

The survey findings confirmed that while 80% of participants had experience in working with autistic children, 60% had never accessed CPD related to autism, as noted by one participant: 'I honestly don't know anything about autism. I would love to be able to understand more about the condition'. Participants identified a number of key areas where they required support in providing appropriately for autistic children, which included, communication; social skills; sensory processing; behaviour management and working with parents. Early childhood teachers frequently referred to requiring support in addressing children's anxiety, which they often observed culminated in disturbing incidents: 'how to teach children the skills they need to prevent/subside the impulsiveness of their actions when they get very agitated and frustrated, which can sometimes lead to violent outbursts'.

Parents were also consulted in relation to the proposed programme content through a support forum for parents of autistic children: ‘Autism Mamaí’ (Autism Mamaí, 2018). Of the 103 parents who participated, 45% responded that they felt very supported in their partnership with their child’s early childhood teacher, 34% felt somewhat supported and 20% reported feeling unsupported. The most prevalent theme identified by parents in relation to supporting their role in their children’s early education experiences was the need to develop better communication: ‘more feedback from teachers and SNAs (Special Needs Assistants). It’s scary having a non-verbal child and always wanting to know about their day’ and ‘I feel like full details of a child’s day in preschool should be made clearer i.e. what activities and learning took place’. Parents consistently highlighted the need for early childhood teachers to have the requisite knowledge(s); understanding and skills to support both their children and themselves: ‘trained personnel in mainstream preschools’ and ‘better trained staff’.

### **Teach Me As I Am Programme: Overview, Delivery and Approach**

Based on the responses of early childhood teachers, parents and research-based practice in providing for autistic children (Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018b;), the aims, objectives and content of the programme were designed and developed by *AsIAm*. The primary aim of the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* was to develop knowledge(s), practices and values to support early childhood teachers in cultivating inclusive environments for autistic children. Knowledge(s), practices and values have explicit meanings and purposes (Urban, Robson and Scacchi, 2017). Knowledge is co-constructed between all involved in the ELC system including children, families, communities, early childhood teachers and researchers; knowledge is always emerging in the complex and ever-changing milieu of the ELC context and is represented in the plural to reflect the nature of knowledge as diverse. Practices are critically reflected on, are purposeful and are not to be equated with ‘skills’, while underpinning values require articulation and go beyond demonstrated attitudes. Nine programme learning outcomes were identified and are detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Teach Me As I Am Programme Learning Outcomes**

1.	Explore the role and responsibilities of the early childhood teacher in relation to inclusion.
2.	Examine and explore potential learning opportunities in the early childhood setting in relation to accommodating and celebrating diversity.
3.	Understand the diagnostic criteria and assessment route for autism.
4.	Understand the different characteristics, strengths and differences autism may present.
5.	Explore services available for children during and post diagnosis
6.	Explore the rights of children with diverse needs in relation to personal autonomy; participation; communication and decision-making.
7.	Relate effectively and appropriately to children with diverse needs.
8.	Explore sensory processing differences and experiences, and how to effectively support these in the early childhood setting.
9	Maintain appropriate and supportive relationships with children, parents, primary carers, and other members of the child's team.

Programme content was designed specifically to ensure both the aims and the objectives of the programme could be achieved and focused on understanding autism; communication methods and techniques; sensory processing; social skills; positive relationships and parental partnership. Specifically the programme maintained a focus on enabling participants to acquire the knowledge(s), practices and values necessary to understand the implications of the differences associated with autism for children's learning and development in the early years as detailed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Implications of the Differences Associated with Autism for Children’s Learning and Development**

<b>Differences Associated with Autism</b>	<b>Implications of these Differences for Children’s Learning and Development</b>
<b>Differences in Social Interaction:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literal thinkers</li> <li>• Confused by the rules that govern social behaviour</li> <li>• Require direct teaching in social skills</li> <li>• Necessary to structure opportunities for the child to use social skills in different situations</li> <li>• Awareness of the difficulties for the child inherent in less structured situations such as break and lunchtime, and in transition between lessons.</li> </ul>
<b>Differences in Language and Communication:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The child needs support in understanding the purpose and value of communication</li> <li>• Attention needs to be directed to teaching the social aspects of language e.g. turn-taking.</li> <li>• Direct teaching of gestures, facial expression, vocal intonation and body language</li> <li>• Use of visual material and/signing to support and facilitate the child’s communicative initiations and responses</li> <li>• Providing precise instructions for the child to follow.</li> </ul>
<b>Differences in Flexibility of Thought and Behaviour</b>	<p>The child must be helped to cope with new and varying activities</p> <p>Pre-empting the child’s anxiety, which results from being presented with unstructured or unfamiliar situations without prior warning/explanation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devising and implementing a structured play-programme.</li> </ul>
<b>Differences in Sensory Responsivity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjustments must be made to the classroom to address the child’s under-sensitivity/over-sensitivity to noise, smell, taste, light, touch or movement</li> <li>• Eliciting relevant information regarding the child’s eating, drinking and sleeping irregularities</li> <li>• Structuring the classroom environment to reduce distractions</li> <li>• Securing the child’s attention prior to issuing instructions/engaging in conversation</li> <li>• Avoiding insisting on eye-contact</li> <li>• Provision of structures which assist the child in understanding the duration of tasks</li> <li>• Making the links between different tasks clear to the child</li> <li>• Direct teaching of target skills with directedness and clarity.</li> </ul>

The responses from early childhood teachers and parents suggested that there was a need to allow participants time to embed knowledge(s), practices and values in children’s experiences. Therefore, it was decided that a two-day programme would allow learners to embed new learning more effectively. This programme was delivered nationally in 2018 in the sixteen locations detailed in Table 3 below.

**Table 3. Schedule of Teach Me As I Am Programme Delivery**

Location	Day One	Day Two
Dublin North	12th February	2nd May
Galway	15th February	3rd May
Dublin South	19th February	8th May
Kerry	22nd February	10th May
Mayo	8th March	24th May
Cavan	12th March	28th May
Clare	15th March	31st May
Westmeath	21st March	6th June
Waterford	23rd March	8th June
Cork (Glanmire)	4th April	16th May
Kildare	9th April	11th June
Kilkenny	12th April	13th June
Meath	16th April	21st May
Donegal	19th April	20th June
Cork City	25th April	17th May
Limerick	26th April	28th June

A two-day programme was designed with Day One of the programme focused on addressing the areas that early childhood teachers had suggested should be included in the programme. In order to allow the learning from Day One to embed in practice, Day One was followed by a two-month period. Believing that reflective practice allows for critical reflection on practices, and deepens learning, the concept of reflective practice (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009; Bonfield and Horgan, 2016; Tynan, 2018) was

central to Day Two, which incorporated discussion with peers; interrogation of group case-studies and class discussions on how the learning from Day One was applied to practice in ELC services.

