



# ADULT LEARNER 2012

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# Editorial comment

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This past year has seen a continuing focus on the economy which continues to send shivers around the globe. This focus, many argue, has shifted attention away from education and many key questions surrounding policy and practice in adult learning remain unanswered. During this time, the *Adult Learner* has continued to provide a forum for discussion and debate on issues relevant to those working in the adult learning sector. The journal has provided an opportunity for expression of ideas and opinions from all those involved in adult education including teachers, managers, researchers and others with an interest in these debates.

The need for an on-going debate on the nature and purpose of adult and community education is a healthy sign and in this respect, the recent AONTAS report on 'Sowing the Seeds of Social Change' (2012) is to be welcomed. The report reminds us of the importance of adult and community education in reaching out to disadvantaged and marginalised sections of society and in addressing the barriers to second chance education. A review of this report is also included in this year's book reviews. Perhaps one of its most telling findings is that the authors note the increasing difficulty in perceiving community education as a vehicle of social change.

Each year brings its own particular focus and this year it has been on older learning and on learning across the generations. Indeed 2012 has been named the European *Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between the Generations* which brings many new challenges for the provision of adult learning.

Learning in later life is not a new idea and we are indeed reminded of the power of learning through the words of the 16th century Italian painter, poet and

sculptor Michelangelo, who at the age of 87 wrote in the margin of one of his sketches '*Ancora Imparo*' (I am still learning). If active ageing is to be a positive experience, it must be accompanied by opportunities to realise the potential for older people to participate in the many different facets of society and this requires us to optimise opportunities for older people to take an active part in society and to enjoy good quality of life. At the same time, solidarity between generations sends a clear message that active ageing is not just about older people, but is of relevance to everyone, whatever age they may be. This focus also provides us with opportunities to commit to widening access for all who can benefit across the lifespan.

Many of the contributions in this issue of the *Adult Learner* provide us with new insights into longstanding issues. In the first section, two articles take up the theme of older learning and intergenerational learning. In the first of these, Brian Findsen looks at older adults' access to and participation in higher education using a critical educational gerontology approach. He shows how participation is skewed towards certain groups and argues for the right of access of older people to higher education and the need for the institution to be ready to accommodate older people. Later, Mary Surlis takes up the theme of intergenerational learning, reviewing the *Living Scenes* educational initiative involving young people and older adults learning together in Irish schools and in the community. Her research shows how this new type of learning, which brings together schools and community, is emerging.

The remaining papers in Section 1 drawing on field research to discuss access to education for excluded groups. The first two papers focus on community learning and its power to bring about change in the lives of individuals. Clodagh Harris and Philip Murphy focuses on political participation among asylum seekers while Margaret Howard and Anna Logan focus on the power of literacy to transform individuals for social change. Anne Doyle and Lucy Hearne examine the role and importance of guidance for female Travellers, while Bill Johnston, Tony Anderson and Alix McDonald discuss the transformative potential of access programmes for adult learners returning to higher education.

In the Practice Section, Fergus Craddock provides a critique of the *Adult Better Learning and Education (ABLE)* programme, while Mary Noonan examines the search for an inclusive model for students with intellectual disabilities. Finally, Majella Breen offers some refreshing ideas on our understanding of what is involved in learning from Travellers by reflecting on her experience work-

ing with Travellers and through challenging myths and making connections between theory and practice.

I would like to thank all the contributors to this edition for providing us with new ideas and thoughts to ponder over and for challenging us in how to improve our practices. I should also like to take this opportunity to thank the readers and peer reviewers for the care and attention they have given to ensuring that the articles are clearly presented.

A special thank-you is also due to Eleonora Peruffo, Secretary to the *Adult Learner*, for her ongoing dedication and support, without which this publication would not have been possible.

Finally, I am sure you will agree that one of the many strengths of the *Adult Learner* is its ability to promote an informed understanding by providing insights across a very diverse sector and through promoting improved links between research, theory and practice in meeting the needs of adult learners. We are very grateful to the Department of Education and Skills and AONTAS for their on-going support for the journal and we wish you pleasant reading.

**ROB MARK, EDITOR**

University of Strathclyde

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# SECTION ONE

*Peer Reviewed Articles*



# Engagement of older adults in higher education: International perspectives from New Zealand and Scotland

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores the issue of older adults' access to and participation in higher education in two countries, Aotearoa New Zealand and Scotland. It discusses older adults' engagement with regard to patterns of participation and provision, using a critical educational gerontology approach. The two case studies, one in more theoretical terms, the other empirically-based, illustrate the complexities surrounding older people's engagement through the lens of a political economy. The paper argues for more proactive policies at both institutional and governmental levels to improve recruitment, retention and successful outcomes for older adults.*

## **Introduction**

Given the rapidly changing demographics in many countries towards increasingly ageing populations, for the first time in history large numbers of older adults in industrialised countries can reasonably expect to achieve a longer fulfilling life. Brought about by a myriad of factors – reduced fertility rates; better health schemes; more advanced technology – older people have better prospects of engaging in active learning in the third age, one arguably characterised by increased autonomy and leisure (Laslett, 1989). Equally, growing numbers of older people will experience severe poverty and deprivation as gaps between rich and poor increase under neo-liberal regimes (Estes, Biggs & Phillipson, 2003).

In this paper the primary focus is placed on how older adults engage with higher education in two countries: New Zealand where I have spent the majority of my life; and Scotland, where I was formerly employed as an adult educator in an ancient university setting. It needs to be acknowledged that the majority of learning undertaken by older adults – here arbitrarily defined as 55 years

or older – is carried out in non-formal and informal environments (Jarvis, 1985; Findsen, 2006). The virtual exclusion of older adults from higher education is a predominant international pattern (Glendenning, 2000). Here it is explained through a political economy approach where issues of social class, gender, and ethnicity intersect with age, producing multiple layers of marginalisation (Estes, 1991; Phillipson, 1998). Two case studies have been chosen to illustrate this marginalisation: first, older adults' access to Higher Education (HE) in Aotearoa New Zealand; second, a research project carried out for the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum examining the levels of engagement of older people with Further Education (FE) and HE in Greater Glasgow.

### **Patterns of participation for older adults in education**

It is important to distinguish between patterns of participation in 'education' (i.e. organised learning, often by a provider) and 'learning' (entailing a broader range of activities, sometimes self-initiated). Within formal learning, older adults' involvement in mainstream adult education has not been commensurate with their percentage of the population (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999). Reports from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in the UK (see *Learning to grow older and bolder*, 1999; *Older people learning: Myths and realities*, 2004; *Demography and older learners*, 2005; *What older people learn*, 2008) continually demonstrate that the extent of older adult education has plateaued, if not decreased, at least in that region. The overall picture appears to be one of neglect, as identified by McGivney (2006).

An interesting exception in the British scene has been participation in the Open University (OU) where older adults constitute a significant majority of all older higher education students (McGivney, 2006). This suggests the mode of distance learning, including time convenience to participants, to be a significant factor in participation; recent popularity of SeniorNet provides additional evidence to support this claim. The general observation that "participation in learning declines with age" (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999) needs to be tempered by knowledge of the type of activity and preferences of older adults for locally accessible learning opportunities. In addition, older people are not a homogeneous group and older adults outside of the white middle-class mainstream are more at risk of having no real choice at all. If we analyse the heterogeneity of older adults – look at specific sub-populations within older adults – then we are likely to find that participation is strongly associated with previous educational experience, gender, race/ethnicity and social class (Findsen, 2006).



There has been prolonged interest in adult education generally and in older adult education in particular on models to explain participation and typologies to identify participation in learning activities. This is not the place to rehearse these well-worn debates. Suffice to add that among situational, institutional, informational and psychosocial barriers often mentioned, the last-mentioned are the most persistent and resistant to change. While older adults may eventually overcome mobility issues, poor public transport, unsupportive peers or unfriendly enrolment procedures, the major hurdle is often located within themselves. The notions that “you cannot teach an old dog new tricks” or “I am too old to learn” need to be discarded. While there is the need for societal changes in respect to overcoming negative stereotypes of older adulthood, educators can adopt more proactive stances towards out-moded cultural practices and moribund social and educational policy. National and local body policies which discriminate against older people need to be aggressively challenged.

### **An alternative framework: A political economy approach within critical educational gerontology**

Several educational gerontologists have acknowledged the limitations of current conceptions of this field and have used critical theory as a basis for new developments (Battersby & Glendenning, 1992; Arber & Ginn, 1995; Phillipson, 1998, 2000; Cusack, 2000; Findsen, 2005). This new discourse about the education of older adults moves away from a functionalist tradition of adaptation of individuals to society to one which emphasises the agency of older adults, their collective capacity to empower themselves. Critical theory – an umbrella term for a range of radical education theories – provides the basis for such a critique of the status quo and the call for social action to empower older adults. Battersby and Glendenning (1992) have used the phrase ‘critical educational gerontology’ when they applied critical theory to educational gerontology. Amid Phillipson’s (2000) typology, the political economy perspective acknowledges an awareness of the structural pressures and constraints affecting older people, the most obvious of which are gender relations, ethnicity and social class. In this framework it is also common to analyse the role of the state with respect to policies and practices which enhance or inhibit the ageing process. This approach also seeks to better understand the social and historical contexts of older adults’ lives. In this perspective, older adults’ access to higher education is couched in the social fabric and material conditions of their lives rather than viewed as an individualistic decision made in isolation from social context. From this viewpoint, the educational institutions themselves, as instruments of the Government, are not exempt from political and ideological forces that may influence older adults’

engagement with them. In this way, (non) participation among older adults is viewed from a macro perspective related to cultural patterns and social dynamics in the surrounding society. Hence, it is possible to understand the meaning and experience of old age via an analysis of the distribution of resources in society in turn directed by economic, political and socio-cultural forces. In addition, social policy for or about the aged is also inextricably linked to these same material and ideological arrangements.

The following two case studies demonstrate the potential of a political economy approach to better understand older adults' engagement with higher education in two countries.

### **Case study 1: Higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand**

The system of Higher Education (HE) in New Zealand reflects its colonial past in that the universities have been modelled from British antecedents (Dakin, 1992). New Zealand society is characterised by economic and political stability, a developing pluralism in terms of ethnicity (though officially a bi-cultural nation) and a fairly stable population of around five million people. Since 1987 the country has undergone significant neo-liberal reforms, the negative effects of which have been severely felt by the most vulnerable members of society such as Maori and Pacific nations' people, workers, many women and state beneficiaries. The gaps between rich and poor have widened and the social welfare and health systems are more fragile than they used to be after numerous restructurings (Kelsey, 1999).

In education, these reforms have had a major impact. Across all sectors of the education system (from early childhood through to higher education and adult education), the neo-liberal changes have induced what commentators (e.g. Olssen, Codd & O'Neill, 2004) have dubbed 'a cult of efficiency'. One manifestation of these changes has been increased attention to charters, strategic planning and quality management systems in a bid to strengthen 'quality' of provision. Another manifestation, more obvious in adult education, is the movement away from community development because it usually involves time and labour intensive activity towards greater focus on 'the enrolment economy' in institutions, including higher education.

The system of tertiary education (of which HE is the highest status component) has diversified considerably at the same time as the governmental reforms were introduced. Today there are eight publicly-funded universities (including a new

university of technology, previously the largest polytechnic), 20 polytechnics or institutes of technology, three *whare wananga* (houses of advanced learning for Maori) based in the North Island and several hundred Private Training Establishments (PTEs). Some examples of PTEs include language institutes, religious-based training organisations, travel and tourism, and commercial/secretarial colleges.

For most New Zealanders, including older adults, tertiary education is still most closely identified with universities and polytechnics. The advent of *whare wananga* reflects the need for indigenous Maori to have an alternative education strategy for their people based on the principle of *tino rangatiratanga* (self-determination), enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi (signed between Maori and the Crown in 1840). This alternative system controlled by Maori (funded mainly by the State) aims to operate from the cradle to the grave.

Many older adults are not attracted to HE as they feel somewhat alienated from its ethos of competition, credentialism and formality. In the following section a brief explanation is offered of some macro level factors that tend to work against the access and participation of older people in HE. (For a fuller explanation readers are directed towards Findsen, 2002).

Explanations from this perspective can entail the relationship of the state to (older adult) education and analysis of social stratification according to social class, gender and ethnicity. In this instance, only the role of the state and ethnicity will be examined.

#### *The higher education institution as part of the state*

Institutions of higher education are part of the state's apparatus in disseminating traditions, values and ideologies. The few older adults who frequent higher education are primarily from white middle class backgrounds, typically with solid educational credentials. Their involvement tends to be in the arts, humanities and social sciences rather than in more vocational or technical programmes; more women than men enter the universities. This trend arguably is to be expected, given the observation that most learning in older adulthood is expressive rather than instrumental (Pearce, 1991).

The institutions of higher education represent a state apparatus in which prevailing cultural trends – such as neo-liberalism – are promulgated. Ironically, higher education itself has suffered as a result of these same reforms: there is

proportionately decreased spending by the State on education; increased staff: student ratios have arisen so that teachers deal with larger classes and increased workloads; greater contestability for research funds occurs. Currently, the universities are preparing for the 2012-2013 round of the Performance-based Research Fund (PBRF) striving for the favoured position in terms of research outputs, akin to the former Research Assessment Exercise in the UK. While universities are permitted by statute to be 'the critics and conscience of society' they more commonly acquiesce into being the primary vehicle for acculturation of future generations in reproducing dominant ideologies.

In line with the UK, tertiary education in New Zealand has been re-occupied with widening participation and the massification of the system (Stuart, 2000). The country has previously prided itself on open entry to universities so that mature students could enter with minimal qualifications and try themselves out. Times have hardened considerably. Entry standards to university have been more rigorously enforced under 'managed entry' reforms and older people now find it more difficult to gain entry to credit studies. In addition, the reality of the stratification of knowledge between and within tertiary education institutions in New Zealand, though nowhere as marked as in the UK, nevertheless is a factor impacting on older adults' preparedness to enter such institutions.

### *Ethnicity*

In the New Zealand scene the vast majority of people identify themselves as European or Pakeha. In many places in this small country, especially in the south, the population of five million is quite mono-cultural in its outlook, despite the country's official position as a bi-cultural nation where both Maori and English languages have equal status under the law. This mono-cultural outlook is severely challenged in the larger North Island cities where many different peoples live and where different languages are spoken. Especially in Auckland (where one third of the New Zealand population lives), there is a multi-ethnic reality. This is primarily a result of heavy Maori migration to the cities in the 1950s/1960s and comparable immigration from the Pacific Islands mainly in the 1970s. In the most recent decade, more South-East Asians have settled in New Zealand, particularly in Auckland.

Marginalisation is experienced by Maori and Pacific nations' peoples in most institutions, including education. While social equity programmes have been introduced by universities and polytechnics to provide access to higher education, there is still a major struggle for sizeable proportions of indigenous peo-

ples to gain access and then complete degrees. Where programmes have been successful, the ownership of these initiatives has been in their own hands. For example, *whanau* (extended family) groups established in higher education, where Maori students have provided one another with on-going academic and social support as a collective, have had positive outcomes. This observation pertains mainly to younger and mature-aged Maori since older Maori (especially men) are noticeably absent from Pakeha-dominated higher education.

A solution for Maori has been to establish their own parallel education institutions where a Maori ethos and Maori knowledge are valued and legitimated. From *kohanga reo* (language nests) at early childhood to *kura kaupapa Maori* (primary and secondary schools) to *whare wananga* (adult and higher education), Maori have taken control of their own knowledge, emphasising those aspects which will enable them to survive in a bi-cultural nation. The role of older adults in the traditional Maori context is generally well prescribed in terms of gender specific roles and there is a respect and treasuring of older people admired by other more individualistically-oriented communities. But in the modern urban context, this traditional leadership pattern has become fragmented and the situation for older Maori has become more ambiguous.

While in this case only ethnicity has been discussed, the obvious point to be made is that it interacts with other factors such as social class and gender compounding the situation for the marginalised, especially older people.

### **Case two: Higher education in Scotland – a research project in the west of Scotland**

Scotland is a nation which is continuing to strive for its own identity, having in its past had many battles with England in terms of self-determination. It is a country of nearly six million with a slightly declining population (as young people are often attracted to London or beyond). It has a new Parliament in Edinburgh with some devolved powers from Westminster, including education. The population is largely mono-cultural though there are increasing numbers of new immigrants and asylum-seekers.

The phrase Higher Education in Scotland refers to 13 universities, quite distinct from further education colleges of which there are at least 45. (In addition, there are number of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) such as the Glasgow College of Art). There is a strong demarcation between the universities in Scotland in terms of social stratification – the ancient universities (e.g. Glasgow); the ‘mod-

ern' institutions of the 1960s (e.g. Strathclyde); the post 1992 institutions, as converted polytechnics (e.g. Glasgow Caledonian University). This is a significant factor because in terms of their general intake of students, the ancient institutions tend to have first call on the 'best' students from high schools; unsurprisingly, the 'new' universities have tended to attract more of the non-traditional students, including 'returnees', more typically mature-aged women (Thomas, 2001; Layer, 2005). Little is known about older adult recruitment into universities in Scotland but it has been supposed that most older adults undertake non-credit courses rather than programmes leading to a specific qualification. The research project below severely challenges this belief.

### *Social inclusion and the research project*

One of the major agendas in higher education in Scotland has been the ambition to achieve 'social inclusion' of previously marginalised learners. In universities and further education colleges alike, the move towards widening participation has been accelerated, aided by initiatives from the Scottish Executive. In this vein, I sought funding from the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum (West Forum), a catalyst for integrating wider access in both FE and HE. The research project has now been completed (Findsen & McCullough, 2008).

This two-phase research project (literature review, followed by a longitudinal study) focussed on older adults' engagement with FE/HE in the West of Scotland. The concentration was on older adults' educational journeys, thus connecting with a group in society historically excluded from formal provision (especially in credit programmes). The study provides insights into the educational experiences of older adults (here defined as 50 years and beyond) as they negotiate formal education in FE and HE contexts. The stories of these participants (biographies) intersect with key objectives of West Forum: analysing information and guidance for students; identifying barriers and incentives for continuing study (retention); and investigating benefits for them in completing a programme (constituting one main element of 'success').

The aims of the project included:

- To provide a comprehensive literature review of older adults' (dis)engagement with formal education institutions in the West of Scotland (linked to UK and international trends of older adults' participation in education).

- To provide through a case study approach two major perspectives of older adults' connections with FE and HE (i.e. perspectives of learners; perspectives of the institutional providers) in the West of Scotland.
- To examine the ways in which formal learning opportunities relate to the wider realm of older adult learning (including non-formal education).
- To track the educational journeys of selected groups of older adults over a period of two years, focussing on their issues emerging from life as older students.
- To investigate selected FE and HE institutions' attitudes and practices in the West of Scotland towards older adults' participation.