Based on the work of Knowles (1980; 1984), a delivery approach was adopted that considered the characteristics of adult learners and in particular the specific context of early childhood teachers. Activities focused on enabling participants to be self-directed in their learning; encouraging participants to utilise their experience as a resource for learning; focusing on ELC contexts in cultivating readiness for learning; harnessing the orientation to learning through employing case-studies grounded in practice and consolidating the internal motivation to learn. In addition, and acknowledging the similarities between andragogy and pedagogy, the programme drew on current learning theories related to motivation, cognitive psychology and neuroscience through locating content within participants' sphere of experience in a motivating and engaging manner; eliciting and building on previous learning and providing multi-modal representations of concepts (Ring *et al.*, 2018).

### **Evaluation Methodology**

In order to address the complexity of evaluating programmes of CPD, a multi-method approach was used to evaluate the impact of the programme and included semi-structured interviews, exploring and telling and word cloud generation using Mentimeter and questionnaires (Hein, 2018; Mentimeter, 2018; Mukherji and Albon, 2018; Ring and O'Sullivan, 2018). All data collection instruments were piloted prior to the commencing the evaluation and were adjusted accordingly. Ethical approval was received through Mary Immaculate College's (Limerick) ethical approval process.

A pre- and post- programme questionnaire designed to capture participants' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, values, experiences and behaviour in addition to demographics and relevant background information was distributed to participants. The post-programme questionnaire focused on establishing the impact of the CPD programme on participants' knowledge(s); practices and values vis-à-vis the inclusion of autistic children (Urban *et al.*, 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018). Both questionnaires included a combination of forced-choice questions and open-ended questions and generated both qualitative and quantitative data. In order to optimise response rate, participants were invited to complete the questionnaires at the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* sessions in hard-copy format and data subsequently inputted by the programme deliverer on the SurveyMonkey® platform (SurveyMonkey Inc., 2018).

Participants at both *Teach Me As I Am Programme* sessions were asked to record their understanding of providing for autistic children in the early childhood settings, using Mentimeter and word clouds were generated through the software (Mentimeter 2018). The word clouds at Figure 1 and 2 below provide data from one of the sixteen locations in which the programme was delivered. The data summarises participants' understanding of providing for autistic children in early childhood settings, pre- and post- participation in the *Teach Me As I Am Programme*

**Figure 1. Pre-programme Word Cloud from Participants at the Blue Location<sup>1</sup>**



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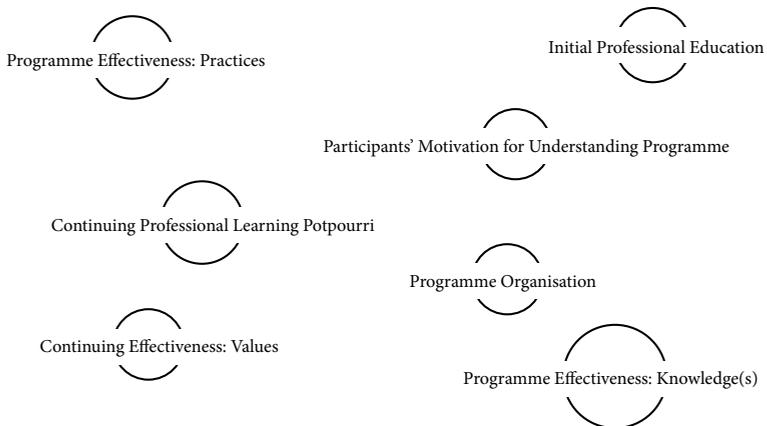
<sup>1</sup> 'Nuralogical' in Figure 1 can be equated with 'neurological'.

**Figure 2. Post-programme Word Cloud from Participants at the Blue Location**



Six early childhood teachers in two early childhood settings, who had completed the Teach Me As I Am Programme, were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews related to their experience of the programme, which were recorded using a voice-recording device. Following transcription, Quirkos was used to support the data analysis (Quirkos, 2017). Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the interview-coding process from Quirkos.

**Figure 3. Interview Coding Process (Quirkos 2017)**



Exploring and telling was used to explore autistic children’s experience in the ELC setting (Ring and O’Sullivan, 2018). The process utilises auto-photography

to capture how the child is experiencing the ELC service. In effect the child is invited to become a co-researcher in the evaluation. Following securing of parental consent and child assent, each child wore a small portable camera during activities in the setting. Video-data were uploaded to the Observer XT® software and analysed through coding of the video-data using an emergent approach to initially identify the main concepts evident in the data (Noldus 2018). During the subsequent phase of analysis, these codes were clustered to reflect broader emerging themes. The methods in Table 4 were adopted to support the trustworthiness of the research process and findings.

**Table 4. Methods Adopted in Establishing the Trustworthiness of the Research Process and Findings**

<b>Internal Validity and Credibility</b>	Triangulation of data sources and collection methods Extracts from data used in reporting Photographic evidence (video-stills) Attention to researcher-effect
<b>External Validity and Transferability</b>	Rich description of research context, research participants and process of data collection and analysis
<b>Reliability and Dependability</b>	Methodological Triangulation
<b>Objectivity and Confirmability</b>	Application of all of the above techniques in a systematic and consistent manner

### **Evaluation Findings and Discussion**

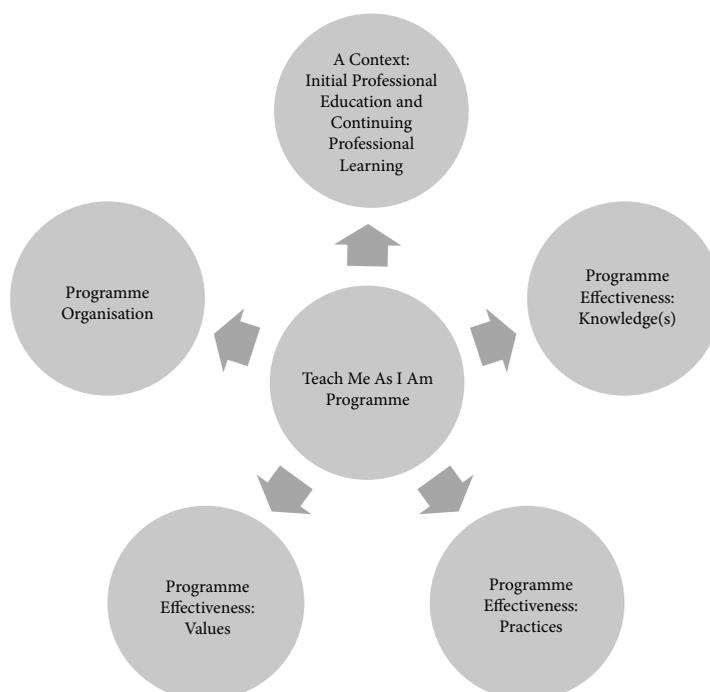
The findings of the evaluation yielded a range of significant findings in terms of the impact of the programme on participants and children and future directions in terms of addressing the lack of coherence in the qualifications' profile of the ELC sector. The pre-programme questionnaire was disseminated to 311 participants, yielding a response rate of 91%. The post-programme questionnaire was distributed to the 272 participants, providing a response rate of 95%. Not all participants on Day One or Day Two completed all questions, which has created a disparity in frequency of responses evident in a number of Tables. Early childhood teachers participating in the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* were working across community, private settings and primary schools as summarised in Table 5.