Initially, a literature review was undertaken to summarise and critique pertinent studies, policies and empirical research related to older adults' recruitment, retention and 'success' in formal education (both credit and non-credit). This involved a wider search than just Scotland as participation trends need to be analysed from global perspectives but still retain a main focus on local conditions.

In the second phrase of empirical research, selected localities and adjacent institutions (FE/HE) were selected as case studies. Both HE (3) and FE (4) institutions were included. The project tracked 85 students over a two-year period to ascertain their learning experiences and connections with the participating institution(s) via face-to-face interviews and focus group meetings. Given that the focus of West Forum was upon the learning needs of people in 'the highest deprivation zones' within the West of Scotland, the intent of the research team was to gather data from individuals and selected institutions where multiple disadvantage could be found. The interest of West Forum in funding this project was that it targeted a non-traditional group of learners (older adults) in the poor areas in and around Glasgow city.

Some of the major outcomes for the study were as follows:

In line with the work of Schuller et al (2001), benefits of learning were identified in varied categories.

- *Physical and mental health:* for many students, participation arose in response to a necessary reorganisation of a life schedule (e.g. bereavement). An improvement in health was closely linked to commitment to studies.

- *Intellectual stimulation, competences and skills*: the notion of ‘keeping the brain alive’ was frequently reported. While intellectual challenge was valuable for itself, for many respondents it fostered a profound sense of achievement too.
- *Quality of life, empowerment and self-confidence*: these improvements were aligned to satisfaction of achievement, in learning something they had previously deferred, understanding new subjects and the transferring of knowledge into different life areas.
- *Personal and social values and networks*: participants reported benefits in terms of changed meaning perspectives (see Mezirow, 2000) and stronger social networks.
- This expanded network also related to more effective inter-generational learning, usually between grandchildren and grandparents (sometimes online). At times, this learning consisted of the older person providing academic advice to youngsters or young people seeking knowledge from older people.
- Later life learning assisted many participants to deal with crises or transitions (e.g. ill-health of self or partner). Education provided a source of hope for those un- or under-employed to gain respectability in the workforce, more particularly for men.
- Institutions (more often FE colleges than universities) with out-reach sites provided much needed access for less mobile older adults to continue to study.
- Funding by the Scottish Government (via either fee waiver schemes or through Independent Learning Accounts (ILAs) implemented by the institutions) enabled large numbers of the participants to afford to study.

## Discussion

The two case studies above, one more theoretical, the other empirical, do have much in common from a critical gerontology perspective. The common focus on how older people negotiate the complexities of higher education, typically a rather remote arena for them, is a common thread. Both studies are concerned with the plight of older adults in a state system of university provision and the extent to which older people, especially those from disenfranchised groups, can



find ways of getting into the institutions and completing their programmes of study. Higher education is part of a stratified society and while widening participation initiatives have had a modest impact on diversifying the student base, much remains to be done to attract, retain and encourage greater success for older students in both countries.

In the New Zealand case it is necessary to understand the wider political-economic reforms in society to appreciate the difficulties facing older people who want to enter universities. Even for those older adults who have benefited most from the education system in the past, it is a challenge to retain one's determination to 'get through' the system. These people, usually white and middle class, have the necessary 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1974) to succeed or alternatively set up their own system such as the U3A movement which has blossomed in New Zealand (Swindell, 1999). Since the global economic crash, the HE sector has tightened its entry requirements, making the 'open entry' of the past an almost unattainable goal. Indeed, if you are an older Maori woman living in a rural area it is highly unlikely that you will ever find your learning path leading to a university. If you are a Pakeha male from a professional background, you will find the journey less daunting. To gain respect from Maori communities, universities will need to recruit more staff of Maori heritage plus adopt a willingness to innovate to make the individualistic orientation of the institution into a more collectivist one, less scary for marginalised adults.

In Scotland the same kind of political economy analysis applies. The 'socially excluded' in Castlemilk or Easterhouse of Glasgow (poor suburbs) will find the University of Glasgow, for instance, with its ancient history of recruiting students from the élite, a road too far unless progressive and innovative steps are taken to target and welcome students, including older adults beyond the mainstream. The recent 'downsizing' of the former Department of Adult and Continuing Education does not suggest an optimistic future. Many older adults have come into this University via Access programmes or the Certificate in Higher Education. The above research project, with its focus placed on older students from mainly working-class backgrounds who have had minimal association with FE and HE earlier in their lives, demonstrates the considerable demand for both credit and non-credit programmes if conditions are even mildly conducive. It illustrates the potentiality for HEIs to recruit from older people if they practise real social inclusion in their strategic plans.

## **Conclusion**

One of the main arguments in this paper is that those few older adults who do engage with higher and continuing education in universities are the already privileged, predominantly white middle class women. Participation patterns of older adults need to be analysed from the viewpoint of social class, gender, ethnicity, geographical location and disability, in addition to the role of the state. This paper has offered an unapologetic analysis of the disenfranchisement of older adults from formal education in higher education contexts but indicates that older people will engage more fruitfully if the political will exists at both institutional and governmental levels. This argument is one based on a radical stance emergent from critical gerontology.

The two case studies illustrate that a political economy approach can provide a hardened analysis to understanding the circumstances and life chances of older learners, particularly with regard to universities in two Commonwealth countries. While there are idiosyncratic characteristics of respective higher education systems and nations, the historical situation of older adult engagement in relation to universities in both locations has been tenuous. While older people may come to occasional short non-credit courses, principally of the expressive liberal education type, historically there has been not much engagement beyond this level. Given changing labour market conditions and recent anti age discrimination law in both countries, there may be renewed impetus for more instrumental education as older people seek to re-engage with education to help diversify their options. The virtual exclusion of older adults from higher education may in part be remedied by a decline in the numbers of school-leavers coming to universities but this seems more of a default mechanism than it is an institutional belief in the importance of lifelong learning. There needs to be a continuing demand for the rights of access of older people to higher education and at the same time an enhanced readiness by the institutions to accommodate these senior citizens.

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# A window of wonder: An insight into intergenerational learning in the Irish second-level education system

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## **Abstract**

*This paper introduces Living Scenes, and intergenerational programme of learning which has been in operation in selected schools in Ireland for the last thirteen years. An overview of the programme is followed by a description of the hidden curriculum and the transmission of arbitrary culture in an educational context. This is followed by an introduction to intergenerational learning as an antidote to the competitive and results driven Irish second-level education system exploring the potential of investing in social capital in schools.*

## **Introduction**

Living Scenes is a collaborative education initiative, involving schools, teenagers and older adults, working together within a community learning environment. It encourages, supports and accommodates active experiential learning among participants of the programme, thus eliciting specific learning outcomes from the curriculum based objectives of the programme.

## **Living Scenes: An intergenerational programme of learning**

Living Scenes seeks to promote and cultivate the enriching relationship that has been established in the course of the programme's thirteen year history. The concept of intergenerational learning in a school-based setting with a devised and planned curriculum is relatively uncharted territory in this country and abroad. The changing socio-economic landscape that is now an integral part of Ireland's development as member of the European Union brings its own burdens on family and community life. The effects of this change have permeated every aspect of society. Increasingly, parents, professionals and educators find themselves experiencing the dilemmas associated with a populace that is struggling with identity and values. Through its value-led approach in traditional

and community-based education, Living Scenes seeks to highlight the need for re-establishing and preserving Irish heritage and cultural identity whilst embracing the ever-changing multicultural dimension of our society.

The programme takes into consideration and responds to the needs of younger and older adults in our society through a specifically designed curriculum that provides a platform for equal expression from both groups. Strong emphasis is placed on the holistic development of the participants. In an intergenerational context equality of opportunity, empowerment and personal development are promoted and encouraged. The objectives of the programme are: to discover common links between generations that are perceived as diverse; to foster and promote mutual respect; furthermore, to empower both groups through consultation to actively participate in the development of the curriculum, thus developing a sense of ownership of a non-hierarchical nature within the programme. Living Scenes is transferable in nature and is responsive to the needs of a fast-changing society.

### **Key features of Living Scenes**

#### *Aim*

The aim of Living Scenes is to promote the sharing of culture, heritage, tradition and experiences between two diverse generations through a structured programme of work. The perceived barriers of age, social background, culture and inequality are addressed and engaged in the course of the programme. The curriculum process is consultative and participative in nature and aims to promote reciprocal learning and experience. The intergenerational focus of the programme seeks to create a climate in which the participants will develop interpersonal skills, self-realisation, character building skills and cross-generational awareness and respect, which are encouraged in practical terms through application and self-expression in the four identified modules of Living Scenes, Art, Music, Drama and Writing.

#### *Teaching methodology and content*

Adopting an open, inclusive and consultative approach is one of the key aspects of this programme. The primary focus is on a non-hierarchical and a non-judgmental approach to learning. The core emphasis of the programme is on a multiple intelligence approach to learning, the learning environment itself is designed to facilitate a highly consultative approach to course content and curriculum design, thus promoting high levels of engagement and participation, the “buy-in factor”.

The programme is school-based, and is timetabled on the Transition Year timetable for a two and a half hour weekly session over a thirty week period. The programme is facilitated by external facilitators who are not members of the school's teaching staff but who are trained by the University to deliver the modular content. The curriculum of Living Scenes promotes equality by attaching value to the participants and their views. Because of the intergenerational nature of the group, the level of experiential learning is valued and promoted as core to the programme's function. In the context of curricular design, the programme is nontraditional and responsive in its planning and implementation process. The context and conceptual focus of the curriculum from an intergenerational perspective is founded on the acceptance of change, societal change, educational change and demographic change. In an educational context, Living Scenes promotes a holistic approach to learning. The tenets of multiple intelligence, self-directed learning, integrated learning and life-long learning inform the implementation and design of the programme.

#### *The hidden curriculum*

The non-participatory nature of schools, driven by a prescriptive learning model was a key motivating factor in establishing the Living Scenes programme. Illich (1973, p.71) encapsulated the 'insidious' nature of schooling when he referred to 'the hidden curriculum'. Far from having the function of developing a democratic and participatory society, Illich (1973) argued that the main functions of the school were in reality four-fold: they provided custodial care for children; they effectively distributed pupils into occupational roles; they transmitted the dominant value system; and they taught pupils to acquire approved knowledge and skills. Illich (1973) contends that the relationship between school and society is essentially one of producing the economic requirements of society – and in particular, disciplined workers (at all levels), who are aware of and accepting of the political and economic hierarchies. His argument is set within a wide-ranging critique of contemporary society, in which he maintains that modern economic development has removed from previously self-sufficient individuals the skills they need, and made them instead dependent on professional experts. Continuing, he asserts, that 'schools encourage passive consumption of the existing societal structure in the unconscious manner in which their procedures inculcate disobedience and conformity' as he contends, 'schools teach children to know their place and to sit in it.' (Illich 1973, p. 72).

The theorists who followed Illich (1973) focused on the way in which control was imposed through the form of school organisation, rather than through for-

mal curricular content, stating that this notion is so deeply embedded and hidden that as McDonald (1997) contends, it passes completely unrecognised by both the pupils passing through school and the teacher who uses the control to determine the pupils' experiences in school.

The nature of the hidden curriculum was summarised succinctly by Valance (1974) when he described it as:

...the non-academic but educationally significant consequences of schooling that occur systematically but are not made explicit at any level to the public rationale for education.

(Valance, 1974, p. 7)

Valance (1974, p.7) continues thus: 'No open rationalisation of the practice of schooling publicly acknowledges and defends the insidious infusion of values, the tacit political socialisation into a culture of docility and acceptance of the reproduction of structures.' One of the best known expositions of the nature and workings of the hidden curriculum in the context of political economy is put forward by Bowles & Gintis (1972; 1976; 1988). To them, education is simply a response to the capitalist systems, transmitting technical and social skills through the core curriculum and inculcating discipline and respect for authority through the hidden curriculum. The social relations of the means of production correspond to the social relations of schooling, and this, they argue, is no coincidence:

...the school is a bureaucratic order, with hierarchical authority, rule orientation, stratification by 'ability' as well as by age, role differentiation by sex (physical education) home economics etc. and a system of external incentives (marks, promises of promotion and threat of failure) much like pay and status in the sphere of work.

(Bowles and Gintis, 1972, p. 87)

It is not just that schools reproduce the personality types required by capitalist reproduction; this is the very purpose of the school. Alienation and anomie are necessary outcomes of this schooling, not merely incidental to the incompatibility of the cultures of primary and secondary socialisers (Gramsci, 1971; Berger and Luckman, 1966). Following this argument, it becomes apparent that



schools become mechanisms both for cultural distribution and for class reproduction: the two are indivisible.

In the same vein Bourdieu's (1971) theory of cultural capital includes both cultural production and reproduction in schools. The school inculcates partly through the formal but particularly through the informal curriculum, not so much with particular and particularised schemes of thought as with the general disposition which engenders particular schemes (Bourdieu, 1971). This "cultural capital" argues Bourdieu (1971), is used as a mechanism to filter pupils into particular positions within the hierarchy of capitalist society. Schools recreate the social and economic hierarchies of the society in which they are embedded by using processes of selection and teaching; but, by judging and comparing these activities against the habits of the middle class, they effectively discriminate against all those children who have not had access to a middle class upbringing.

...by taking all children as equal, while implicitly favouring those who have already acquired the linguistic and cultural competencies to handle a middle class culture, schools takes as natural what is essentially a social gift, i.e. cultural capital.

(Dale et al, 1976, p.4)

As Bourdieu (1971) puts it,

...the cultural capital and the ethos, as they take shape, combine to determine behaviour and attitude to school which make up the differential principle of elimination operating for children of different social classes.

(Bourdieu, 1971, p. 36)

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that education has a particular or special function in the transmission of the cultural hierarchy arguing that education can reproduce realities in social classes and thus preserve cultural and other differences between classes. They assert that traditional analyses of education tend to separate cultural reproduction from its function of social reproduction and 'ignore the specifics of symbolic relations in the reproduction of power relations' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Challenging the notion of the 'nature v nurture' debate, functionalists contend that we are formally socialised by the system of education,

...we receive the cultural identity which has been handed to us from previous generations ... as we grow older, we modify the identity inherited. This identity is not intrinsic but the scope for changing it is hindered by the social expectations of the group with which we are associated. By our actions we informally reinforce our inherited group affiliation.

(Robbins, 1990, p. 174)

For the most part, schools are involved in the transmission of arbitrary culture and knowledge. Robbins (1990) contends on this issue that 'the equalisation of opportunity' provided by state education and by the recognition of 'innate' intelligence is a sham. The system simply provides a series of awards or qualifications which, 'as much as hairstyles, are reinforcements of our previous group identity' Robbins (1990 p. 34).

Young (1971) concurs with this approach, contending that power is unequally distributed in society: the system that allows this is created and maintained partly through the transmission of culture, described by Young (1971) as:

...access to power and the opportunity to legitimise certain dominant categories, and the processes by which the availability of such categories, to some groups, enables them to assert power and control over others.

(Young, 1971, p. 8)

In an exposé of the hidden curriculum in Irish post primary schools, Lynch (1989) asserts that the majority of people in working-class communities are keenly aware of the importance of education and value it for their children. Lynch (1989) claims that, while Bourdieu (1971) and his French associates are correct to say that class differences in habits take the form of differences in manners, tastes, style of dress, speech dispositions and attitudes, there is a type of symbolic violence being done to working-class culture in schools

...what alienates working class children from the system most of all is not only the middle class character of the formal and hidden curriculum but the absence of the financial resources to make the system work for themselves.

(Lynch 1989, p. 58)

Schools and universities do not simply act as a guide to 'official' culture, but behave in ways that reinforce the social groups which support their choice of approved culture. Schools and universities thus both conserve culture, and act to reproduce it; individuals are cultivated to have a specific set of values, tastes, thoughts – their habits. Thus, the organisation and validation of knowledge becomes more important than the content of knowledge, the curriculum. What is important is not what the knowledge is; it is how particular knowledge comes to be validated as important and how it is used to have power-forming and power-augmenting characteristics:

...thus culture both classifies knowledge but also, in its power-validating mode, classifies the classifiers: it discriminates between those who have the power of cultural legitimisation and those who do not.

(Ross, 2000, p. 90)

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 5) describe this process. All pedagogic action, they argue, is 'objectively symbolic violence, insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (p. 5). Such pedagogic action implies that it has pedagogic authority, so that pedagogic transmitters (schools and universities) are:

...from the outset designated as fit to transmit that which they transmit, and hence entitled to impose its reception and test its inculcation by means of socially approved or guaranteed sanctions

(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 20)

The banking concept of education (Freire, 1972a) with its implicit belief in the superior knowledge and authority of the teacher and its passive view of the learner is still highly pervasive. Lynch (1999) contends that such hierarchical relations are antithetical to the development of an egalitarian perspective as they

...habituate both pupil/student and staff consciousness to a mode of educational and organisational relations in which dominance and subordination are naturalised.

(Lynch, 1999, p. 303)

Lynch (1989, p. 63) states that, if schools are not participatory democracies in their organisation, and 'dialogical in their pedagogical practice' then it is likely that equality goals pursued through the curricula will be self-defeating, as the hidden curriculum of schooling will contradict the message of the formal curriculum. Lynch (1989) contends that students are subjected more systematically and consistently to the equality message of the hidden curriculum rather than that of the formal.

### **Intergenerational learning: Levelling the playing field**

The challenge of embedding an intergenerational programme of learning in an established mainstream academic system was at times daunting. Living Scenes was to embrace "the non academic but educationally significant consequence of schooling" (Valance, 1974). The programme is designed to acknowledge the powerful equalizing effect of reciprocal active learning, non-judgmental learning and a non-hierarchical approach in the classroom most of which is readily ignored in mainstream Irish secondary schools.

According to Bengston (1993), interactions between individuals from different generations play an important part in the growth of trust, the development of the ability to rely on each other and the strengthening of the links involved in such relationships between younger and older people. Such interaction is considered to fall within the scope of intergenerational learning.

Boström (2003) contends that intergenerational learning may be viewed as an integral part of lifelong learning and a means by which it is possible to introduce aspects of informal learning into the system of formal education (see diagram). According to Boström (2003), this model provides a framework for describing how intergenerational learning may be seen in relation to lifelong learning in a life wide perspective. In Boström's study, the pupils undergoing formal education in schools meet male senior citizens (The Granddad Programme) as role models and friends where dialectic transmission of learning occurs between them. The senior citizens in the programme are providing care for the pupils but are not teaching them in any direct manner. In Living Scenes, the experiential learning aspect of the programme ensures that learning is occurring constantly, thus making the Boström model highly applicable to the programme's objective.

Feedback from principals and co-ordinators on the last point indicate that, from a school's perspective, the Living Scenes programme fosters inter-human

communication as it allows TYs to encounter older adults in a fixed way that would not otherwise have occurred in a school environment. Because of the level of interaction and the relaxed learning environment, the participants of the programme have discovered talents that are sometimes not visible in a standard classroom. In all of the schools, the adults are viewed as a potential resource, whose presence may permeate in a cross-curricular context to other aspects of school life. Kaplan (1998) observes that senior citizens generate community-based learning experiences not only for older people themselves, but also for the young.

Current trends dictate that an increased proportion of psychological investment in child-rearing derives from actors in new structures, such as a child day-centres and schools. Therefore, it is possible for adults other than parents to constitute a social benefit for the child. Coleman (1990) reflects that social capital resides in the capability of any transmission between an adult and a child. He contends that corporate actors have found opportunities to establish and strengthen their own relationship with children. Television programmes are made specifically for children; toys, clothes and entertainment have been devised to strengthen the relationship between children and other adult actors.

Since many parents are spending an increasing proportion of their day at work, many children remain at home or in care isolated from their parents. The teenagers in Living Scenes speak of a friendship, respect and trust that has developed between the older adults and themselves.

Kaplan (1998) observes:

Whereas initiatives have been designed to create shared friendship and learning experiences for the children, youth and senior adult participants, more attention is now being paid to the potential of intergenerational programmes to provide solutions to social problems. There are now intergenerational programme initiatives designed to investigate and improve community conditions.

(Kaplan, 1998, p. 19)

*Social capital: Building community in schools*

In Living Scenes the rudimentary tenets of social capital are expounded as the foundation of the whole programme. If the one common denominator in the

utilization of the concept of social capital entails trust, communication and network, then, in essence, it describes the core of Living Scenes in context.

Coleman (1988; 1990) in a further development of the concept of social capital defined it as follows:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, they facilitate certain aspects of social structures and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure

(Coleman, 1988, p. 98)

According to Coleman (1988) there are three forms of social capital:

- Social capital at the level of trust to be found in the social environment and the actual extent of recognised obligations
- Social capital as information channels
- Social capital constituting those norms and sanctions that encourage or constrain people to work for a common good, thereby relinquishing their own immediate self-interest.

Utilising Coleman's (1988) definition Fukuyama (2000) has chosen to concentrate on the importance of norms and structures in his particular conceptualisation of social capital. For Fukuyama (2000), social capital is to be regarded as a set of informal values or norms, shared by members of a group, which permits co-operation amongst them. According to this view, where trust is seen as a by-product of shared norms of ethical behaviour, it is the presence of social norms that provides the indicator for social capital.

Current trends dictate that an increased proportion of psychological investment in child-rearing derives from actors in new structures, such as child daycentres and schools. Therefore, it is possible for adults other than parents, such as teachers or older adults, to constitute a social benefit for the child. Coleman (1990) contends that a child is dependent on social and psychological support and on social constraints, which together constitute that social capital which is required of adults to invest in the young.

Coleman (1990) reflects that social capital resides in the capability of any transmission between an adult and a child. Coleman (1990) also observes that it was the transformation of the exchange economy to the money economy, that prompted males to leave their households in large numbers in order to exchange their labour for wages. However, during the early phase of the money economy one adult, namely the mother, continued to remain in the household. But this trend would change.

....It was the exodus to external workplace that saw the beginning of the process of fragmentation of the family household from the three-generational unit to the nuclear family, and, eventually, through further fragmentation as a result of increasing divorce rates, to the single-parent family.

(Boström, 2003, p.49)

While these processes resulted in alienating parents physically from their children, Coleman (1990) states that a variety of corporate actors discovered opportunities to show increased interest in children and their own relationship to them. Television programmes were made specifically for child audiences; toys, clothes and entertainment were devised to strengthen the relationships between children and these other adult actors. Coleman (1990) explains how corporate actors have found opportunities to establish and strengthen their own relationship with children. These opportunities arise as a consequence of children needing to feel that some form of adult authority is taking responsibility for them; but, since many parents are often absent from home, spending an increasing proportion of their day at work, many children remain at home or in care, isolated from their parents. Thus, the role of the parent in the child-rearing process has become increasingly diminished, and this has added further to the complexities of child-rearing.

### **Social capital in the school**

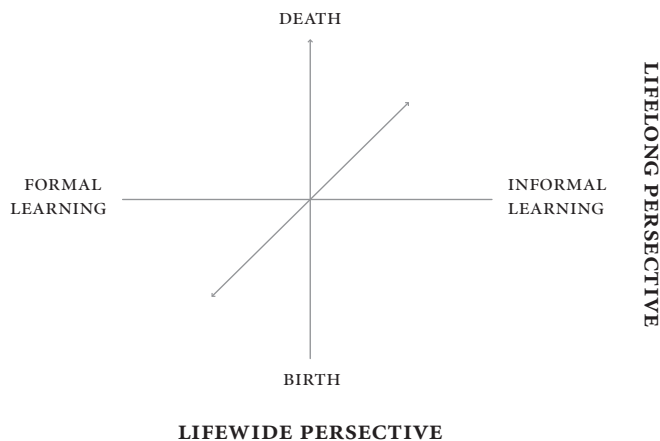
Observing the decline in the impact of parental involvement in the life of a child, it has become apparent that the role of the actors has a high impact effect on the life of a developing child.

In Sweden in 2003 a detailed study was carried out by Boström (2003) to examine the relationship between lifelong learning, intergenerational learning and social capital by reporting on an analysis of the concepts and an investigation of one instance of intergenerational interaction namely 'the Granddad Programme'.

The findings of research on Living Scenes clearly concur with Boström's view that the benefits to be derived from this programme constitute a two-way flow. On the one hand, the pupils gain the opportunity to meet and learn from a member of the older generation, who have a different type of 'time' at their disposal, which they are able to spend with individual pupils, than is the case with the teacher. On the other hand, the retired or unemployed senior citizen gains the opportunity to engage in activities that give him a sense of having a significant role to play in society, rather than remaining at home, perhaps feeling isolated and with nothing useful to do. Therefore, although the granddad voluntarily chooses this work in order to help the pupils, he also earns increased self-esteem and gains an improved quality of life through the engagement and participation in a network derived from a lifelong-learning situation.

Boström (2003) contends that an appropriate model of lifelong and lifewide learning may be applied to the area of intergenerational learning which the Granddad programme represents (see diagram following). In this model, the vertical axis represents a complete life span which, when viewed from the bottom up, represents a theoretical description of an individual life cycle from birth to death. The horizontal axis represents experience of lifewide learning, where formal learning is located toward the left side, non-formal learning is located on the central section of the axis and informal learning is located on the right side. For the Granddad Programme, the pupil in formal education is located in the bottom left quadrant and the male senior citizen representing informal learning is located in the top right hand quadrant.

### Lifelong learning and intergenerational learning



*Adapted: Boström, 2003*



### **Living Scenes ripple effect**

The schools selected for the Living Scenes study were fundamentally very different schools. They have a very different dynamic in their catchment: rural, urban and large provincial town. This in turn influences the culture and ethos of the programme in each school. As indicated in the sample of interview data presented, all of the teachers who became co-ordinators expressed views of being concerned about initial discomfort at bridging the gap professionally from their traditional role to that of a more interactive, delegatory position. Co-ordinators spoke of the demands of the programme's extracurricular dimension, but not in a particularly negative way. There is an awareness amongst the co-ordinators of the extra-curricular demands of managing Living Scenes in the individual schools. Despite this, co-ordinators speak of the experience as being rewarding and beneficial to themselves, to the school and to their students. There is a realisation evident that this role reveals their professional identity in a new way both to students and to the older adults. They speak about their role changing to a more interactive one. They speak of commitment but again not in a negative sense. There is an obvious sense of belief and motivation evident in their responses. It would appear that this is driven by their commitment to the older adult grouping in particular. With regard to collaboration the co-ordinators speak of having high levels of co-operation from colleagues particularly when requested. In one of the larger schools it emerged that collaboration is more difficult due to the size of the staff. In this instance, as described by the co-ordinator, it feels like 'working in a vacuum'; however, the same co-ordinator has indicated that, when directly asked, staff are willing to get involved.

Principals and co-ordinators have described the high impact of inter-generational learning in their schools. They speak of unexpected responsiveness from the students, and in particular the way in which students respond to the older adults in an interactive manner. There has been widespread acknowledgement in the four schools of the reciprocity of learning in an intergenerational context. Co-ordinators in particular have commented on the 'no right or wrong' approach to learning. This has been associated with 'freedom', thus allowing the students and adults in particular to voice their opinions. Principals and co-ordinators have spoken of the transferable skills being promoted and adopted in the programme (mutual respect, co-operation, confidence-building, empowerment). On an interpersonal and intrapersonal level, there is genuine wonder at the ease in which the students communicate with the older adults: 'They light up when new students talk to them' (male, principal, urban school). There is also an awareness that this is a complete break from academic measurement

and climate of schooling. Participants, particularly students, speak of learning 'but not for exams'. Describing the effect of the programme as a levelling factor in his school, a principal observed that "many students, who otherwise would have slipped beneath the radar in the academic system, blossomed having had the opportunity of recognition in Living Scenes."

The one constant in the dissemination process has been the relationship developed between the younger and older generation in every school. All of the principals and co-ordinators have alluded to the commitment and loyalty of the adults to the programme and to their schools. As the co-ordinator in an urban school pointed out, even when difficulties were evident, the adults still appeared weekly. The principals and co-ordinators have also observed how the students have spoken of their relationship with the older adults developing as there is a noticeable decline in their relationships with their parents. The older adults have made a high impact on the students as is indicated by a selection of the students' responses, for example: 'They don't judge us'; 'They're good listeners'; 'Great craic'; 'Laid back like us'; 'Age is just a number'; 'Easier to communicate with than our parents or someone twenty or thirty years older than us'; 'They know what's important [and] what's not'.

The older adults on the other hand speak of 'friendship'; 'a new family'; 'a revelation'; 'shedding masks'; 'total breakdown of barriers'; 'confirming faith in the younger people'. They speak of being rejuvenated and respected. In terms of a wider impact on a locale, again in all the schools co-ordinators and principals speak of the impact of the programme beyond the classroom. Time and again in interview data, personal and community gain were referred to. The community developmental potential was referred to by the co-ordinator in a rural school as she indicated that the change of attitude evident in both groups is noticeable on the street.

Overall, the perception gleaned from the research carried out on the programme to date suggests that, as a result of involvement in Living Scenes, participating schools have been reintroduced in their locale as community learning centres promoting social capital. The teacher's role is defined as a facilitator of learning rather than as the traditional didactic role. A new type of learning is occurring in the participating schools and a new level of reciprocal interaction has been forged between these schools and their local communities.

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# Assessing the relationship between community education, political efficacy and electoral participation: A case study of the asylum seeking community in Cork

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## **Abstract**

*This paper assesses the relationship between community education and internal political efficacy. In particular it examines the association between voter/civic programmes run in advance of the 2009 local elections in Ireland and internal political efficacy amongst the asylum seeking community in Cork. A survey is used to test this relationship. The paper outlines the methodological issues faced in conducting research within this community and presents the results of the sample groups' involvement in community education, levels of political efficacy and participation in the 2009 local elections.*

## **Introduction**

Community education which draws on the teachings of Dewey (1916) and Freire (1970) has been described as ‘a flexible, emancipating process, which enables people to become more agentic in their own lives, and to bring about change in their worlds’ (Connolly 2003, 9).

Political efficacy refers to a citizen's appraisal of her ability to influence and have effect in a political system. Research details the strong relationship between political efficacy and political participation (Almond and Verba 1965, Pollock 1983, McCluskey et al 2004, Valentino et al 2008). Voter/civic programmes fall under the ‘umbrella’ of community education to the extent that they emphasise its philosophy of empowerment and engagement. In this regard we can hypothesise about their association with an individual's internal political efficacy and electoral participation.

Ireland, unlike many other European countries, experienced little inward migration during the twentieth century. It was not until the ‘celtic tiger’ economy developed in the late 1990s that the country experienced high levels of immigration and it was

only in 2007 that a Government office with responsibility for integration was established.

The number of asylum seekers entering Ireland reached a peak of 11,634 in 2002 but had declined by two thirds to 3,866 in 2008 (Taguma et al 2009). Asylum seekers in Ireland are entitled to vote in Irish local elections. In terms of educational provision, those under the age of 18 have the right to primary and secondary education while adults are eligible for part time English language and literacy classes as well as other part time courses (e.g. computer courses) provided by voluntary groups.

Community education projects on voting and Irish politics were conducted by civil society organisations, University College Cork and other institutions in advance of the 2009 Irish local elections. This research assesses the relationship between community education (and voter/civic programmes in particular) and an individual's efficacy and electoral participation by surveying members of Cork's asylum seeking community who have and have not participated in these community education programmes. It starts with a discussion of what is meant by community education and then explores definitions and measurements of political efficacy. Finally it assesses their relationship within this demographic.

### **Adult and community education**

The term 'adult education' has a multiplicity of uses depending upon the context and the intention of the user (Lawson 1979, 111). In its White paper on Adult Education the Irish Government argues that it includes aspects of further and third level education, continuing education and training, community education and '*other systematic deliberative learning by adults, both formal and informal*' (2000, 12). This broad definition is underpinned by what it describes as priority areas, namely: consciousness raising, citizenship, cohesion, competitiveness, cultural development and community building. Other purposes of adult education include; facilitating structural change in a dynamic society; supporting and maintaining social order; promoting productivity and enhancing personal growth (Beder 1989, Boggs 1991, Connolly 2003).

The purposes vary according to different philosophical or ideological perspectives. Beder identifies three philosophical traditions in adult education:

1. liberal-progressives who see the good democratic society as the goal of adult education and broadly agree that learning should proceed from experience as opposed to abstractions or discipline-based subject matters.

2. countercritique/reproductionists, such as Freire, Gramsci and Bourdieu, who focus on the relation of education to society and argue that capitalist democracy is flawed by structural inequalities that can be remedied only by a significant reordering of the social system. Freire (1970), in particular, emphasises empowerment and the development of critical consciousness, and sees the role of adult education as facilitating learners to attain this, through dialogue.
3. personal growth advocates, who like the liberal-progressives believe that society is essentially good. They focus on the individual rather than on society. This tradition is associated with Humanism and it views the role of adult education as assisting learners to make choices that maximise their human potential (Beder 1989, 45- 6).

In particular, Beder emphasises the role played by adult education in promoting the democratic order, a view supported by Boggs who contends that '*the quality of democracy seems to depend upon the degree to which civic education can assist adult citizens in finding meaningful bases for participation in public affairs*' (1991, 46-7).

Boggs and Beder's views are reflected partly in Brookfield's discussion of 'adult education of the community' which he argues reflects the tradition of citizenship training in which a democracy requires its members to possess a certain philosophical orientation and a set of civic virtues and where the educator holds the community to be in a state of normative need (1983, 88-9).

Similar points are expressed on civic education which is informed by the political and ideological interests embedded in varied conceptions of citizenship. Some describe it as the education of '*tolerant, rational political actors*' while others claim it is one that it gives citizens the '*organizational and participatory skills necessary to negotiate democracy*' (Dale et al 2007). Some suggest it teaches the '*critical and deliberative skills necessary to participate effectively in contentious public debates*' yet others are uncomfortable with approaches that '*encourage dissent and critique of current policies*' (Westheimer 2004, 232).

Westheimer and Kahne identify three visions of citizenship that may be incorporated into programmes of civic education (2004): the personally responsible citizen (citizens must have good character); the participatory citizen (citizen must actively participate and take a leadership position in community struc-



tures) and the justice oriented citizen (citizen must question and change established systems and structures when they produce patterns of injustice).

The Boggs and Beder discussions primarily focus on the personally responsible and the participatory citizens. Community Education, a form of adult education that is distinct in its ideology, has been described as

*‘a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level..... (and) an interactive challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes’*

(AONTAS 2000, 110).

Its approach is closer to Westheimer and Kahne’s justice oriented citizen and its emphasis on empowerment, social justice as well as community and citizen capacity building (Connolly 2003) places it in the countercritique/reproductionist school. In the context of the recent debates on the direction of Irish adult education it is orientated towards the renewal of its commitment to critical citizenship (Keogh 2004, Harris 2005). It involves a broad and ‘*non-instrumental conception of education oriented to social equality and justice*’ (Fleming 2004) that goes beyond ‘*reductive and economistic abstractions*’ of the individual (Finnegan 2008). It recognises that the educational system is ‘strongly integrated into the society around it’ and that it is a ‘central part of the egalitarian agenda’ (Baker et al, 2004: 168).

The voter /civic education courses delivered in Cork city and county in advance of the 2009 local election can be classified as community education programmes. The courses consisted of three units delivered over a six week period in UCC and Carrigtwohill community resource centre in late 2008 and early 2009. The goals of the workshop were to help the participants explore areas of concern where they would like to see change happening, identify the root causes of these problems and develop practical ways to change the situation through involvement in electoral and participatory democracy (VPSJ, 2006: iii). These were achieved across three modules/units. The first unit ‘our voices our vote’ focused on the power of each citizen’s individual voice to bring about change. It included technical information on joining the electoral register and completing a sample ballot paper as well as exercises linking ‘our voice’/‘standing up’ for ourselves and our community to voting. The second unit, ‘issues’, asked partici-

pants to identify issues of concern to them and to reflect on them from a justice perspective. It used group and individual exercises to explore and outline the 'way things are' and 'the way we'd like things to be', the latter task from the perspective of a just society. In the final unit 'candidates', the participants assessed the election candidates in terms of how they serve voters' interests and involved a series of exercises on how voters can keep their representatives accountable between elections (VPSJ, 2006).

The course's aim, approach and delivery methods which incorporate participatory exercises, modelling, open questions and facilitation are in keeping with Brookfield's work on critical theory which emphasises the need to 'hunt assumptions', test their accuracy and take informed action (2012, 24). Based on the principles of Freire, the course is underpinned by philosophies of empowerment, social justice and respect. Furthermore, in line with critical thinking approaches the workshops, without making explicit reference to political ideology, are clear in the values that underlie them and highlight the need to examine the values that inform the actions of political actors. In this regard this course can be differentiated from other adult education programmes offered to the asylum seeking community, such as programmes in computers, languages and childcare.

### **Political efficacy**

A central tenet of democratic politics is that ultimate control of the system rests with its citizens. Accordingly, the extent of influence that citizens perceive within the system, that is their political efficacy, is of some significance (Acock et al 1985, Galston 2001, Dalton 2002, Stoker 2006).