**Table 5. Profile of Teach Me As I Am Programme Participants’ Settings**

Setting Type	Frequency	%
Community-based Settings	91	32.73%
Private Settings	156	56.12%
Settings located in Primary Schools	31	11.15%
<b>Total</b>	278	100%

An overview of the five main themes that emerged from the composite analysis of the data is presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Overview of Themes Emerging from the Composite Data-Analysis**



Each theme identified is presented and discussed below. In reporting the findings, the two settings who participated in the semi-structured interviews and exploring and telling are referred to as Aisling (translates from the Irish as ‘dream’) and Réalt (translates from the Irish as ‘star’) and participants as A1; A2; A3 and R1; R2; R3. The two children who participated in the research are referred to as Kate (Aisling) and Jane (Réalt).

### A Context: Initial Professional Education and Continuing Professional Learning

Table 6 below provides an overview of 277 participants' qualifications in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (2018), which reflects the variety of qualifications of early childhood teachers nationally. Four participants elected not to answer the question on qualifications.

**Table 6. Qualifications of Participants at Pre-Programme Phase**

Qualification Level	Frequency	%
Level 5	46	16.6%
Level 6	118	42.6%
Level 7	33	11.9%
Level 8	73	26.4%
Level 9	7	2.5%
Total	277	100%

The findings are consistent with the annual national survey on the ELC sector, which identifies 63% cent of the early years workforce as having a qualifications at a Level 6 Certificate or above (Pobal, 2017). This diversity in staff qualifications at Initial Professional Education (IPE) level also presents challenges in terms of ensuring that all staff working with autistic children have the requisite knowledge(s); practices and values to provide effectively for children in the early years (Urban *et al.* 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018b). Participants in the research frequently commented that autism was a topic rarely discussed in detail during IPE programmes. While participants acknowledged that a number of modules accessed during their IPE experience had some application in preparing them to work with autistic children, the need for a greater focus on the application of theory to practice was consistently referred to as noted by the early childhood teacher in Réalt *'I think looking back with the amount that I am seeing, I think that I could have done a lot more learning about it in college'* (R2).

The extent to which participants reported previously engaging in CPD activities focused on inclusion and autism is provided in Table 7.

**Table 7. Participants' Participation in Continuing Professional Learning in the Areas of Inclusion and Autism Prior to Commencing the Teach Me As I Am Programme**

Type of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)	Participants who had Undertaken CPD %	Participants who had not Undertaken CPD %
CPD in the Area of Inclusion	53.7%	46.3%
CPD in the Area of Autism	26.1%	73.9%

Over half of participants reported undertaking CPD in the area of inclusion, however less than 30% of respondents reported undertaking CPD activities related to autism.

**Programme Effectiveness: Knowledge(s)**

Participants were invited to rate their overall satisfaction with the programme on a five-point scale ranging from 'very dissatisfied' to 'very satisfied'. As illustrated in Table 8, overall satisfaction levels with the programme were high with 11.2% reporting that they were 'satisfied' with the programme and 88.8% reporting that they were 'very satisfied' with the programme.

**Table 8. Participants' Overall Satisfaction with the Teach Me As I Am Programme**

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	29	11.2%	230	88.8%	259	

Post-programme questionnaires indicated a clear increase in early childhood teachers' knowledge, confidence and expertise in providing for children with autism. All participants in the survey were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'

with the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* content as summarised in Table 9 and encapsulated in the words of a participant who noted that the programme was ‘very informative, given great knowledge and advice for not only supporting the child but also supporting parents’.

Specific reference was made by participants to the breadth and depth of the knowledge; the focus on empathy; a child-led concept of pedagogy and curriculum; the role of the environment for autistic children; the critical importance of building relationships with parents and the affirmation of existing practice in the setting.

**Table 9. Participants’ Satisfaction with the Content of the Teach Me As I am Programme**

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	32	12.4%	227	87.6%	259	

As one questionnaire participant noted: ‘the programme covered a wide range of topics in great depth. I picked up far more information at this training than any other I’ve been to’. Overall, post-programme questionnaire results indicate that educators have ‘a better understanding of the characteristics associated with autism’. Critically participants noted that the programme supported them in developing empathy for the autistic child: ‘especially after doing the course...I’ve noticed you kind of have to really put your feet in their shoes, that was one of the main things for me, was putting myself in the child’s shoes and just stepping back, observing and just being like, having that empathy for the child’ (A1). Frequent reference was made to the programme highlighting the child-centred focused advocated by *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2009) as summarised by the settings who participated in the interviews: ‘I think that each child or even adult with autism, everyone is unique so each of the autism interventions has to be different for each

individual' (R1); 'when you've met one child with autism, you've met one child with autism' (A1). This was further captured by an early childhood teacher in Réalt who noted that: 'to teach Johnny, you've got to know Johnny, you've got to know their likes, where they are in life, the key areas of their development and provide them with a caring and friendly environment. That's important to them and we're the adults do we've got to change and adapt to their needs rather than expecting them to change and adapt to everyday life in play school' (R3).

The word clouds in Figure 5 and 6 below demonstrate participants' shift in a concept of autism as a deficit-model to a strengths-based, individualised one.

**Figure 5. Pre-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location C**



Figure 6. Post-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location C2



This conceptual shift was evident in a range of responses provided by questionnaire participants: ‘it made me think differently about children with autism, changing views equals changing practices. Giving me a different view, helped me help that child to learn in a way they are comfortable’. Similarly, another noted her misunderstanding in relation to a child presenting with autism: ‘I can now realise that what I thought as maybe the child not trying to learn or concentrate, was all wrong and that they are trying so hard and need to be understood and that is our job’.

The concept of a child-led approach is captured in the video-stills below from Réalt, where Jane was provided with a prepared environment that enabled her to select to play with the jigsaw independently based on her current interest in both colours and the letters of the alphabet. The early childhood teacher was observed to support Jane and her two peers who joined in the activity, which impacted positively on Jane’s engagement and social interaction.

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2 In Figure 6 ‘sencory’ may be equated with ‘sensory’; ‘opportuni’ may be equated with ‘opportunities’ and ‘wopportunities’ may be equated with ‘opportunities’.

**Figure 7. A Child-Led Approach**



Following engagement with the programme, early childhood teachers frequently referred to the importance of creating a calm, predictable and structured physical environment in the setting as captured by participants during the semi-structured interviews: ‘and see what might be irritating them, why they’re a little but upset today coming in or do you know, it could be the environment, I suppose the environment is a big thing that I kind of notice now’ (A3); ‘am, I notice as well she loves to work, she really focuses on her work when she’s in a quiet environment’ (A1); ‘looking at the environment, over-stimulating sounds that we might not have picked up on’ (R2) and ‘the fridge is buzzing, the light is flickering its kind of pointed out what we need to look, come back to basics’ (R3). Positive relationships between parents and the ELC service play a pivotal role in a child’s wellbeing, identity formation and sense of belonging (Daly *et al.* 2016; O’Byrne 2018) and participants affirmed that the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* had supported them in providing for the autistic child and their parents.