Campbell, Gurin, and Miller's (1954, 187) classic definition of political efficacy describes it as the

*'the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e., that it is worth while to perform one's civic duties. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change.'*

Political efficacy is important from an individual perspective, as it influences political participation, including voting (Finkel 1985, Easton and Dennis 1967, Baker 1973, Valentino et al 2008). It reflects the overall well being of the citizen and the state, and for this reason Craig, Niemi, and Silver reflect that political efficacy is '*thought to be a key indicator in the overall health of democratic systems*' (1990, 289).

Theorists distinguish between internal and external efficacy dimensions (Craig et al 1990). Internal efficacy involves the self-appraisal of one's capacity to understand and act within the political environment (Morrell 2003). Possessing the belief that one is a capable political actor is a reflection of the individual's psychological strength (Clarke and Acock 1989). In some political science literature the term 'political competence' has been used to refer to this dimension (Lambert et al, 1986). Internal efficacy comprises self-perceptions of: political knowledge; political understanding; confidence to engage in political matters; and capability in political matters (Craig et al 1990). The second dimension, external political efficacy, relates to an individual's appraisal of the accessibility and responsiveness of the political system and its agents to their personal input (Acock and Clarke 1990).

The principal considerations in internal efficacy are of the individual's own political competences. Education, particularly civic education, has been shown to boost internal efficacy (Galston 2001, Pasek et al 2008, Kahne and Westheimer 2006, Lopes et al 2009). A positive relationship between internal political efficacy and political participation is also well documented (Balch 1974, Valentino et al 2009).<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis on empowerment and capacity building in community education, indicate its relevance for general feelings of personal competence, i.e. internal political efficacy. A more informed voter, equipped with the critical thinking skills is more likely to challenge the status quo, to 'hunt assumptions' to resist 'ideological manipulation' (Brookfield 2012:5) and to make the decision that best meets their needs and values. We can therefore hypothesise that community education, particularly voter/civic education will have a positive association with internal political efficacy, and voting participation.

### **Methodology, findings and analysis**

The research developed a project specific survey questionnaire that was administered in asylum-seeker residential centres in Cork.<sup>2</sup> Expert consultations with residential centre managers, outreach officers and NASC officers (Cork based immigrant support Non Governmental Organisation), as well as a focus group with asylum seekers, were organised to refine the survey questionnaire and to receive advice on the logistics of conducting the surveys and establishing points of entry to the centres and the community.

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1 Finkel (1987) and Valentino et al (2009) note that the relationship is not necessarily one-directional, as participation is also likely to affect one's perception of political competence.

2 The questionnaire is available on request.

The 'political and community education' items included in the survey questionnaire were largely open-ended to capture the level and context of respondent participation in voter/civic courses. Closed-ended items on attendance and satisfaction with such courses were also included. Comparable items relating to 'non-political' courses captured the respondents' overall educational experience in Ireland.

The political variables measured were taken from existing political efficacy research and used Likert scale closed-ended questionnaire items. The items used reflect Craig et al's (1990) approach to measuring internal political efficacy. Socio-demographic information such as: age; gender; race; education level; and length of residence in Ireland was also gathered.

#### *Methodological issues*

The focus group was held on 23rd June 2009 in the NASC office with 5 participants from diverse age, ethnic and residential status backgrounds. The group focused on the draft survey and the feedback received included concerns around:

- Possible personal identifiers (nationality, age etc). It was noted that this could be particularly sensitive for asylum seekers, as there may only be one or two members of smaller countries seeking asylum in Ireland. Thus if a participant from one of these countries wrote down their nationality, they could be easily identified. This question was changed and the question used by the Central Statistics Office in the 2006 census was used instead. It asked participants to identify their ethnic or cultural background and gave the following options: White, Black (African or any other Black background), Asian (Chinese or other Asian background) and other (including mixed background).
- The question on status in Ireland. Members of the focus groups highlighted that for many African migrants the issue of legal status in Ireland is sensitive and complex. Also it was suggested that the question had negative connotations and that asylum seekers would not answer the question on status no matter how much anonymity was promised. This question was removed from the survey as due to resource limitations it was decided to focus solely on the asylum seeking community.
- The personal efficacy questions and their placing in the questionnaire, in particular. As one participant observed: *'This feels very personal. First you ask me where I am born, my age now you are asking me about my personal abil-*

*ity straight away*’. Before the focus group, the questionnaire started with questions on personal data, then captured interest in politics and then ten personal efficacy questions. After the focus group the number of personal efficacy questions was reduced to five and they were placed on the second page. Also the questions on personal data were placed at the end of the questionnaire. Another participant remarked that the personal efficacy items may be difficult to capture with asylum seeker respondents as they find themselves in a country where ‘*they do not have power in their lives*’.

- The language and terminology used. For example some sentence structures were identified as confusing due to the number of response categories. Also the participants did not favour placing the negative option first. Phrases like ‘seldom’ were identified as possibly being problematic. Finally all agreed that the survey was too long for those who did not have English as their first language. In response the survey was significantly shortened (from ten to four pages) and the number of response categories reduced.

### **Conducting the survey**

The survey questionnaire was conducted in the communal areas of six Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) residential centres in Cork.<sup>3</sup> As those who participated in the survey were self-selecting, the findings of this research are specific to the sample.

The monthly statistics report of the RIA at the time of survey (December 2009), indicated a residential asylum seeker community of 6,482 at a national level, 919 residents were based in Cork centres. As a third of the centres’ residents were under the age of 18, the Cork survey frame at this time was 625. The sample for this survey was 71 respondents. The survey sample is comparable to the sample frame, in terms of gender and the residential centre location. The age of those surveyed ranged from 18 to 44 years old.

The survey involved respondents completing a questionnaire on a one-off basis. While a panel design which surveyed respondents before and after participation in community education would better investigate the relationship between education, efficacy, and participation; this was beyond the resources of this project. The transient nature of those in residential centres, and the difficulty of accessing respondents also limited the possibility of such a design.

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3 The centres surveyed include: Ashbourne House, Glenvera, Millstreet, An Poc Fada, Clonakilty and Kinsale Road. Residents in the Mallow centre opted to not participate in the study.

The survey is not statistically significant, given that those who filled it out may be more engaged or knowledgeable. Yet it does provide an insight into the impact of political education on this under-researched community. Therefore this research is best regarded as a pilot study. The non-random nature of the sample and the sample size did not make it possible to generalise the results. The distribution of the responses is presented on an item by item basis.<sup>4</sup> Cross tabulation of community education, internal efficacy, and participation was used to explore the relationship between the variables. Gender effect on these variables and relationships was controlled for. The subsample size made it impractical to control for other demographic variable effects.

## Results

Of the 71 respondents, 44% of them resided in one centre (the Kinsale Road centre), the largest one in Cork. In terms of gender, while one participant did not provide gender, 40 respondents (57%) were male and 30 (43%) were female. The majority (52%) of the participants were aged between 25 and 34 and no one older than 44 participated. The educational attainment of respondents was as follows: no formal education (1%); primary education (18%); second level education (38%); university undergraduate (24%); university postgraduate (10%); and non-response (9%). In response to the question on ethnic or cultural background 73% of the respondents said that they were of Black origin, 8% classified themselves as Asian and 13% identified themselves as White.

Over three quarters of the respondents (79%) had taken an adult or community education course in Ireland. These included courses on: computers, the English language, childcare, and women's health. Almost half (48%) of them had taken a second course. There difference in the proportion of respondents that participated in any course, on age group, educational attainment, or length of time in Ireland, was negligible.

Fewer than a third (31%) of respondents had taken a voter/civic course with 8% of them having taken two. A greater proportion of male (35%) than female (26%) respondents had taken a voter/civic course; this was also true for participation in other (non-political) courses. A comparison of other background variables illustrated that black, older, more educated, and longer term residents were more likely to have participated in voter/civic courses.

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4 Attempts to create a scale measure of internal efficacy were not supported by Principal Axis factoring and Scale Reliability analysis results. The Cronbach's Alpha (.592) emerging from scale reliability analysis of the four items is not supportive of a reliable internal efficacy scale.

Those who participated in voter/civic courses were more likely to express an interest in politics (95%) than those who had not participated (62%). They also were more likely to identify with an Irish political party (participants 42%, non-participants 2%) and to have had contact with a politician (participants 53%, non-participants 29%). A greater proportion of course participants expressed a connection with the Irish community (60%) compared to non-participants (53%). Moreover a greater proportion of course participants expressed a connection with the migrant community in Ireland (60%) compared to non-participants (50%).

**Table 1: Participant responses (%) to internal efficacy survey items**

Internal Efficacy Items	Disagree	Neither disagreed nor agreed	Agree	n
1. I consider myself well able to participate in politics	17.7	33.9	48.4	62
2. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of important political issues	15.9	27.5	56.5	69

While respondents were presented with four survey items on internal efficacy in the questionnaire, there was some duplication in item focus. Table 1 displays the response distribution to the two items which are focus of subsequent discussion, and which feature in Craig *et al* (1990). The proportion of respondents expressing high internal political efficacy (those who agree) on item number two (57%) is higher than for item one (48%). The proportion of respondents replying with middle category responses to each item is relatively high.<sup>5</sup>

While 48% of respondents agreed with item one, more male respondents (55%) agreed than female respondents (35%). Agreement on item one increased across the age groups; 29% for 18-24 year olds; 55% for 25-34 year olds; and 57% for 35-44 year olds. The trend across educational groups showed that those with postgraduate education were more 'efficacious', that is had higher levels of efficacy, (57%) than those with primary level education alone (40%). Interestingly those who identified with Irish political parties, and had met a politician were more likely to feel efficacious than those who did not.

5 The other internal efficacy items presented to respondents were: *I feel I could do as good a job in political office as most other people* and *I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people*. It is evident that the former item is similar to item number one, and the latter item is similar to item number, in Table 1.

Participation in a voter/political course is associated with higher levels of political efficacy, as 61% of course participants agreed, with item 1 compared with 39% of non participants. No respondent who had participated in a voter/civic course disagreed with the item. Our research revealed that participation in non-political courses does not have a positive effect on internal efficacy. While 56% of those who presented as politically interested agreed with the item, only 16% of those who were not politically interested did so. It is therefore possible, that political interest guided their decision to participate in a political course and their perception of internal political efficacy. However, looking only at politically interested respondents; the proportion expressing efficacy is still higher among voter/civic course participants (63%) than non-participants (48%).

In relation to the second internal efficacy item (Table 1), similar patterns emerge in relation to: gender, age, and education. Those who identified with Irish political parties are more efficacious (78%), than those who did not (55%). Political course participants were also more likely to agree with this statement (70%), than non-participants (54%). Again, the politically interested were more likely to agree to this statement (65%), than the politically uninterested (27%). Controlling for interest, among those who categorise themselves as politically interested; those who have participated in political courses are more efficacious (72%) than those who have not (67%).

### *Electoral Participation*

**Table 2: Respondents and the 2009 local election**

	Percentage
Awareness of right to vote	80
Registered to vote	62
Voted	48

All of the respondents were entitled to vote in the June 2009 local elections and the overwhelming majority of them (80%) were aware of this. Yet only 62% were registered to vote by June 2009 and 48% voted in the election (Table 2). While an equal proportion of male and female respondents were aware of the right to vote, 55% of males registered to vote and 75% of females registered to vote. Fewer male (43%) than female (57%) respondents voted. Older age groups were more inclined to vote. The turnout levels across the age groups were: 42%



of 18-24 year olds; 46% of 25-34 year olds and 60% of 35-44 year olds. Those with a higher level of educational attainment in advance of coming to Ireland were more likely to vote than others. Moreover, the length of time that one spent in the country increased the likelihood of having voted in the 2009 election.

**Table 3: Participants/non participants in voter/civic education and the 2009 local election**

	Course Participants	Neither disagreed nor agreed
Awareness of right to vote	95	70
Registered to vote	95	47
Voted	75	38

Table 3 shows that those who participated in voter/civic education courses were more likely to be aware of their entitlement to vote in local elections than those who did not; and to have registered for the 2009 elections. They were also more likely to vote in the June 2009 elections than non-participants.

As in the case of political education, the relationship between internal political efficacy and voting participation is positive among asylum seekers. 57% of those with high efficacy on the first efficacy item (see Table 1) voted, while only 46% of those with low efficacy voted. On the second efficacy item, 49% of those with high efficacy voted, while only 36% of those with low efficacy voted.

The relationship between voter information programmes and voting is more prominent among those with high efficacy, than low efficacy. Moreover efficacy appears more important in the electoral participation of women. On the first efficacy item, male respondents are equally likely to vote, irrespective of efficacy level. However, among female respondents, 100% of those who agreed with this item voted, only 50% of those who disagreed with the item voted.

### **Conclusion**

This research faced many challenges namely language barriers, access to the survey community, and their apprehension of involvement in a political survey. All of these impacted on the response rate. The small *n* meant that the survey findings were not statistically significant. Therefore this paper presents observations rather than findings for generalisation and should be viewed as a pilot study.

Nonetheless, returning to our initial hypothesis, this research notes a positive association between participation in voter/civic education and internal efficacy that is qualified by gender. It observes that those that participated in such courses were more likely to have been aware of their electoral entitlements, to have registered to vote, and to have voted, than those who did not. In doing so it provides some tentative evidence of the value of voter education programmes in enhancing electoral participation amongst this marginalised community. Further research within this community, particularly panel design approaches, is required to prove this conclusively. Moreover further research is required to explore why those members of this community did not vote. This study has focused primarily on political participation through voting. The authors are mindful that voting alone is not sufficient to empower citizens and also recognise the role of participatory and deliberative democratic processes to widen citizen engagement and deepen it by offering more opportunities for informed and critical engagement with the dominant neo-liberal political discourses.

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# In pursuit of critical literacy: Understanding experiences of exclusion for adult literacy learners

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## **Abstract**

*This paper explores exclusion and equality through critical theory, in the context of adult literacy provision in Ireland, by investigating the sites of exclusion that exist for a group of five male adult literacy learners. A summary review of literacy theories, exclusion and equality is provided framing the reporting of data from this collaborative action research study. Focus groups and visual methods were used to gather qualitative data relating to incidents, attitudes and experiences of exclusion. Findings relate to two main sites of exclusion namely workplace literacy and work-related training and form-filling and correspondence. Giving voice to participants and enabling them to record photographically and critique their individual experiences of exclusion bridges critical literacy theory and practice. It is argued that participative practice in research can empower learners to make links between personal literacy difficulties and the systems that permeate wider society, and to act for social change.*

## **Introduction**

Literacy is one of the most fundamental and valuable forms of “educational currency” and the key to unlocking “the larger coffers of other forms of capital: economic, social and cultural” (Feeley, 2007, p. 15). Considering one in four adults in Ireland displays serious literacy difficulties (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 1997), the issue of being excluded and isolated from these capitals is a very real problem for many.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the links between exclusion, equality and adult literacy provision in the context of critical literacy theory. A further aim is to link current theory to classroom based activities thus informing literacy practice. The research investigates the sites of exclusion that exist for a group of

adult literacy students who tell their own story of marginalisation and highlight how exclusion is of notable significance where literacy is concerned (National Adult Literacy Association (NALA), 2011a). Furthermore, by investigating issues that constitute real problems for people attempting to negotiate their way through the world, concepts such as disadvantage, community and equality are brought to the fore, which can aid our understanding of how society works and lead to change (Freire, 1970).

The paper begins with a concise review of literature relating to literacy theory and to the concepts of exclusion and equality. The methodological design and procedures are briefly outlined and the findings are presented and discussed. In light of the theoretical perspectives explored conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made for policy, practice and research.

### **Literature review**

Low levels of literacy negatively impact on the individual and are likely to permeate a family unit (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2000). Potential negative consequences include unemployment and social exclusion (NALA, 2011a), lower income (Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit, 1993; NALA, 2011a) and reduced career aspirations (NALA, 2011a), questioning the meritocratic beliefs central to the way that our school system operates. The provision of literacy programmes is imperative in addressing aspects of social exclusion (Rose & Atkin, 2007), tackling past inequalities in the education system, and addressing current problems in relation to access and participation.

Although there are opposing views with regard to the categorization of literacy theory (Graff, Jones & Street, 1997), for the purpose of this research, the dominant theoretical perspectives are grouped into three main areas considered by Lankshear & Knobel (1998) and Mark (2007), who identified a triad of dimensions to literacy – operational, cultural and critical.

Concentrating on core skills such as reading, writing and numeracy, operational literacy is the predominant literacy that children entering school are taught. In the past, economic forces have encouraged this approach to literacy, to ensure that the skills needed for the workplace are developed (Mark, 2007). Historically, operational literacy was seen as an independent process, impartial to the vast range of social factors that exist within our society – “a neutral variable” (Lankshear, 1999, p. 205). Viewing adult literacy in this way does not consider the specific literacy needs of the student and concentrates on fulfilling

a standardized set of criteria, disregarding the contextual requirements of the adult learner. If literacy is a dynamic concept (Jarvis, 2005), driven by the need for specific skills to function in our world, the concept of teaching literacy as non-contextual falls short.

Cultural / Social literacy asserts that an individual needs to become adept in more than just words and numbers, in order to function in society and is recognized by many authorities (NALA, 2005; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2006) as best practice in literacy tuition. It is grounded in a strong belief in the empowerment of the individual, supports relaxed, learner-centred tuition, and disregards outdated ideas surrounding attainment of certain levels in reading and writing, lauding a more flexible approach to literacy, based on a student's learning needs (NALA, 2005). However, cultural literacy has been criticized on the grounds that skills learned in a classroom setting may not easily transfer to social situations (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997). In addition, it may encourage adult learners to slot into an existing society, as opposed to challenging students to consider how society could be changed for the better (Ozanne, Adkins & Sandlin, 2005).

Critical literacy is embedded in Freirean theories surrounding discovery and the development of critical consciousness and while the theory supports contextualized learning as per cultural literacy, Freire (1970) urges the student to engage further. He believed that traditional Banking Education, the passive consumption of teacher-directed facts and figures, "attempts to control thinking and action and inhibits creative power", thereby becoming an "exercise in domination" (Freire, 1970, p. 59). Freire presents a solution to this in the form of Problem-Posing Education, whereby students are encouraged to explore a topic through a series of thought provoking questions that relate directly to students' lives. Crucial to Freire's theory is the concept of praxis in education, whereby he encourages the student to reflect on wider issues affecting society and to act for social change by recognising and addressing deep rooted inequalities.

This type of literacy encourages learners to discuss real issues that affect their everyday lives and introduces the teacher as a partner in learning as opposed to a source of knowledge. Furthermore, the perception of education is investigated as students engage with problems within society, and theorise solutions, as opposed to passively receiving a series of text based facts (Shor, 1992). However, this theory is underpinned by engaging critically with a student, which may not happen in the reality of the classroom environment (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2001).

### *Exclusion and Equality*

Exclusion entails being “excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society” (Social Inclusion, 2012). A major factor behind social exclusion is the “joined up” nature of social issues such as unemployment, poverty, high crime rates and family breakdown (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Exclusion can limit employment, economic and life opportunities (Sen, 2000), is a habitual occurrence for those who experience literacy difficulties, and can prevent communication in and with the world. Forms, timetables, bills, text messages all involve some form of literacy capable of excluding the one in four Irish adults with serious literacy difficulties. Consequently, inclusive education “is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Focusing particularly on vulnerable and marginalized groups, it seeks to develop the full potential of every individual” (UNESCO, 2012, n.p.) and aims to eradicate discrimination and encourage and promote equality, social cohesion and personal empowerment.

At the core of literacy education and inclusion lies the concept of equality, one of the basic principles of egalitarianism and democratic social order. Equality is the idea that all people have equal value and importance (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2004) and is a central consideration for this research. Equality helps people to exercise choice and freedom, impacts on personal development and contributes to the evolution of cultural values (Baker et al., 2004). Literacy education therefore, is about a lot more than reading and writing – it is about human rights, liberty, personal development, cultural capital and justice.

The acceptance of exclusionary literacy practices as norms within society signifies that inequalities exist. Experts (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Feeley, 2007; Mark, 2008) maintain that literacy cannot only be a struggle to redistribute basic skills; it should incorporate a wider view which considers equality issues in society as a whole, an outlook shared with the critical literacy perspective. Some (Feeley, 2007) advocate a more structural / systemic approach to literacy, which will impact on educational disadvantage at a national level. This viewpoint suggests that because equality issues are interrelated we need to address a spectrum of disadvantage, and engage in significant social reform, in order to have any real consequence on literacy education. While it is crucial to recognise and discuss the causes of, and possible solutions to, low literacy levels, this systemic view of literacy could be interpreted as overwhelming from the perspective of literacy tutors. Were practitioners to adopt this viewpoint in relation to education, it could become difficult to undertake meaningful practice, until suitable policies were in place at a nation-



al level – a potentially protracted, dispute-ridden process. Therefore, this research fits in alongside Lynch and Lodge who suggest that resolving inequality “means working on a range of political, economic and cultural sites...simultaneously” (2002, p. 195). Systemic change combating inequalities is essential to an inclusive society. However, at times, systemic change arises from issues that are identified at a grassroots level, a process to which this research contributes.

Realising change necessitates the use of power and / or influencing power relations (Coe & Mayne, 2009). Inglis (2009) argues that power in society exists at two levels. On the one hand lies the social class divide, legitimised and perpetuated by state laws, policies and the distribution of funding. This is where the systemic view of literacy is situated. However Inglis suggests that we must also consider how power exists within ourselves and each member of our society, “the way we think, in how we see, read and interpret the world” (2009, p. 111). Critical literacy theory is framed around this belief and attempts to tap in to Inglis’ second kind of power – the power that lies within us as individuals and as part of active communities.

This research highlights the relationship between literacy theory, exclusion and equality, through participatory literacy practice. Theoretical knowledge is important; it provides us with an alternative way of viewing and situating a literacy approach. It also tenders a platform of what is “known” should we wish to reflect on / add to current theory. Each of the literacy theories discussed addresses exclusion in different ways. For example, if a student has difficulties understanding a phone bill operational literacy would advocate teaching the alphabet, verbs, nouns, etc., to enable the student to read the bill. Cultural / social literacy would promote target teaching of the bill, focusing on the specific information relevant to the student. Critical literacy would encourage the student to critically reflect on the bill, explore associations with inequality and identify actions to assist in reducing same.

Frequently, attention in the classroom focuses on the operational and social sides of literacy. This practice is both realistic and beneficial offering learners a system with which to address the practicalities of literacy (such as phonics / form filling) and culturally / socially situating the learning process, framed around the learner’s needs. However, the relational nature of exclusion and its disproportionate connection to poverty and disadvantage (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001), also necessitates a space for learners to critically reflect on literacy and exclusion within society.

## **Methodology**

In this collaborative action research, focus groups and visual capture were used to gather qualitative data relating to incidents, attitudes and experiences of exclusion, giving voice to participants and enabling them to describe their individual experiences of exclusion. A crucial element shared by action research theory and Freirean beliefs alike, is emancipatory social change, achieved through the broadening of participative practice in research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007, p. 301) point out that “those closest to the problem are in the best position to identify it and work towards its solution”. Inclusive teaching practice was an important element of this research, as participants had some difficulties with literacy. Thus photography and group discussion were used to tap into participants’ visual, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences.

The research took place in a local Adult Literacy centre with a group of five male adult learners aged between 25 and 65. Permission to conduct the research was received from the Adult Literacy Officer (ALO), the Board of Management (BOM) and the research participants. The purpose of the research and the implications for participants were outlined at an information session. Confidentiality was assured in relation to group identities; participants had the opportunity to ask questions and were assured of their right to withdraw from the research. The research group agreed to participation and gave consent for video recording of group discussions and the use of photographs. Participants’ names have been changed to protect identity.

Two focus group discussions took place one week apart, fitting in with the scheduling of existing literacy classes. At the first discussion, the concepts of “exclusion” and “literacy” were examined using an application form as a code to enhance critical thinking (Freire, 1970). Participants were led through a critical awareness process in relation to the form, considered and described situations where they experience(d) literacy-based exclusion, reflected upon how these situations could be captured visually and were asked to return in a week with an image that represented exclusion. Photography allowed participants to express their feelings about exclusion through a non-literacy based medium, aided the reflective process and helped in the explanation / understanding of exclusion (Kingsley, 2009). The second discussion revolved around participants’ photos and how they signified exclusion. The group then considered how this exclusion could be prevented and decided if action should be taken to rectify the situation and by what means.

## Findings and discussion

In the first discussion, participants defined exclusion and identified and described times when they were excluded because of their level of literacy. Participants agreed that exclusion was “being left out of something” and that literacy could mean reading, writing, signs, logos, etc and participated in a discussion using a Supplementary Welfare Allowance Form. When discussing the way that the form is written the group agreed – “it’s not too bad, but they ask for a lot of details”. When asked whether they were affected by the form, observations included “I’d just give it to someone else and ask them to fill it out” (Peter) and “it’s a psychological thing...I know now that even if a form is put up to me and I’m capable of doing it, I’m still nervous of it” (Brian). All agreed that their level of literacy had excluded them in some way from reaching their potential and that they had stayed “in the background” due to their literacy difficulties. The discussion concluded with participants agreeing to attempt to capture exclusion by taking photos that represented their experiences in relation to exclusion. Four of the five participants brought photos to the second discussion. Findings relate to two main sites of exclusion – (a) workplace literacy and work-related training and (b) form-filling and correspondence.

### *Workplace literacy and work related training*

Mark illustrated the problems that a literacy difficulty can cause when a promotion at work led to increased reading and writing requirements. Examples included logging information and registering / responding to complaints.

“He (the boss) was at me for ages...So in the end I said yeah and before I knew it I found myself in a room with all the management, all of them had folders and I’m there going oh no, how did I end up here?”

(Mark).

All of the participants reported difficulties in relation to attending and completing work related courses.

“I went up towards the end and said it (*re. literacy difficulties*) to the tutor. And he said, well you could have told me at the start; sure it was there on the form. And I hadn’t even looked at the form....everything goes, your confidence and everything”

(Peter).

John's photo of his local SIPTU office represented the difficulties that he had when he took up a union related role at work, plus the pressure that was put on him to complete relevant courses in relation to the job.

"And he kept on to me that they had a college up in Galway and he wanted to send me up...you're on the list, you're on it, he kept saying...but I made excuses and I just wouldn't do it".

Brian had taken a photo of a sign for a civil defence battalion. He had been asked to complete the officers' training some years ago, had passed the initial interview and taken up a place but resigned after a few weeks, as he found it would involve a high level of reading and writing.

The group also thought it important that those who are giving courses to the public, be trained to deal with people who have literacy difficulties. Advising course attendees at the beginning of courses that they will be facilitated was also suggested – "I was only ever on one course where the guy giving the course said it openly what about the person who can't read and what about the person who's not good at writing?" (Mark). "James recalled a positive experience.

"I went on a first aid course...and I said to the guy look I'm not good with the pen. And he said no problem, let me know any time you're stuck. You're not going to fail your exam...I felt more confident because I said it from the start".

Some of the group thought that there should be less writing on courses in relation to areas that don't require writing (e.g. truck driving).

"but you see all of these courses about why do you want to drive a truck? Why do you think? That's all only nonsense. They should bring you out on the road and teach you how to drive a lorry. Not so many forms"

(James).

In addition, Mark and Peter believed that there should be more multiple choice questions on assessments.

Participants' experiences of fear, embarrassment and negative memories in relation to courses, is supported by NALA's (1998) assertions in relation to barriers to attending training endorsing the claim that literacy difficulties can have a negative effect on life chances (DES, 2000). Attendance at literacy classes aims to give

students the confidence to participate in other courses. Further possible solutions could include advertisement of courses as literacy friendly, with modules written in plain English, the option of assessment through multiple choice exams and the reassurance of the availability of confidential literacy support for those who may need it. The decision to refuse training / promotion means that income levels will never rise beyond a certain point. By limiting career prospects, participants could be making a decision that not only has an impact on many aspects of their own lives, but also the lives of their children and the experiences of the communities in which they live (NALA, 2011b). This illustrates the “joined up” nature of social exclusion and the associated knock on effects. Organisations offering courses to lower skilled workers need to be aware of literacy difficulties, if they are to combat exclusion and promote equality; not only during the course, but also when providing introductory information to potential students.

#### *Form-filling and correspondence*

Several participants recognised the disempowering nature of form-filling. Peter spoke about giving blood.

“Sure that’s why a lot of people won’t give blood. Did you ever look at the questions on them? ...if you were handed a form like that... it’s worse than anything...I don’t understand half the questions”

(Peter).

Peter subsequently brought in a photo of his local credit union, which had treated him unfairly during a loan application and told him they could only hear his appeal in writing. “It made me scared to go near the bank...I had no confidence after it...”

However, none of the participants challenged the authority of the organisation that designed the form. Fawns & Ivanic (2001) suggest several reactions to form-filling by way of resistance to institutional power, including utilising the terms “not applicable” (N/A), entering into dialogue with the organisation, refusing to fill in forms and teaching critical awareness. While all of these suggestions may not be viable, the concept of resisting the form is useful as it demonstrates that we have an alternative(s). However, entering into dialogue with an organisation about a form depends on there being personnel, trained in literacy awareness, available to customers / the public.

Mark and Peter discussed how problematic sending correspondence can be.

“I remember going to get a mass card one time and the man asked me to spell the surname. I was so embarrassed. I didn’t expect him to do that... And I said, you know something, I’ll probably give it to you wrong so I won’t say it. And I left”

(Mark).

“Well, she said, I’m sorry but ...you’ll have to put that in writing. I said...I can’t really write. Well, she said, you’ll have to find someone that can”

(Peter).

Mark brought in a photo of a card, representing difficulties he has in writing and sending cards and his resulting avoidance of this activity.

Correspondence is embedded in social situations, beliefs and practices and has both meaning and consequence (Barton & Hall, 2000). Representing personal connections between people and linking the individual with his / her social world (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), card writing tends to encompass a personal sentiment and may therefore assume particular significance.

The group advocated more literacy awareness training for people working within the public service and for tutors involved in workplace training, alternative assessment procedures for compulsory testing and more visual aids, in particular, the literacy help sign/symbol. “They take it for granted that people can read and write... they’re probably not being trained to deal with people with difficulties” (Brian). While only Brian knew anything about the literacy help sign prior to the study, participants suggested more widespread introduction of this sign into businesses and public places would be a positive step towards inclusion, echoing the views expressed by adult learners consulted by NALA (2010).

When asked whether they would like to take action in relation to the exclusion they had discussed, some felt that they would not be listened to as individuals, but that correspondence would be better coming from the Adult Literacy Centre – “I think that that stuff is better off coming from the centre...from the boss of the centre” (James). Others were reluctant, due to issues in relation to confidentiality and self-confidence. Freire puts forward a “dialogical cultural theory of action” (1970) which incorporates a number of constituent elements,

including cooperation, unity for liberation, organization and cultural synthesis. Future research in this area should give a more detailed consideration to these elements

This research was underpinned by critical awareness and by Freirean theory concerning discovery, reflection and action. Critical literacy theory urges the student to think of literacy as not only reading and writing skills, but an opportunity to create a more equal society. It also relates to Inglis' (2009) view of the power that exists within us as individuals. Subsequent classes with this group involved much discussion concerning exclusion, demonstrating a heightened critical awareness and a willingness to reflect on aspects of society that are excluding them, and to question the systems that support this exclusion. This trend has been recognised by previous research (Birden, 2002) and is a central objective in critical literacy. While it is important to acquire the basic skills to participate fully within society, the introduction to a critical way of thinking and being in the world is crucial to effect change and is of more value to both individuals and their communities, empowering learners themselves to act for change.

The findings reported represent the views of a small sample of adult learners and cannot be taken as in any way representative of the views and experiences of adult learners more generally. Gender issues present during the research process should be mentioned. The all-male research group existed as a class prior to the study and were chosen to participate for a number of non-gender related reasons including excellent attendance, a history of spirited discussions and a willingness to try new ways of learning. In addition, almost all participants had been together for at least six months, which had fostered a group sense of trust. Participation rates of men in literacy education and adult education in general are relatively low due to complex issues surrounding barriers to participation, leading NALA (2009) to conclude that "literacy and education settings are increasingly being viewed as the female domain" (p.38). While the group were chosen for reasons not related to gender, it may have played a part in the research. Men's identity and role in society is often defined by their jobs and this study resulted in findings surrounding work based literacy and training. Perhaps this issue was more to the fore than it would have been in a mixed / all female group. Participation of men in adult education is important – lack of participation of any demographic leads us to question equality of access, provision, flexibility and responsiveness (AONTAS, 2008).

There are a number of recommendations as a result of this research. An updated literacy survey of the Irish population should be conducted as a matter of urgency. At a policy level, a more widespread awareness campaign around workplace literacy and introduction of workplace literacy programmes is advised. Furthermore, research into employers / trainers and their opinions / knowledge / conceptualisation of the exclusionary consequences of work place literacy difficulties would be useful. Literacy training and support for tutors and trainers is also proposed. The vital role of NALA and the VECs in combating exclusion for those with low levels of literacy must also be acknowledged. Furthermore, literacy awareness classes for individuals whose job involves dealing with the public, particularly those in public service organisations is crucial to reduce exclusion. The use of the literacy awareness help sign could be investigated and promoted by students as part of their class / group work. Finally, at a community level, critical thinking strategies should be incorporated into literacy / basic education classes, to create opportunities for students to effect change.

### **Conclusion**

Literacy provision can be conceptualised from operational, social / cultural and critical perspectives. In order to fully cater to individuals presenting with literacy difficulties, we must consider the value of incorporating elements from each of these methods. The interwoven concepts of adult literacy, exclusion and equality and the disproportionate connection between exclusion and disadvantage (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) necessitate a space for adult learners to critically reflect on literacy and exclusion within society.

Exclusion begets exclusion and is connected to a host of ancillary social issues. This research underlines the social division between those with literacy difficulties and those without and the exclusion that can arise because of this disparity. Participants spoke of the fear and embarrassment felt in relation to literacy problems and how these affected course participation, promotions and everyday activities such as giving blood, sending a card and applying for a loan. Hence, for literacy learners, exclusion and inequality are phenomena to be faced on a daily basis, a concept that is underappreciated by many.

Quality adult education aims to empower adult learners to achieve their full potential (UNESCO, 2010). This research focused on bridging critical literacy theory and practice. Critical investigations into the experience of exclusion assists learners in making links between personal literacy difficulties and the systems permeating wider society. This meant that participants were able to



connect the exclusion that they had experienced to broader societal concerns and to deliver possible responses such as more training for public service and training personnel, less writing on courses for more practical subjects and alternative testing procedures.

Freire stresses the concept of praxis as reflection and action which cannot be condensed into either “verbalism or activism” (1970, p.106). Missing from this research was a way in which to translate the knowledge, experience and suggestions of the group, into a more structured plan to take action against exclusion. Therefore, this research as a Freirean exercise is incomplete without the presence of a transforming action to free the dominated culture from alienation (Freire, 1970). The dialogic cultural theory of action suggests a starting point with which to begin this process.

When considering action, we must also reflect on ourselves and the ways in which practitioners can act against exclusion. It is easy to feel as if we are being swept along in a wave of new regulations, documentation requirements and funding cuts. As Inglis (2009) points out, power exists within us as individuals and as part of active communities. Embracing critical literacy as a viable form of learning within the spectrum of literacy education is a necessary action for us as tutors to take against exclusion.

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# An exploration of female Travellers' experiences of guidance counselling in adult education

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## **Abstract**

*The proposed changes in the further education sector, including the rationalisation of the VEC into Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) and the closures of the Senior Traveller Training Centres (STTCs), have implications for guidance counselling provision to the Traveller community. This article discusses female Travellers' experiences of guidance based on exploratory research in one STTC. The findings highlight low levels of participation in education and employment, as well as the types of barriers experienced by the learners. It also suggests that female Travellers have particular guidance needs that require culturally sensitive interventions to support their progression.*

## **Introduction**

The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) was established in 2000 by the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2000). There are currently 40 services providing guidance counselling to adults pursuing education and training courses leading to further education or employment opportunities. This includes members of the Traveller community. Despite the advancements since 2000, the need for appropriate quality assurance mechanisms to evaluate the long-term outcomes of guidance interventions in the AEGI is still an issue (Hearne, 2011). In view of the proposed closure of all STTCs in 2012, guidance on progression options is particularly relevant for adult Travellers at this present time. However, there is a dearth of research on adult Travellers' personal experiences of guidance provision within the further education sector in Ireland. This exploratory study, which examined a small group of female Travellers' experiences of an AEGI service in one STTC located in a VEC adult education centre, attempts to address some of the issues involved for Travellers and guidance practitioners.

Having worked with adult Travellers as a tutor for a number of years, the researcher was interested in female Traveller education and progression in the context of their unique culture and the Traveller economy in general. Specifically, this practitioner-based study focused on the relevance of guidance counselling for female Travellers, and the implications of the closures of STTCs' for access to appropriate guidance and support in the future. A total of 11 second year students who had experienced guidance counselling at the STTC were invited to participate in the study. Nine of them, ranging in age from 19 to 26, took part in two focus groups. There was some variance in their levels of education and qualifications, ranging from FETAC levels 2 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. In addition, a former Traveller student of the STTC who had received guidance and is now studying for a degree in an Institute of Technology (IoT) was interviewed.