### Programme Effectiveness: Practices

Practices are concerned with the application of knowledge to practice and is therefore inextricably linked with knowledge(s). In terms of application to practice, the majority of participants were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the programme. As detailed in Table 10 below.

**Table 10. Participants’ Satisfaction with the Application of the Teach Me As I am Programme to Practice**

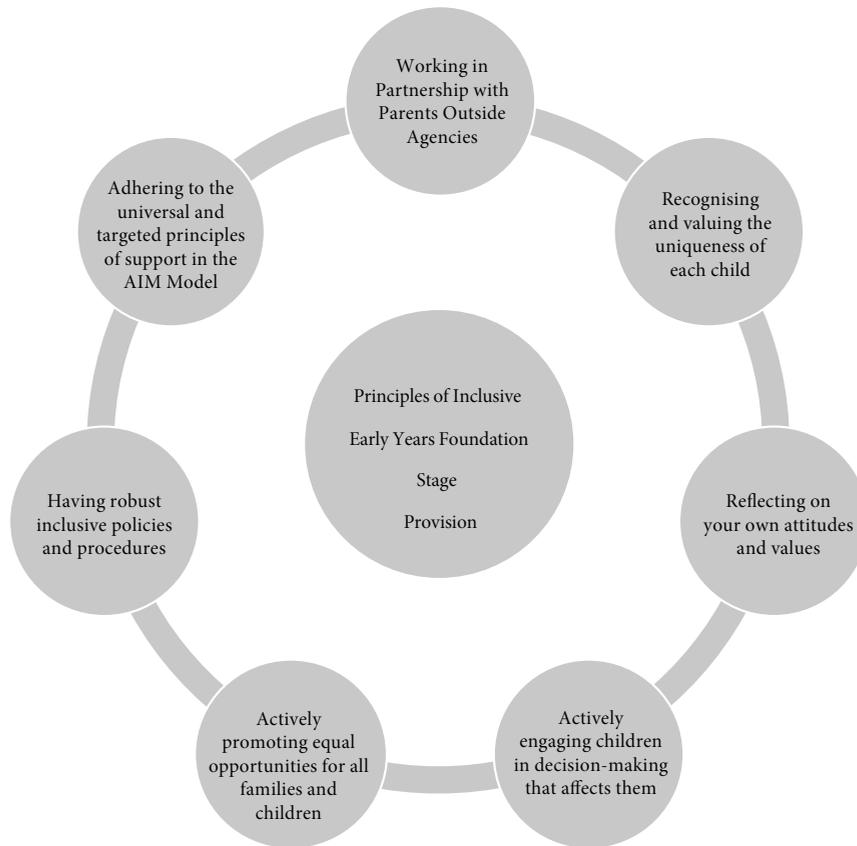
	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	1	.4%
	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>18.9%</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>80.7%</b>	<b>259</b>	

Qualitative responses to the survey suggest that participants particularly valued the emphasis on practical strategies in the programme. As summarised by one of the questionnaire participants: ‘this programme has been the best most practical and realistic training I have ever had’ and that ‘the practical tools given were [so] beneficial’, while others, as referred to previously, were encouraged by the affirmation that the current strategies they were using were beneficial and meaningful.

### Programme Effectiveness: Values

Values are reflected in the pedagogy early childhood teachers adopt and are inextricably linked to theoretical perspectives about how children learn and develop and beliefs and about education (Jones and Shelton, 2011). A respect for the way children with autism think and learn should lie at the heart of beliefs about the autism and be aligned with *Early Childhood Care and Education National Inclusion Charter* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2016) summarised below.

**Figure 8. Principles of the Early Childhood Care and Education National Inclusion Charter (DCYA, 2016)**



Questionnaire participants were asked to give an overall indication as to how well they felt the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* prepared them to work with an autistic child in the future. As captured in Table 11, participants felt that the programme either prepared them 'well' or 'very well' to meet the needs of an autistic child. Crucially, these responses indicate a notable change from the responses to the pre-programme survey where participants reported being ill-equipped to meet the learning and developmental needs of autistic children in the early years.

**Table 11. Participants’ Perspectives on how the Teach Me As I Am Programme Prepared them for Providing for an Autistic Child in the Early Childhood Setting**

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	58	22.5%	200	77.5%	258	

The transformation from equating the autistic child with a series of ‘behaviour’ challenges to understanding the concept of difference and being able to respond to each child’s unique differences is captured in the pre- and post- programme word clouds from Location D.

**Figure 9. Pre-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location D**



Figure 10. Post-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location D<sup>3</sup>



A key element that emerged was participants' commitment to observation, planning and in including children's voices through actively listening to children, as encapsulated by an early childhood educator at Réalt: 'in our setting we would use observation and documentation of little stories or whatever has happened that day, like little things that we notice and we have the little scrapbook as well that we send home at the end of every month' (R2). The importance of observation and planning in providing effectively for autistic children is consistently emphasised in research (Ring, 2018; Ryan, 2018; Dunleavy-Lavin, Heaney and Skehill, 2018). Participants frequently articulated a concern to provide for children's well-being and to support children in achieving their full potential.

### **Programme Organisation**

All participants in the questionnaire reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the tutor support offered during the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* as summarised in Table 12.

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3 In Figure 10 'sensoru' may be equated with 'sensory'

**Table 12. Participants’ Satisfaction with Programme Support**

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	11	4.2%	248	95.8%	259	

In the qualitative responses, participants repeatedly made reference to the tutor’s *‘passion and knowledge’*. The tutor was described as ‘excellent’ and ‘knowledgeable’ and as someone who helped me to understand better from the child’s perspective how chaotic the world is’. These high satisfaction levels were echoed by interview participants and reference was frequently made to the tutor’s own experience of having autism, as summarised by an early childhood teacher at Aisling: ‘I suppose (the tutor) was just amazing the way she spoke about it and she had Asperger’s, well that side of the spectrum and her daughter has it and it’s just amazing to see that how great a child can do, like brilliantly’ (A1).

Participants were also asked to share any ideas which they had in relation to improving the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* in the future. Consistent with the findings above, the majority of participants reported that they would not change anything about the programme, for example: ‘not sure the programme needs improving as I really enjoyed it!’. A number of participants indicated that having a workbook or handouts would be useful in bringing their new learning back to their settings.

There were mixed views with regard to the timing of the sessions with some participants indicating a preference for less time between the two CPD days, while others felt that more time between the two days would have given more time to try out newly acquired strategies and receive more feedback. Consistent with broader issues relating to non-contact time in ELC services, many respondents’ articulated the challenges experienced around attending CPD activities and sourcing relief staff for their services.