### **Literature context: Female Travellers' experience of adult education and guidance**

This section briefly contextualises the study before discussing the findings. Given the low participation rates in second level education by Travellers, it is likely that adult education has particular importance for Travellers who have experienced gaps in their earlier education (Pavee Point, 2005). However, the failure of service providers to take sufficient account of the culture and lifestyle of Travellers is a contributory factor in relation to poor school attendance (Lodge and Lynch 2005). More recently, the lack of role models, the low levels of Travellers staying on in school and older Travellers' unhappy experiences of school, account for poor engagement in formal education by some Travellers (DOHC 2010).

Unsurprisingly, Travellers continue to encounter obstacles to accessing education and guidance provision in further and adult education. Some barriers are general to adult learners' experiences, such as the lack of flexible learning opportunities, childcare commitments, poverty and discrimination (Hearne 2005; 2010; Lynch 1999). Others relate to cultural factors such as family commitments and early marriage, gender roles and obligations towards the extended family (Hourigan and Campbell 2010; Kiernan 2010). There is also a high incidence of exclusion and low participation rates in education by Gypsy, Roma and Travelling communities in the UK and Europe, which is comparable with the experience of Irish Travellers (DOHC 2010; EUMC 2006; Maddern 2010; Phillips & Eustace 2010; Wilkin et al 2009). Therefore, it is argued that education provision, including frontline supports such as guidance, needs to attend

to issues of cultural diversity and become more accessible to ethnic minority groups (DES, 2000; NCCA, 2006; Philips & Eustace, 2010). Consideration must also be given to a socially just accommodation of diverse groups in the allocation of public funding (Parker-Jenkins et al, 2005).

There is now an imperative in guidance provision to match the personal needs and client's circumstances, as well as the importance of ensuring greater diversity in the types of services available and the ways these services are delivered (OECD, 2004b) However, the prevalence of an ethnocentric notion of counselling of a white, middle-class activity that operates with many distinctive values and assumptions is different from, and irrelevant to, many clients, including the Traveller community (Bimrose, 2006) Therefore, a multicultural competency framework for guidance counsellors specifies the importance of practitioners having an awareness of their own assumptions, values and biases, an understanding of the world view of culturally different clients and the ability to develop appropriate intervention strategies and techniques when dealing with multicultural clients (Sue et al, 1995,1996).

### **Female Travellers' experiences of education and guidance in one STTC**

The issue of low levels of participation in education at all levels by Travellers indicates that only 40% of all Traveller children of post-primary age attend mainstream secondary school (Pavee Point, 2005). This was highlighted by the Traveller women in the study with some of them citing the lack of value traditionally placed on formal education as a reason for poor school attendance and attainment amongst Travellers. One woman stated "*we never thought of education, we weren't brought up with it*". The issue of the poor history of role models within the Traveller community identified by the DOHC (2010) was also evident, with another woman observing, "*the mothers haven't an education; the fathers haven't an education. That's leaving them say oh, when I'm leaving school, that's it. Whereas if they see role models maybe getting proper jobs, at least it's something*".

The Traveller women in the study referred to their need to feel comfortable in their education surroundings in order to engage fully with the learning process. Two women had encountered difficulties caused by gaps in their earlier education which had an impact on their later learning experiences. One woman had "*found it very challenging*", whilst another who had progressed to an IoT stated "*I really feel that I had to work extremely hard because my education wasn't up to the standard of third level.*"

The provision of guidance counselling by qualified guidance practitioners in the STTC featured in this study is a relatively new phenomenon. The Traveller women had little experience of guidance counsellors either in the STTC, or in second level in relation to themselves or their children. This correlates with previous findings that marginalised and disadvantaged groups tend to be the most reluctant to use support services in a formal institutional context (OECD 2004b; Marris 2004). Although the Traveller women had engaged with the guidance service in the STTC, including group and one-to-one support, they demonstrated different degrees of understanding of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in the Centre. For some, their experience of guidance counselling ranged from *“I was very happy with the outcome”*, to *“I found it wasn’t relevant to me at all”*. However, some of their expectations of the service were somewhat unrealistic. For example, one learner thought it was part of the Guidance Counsellor’s role to act as an advocate on her behalf at her third level college *“If their kids are sick, they’re (Travellers) not going to go to college. Guidance Counsellors need to make lecturers aware of this and be there to support them”*.

The OECD (2004a) recommends that guidance counselling should address the personal, social, educational and vocational needs of learners in STTCs. This is significant in light of the Traveller women's experience of guidance sessions being pitched at ‘too high a level’ for them. In particular, they identified the value of continuity and familiarity with education and guidance personnel, and the need for the Guidance Counsellor to be familiar with Traveller culture. One learner felt that to fully engage in the guidance counselling process *“you have to trust a person, confide in them ... the people teaching here are more helpful really”*.

Sue et al’s (1996) propositions that guidance practitioners need to examine their own assumptions and biases when dealing with clients from different ethnic backgrounds is pertinent to this study. Some of the women described how the Guidance Counsellor’s perceived low expectations led to their disengagement with the guidance process. One learner stated, *“I was thinking of work experience at the time and she said “no” that she couldn’t do anything and that was no good to me, personally”*. However, as this may relate to the learners’ expectations there may be confusion amongst both parties as to the role of guidance in the STTC.

Whilst there is an emphasis on income generation rather than working for a wage in the Traveller culture (DOHC, 2010), traditional Traveller self-employment activities, such as recycling and horse trading, have become more difficult with increasing legislation around such activities. Consequently, a large pro-



portion of Irish Travellers may be unemployed and dependant on social welfare payments. The Traveller women in the study acknowledged the changes in Travellers' lifestyles and their need for practical guidance support, "*It's all about making ends meet now*"; "*Well it's changing times, isn't it. I mean, you'll see more and more going into education*". This highlights the need for the guidance practitioner to be familiar with Traveller issues including cultural and economic concerns and a multicultural interventionist approach based on the individual needs of the learner.

### **Barriers to participation in education for female Travellers**

A number of specific barriers for female Travellers, already identified in the literature, emerged in the study. The Traveller women also referred to specific gender issues in terms of traditional roles in the family and community which may impact on them engaging in education. The Traveller community is generally recognised as being a strong patriarchal society, and so the role of women is heavily orientated towards motherhood and the homemaker (Cooney 2009). The research findings support this view with one woman stating "*Traveller families are male dominated. You're not going to see the man looking after the kids*". Hourigan and Campbell (2010) identify Traveller gender roles and obligations towards the extended family as barriers to progression in education. Kiernan (2010) quotes some young Traveller women who suggest that getting married young and the value put on motherhood within the Traveller culture are factors affecting early school leaving for Traveller girls. However, Kiernan's (2010) research also finds that some Traveller women value an education and career before settling down. Similar viewpoints emerged in this study with some of the Traveller women citing early marriage within Traveller culture as a significant factor in girls' decisions to leave school early. Nonetheless, the importance of engaging in education was also referred to by one of the participants who stated "*you achieve more out of life...being out, mixing with people. Knowing you're doing something worthwhile*".

Lynch (1999) identifies the alienation and prejudice experienced by Travellers generally in education. It is claimed that Traveller women actually experience triple discrimination – discrimination as women, as Travellers, and as Traveller women (Pavee Point, 2008). One woman in the study summed up her experiences of the barriers to participation succinctly, "*with one, me being a Traveller and two bad education and three I'd no confidence and all them piled into one and I just lost confidence altogether*". Furthermore, as identified by Maddern (2010), for one of the women who had progressed to third level the effects of poor ear-



lier education experiences had resulted in a lack of trust and fear of the learning environments. She commented, “...*walking into college as a Traveller, you’re already looked at. People judge you*”.

Finally, despite varying levels of funding supports in further education, the financial barrier still impacts significantly on adults’ participation in educational activities (Hearne, 2010). In light of current Government cuts this issue is likely to become more notable. The issue of finance was a recurring theme for many of the Traveller women in the study, with one learner stating “*my children are small and if you...have to pay for a crèche then obviously you won’t be able to afford that*”. A specific cultural difference emerged in relation to parenting and finance. The women felt that the Traveller culture dictates that Traveller parents put money away for their children’s weddings, whereas settled parents were more likely to save for their children’s education. One mother stated “*it’s our job to pay for the wedding*”. Childcare and the medical card were major priorities with one participant stating “*it’s important for some Travellers like if they get employment they’d be thinking will I lose my medical card?*” Interestingly, another participant argued that the current scrutiny of social welfare payments could have a positive effect in terms of Travellers getting into work “*if the dole is took off, they have to get into some kind of job*”. This viewpoint mirrors Hourigan and Campbell’s (2010) claim that Travellers’ reliance on the social welfare system can be a significant obstacle to Traveller progression in education and employment.

### **Implications for guidance provision to Travellers’ in adult education**

This article has explored female Travellers’ experiences of education and guidance provision in one STTC. A number of observations can be made from this study, namely: the relevance of further education for female Travellers in the context of the changing nature of the Traveller economy; the necessity for guidance practitioners to be culturally aware of Travellers’ needs in adult education; and the need for greater recognition of the barriers that Travellers continue to face in their engagement with education.

The findings indicate that specific, culturally sensitive guidance counselling interventions are required when engaging with female Travellers. Even though the AEGI provides a range of guidance supports to adult learners the complexities of guidance interventions for the Traveller community has been overlooked to date. Therefore, a multicultural approach that appropriately responds to client needs is strongly advocated by the authors. This would involve the inte-

gration of society's response to difference together with relevant strategies and techniques within current theory and practice (Bimrose, 2006). Furthermore, the impact of the closure of the STTC's and the establishment of the new further education and training authority, SOLAS, has implications for the future provision of guidance counselling to the Traveller community. As there is currently an absence of research into the effectiveness of guidance interventions for adults in general, the need for further research with the Traveller Community is vital.

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# Improving pre-entry access to university: Towards a model of transformational alignment

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## **Abstract**

*This article presents empirical research exploring adult returner students' approaches to learning via qualitative analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews. Interviewees' comments illuminate their approaches to study, their conceptualisation of information literacy, and their experiences as learners. We interpret the data through two theoretical lenses (transformational learning and constructivism). We propose a model of course re-design aimed at improving the practice of access by foregrounding within the redesign process the notion of personal transformation afforded by access courses.*

## *Introduction*

Courses offering access to higher education constitute a significant intersection between two major forms of Lifelong Learning, given that they are part of the adult learner's transition from previous forms of formal and informal learning (e.g. school learning, workplace training and learning) to a more formalised and academic learning situation, and in turn offer the possibility of further transition into full-time undergraduate study. As such, students on access courses are an interesting group to research, because they are positioned at the meeting point of a number of powerful learning environments, each with its own tradition, ethos, theory and practice of learning. The present paper seeks to illuminate the interaction of educational forces in the learning journeys of one such group of students.

The Pre-Entry course in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Strathclyde offers potential adult returners the opportunity to study part-time a variety of arts and social sciences subjects as a prelude to possibly re-entering full time education as an undergraduate student. As such, like many equivalent access

courses in other institutions, it allows students to sample higher education and if they wish, to use the access course as a vehicle for entering a full-time degree course, either at Strathclyde or at other universities. In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, the course provides a) a form of preparation for the first year experience as it would be understood in the relevant Higher Education literature, and b) a space for transformational personal development as it would be understood within the Adult Education literature. These aspects may be said to overlap in varying degrees, depending on the perceptions and needs of the students, staff and the course designers.

The course is open to adult returner applicants, a group who are defined as having been away from full-time formal education for a period of at least three years (which means that this group of students are typically at least 21 years old, in effect the group formerly referred to in the UK as ‘mature students’). In practice, a range of individuals of different ages and from varied backgrounds apply to this course:

- adults who are either unemployed and who perceive a degree as a route into a career
- individuals who are already in occupations but who would like to obtain a degree as a vehicle for career change.
- retired individuals who are fulfilling a long-harboured ambition to undertake academic study that circumstances had denied them earlier in their lives.

Equally, having sampled the higher education experience, pre-entry course students are free not to proceed to undergraduate study. As a part-time course taught by evening study, it is particularly attractive to individuals in full-time work who wish to explore university-level study without committing themselves to a full-time access course, with all the implications of sacrifice and financial hardship that the latter might entail.

Like the first year of the undergraduate degree to which the Pre-entry course provides access, it involves the study of three academic subjects. These are taught in a series of three modules of seven teaching weeks’ duration, interspersed with generic sessions on study skills, applying through the Universities and Colleges Admissions System (UCAS) for a full-time place at University as an undergraduate, and so on, meaning that the three subjects are covered in succession (unlike the undergraduate degree proper, where the three subjects

are covered concurrently). The course therefore strikes a compromise in that the breadth of subjects studied in the first year of the degree is replicated, but in a less demanding timetable allowing exclusive concentration on one academic subject at a time, as befits a course which is preparing individuals who have not been engaged in full-time study for some time for the subsequent more intensive undergraduate first year. The range of modules on offer draws upon the range of subjects taught within the BA (Arts and Social Sciences) curriculum and in many cases involves the same teaching staff as the students will encounter if they proceed forward to first year full-time undergraduate study.

A number of questions about the experiences of learners on such a course naturally arise from an adult learning perspective. What sort of Lifelong Learning journey are the adult returners embarked upon and how does the University curriculum support them at the pre-entry/first year stages? Are access courses such as the Pre-entry course better characterised as providing Adult Learning in the broad sense alluded to in the lifelong learning literature, or as simply recruiting adult returners to standard (and somewhat entrenched) pre-existing academic practices? Our interviews with the participants were designed to shed light on these themes, but before summarising the results from the study, we will explore the relevant background literature in a little more depth.

### **Theoretical background**

The broad field of adult education encompasses a wide range of learning situations including informal learning, workplace learning and lifelong learning within communities. The adult learning literature is not only broad in terms of its coverage of a wide range of learning situations, but is also broad in terms of the range of concerns addressed within it: not only is the learning of academic subject content examined, but also altogether wider issues such as self-direction, affective issues, transformation of conceptual structures, and personal development (Tennant, 2006; Schuller and Watson, 2009).

Issues surrounding adult return to full-time study have received a great deal of attention in recent years (e.g. King, 2004; O'Donnell and Tobell, 2007; Reay, Ball and David, 2002; Richardson, 1994; Tennant, 2006). A number of such issues merit detailed study in connection with adult returners. At the broadest level of discussion are concerns about why these individuals decide to participate in education, what factors encourage success and what factors encourage dropout (e.g. Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). More specific issues concern, for example, learner identity (e.g. O'Donnell and Tobell, 2007; Brine and Waller, 2004),

affective issues (e.g. George, Cowan, Hewitt and Cannell, 2004), and learning skills and strategies (e.g. Richardson, 1994). However, the extent to which access courses provide adult learning in the broad sense as opposed to more narrow preparation for the undergraduate first year experience, and the learners' perspectives on this issue, are at best only partially addressed by these previous studies.

The present paper focusses on the experiences of a group of adult returners to full-time study, and we contrast two distinct perspectives on the issue of access course students. The first is a broader adult education perspective emphasising personal development (involving two aspects – reflections on how the learner's identity is constructed historically and socially, and reassessment by the learner of his/her personal situation and options). The second is a more narrowly-focussed, constructivist, domain content (substantive knowledge of a discipline) and skill learning perspective (i.e. concerning the acquisition of skills such as study skills, life skills and employability skills as distinct from the implications of empowerment associated with personal development). These two perspectives draw upon two distinct bodies of research literature: the adult education literature (specifically, Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformational learning) in the former case, and the more narrowly focussed literature on theories of learning within higher education in the latter. These two bodies of literature share some common concerns and complement each other in significant ways, but also differ somewhat in emphasis. Consequently they offer a useful way of conceptualizing and examining the student experience of the pre-entry course; a brief review of these will allow us to explore tensions within the literature and examine its implications for adult return to university.

### **Adult learning theoretical framework**

An adult learning-based theoretical framework that has generated a good deal of interest is Mezirow's (2000) notion of Transformational Learning. Mezirow poses the question: to what extent do students transform their own thinking patterns (the values, beliefs and assumptions, which constitute a lens through which "personal experience is mediated and made sense of": Merriam, 2004, p.62) as a function of participation in learning? The assumption is that when individuals find they can no longer use their existing values and beliefs to make sense of an experience, transformational learning can occur allowing the development of a new, more advanced perspective (Mezirow, 2000). Such transformations are argued to be triggered by a 'disorienting dilemma' which prompts a process of reflection on the adequacy of one's meaning structures.

The theory first emerged within a wider adult education context, but it could also be usefully applied to the more specific issue of adult return to full-time study via access courses, by conceptualising adult return in empowerment terms. The idea of learning as transformation in perspective entails a number of key assumptions:

- adult learners are distinct from school leaver undergraduates in having a greater amount of life experience to draw upon, and greater autonomy and less dependence on teachers.
- learners must learn to reflect on their own learning experiences and develop a greater capacity for insight and self-regulation.
- individual reflection is enhanced by collaboration with others and can develop into critical, discursive engagement with the objects of study and learning.

The fundamental pedagogical implication of all this is that the basic teaching ethos should become that of ‘facilitation’ and this is strongly associated with advocacy of ‘student centredness’ with an emphasis on ‘designing for learning’ as opposed to ‘covering the content’.

### **Undergraduate learning theoretical framework**

There is a considerable body of literature focussing specifically on learning by undergraduate students (e.g. Barnett and Coates, 2005; Biggs, 2007; Entwistle, 2007; Entwistle and Tomlinson, 2007). The consensus view emerging from that literature is referred to as *constructivism*, which essentially is the idea that students construct knowledge under the guidance of tutors, and the more actively engaged students are with the learning task, the better they will learn. According to constructivism, students have to engage in complex processes of seeking meaning and deep understanding through practical activity, reflection and judgement; the lecturer’s task is one of designing student activities that promote this deep processing. Learning is characterised as involving reflection, self-regulation, metacognition and creativity, all of which emphasise the active nature of student learning processes. This activity would require students to select, analyse and apply knowledge to complex problems, which in turn would extend activity beyond the classroom to the relevant background literature, both printed and online, requiring good skills in finding, evaluating and using information sources. This has many echoes of the pedagogy outlined above in terms of adult learning practice.



From the constructivist perspective, assessment is seen less as a means of judging students and more as a means of motivating students and providing feedback to improve future performance. Biggs (2007) articulated the notion of *constructive alignment* as defining a good system of university teaching. In constructive alignment, the focus is on promoting student activity by specifying learning objectives through verbs (i.e. specifying actions and activities rather than domain facts to be acquired), selecting teaching methods and student activities that will elicit relevant activity from students, and using assessment strategies which will evaluate the students' accomplishment of the stated objectives and motivate in them efforts to improve. The emphasis is on promoting relevant student activity rather than transmitting information or covering content.

Constructivism can be criticised from an adult learning perspective on several grounds (Zukas and Malcolm, 2007): constructivism tends to ignore individual differences among students in terms of diversity, gender, ethnicity, selfhood and so on; it treats learners as anonymous and interprets pedagogy as sets of techniques applied by teachers to elicit particular responses in learners; it incorporates demands for employability skill sets but more in response to employer demands than student needs and potential. In short, the research literature on constructivism in undergraduate student learning could be argued to conceptualise learning as the acquisition of a skill set rather than as a matter of individual personal development. The adult education literature constitutes an altogether wider vision of higher education's role within society, and places more emphasis on individual ethical and existential growth: that is, transformation, arguably in the Mezirow sense.

Consequently there is a need to reconcile two somewhat different bodies of pedagogical knowledge, which can for convenience be labelled as theories about *Adult Learning/Adult Learners*, and theories about *University Study/Teaching Disciplines*. Johnston (2010) argues that University lecturers could gain some useful insights from studying the precepts of Adult Education: for example, in course design, teaching practice, and management of the first year experience. We explore these themes further below.

Biggs' (2007) notion of constructive (or curriculum) alignment is an interesting one to apply to access courses. The extent to which access courses are consciously designed with constructivist or alternatively lifelong learning precepts in mind is unclear. In fact, it may be that access course design is more aligned to the practices currently employed in the first year of undergraduate study at

university rather than more encompassing notions of personal development. But it is reasonable to ask: how do the access students themselves perceive their course in relation to these issues?

The research that we undertook attempted to address elements relating to both the constructivist skill acquisition perspective (namely the students' approaches to learning, i.e. their study skills, and their information literacy skills) and a more encompassing aspect of learning in terms of their reflections on the experience of studying on their access course.

### **The study's findings**

The findings of our study have been presented elsewhere (Anderson, Johnston and McDonald, 2011; Anderson, McDonald and Johnston, 2011). In the present article, we summarise the key findings and integrate these into a more comprehensive overview. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on our behalf by three postgraduate students who were experienced in interviewing. 18 volunteer individuals (9 male, 9 female, of varied ages, with all participants older than 21 years of age with a maximum age of 70 for one participant) were interviewed on the three broad topics (approaches to learning, information literacy, and their experience of the pre-entry course as a whole). These three broad topics were selected because arguably they tap directly into major facets of the learning experience: the learners' conceptualisation of the learning task (what is to be learned and how it is to be learned), the learners' conception of information (what is to be accessed, how it is to be accessed, and how obtained material is to be selected among) and finally reflections on the experience of undertaking the course. Their responses were transcribed in full, and subsequently qualitatively analysed using the constant comparative method to identify the underlying themes emerging across the group as a whole.

In respect of study skills, participants report using fairly rudimentary study techniques, typically involving multiple readings of textbooks. E.g. to quote one student,

'I don't know if what I am doing is right, I just read the information, I write it down, I read it again, I write it down. I just try and write it down and read it as much as possible so that hopefully some of it sticks.'

More rarely, such reading is combined with integration of other materials. More rarely still a variety of learning strategies is selected among, with reference to the demands that particular academic disciplines place on learning. For example:

‘Well Sociology was just re-writing notes that I had taken in class about the relevant material and reading books. In Spanish I put my words on cards and labelled everything in my house and put signs up on my wall. For Law again I just wrote out quotations and did mind maps for the little Acts and quotes. I’ve been in education for some time so I’ve picked up a few things along the way’

These techniques appear to be used very much in the service of a memorisation approach to learning. The students drew a strong distinction between material that was seen as more reliable and other material that was seen as less reliable, or as they put it, between ‘facts’ and ‘conjecture’. One side effect of this was a reluctance to engage in peer interaction, because fellow students’ knowledge was perceived as less valuable than tutors’ and students failed to see the point of hearing about their fellow students’ views.

The sharp distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘conjecture’ also influenced these students’ information using processes. The interview data suggest that these respondents have a strong sense of reliance on the authority of staff and published texts. This leads to students cautiously ‘sticking to the rules’ about what is legitimate information activity, and these rules in turn are inferred from what staff said about information searching. Interviewees’ responses suggested that they had a developing sense of how to form judgements about subject-related sources of information for study purposes. This tended to be somewhat rudimentary, relying substantially on consensus across sources and the notion of ‘authority’. For example:

‘Well the internet I was a bit wary about because obviously on the different websites and things if its published in a book then you’re a bit more confident thinking that this is actually kind of true information, whereas when I was looking at different websites, I mean there were some that were just wacky and I was just like I’m just not even going to let that sink into my brain in case I start talking about it’

The interview data also provide some evidence of transformation in learners’ perceptions of themselves as a function of having undertaken access course study. For example, interviewees reported becoming more analytical in their day to day thinking, and of coming to see the learning process, and not just the end product, as important for them; such changes in perspective fit very well with Mezirow’s notion of transformation. To quote one interviewee:

‘It has really changed me though in the way I think about uni it was more the idea of doing, getting a degree but now its more I actually can learn something and I can I don’t know do more with the whole uni experience I think that it has changed me that way, it’s given me more commitment and you know I’m more focused and I’m more disciplined in a way because you only had seven weeks to get something down and you had such a short time span to learn so much things so in a way you had to discipline yourself if you wanted it..... I think it’s definitely been beneficial and it’s changed me a bit’.

The interviews also reveal that the students had held specific presuppositions regarding study in higher education, which were contradicted by the actual experience, in that the access course provided a more diverse range of teaching and learning experiences than the anticipated lectures, and in not involving sarcasm toward or belittling of students during teaching sessions:

‘Well before I was, before I was coming here I was rather apprehensive just about whether or not this was a good thing or a bad thing, but you forget how open people can be especially those who are teaching to those who are wanting to learn. There’s a sort of informal, unwritten rule that you’re not going to be made fun of because you’re learning, we all want to learn...’

This individual appears in the above quote to be harking back to negative experiences from the school years (and overcoming that negativity); Belzer (2004) noted similar phenomena.

## **Discussion**

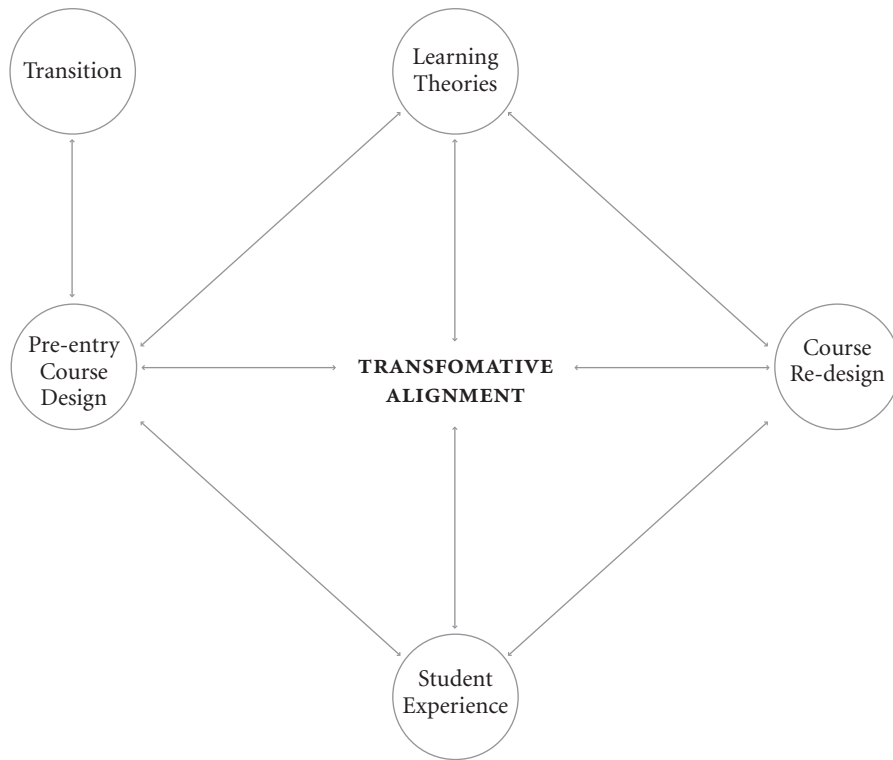
The overall picture of the access course student at the end of their access course that emerges from this sample of interviews is one where typically the individual has fairly rudimentary study skills and information literacy skills, allied to a realist epistemology in which there are right and wrong answers to academic questions. They see it as their task to learn the ‘right’ answers rather than opinions or conjecture and therefore focus on learning from textbooks on the grounds that their contents have been vetted and are more dependable. These students expect to encounter mainly lecturing-based teaching and learning experiences. This sample of access students typically report feeling academically underconfident and have anxieties about looking foolish before their peers during the course of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, these interviewees report having been transformed in significant ways by the experience of having taken the access course. How does this overall picture relate to this paper’s major themes?

We would argue that there should be two lessons emerging from the theory we have reviewed and the data that we have gathered: firstly, there is a need to improve practice at the pre-first year undergraduate level; secondly, pre-entry access courses constitute an opportunity to provide a focussed period for personal reflection and development for the students, and a major question for future research on practice concerns how to best facilitate such processes of transformation.

Pre-entry access courses are the practical means of implementing access policy to increase the numbers of ‘mature’ students entering university. They are distinctive academic entities oriented to the first year of study, but they also display powerful transition issues of identity change, affective problems and lack of study skills on the part of returnees. To an extent they have been effective, although as a number of studies have shown, it is not an easy transition and significant numbers do not succeed (Karkalas and Mackenzie, 1996; MacDonald, Karkalas and Mackenzie, 1996; Reay et al., 2002). We argue that what has been missing is a model of the key elements of transition – academic, experiential and pedagogic – which will allow course designers and lecturers to refine practice and enhance the student learning experience. (see fig. 1). In the absence of such a model, academic practice to improve pre-entry courses is likely to be reactive and piecemeal.

In this model we have blended Biggs’ concept of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2007) and Mezirow’s concept of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000) in order to make new sense of what may be going on in pre-entry courses, and thereby providing a new set of conceptual tools for course redesign and improved practice. We have provisionally called this idea “transformational alignment” as a shorthand means of conveying a complex scenario of individual development and the professional act of course design to support that development: see figure 1 overleaf.

**Figure 1: The model of transformative alignment**



At the centre of the model is the concept of transformational alignment, by which we mean that course design (e.g. the selection of objectives and the design of activities as outlined by Biggs, 2007) should be consistent with and facilitative of personal transformation of perspective in Mezirow's (2000) sense. The dimension of 'transition' identified in the model comprises several strands: a) the course design and teaching staff's intuitive sense of personal change experienced by learners in moving between educational levels; b) the formal acknowledgement of transition as a factor to be taken into account by course designers and teachers; and c) the reflection of both a) and b) within the academic literature, particularly in the sense expressed by Mezirow. Initial pre-entry course design (left hand side of the model) is informed by both research literature on transition and on learning theories; these justify the selection of pedagogies, and in turn the initial course design influences the quality of the student experience. Of course, the student experience is also in part influenced by other factors not represented in the model (for simplicity), such as previous experiences

in other formal and informal learning contexts, which can provide a ‘filter’ for interpreting the access course experience.

We argue that the initial pre-entry course design, learning theories, and information regarding the students’ experiences should all feed into a process of transformational alignment for redesign of the course in such a way as to encourage and facilitate reflection and transformation. We see this as an iterative process, with repeated fine-tuning of the course in successive academic cycles. A key aspect of a re-design process would be the involvement of lecturers from the mainstream of first year teaching to ensure that pre-entry students are well prepared and supported. This would require lecturers to expand their appreciation of students’ entry level assumptions and to develop reflective exercises as part of pre-entry teaching and feedback.

Consequently, we argue that a necessary additional aspect is the acknowledgement of this potential for personal transformation on the part of returnees. This would require anticipation of the kind of difficulties experienced, but more significantly, attention to such learning issues as: engaging more effective patterns of learning as described in the literature (Vermunt, 2007); and making explicit the nature of epistemological growth and its value to gaining knowledge and understanding. Thus we propose a concept of transformational alignment which incorporates an enhanced sense of the developmental aspect of transition as a driving force in pre-entry practice.

In conclusion, we argue that access to university by adult returner students could be considerably improved by the adoption by universities of an adult learning, transformational perspective. Doing so would mean that pre-entry access courses would not merely enhance the students’ capacity for learning the traditional study skills entailed in the first year experience, but also help transform their thinking and conceptualisation of learning.

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# SECTION TWO

*Practice Articles*

# Bringing it all back home: An innovative approach to the provision of tailored education and training for young people

*The experience of the Adult Better Learning and Education (ABLE) 18-21 programme*

FERGUS CRADDOCK, TOLKA AREA PARTNERSHIP

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*The aim of this article is to give a brief overview of the context to the Adult Better Learning and Education (ABLE) 18-21 programme and the objectives which the programme aimed to fulfil in light of the challenges facing early school leavers. The article will also document the triumphs and challenges experienced by the participants when returning to formal education.*

## **Origins of programme**

The Adult Better Learning and Education (ABLE) 18-21 programme was developed in 2010 to improve young people's opportunities to access further education and employment. The programme involved the delivery of a Leaving Certificate Equivalent (FETAC Level 4) course, full time over the course of 24 weeks, which would facilitate progression onto local Post Leaving Cert (PLC) and further education courses. The ABLE programme was delivered through a multi-agency approach that allowed for collaboration in delivery across a number of different sectors including youth work, social welfare and local employment services utilising the shared resources and expertise of the agencies involved.

## **Participant profile**

The target group for the initiative were those who were aged 18 to 21 who didn't have a Leaving Certificate or formal educational qualifications, but sought a 'gateway' programme to access education and employment options. Participants were chosen for the programme through a series of initial individual information and guidance meetings followed by group literacy, numeracy and motivation assessments. This was to ensure that the programme could

respond to the needs and ability profile of the group as well as ensuring the programme was suitable for their career and education goals. A vital factor in the initial screening process was the identification of progression routes into further education and employment beyond the ABLE programme, and the potential of participants to benefit from all aspects of the programme.

A total of 95 enquiries were made about the ABLE programme (comprising of personal contact, telephone contact, referral from external agencies etc) with 65 students offered places and 61 arriving for the start of the course. The gender breakdown ratio was consistent across all three groups with 42 males and 19 females engaging in total on the programme.

In developing a programme around the shared characteristics of the target group, a number of trends and beliefs emerged which informed the design of the ABLE programme and were essential in designing an alternative to existing provision:

- A widespread belief that education was “not for them” and that Youthreach and Community Training Centre (CTC) programmes were an extension of the formal education sector and a desire for greater freedom in their learning path
- A perception that Youthreach and CTC programmes were catering primarily for those aged 16-18 and therefore not targeted on their situation and circumstances
- Previous expulsion from Youthreach and CTC training centres
- A desire to obtain a full FETAC award in an intensive and sustained programme which would enable them to avail of the full range of Post Leaving Cert (PLC) programmes throughout the city
- A methodology which offered an alternative to the traditional classroom model which also allowed them freedom in their learning

### **Programme ethos**

The ABLE programme was developed to provide a departure from existing programmes and was based on a number of core considerations in structure, recruitment, pedagogy and practice which informed the development and delivery mechanisms of the programme.

These included:

- An acknowledgement of the importance of guidance through a dedicated guidance worker throughout the programme. This took the form of classroom based exploration of the world of work to Individual Learning and Progression Plans in collaboration with the students in supporting them beyond the Programme.

Pre-programme	Programme	Post-programme
Initial guidance	One-to one performance review and appraisal on term by term basis	Links maintained with guidance worker following programme to ensure continuity post programme
Initial needs assessment	Exploration of areas of potential progression and information provision	Invites to TAP education supports (grant workshops, application to hardship fund and travel and book supports if required)
Organisation of required learning supports (if necessary)	Organisation of workplace visits and work placement in areas of interest  Application for progression programmes and interview preparation	

- The curriculum was built around students' interests in terms of content and delivery and allowed students tailor their own experience through a broad range of 18 electives which were made available to ensure the course is of the greatest relevance to them
- The acknowledgement of core principles of multiple intelligences, reflective practice, group based learning outside the traditional banking model of formal education and the power of education to empower and inspire are central to all aspects of the programme

- A realisation that an adult education model (continuous assessment and group based activities etc.) is better equipped to respond to their needs in light of the experience locally of young people returning to education
- Students were encouraged and supported in becoming self-advocates. The Young People and Society module focused on the issues and challenges facing young people and encouraged them to be active in the community (volunteering), the workforce (work experience and work placement opportunities) and in civil society (registering to vote etc;) which would broaden their view of community and society outside the experience of the programme
- An acknowledgement of the importance of putting newly acquired skills into practice to reinforce learning and the encouragement of teamwork skills amongst students in group based activities as necessary skills for the workplace
- Many participants presented with negative or mixed views of education based on prior engagement in formal education. Students were encouraged to develop skills in critical thinking as a means through which they could develop a better understanding of what constitutes learning and by consequence, their understanding of self
- The availability of a range of supports such as a dedicated coordinator, individual tuition support, ongoing guidance support and counselling services. The availability of counselling services throughout the programme was extremely valuable for a number of students who experienced moments of crisis during the programme.
- Tutors were chosen based on their commitment to a participant led learning model based on the acknowledged principles of adult education.
- A belief that the programme should be based on a voluntary ethos by which all students who embarked on the programme did so by their own volition. A decision was made at an early stage that the equation between education/training and income generation should be broken. This was based on a belief that the most sustainable and cost effective way to deliver an education experience is through direct programme activity as opposed to providing training allowance incentives

- All programme rules and codes of conduct were devised by the group, for the group
- The participants were invited to form a social committee reflecting the importance of a social factor in adult education. To facilitate the growth of this dimension, a Facebook group was formed which facilitated informal discussions amongst participants

### **Triumphs and challenges**

In working with a group with such a variety of needs and expectations, a number of observations can be made which will be examined in greater detail. While the stated aim of the ABLE programme was to offer accredited certification to progress onto further education, the most valuable work took place in addressing more fundamental issues for the participants.