Many respondents referred to programme duration and indicated a preference for a longer programme which would allow for more extensive learning in the area of autism. Some respondents expressed a preference that the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* would be developed as an accredited programme at Level 5, 6 or 7. One respondent commented, for example: ‘give us more of it, develop it make it into an accredited level 5, 6, 7, 8. This is definitely the way I would like to see it going’. Many respondents felt that it would be beneficial to ‘provide the training programme to parents as well’. Here respondents are referring to the programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) 2018).

The interactive way the programme was delivered was particularly referred to and noted by participants as significant. The open and collaborative approach encouraged by the tutor motivated participants to consider autism in a novel and encouraging light: ‘the interactive and open approach promoted autism and difference in such a positive way’. Participating early childhood teachers enjoyed receiving feedback and interacting with ‘other class members’, noting that ‘the shared learning was very good’. Participants reported that content was presented in a realistic fashion, which greatly enhanced overall engagement with programme content: ‘the trainer’s passion and knowledge coincided with practical tools which will enhance understanding amongst us all’. Similarly, another noted how the tutor’s in-depth knowledge of autism supported the practical advice given: ‘knowledgeable trainer who was able to give very practical real-life ways of engaging with children and families of children who have autism’.

### **Conclusion**

The limited time-frame for the research precluded the isolation of complexities such as individual early childhood teachers’ prior experiences and expertise; capability; personal and professional biographies; contextual factors; emotional and psychological dimensions and the heterogeneous needs of children (Day and Sachs, 2004; Guskey, 2009). While acknowledging the limitations of the research and the need for more in-depth field-work to further explore impact on practice in the ELC services involved, nonetheless the findings are significant for both early childhood and adult education. The high levels of satisfaction with the *Teach Me as I Am* programme are significant and merit discussion, specifically as they relate to the current melange of qualifications in the ELC sector and the absence of a coherent qualifications and CPD framework; the critical importance of early childhood teachers having the

requisite knowledge(s); practices and values to support inclusion effectively for children in the early years and the potential of high-quality adult-learning CPD programmes, that adopt innovative and engaging andragogy.

There has been a concerted government commitment to improving initial training and CPD for all early childhood staff, which was once again articulated in the *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* 2019–2018 (GoI 2018), however the absence of a coherent qualifications structure and CPD infrastructure is a cause for concern and requires addressing urgently. Creating inclusive learning environments where diversity is the norm is complex and it is therefore important that teachers are prepared to provide for the engagement and achievement of all children (Ring and O’Sullivan, 2019). The importance of building professional knowledge and confidence in relation to providing effectively for autistic children is consistently highlighted in the literature (Daly *et al.*, 2016; Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018b). The research findings demonstrate that the *Teach Me As I Am* programme provided early childhood teachers with a range of appropriate knowledge(s), practices and values to provide for autistic children. Participants’ specifically referred to the expertise of the tutor; the innovative andragogy employed which created opportunities to explore the concept of autism in meaningful and practice-based contexts and the emphasis on cultivating positive relationships with parents as contributing to the overall effectiveness of the programme.

Continuing professional development programmes therefore that are planned in collaboration with early childhood teachers, provide time for embedding of practice and utilise effective andragogy can contribute significantly to the professionalisation of the ELC profession. The positive findings from this research can be harnessed as a blue-print with which to interrogate the CPD infrastructure for the ELC sector recently announced by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, TD (Zappone, 2018). Additionally, these findings support the potentially radical impact of effective andragogy and most importantly highlight the role of lifelong learning in transforming the lives of early childhood teachers, autistic children and their families.

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# The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum: The Benefits and challenges of Transforming Learner Voice into Policy Change

LEAH DOWDALL, EDEL SHEERIN, NIAMH O'REILLY

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## Abstract

*This article is a reflection on the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum (NFLF). It uses the NFLF as an example of learner voice in practice, retracing the history of the NFLF as a means of reflecting on some of the benefits and challenges of bringing learner voice into public policy. The article outlines educational debates on learner voice processes alongside public policy debates around the role of qualitative data in decision-making processes to expose the differing perspectives on what learner voice processes should look like. It explores how these debates have shaped the NFLF and addresses what this has meant to learner voice in Irish FET.*

**Keywords:** Learner voice, educational theory, public policy, National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF), AONTAS [The National Adult Learning Organisation], SOLAS [The Further Education and Training Authority], Further Education and Training (FET), and Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

## Introduction

The National FET Learner Forum (NFLF) began in 2016 as a one-day national event where learners could share their voice and reflect on ways to improve the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Today the NFLF consists of a series of sixteen regional events organised in partnership with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland. Over the course of its three years, the NFLF has seen significant expansion in both its size and impact, however, in the background of these developments have been conflicting views on how the NFLF should progress a learner voice agenda. These differing perspectives have largely come from the two worlds which the NFLF straddles: the world of

educational theory and the world of public policy. This article uses the NFLF to reflect on some of the challenges faced in bringing these two worlds together and moving forward in a way that protects the authenticity of learner voice and the best interests of the learner.

The NFLF developed directly from the Objective 3.1 of the FET Strategy, which envisioned a FET policy that responded ‘to the need of learners’ by ‘systematically benchmarking learner’s views and satisfaction with their FET programme’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 137). This objective required learner views to be captured through both large-scale programme surveys and through a series of learner fora. Based on AONTAS’ position as the organisation leading learner voice initiatives in FET, it was tasked by SOLAS to deliver a learner forum piece of this objective.

AONTAS set about developing the forum that aligned with its belief that learners should be at the heart of all processes in FET. For AONTAS, learner voice was about moving toward a more democratic and inclusive FET system. To achieve this aim, AONTAS believed the NFLF must provide a safe space for learners to voluntarily share their voices, ensure its methods and practices are inclusive, and contain feedback structures that allow policy makers to respond to learner needs. These beliefs developed directly from a wide selection of educational theory on learner voice. AONTAS saw the NFLF as a way to bring some of these theories into practice in Irish FET.

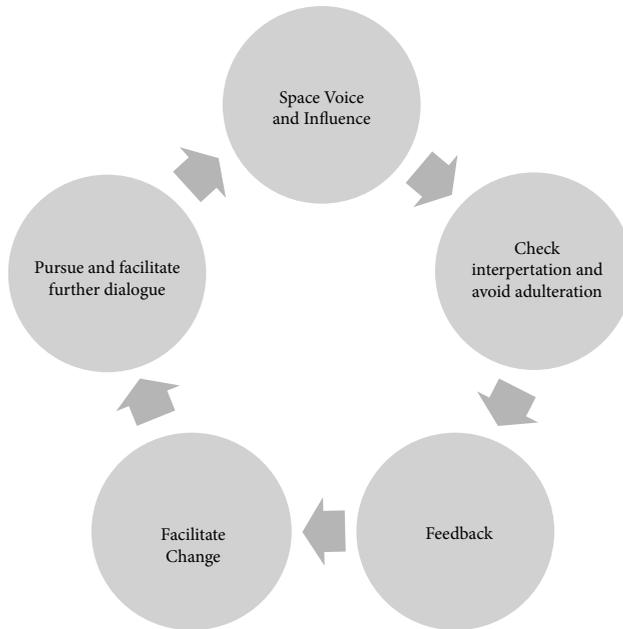
### **Learner Voice Theory and Methods**

Learner voice has a rich and well-developed discourse within educational circles, however, it was ‘the new wave of student voice’ from the 1990s that has largely shaped modern day concepts of learner voice processes (Fielding, 2010). One of the initial forces behind the resurrection of learner voice is British researcher Michael Fielding. His vision of learner voice was one that reimagined the school and the classroom as a more egalitarian and democratic space. For Fielding, learner voice processes necessitated a rupture from traditional approaches to education and a radical reconstruction of the teacher-student relationship aimed at developing a more egalitarian learning culture (Fielding, 2004). The emphasis on a cultural change was important because its manifestation meant that transformation had to move beyond the classroom space, and into the institutional and policy realm.

In the beginning, many organisations like Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (SPARQS, 2016), Soundout in the United States (Soundout, 2002) and Futurelab in England (Rudd *et al.*, 2006) focused on developing learner voice processes in established spaces, such as the classroom or the school, and as a result emphasised the importance of relationships between administrators, teachers, and learners. This left many questions open about how to employ these principles at the national level. In a number of places, efforts were made to use traditional representative models that placed learners on public boards and allocated space to learners in policy discussions. However, these actions espoused criticism from those who believed these models ignored power structures in place that restricted learner voice and that these models prevented assurances that a diversity of learner voices was heard (Logan and Walker, 2008, p. 11). This did not mean representative models did not have a place in learner voice processes, rather that they should be used in conjunction with other broader forms of engagement. Futurelab, for instance, outlined a series of processes that could be implemented to improve learner voice structures, pointing to surveys, fora, and student councils as tools that could be used to capture learner voice (Rudd *et al.*, 2006, pp.16–18). Futurelab also reiterated the importance of ensuring each of these tools was employed with the focus inclusivity as the underlining outlook of these developments (*ibid.*).

Even with these more comprehensive approaches in place, a number of advocates still raised concerns about the potential of policy makers and administrators to use learner voice solely as ‘a tokenistic gesture’ without any desire to enact meaningful change based on the feedback gathered through these processes (Robison and Taylor, 2007, p. 5). In her work on inclusive practices for children’s voices as based on the United Nations Rights of the Child, Laura Lundy addressed this very issue (Lundy, 2007). According to Lundy, ‘voice was not enough’. Instead policy makers had to ensure voice was given the space it needed to be shared without constraint, facilitated in a meaningful way, given the appropriate audience, and acted upon before it could be considered effective (TUSLA, 2015, p. 5). The focus then became closing the loop. One of the clearest examples of this is seen in Paula Flynn’s learner voice framework, as featured in Figure 1, where she outlines a clear step-by-step process that not only ensures learner voices will be heard, but also develops a sustainable feedback structure where schools can continue to build upon the learner voice work in place (Flynn, 2017, p. 30).

**Figure 1. Flynn’s Transformative Dialogue (Flynn, 2017, p. 30)**



Despite these advances, a number of learner voice advocates remain sceptical of any successful learner voice models working in today’s world. For them, the current neoliberal educational climate prevents learner voice from being enacted in a meaningful way. For them learner voice is the antithesis to neoliberalism and therefore any political embrace of the concept must mean that learner voice has been corrupted (Seale, 2010, p. 997). Researcher Nick Zepke, on the other hand, explains how neoliberalism and learner voice, two seemingly incongruous concepts, grew alongside each other through an ‘elective affinity’ whereby learner engagement fulfils neoliberal desires for ‘measurable accountability processes’ (Zepke, 2015, pp. 695–6). Zepke’s explanation seemed to support those who argued that policy makers were attempting to quantify learner voice in order to provide an alternative data set to measure against their expansive quantitative data.

Many, including Fielding, feared the long-term implications of this systematic approach to learner voice. Fielding argued that these efforts were an attempt to manipulate learner voice, thereby fitting it into pre-existing vocabularies and structures that allowed the system to maintain its traditional power structures (Fielding, 2004, p. 296). In essence, it was not ‘the rupture’ he had called for,

instead it was symptomatic of the troubling hierarchal approach to education that poised learners as objects of policy and pedagogy rather than partners in the educational process.

These critiques raise some important questions about learner voice processes and more importantly showcase the diversity of opinions on exactly what learner voice processes should be. AONTAS went into the project being very aware of these debates and the potential challenges that would lie ahead. Nevertheless, AONTAS maintained that the benefits of expanding learner voice processes in FET outweighed arguments that cooperation with government bodies could damage learner voice processes. AONTAS believes that all good educational policy must include mechanisms that engage a diverse range of learners, particularly those who experience education disadvantage. The NFLF provided a way to do this and, as such, offered a potential to create a FET system that was more responsive to learner needs. It would be the duty of AONTAS to resist attempts to systematically quantify learner voice, but it would also be its obligation to deliver a NFLF that promoted the wider benefits of learner voice in Irish FET.

### **Learner Voice and Policy Work**

AONTAS has always maintained that its ultimate responsibility is to the learners who share their experience, stories and recommendations at NFLF events. Adult learners are very often those who have experienced structural inequalities, negative past educational experiences and challenging circumstances associated with poverty. The NFLF is not about hearing the loudest voice, but instead it is about providing a space for the voices which are the least often heard at the policy table. Our goal is not only to ensure that learners feel welcomed, but that those least likely to share their views are heard in a meaningful way, and also that policy action at local and national level is made. The challenge of moving from learner recommendations to national policy influence has been a learning process over the project.

This challenge, of course, is not a new one and has been faced by a number of organisations who have worked in the area of learner voice before. A number of researchers have pointed out that some policy makers seem to lack the impetus to use learner voice for change because they are unable to accept qualitative data, while others blame the problem on the very concept of learner voice itself (Moore and Muller in Arnot and Reay, 2007, p. 315). This latter group has even argued that too many conclusions are drawn from learner voice without

a 'rigorous methodology in place' going as far as to even suggest that it be abandoned altogether in favour of traditional large-scale quantitative studies (*ibid.*).

There is an element of this debate in the shadow of the NFLF. Indeed, one could ascribe some of the challenges the NFLF has faced in advancing learner recommendations to the qualitative nature of the project. This approach is seen by some as problematic, due to a perceived lack of replicability, lack of representative sample in quantitative terms and overall dominance of quantitative data-informed policy. However, qualitative research findings can facilitate a deeper analysis of an education context, draw out the learner voice, and delve deeper into the learner experience highlighting solutions and recommendations. Qualitative research supports the voice that is unheard as it seeks to understand complex environments and has real value in terms of describing the lived experience of the issues facing learners to policy makers. Additionally, the recommendations are, by their very nature, not clear-cut; a possible strength in that: 'good qualitative research is meant to provoke conversations and debate rather than proffer a conclusion served as a *fait accompli*' (Tierney and Clemens, 2011, p. 99). The NFLF offers a deeper analysis, and helpfully not only a statement of policy issues but also policy recommendations that can further complement the extensive FET data available. One of the strongest arguments for qualitative research, and its range of influence on policy, is cited by Rist (1994) and incorporates other considerations including the intended and unintended consequences of a policy approach; 'policy makers have no equally grounded means of learning about program impacts and outcomes as they do with qualitative research findings' (Rist, 1994, p. 632). Yet, the dominance of notions around 'robust' data stem from the legacy of the positivist tradition that attributes a higher truth value to quantitative data; a difficult barrier to overcome when advocating for policy change.

However, that is not to say that the NFLF has had limited policy impact, in fact findings from the NFLF 2017 were included in the *Progress Review of the FET Strategy* (SOLAS, 2018). At a recent 2018 conference organised by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the National Forum for Teaching and Learning, SOLAS' Executive Director of Strategy and Knowledge, Andrew Brownlee, presented the recommendations from regional NFLF events that linked directly to improvements in FET implemented at the local level.

Furthermore, internationally there is a shift towards qualitative data and learner/citizen engagement as a legitimate basis for public policy change. For example, in the United States, the Centre for Public Impact offers focus-group style ‘people panels’ as a data source for international governments to better understand ‘issues affecting people’s lives and the role that government can play to address these’ (Centre for Public Impact, 2019). Interestingly, the methods they employ are arguably not as comprehensive as the qualitative research of the NFLF as they use a smaller sample size, yet they are seen a viable mode for policy influence. At the recent World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, discussions at a workshop for inclusion centred on the need for ‘keeping people at the centre’ for people to be part of creating solutions to issues that impact them. Also, at the recent European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Youth, and Sport and Culture’s conference on the Forum on the Future of Learning (January, 2019), again the importance of learner voice featured strongly at its Inclusion and Citizenship workshop. Supporting student success and inclusion by listening to the learner voice at all levels of the education experience is increasingly becoming a recognised norm for good practice.

AONTAS sees a large part of its role as ensuring that policy makers continually embrace these values. The NFLF is moving toward the normalisation of learner consultation in FET policy. While there may be differing opinions on how this should be done and even a reluctance toward qualitative data held by some, the NFLF has ensured that learner voice is regularly discussed at the policy table and celebrated publicly. It has become a tangible example of how learner voice is something that can no longer be ignored in FET.

### **The Evolution of the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum (NFLF)**

When AONTAS first designed the NFLF, it made great efforts to ensure it would meet the needs of all those impacted by the project. In 2015 before the NFLF began, AONTAS hosted a Learner Engagement Seminar that brought together policy makers, academics, practitioners, and learners to discuss learner voice methods used across the FET sector. The seminar identified best practices and developed a series of recommendations on how to deliver an effective and meaningful NFLF (AONTAS, 2015). To ensure learners and stakeholders remained the drivers of the project, there were two groups established to inform the development of the NFLF: a learner focus group and an advisory group. Later these groups merged to establish one advisory group that would assist in shaping the development of the NFLF.

The first ever event took place on 26 February 2016 in the Mansion House, Dublin. It brought together 70 learners who were participating in SOLAS-funded FET courses. Each learner was nominated by their Education and Training Board (ETB) to attend. At the event, learners participated in round table focus groups led by facilitators. Facilitators guided the discussions with the following questions:

- Question 1: What is working well in FET?
- Question 2: What is not working well in FET and how can it be improved?

Note takers and facilitators recorded highlights of the discussion. Feedback was collated and developed into the 2016 NALF Policy Report, which highlighted key findings and recommendations to influence future policy decisions at the national level (AONTAS, 2016).

This process garnered some criticisms from policy makers who felt that one national event with 70 learners was simply not enough. Others expressed concern over the nomination process suggesting that ETBs could simply select particular learners who met their own individual agenda needs. Policy makers asked that a larger number of learners be brought into these discussions to ensure recommendations were more reflective of the wider FET body and from a more diverse group of learners. While there was no universal message on exactly how many learners would need to participate to make recommendations valid, there was general agreement that the NFLF could be expanded. In 2017, AONTAS sought to do just this.

In April 2017, the NFLF held one national event with 90 learners and an additional three regional events with 154 learners. The total reach in 2017 increased by 263% from the previous year. The national event maintained the celebratory atmosphere of the 2016 national event with a mix of stakeholders, guest speakers and learners each attending the event. Learners were broken up into discussion groups of 10–15 participants, with an effort made to ensure each group had diverse FET programme representation. As the NFLF remained a partnership programme with SOLAS, it was agreed that results from the national event would remain internal, with a larger national report developed after regional meetings were held.

Three ETBs (Cork, Galway and Roscommon, and Tipperary) offered to pilot the first regional events. Each participating ETB held one half day event that

included two discussion sessions. Each group was led by a facilitator who posed the same questions used at the national event. On a recommendation from the advisory group, AONTAS also piloted a survey to learners at the regional events. Questions developed on the survey came from members of the group, with SOLAS and AONTAS agreeing to a final version. The questions on the surveys were based on topics raised by learners at the two previous national events. Topics included: transportation, tutor availability, FET advertisement, and finding information. The information gathered through the regional events was analysed and shared alongside the findings of the national event in the 2017 *National Further Education and Training Learner Forum Advisory Report* (AONTAS, 2017).

One of the greatest strengths going into the planning of 2018 was the success of the regional events. ETBs welcomed the opportunity to bring learners together from across programmes in their area to hear about learners' experiences. They encouraged AONTAS to move ahead with this development, taking on a greater role as partners in the delivery of the NFLF. ETBs also welcomed feedback, seeing NFLF reports as effective tools to implementing change at a local level. ETBs praised regional events for the role they played in developing a sense of community within the ETB. This sentiment was shared by learners whose reflections on regional events said that they 'now realise how much interest is taken in adult learners'. When describing what they enjoyed most about the NFLF regional events, learners highlighted 'hearing different comments from people with different backgrounds' and 'how everybody was given the opportunity to give their point of view'. One participant even cited the regional NFLF event as an important opportunity to hear about other courses offered in his/her ETB, promising to progress from his/her current course to an apprenticeship as a result of meeting other learners at the event.

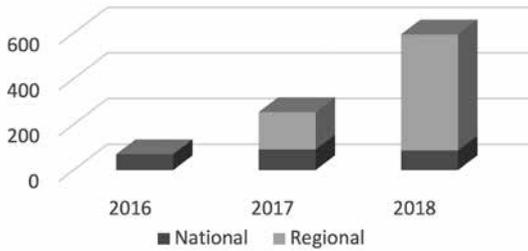
AONTAS committed to moving ahead with the regionalisation of the NFLF, seeing this as the most effective way to ensure the NFLF was having an immediate impact on policy at a local level. It set an ambitious growth plan that called for nine regional events and one national event, which would reach approximately 600 learners. Despite these efforts, there were still challenges. Some still argued that more representation needed to come from full-time FET programmes, where FET investment was the highest. To address these concerns, and on recommendation from the Advisory Group, two regional events were held in training centres to attract more full-time learners.

The regionalisation of events has also transformed the nomination process. ETBs reached out to tutors to promote NFLF events. In turn, tutors brought along whole classes to events. In total over the course of the year regional events yielded a total of 56 hours of recorded learner conversations. Once discussions were finished, learners then filled out the same questionnaires and evaluations as used in the national event. In 2018, the NFLF compiled survey responses from 556 learners across FET. Each participating ETB received an internal report, detailing key results from their regional event. Key findings from all regional reports will also be merged with findings from the national event to produce a 2019 Advisory Report in May.

To espouse national change, it became increasingly evident that more work would still have to be done. AONTAS decided to take two key actions: commission an evaluation of the NFLF to date and establish an Academic Expert Group to devise a solid intellectual framework to the project. The Academic Expert Group drew on expertise from across Europe thus broadening the perspectives shaping AONTAS' learner voice engagement. The hope was that by opening the NFLF up to outside guidance and critique, AONTAS would have an even stronger case that the NFLF's methodology was robust and based on solid intellectual framework. AONTAS also wanted to use the opportunity to bring the academic and policy worlds together for the betterment of the project. At the 2018 national event the Academic Expert Group and key policy makers came together in two policy discussions that explored the issues of best practice in learner voice.

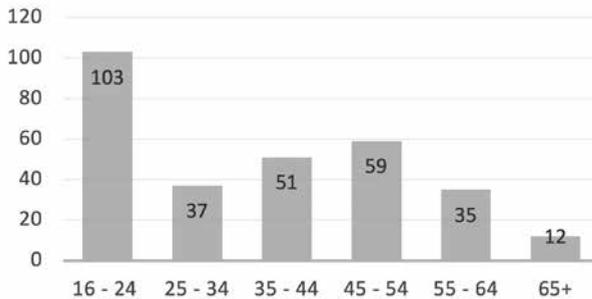
Over the last three years, AONTAS has worked tirelessly delivering and expanding on their task of amplifying learners' voices. As you can see from Figure 2 below, the NFLF has continued to reach more and more learners at a national and regional level to ensure SOLAS and all other stakeholders can hear the voices of FET learners across Ireland.

**Figure 2. National FET Learner Forum Participation**

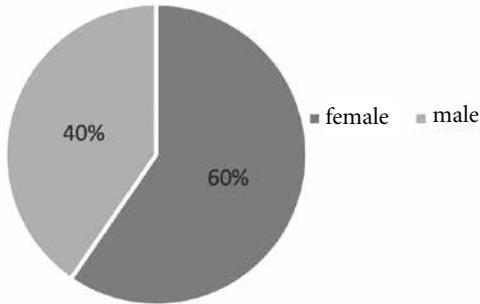


Since its formation, the NFLF has been guided and overseen by 12 Advisory Group meetings and five Academic Expert Group meetings. The NFLF has engaged 919 full-time and part-time learners across 17 SOLAS-funded programmes over the course of the project. Learners from each of the 16 ETBs have been reached through a regional or a national event. 673 learners have participated in 12 regional events and 246 learners have participated in three national events. At a sample of 2018 NFLF events, learners were given the option to answer a series of demographic questions. As you can see from figures 3-6 featured below, learners came from diverse groups.

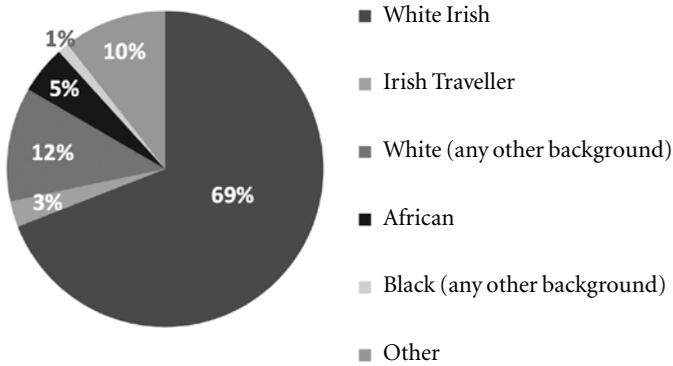
**Figure 3. NFLF 2018: Age Representation**



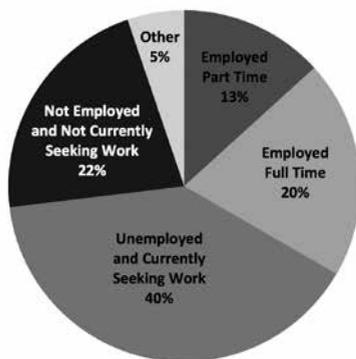
**Figure 4. NFLF: Gender Representation**



**Figure 5. NFLF 2018: Racial Identity Representation**



**Figure 6. NFLF 2018: Employment Status Representation**



### **Conclusion: Learner voice in the policy world**

The NFLF does not claim to be a solution to all learner voice processes in FET, rather it is a critical piece to a much broader transformation taking place. For the first time, learner voice processes are being included within policy reviews and assessment of government bodies. Learners' opinions cannot simply be ignored or omitted from policy discussions. Their voice is seen as an essential component to policy development. Through the NFLF, FET learners are being listened to by policy makers and administrators at a local, regional, and national level. Is it the radical educational transformation that some learner voice advocates envisioned? No, but it is certainly an improvement upon the top-down policy processes that were in place before and this should be something to celebrate.

The most important opinion of the work of the NFLF comes from the learners. When asked about whether the NFLF is a valuable exercise, learners continuously say 'yes.' In unpublished survey responses from the 2018 NFLF events recording reasons why they enjoyed the event learners have stated, 'I most enjoy the fact that we could speak openly about our courses'; 'I feel like I have been heard'; 'I enjoyed the chance to be able to voice my opinion and views'; and 'there should be more events like this.' AONTAS has always asserted that the NFLF's greatest strength comes from its ability to engage the voices of learners who are not traditionally heard in alternative formal structures. In fact, of the 490 learners who were asked at regional events if they had ever been asked to speak about their experiences in FET, 60% responded 'no.' This is a testament to the NFLF's unique capacity to include those who have largely remained voiceless in other current FET structures and would most likely remain unheard if alternative representative models had been used in its place.

While AONTAS should and is currently planning to expand its learner voice processes throughout FET and continue to move toward the transformative learner voice processes that advocates originally envisioned, it is important to recognise and celebrate the unique milestones achieved by the NFLF to date. The NFLF has opened a dialogue between policy makers and academics, it has developed a process that is informed by the perspectives of both worlds, and it has adapted to the suggestions from both fronts in an effort to move toward a collaborative approach going forward. This should be seen as a valuable exercise because it offers hope that change is possible and that some compromises should be welcome as long as they move us closer to improving the educational experience for learners.

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