The greatest initial obstacle for the participants was in readjusting to the learning environment which, for many, involved unlearning past perceptions of what education meant to them before learning could take place. Many students harboured negative experiences of formal education (lack of relevance, disciplinary issues, difficulty with course material etc.) and an important stage was to examine what education meant to them and how it related to how they viewed themselves. This provided a rich source of learning where students had initiated a desire to learn, grow and in so doing opened up new opportunities to commit to the programme and to building a sense of common purpose amongst course participants. The delivery of the programme within local youth services was important in providing a welcoming and understanding space for the participants and ensured that they felt at ease in a place with which they could identify.

The transition to a full-time programme was a big challenge for the majority of the participants. Those who struggled most with attendance, also typically struggled most with their motivation in classes when they were actually present, and were quite difficult to engage. In addition to participating in the programme, priorities in participants' personal and social lives needed to be adjusted which required changing behaviours to respond to the challenges participating demanded.

A significant stage in the learning cycle occurs when participation must develop from attendance to producing work as attendance alone cannot solely bring a sense of achievement. As the initial enthusiasm waned, and attendance and engagement were affected, tutors needed to plan a number of activities as the composition of the



class would be uncertain in advance. This also required the tutors to be intuitive. Consequently, tutors had to be aware of the energy and the dynamic of the group to ensure the students engaged and participated in the activities which in many instances had been adapted to reflect the composition of the group.

Throughout the Young People and Society module, students were invited to examine the world around them through analysing the local, national and international environments and the most important issues which affect them as young people. The participants were enthusiastic in being able to give their opinions, which they felt they rarely had the opportunity to voice. It also led to rich discussions about issues of power, discrimination and beliefs about society and the status quo in the world around us. These had been learned inherited in many instances through family, friends and communities without questioning and an important task for the educator was to challenge and encourage students to be able stand up for their beliefs, irrespective of whether we as educators agree with them.

In charting the development of the group, the overwhelming preference was to work individually, despite many strong friendships being formed over the duration of the programme. Assignments were particularly challenging when work was required on a group based format as contributions varied due to attendance and interest in the task. The skills of negotiation, delegation, persuasion and leadership were required to maintain the effectiveness of the group and this presented many difficulties. This led to a variety of responses such as feeling overwhelmed and in some cases to the emergence of conflict in the group. This requires further consideration if the participants are to be successful in the workplace after the programme has ended.

In the period of initial outreach and profiling of potential participants, the expectation that there would be financial incentives for programme participation was evident. Such expectations can lead to problems in making choices guidance as by offering financial incentives, decisions based on financial betterment can transfer to potentially poor career decisions which are especially vital when returning learners are mapping out their educational and career goals. While some of the participants were eligible to apply for a Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and did have a financial incentive for in taking part, it was interesting to note though that although financial gain was attractive in incentivising students to take part, it could not maintain their interest throughout the course with no correlation between those completing and receipt of a BTEA payment.

A prevalent belief within the group, when attempting to foster critical thinking and social analysis, was the limited expectations they held coming from communities defined as disadvantaged. Through exploring their perceptions of society, there was a belief amongst the students that they were powerless in society and lacked a voice due to where they came from, their age and their lack of academic achievement, which resulted in a perceived lack of opportunities. This could manifest itself in apathy in how they interacted with tutors, other participants and in the material. Often, this attitude was accepted and rationalised by stating that there was no point in progressing and developing through education as there were limited to no opportunities existing, especially in the current economic environment.

These ideas have huge implications for each student's self-esteem, attitude and priorities, not only in their ability to succeed but also in preventing participants from returning to further education in the first place. What became apparent was that despite being encouraged in their pursuit of education and excellence, the self imposed constraints means they will have to struggle to break the mould and challenge their own definition of who they are.

In trying to summarise what motivated the students to participate on the programme can be encapsulated in one concept: self esteem. Many of the students had low levels of self esteem upon enrolment – they feel defined in education by what they have not done (i.e. early school leavers, not holding a Leaving Certificate) as opposed to the many talents they do possess. This is not surprising based on the student's history in the traditional education system and proves damaging as it affected their vision of who they could be and a lack of confidence despite possessing lots of potential and ability.

Through course work, one to one meetings, progress appraisals with the course coordinator and also through completing the course, many students learn to establish a stronger sense of self improvement and a ability to assert themselves in day to day situations and generally confident. It is critical to note that through engaging in education, tutors involved in the programme remarked on a distinct increase in confidence levels, assertiveness and general personal and interpersonal skills among students, many of whom had entered the programme with low levels of self-esteem linked to long-term unemployment. The importance of group outings in making connections with the students is essential to the success of any programme as it helps build relationships and fills in the detail about their lives and realities. It also gives them the opportunity to be themselves and at ease

and a noticeable boost in energy and confidence could be seen when they went back to the class after an outing.

The most striking culmination of students lacking belief in their own abilities and the perception of cultural constraints around them lies in a fear of success on the programme. For many students, the realisation that they can succeed and the evidence of that success as they build up their portfolios can be terrifying. If they continue their studies and achieve a qualification, they will have to change how they perceive themselves. They will have to adjust their personal identity to align with the new opportunities before them, and let go of the early school leaver label that they may have used to protect themselves from their own potential.

The fear that the young people from the ABLE programme face, and many cannot overcome, is simply fear of success. Overcoming this fear and embarking on a new future can be the most difficult piece of work that ABLE students do. This may in part lie in the fact that they are hesitant to complete the most important piece of work as it is not tangible or classroom based, but individual and personal. This transformation is not recorded in end of programme reports or FETAC certification but instead in the renewed sense of opportunity in the eyes of the students who finish the course and are enabled to shape their futures. It is the most rewarding piece of work for you can see done as an educator: a student who no longer believes what is not possible but instead knows what they are capable of themselves – true success. The foremost goal must lie in inspiring the young person to value education and the avenues that this may bring them in their learning and in future career choices.

### **Conclusion**

Sixty-one young people across both the Finglas and Cabra locations participated on the ABLE programme in the 2010/2011 academic year. Of the 61 who started the programme, 36 students completed the programme with 25 students submitting FETAC portfolios. Of those who submitted work, 14 successfully achieved a full FETAC Level 4 General Vocational Studies Award. 42 males and 19 females took part in the programme. All students who participated on the course had some level of success even if not earning full qualifications. Many students who did not complete the programme struggled with attendance or personal issues that prevented them from making the necessary commitment to the programme.

The ABLE 18-21 programme won the National Projects in Progress STAR Award at the AONTAS launch of the 2011 Adult Learner's Festival. The programme won the award amongst strong competition from 86 nominated entries received nationwide. The purpose of the STAR Awards Ceremony is about Showcasing Teamwork and Awarding Recognition and acknowledging the work undertaken by adult learning projects throughout the country and celebrating the positive contribution that these projects make to our society, our economy and our local communities.

The STAR Awards Nominated projects were requested to demonstrate the following criteria:

- **A high level of teamwork and partnership amongst participant groups**
- **A learner centred approach to education provision**
- **Adult education practice and methodologies**

Not only did winning the award serve to raise the profile of ABLE for potential students but crucially gave recognition to the achievements of the participants who took part, giving them pride in their accomplishments.

# An inclusive learning initiative at NUI Maynooth: The search for a model of best practice for integrating students with intellectual disability

MARY NOONAN, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, MAYNOOTH

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## **Abstract**

*While students with disabilities have been accepted into universities for many years, the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities is a relatively new concept here in Ireland. This article outlines the search by NUI Maynooth, for a model on which to base an inclusive learning initiative for students with intellectual disabilities. The initiative, currently being piloted, came about as a result of collaboration between NUI Maynooth and other agencies dealing with people with intellectual disabilities.*

## **Introduction**

The concept of higher-level education for students with intellectual disabilities first came to my awareness when as a mature student I participated in the Student Programme for Undergraduate Research (SPUR Project), at NUI Maynooth in Summer 2010. Part of my brief was to conduct research into national and international models of best practice for students with intellectual disabilities in higher-level institutions, and this marked the beginning of my journey into a complex and little researched area in the field of education.

The early days of my research were marked by confusion and uncertainty as I struggled to understand the subject matter, and having completed six weeks of research, I was more confused than when I started. Following on from this I completed a minor dissertation (in part-fulfilment of the requirements of the BA Degree in Community Education) entitled 'Exploring international and national models of best practice for students with intellectual disabilities in higher level education institutions, with a view to finding a model for NUI Maynooth'.

As a novice researcher and a newcomer to the field of intellectual disability I found the complexity of the subject matter, particularly in relation to legislation

and human rights issues, overwhelming at times. My efforts to understand were further thwarted by the lack of a single working definition of intellectual disability, but I was heartened to note that experts in the field (Luckasson & Reeve, 2001; Hughson, Uditsky & Moody, 2004-2005; Grigal & Hart, 2010) all acknowledged that defining intellectual disability is a complex and challenging issue. The terms 'learning disability' and 'intellectual disability' were used interchangeably in the literature, yet appeared to have two different meanings. This was further compounded by terms such as significant disability, specific learning disability and developmental disability, which likewise meant different things depending on the nationality of the author. It also emerged that while the term 'intellectual disability' is commonly used among professionals and other service providers, "terms such as mental retardation or intellectual handicap are more familiar to many people" (Bray: 2003:1). Having struggled to find a definition that was not complicated by medical or legislative jargon, I opted for a functional, rather than a legal definition which, according to Grigal & Hart (2003:10) may be more useful in certain circumstances. In order to avoid ambiguity, and to save readers from the same confusion I experienced, the term 'intellectual disability' will be used throughout this article and will be understood to mean the following.

Students with significant learning, cognitive, and other conditions (e.g. mental retardation), whose disability impacts their ability to access course content without a strong system of educational supports and services. These are not students who would access the postsecondary education system in a typical manner; rather they require significant planning and collaboration to provide them with access. (Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez & Will, 2006:45:1)

### **The search for a model**

My search for a model that would embrace the fully inclusive ideals of NUI Maynooth (NUIM Strategic Plan 2006-2011: Goal 5), which demanded a model that would embrace students with intellectual disabilities into all aspects of university life, and accept them as part of the general college population, took me on a journey that began with an extensive literature review. As mentioned earlier, the concept of higher-level education for students with intellectual disabilities is relatively new internationally, and practically cutting edge here in Ireland, and this was reflected in the literature. Most of the literature related to studies conducted in the United States and Canada, and involved a small cohort of researchers and expert practitioners. The literature relating to the Irish context was understandably sparse, as there was only one full-time initiative in operation at the time.

### **Models of inclusive education**

A number of models of inclusive education emerged from the literature, but the three models as identified by Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez & Will (2006), outlined below, are the most widely used internationally.

1. Substantially Separate Model
2. Mixed Program/Mixed Hybrid Model
3. Inclusive Individual Support Model

#### **The substantially separate model**

- Programmes are often staffed by special education teachers and are generally housed separately within the college.
- Students only take part in classes with other students with disabilities and “typically don’t enjoy on-going sustained interaction with the general student body” (Hart, McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich & Parker, 2004).

Bearing in mind the inclusion mandates of current legislation, and also the ethos of full inclusion of NUI Maynooth, a programme based on this model was deemed inappropriate and therefore was not given further consideration.

#### **Mixed program/mixed hybrid model**

- Programmes normally have a separate programme base on campus.
- While students with intellectual disabilities may take part in regular college courses with the general student body, they mainly follow a separate curriculum with other intellectually disabled students.
- Students may participate in social activities with their non-intellectually disabled peers.
- “The main focus of this model is on “functional life skills and employment objectives” (Grigal & Hart, 2010).

The Mixed Programme/Mixed Hybrid Model is undeniably inclusive, in so far as it offers places to students with intellectual disabilities, and allows access to a limited number of regular college courses. However, because the intellectually disabled students mainly follow a separate curriculum with other intellectually

disabled students, and the fact that there is a separate base on campus for ‘programme’ participants effectively isolates these students from the general college population. This calls to question whether the Mixed Hybrid Model truly aspires to be inclusive or is simply paying lip service to legislative requirements and pressure from national and international disability bodies.

### **Inclusive individual support model**

- Students with intellectual disabilities are invited to participate in courses for audit or credit in regular college courses, certificate programmes, and or degree programmes along with the general student population.
- The intellectually disabled students “are not part of a specially designed programme for students with disabilities, but individuals who avail themselves of existing supports available through the college...and other relevant support agencies” (Weir, 2004:67). There is no program base on campus.
- Services are driven by the student’s vision and career goals, and students receive individualised support throughout the course of their studies.
- No limitations are imposed on the student by a ‘programme’ and students therefore have access to a whole range of college courses and social activities, in keeping with the fully inclusive ideals of the model.

The Inclusive Individual Support Model encapsulates everything that is important to NUI Maynooth in terms of diversity and inclusion, and therefore was considered the most appropriate model on which to base a programme. This model has been used with great success for a number of years in the state of Alberta, Canada, and it is hoped that NUI Maynooth can achieve the same level of success with the implementation of the Inclusive Learning Initiative currently being piloted.

### **The concept of inclusive education**

Before considering the implications of admitting students with intellectual disabilities, to NUI Maynooth and other higher-level education institutions, it is pertinent at this point to briefly review the concept of inclusive education and the human rights issues underpinning it. It is generally accepted that the concept of inclusive education emerged at the World Conference on Special Needs Education Access and Equality, known as the Salamanca Statement 1994. A framework for action on special needs education was agreed at the conference, which stated,



Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. Within the field of education this is reflected in the development of strategies that seek to bring about a genuine equalisation of opportunity. (Salamanca, 1994:11)

The concept was restated at the World Education Forum, Dakar 2000 (UNESCO, 2000), and The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). State parties were called on “to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels.” (United Nations, 2006:Article 24 (1). The European Association of Service Providers for persons with disabilities (EASPD), reinforced the concept in its Manifesto on Inclusive Education (2009), stating clearly that it is the responsibility of all to ensure that every adult and child has the same right to high quality and appropriate education as everybody else (EASPD, 2009).

### **Beyond the concept**

While the concept of inclusive education has been affirmed by all of the above, it is important not to think of it as just a concept. In order to understand its meaning in real terms, we must consider its implications for universities and other higher-level education institutions that aspire to full inclusion of disadvantaged groups. It is also important to differentiate between the ‘partial inclusion’ approach of the Substantially Separate and Mixed Hybrid Models, and the fully inclusive aspirations of the Inclusive Individual Support Model. Before exploring the implications for universities offering such an initiative, I would like to share my own misgivings, as to how students with an intellectual disability could be successfully integrated into a university environment.

Apart from the implications for faculty and also the general student population, I wondered how a student with an intellectual disability would cope with the demands of a university schedule and all it entails. Others with whom I discussed my research had similar reservations. Some questioned whether the academic standing of the university would be adversely affected by admitting intellectually disabled students, while others suggested that a university was simply not a suitable environment for a person with an intellectual disability. These were some of the issues addressed in my dissertation, and as my research progressed and I learned more about the practical application of the Inclusive Individual Support Model, my misgivings were replaced by an understanding of the difference between token inclusion and the true meaning of diversity and integration. I also came to recognise that the benefits of an initiative like

the Inclusive Learning Initiative offered by NUI Maynooth, extend beyond the intellectually disabled students to faculty, regular college students, and everybody else that becomes involved in such an initiative.

### **Implications of admitting students with intellectual disabilities to a higher education institution**

One of the implications of an initiative such as the Inclusive Learning Initiative being piloted by NUI Maynooth is that it contradicts traditional perceptions as to who belongs in a university. By welcoming students with all levels of intellectual disability into the regular college community, outdated notions are severely challenged. For those concerned that the academic standing of the university may suffer as a result of admitting intellectually disabled students, Adams & Browne, (2006:4) point out “it is not about the dilution of academic standards but a recognition of difference, and the creation of a rigorous framework that reflects that position”. A feature of the Inclusive Individual Support Model is that students are not expected to reach degree or even certificate standard. Instead, their work is individually assessed, and accredited according to their own level of achievement. Many of the successful initiatives worldwide based on this model give priority to increasing social skills, and place little emphasis on accreditation, preferring to present students with portfolios of completed work and certificates of achievement. It should be noted however that in some instances intellectually disabled students have

It would be unwise to focus only on the positive implications for universities of offering places to students with intellectual disabilities, because as with all innovative projects, a number of challenges present themselves for faculty, administration and regular college students. A high level of support is needed in the planning stages for each individual student, which inevitably places a strain on resources. However, the small numbers catered for within the Inclusive Individual Support Model means the level of strain is manageable and existing support structures are not unduly stretched. Regular college students are called on to volunteer as mentors to their intellectually disabled peers, but inherent in this challenge lies an opportunity to grow as caring and accepting individuals. Faculty likewise, are called upon to reach out to those who learn differently than others, and to “rethink their pedagogy and remodel their delivery methods” (Smith, 2003:15). Within this challenge also, lies an opportunity for reflection and evaluation.

## Conclusion

Having embarked on a journey of exploration into an unknown and under-researched area of adult education, I emerged, with a greater understanding of the intellectually disabled, and their capabilities. The readings for my literature review and the interviews I conducted throughout the course of my research introduced me to a level of compassion and acceptance that most of us can only aspire to.

The past decade has afforded us an immense opportunity here in Ireland to embrace diversity in terms of religion and ethnicity, and we pride ourselves on being an inclusive and culturally diverse nation. This is reflected in our education system, from preschool right through to higher level. However, in order to grow as a nation that truly embraces those who are different, it is imperative that we extend our understanding of diversity beyond these narrow confines. Ireland has a long history of institutionalising its' intellectually disabled citizens, and it is only in recent decades that measures have been taken to integrate intellectually disabled adults into the wider community. The onus is now on every organisation and institution to further advance these measures by providing equitable access and equal opportunities to one of the most marginalized groups in our society, those with intellectual disabilities. NUI Maynooth, by means of the Inclusive Learning Initiative, has demonstrated its' commitment to improving integration approaches, and it is hoped that this will act as a catalyst for other universities and higher-education institutions wishing to do likewise.

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# An “Other” perspective: Emancipation in alterity?

MAJELLA BREEN, BRAY TRAVELLERS CDG

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## Introduction

The local newspaper usually publishes a photo of the Traveller women who have attended our back to education and training programme.<sup>1</sup> On each occasion there are a number of women who do not wish to be included in the photo, for very plausible reasons. For example, in a previous year one of the participants progressed on to a Community Employment scheme. She specifically requested that her new colleagues would not be informed that she was a member of the Traveller community. When I asked her why, she said that she was afraid that she would be treated differently in a negative way.

It is not surprising that individual Travellers fear negative treatment. This article will look at the bases of those fears, and explore where the negativity comes from. I will outline the stereotyping that is perpetuated in the media in general, and how education has a central role in challenging these myths and stereotypes. My positioning to discuss this issue is located in my own experience as ‘The Other’ (de Beauvoir, 1949). In the article, I will explore the concept of otherness or alterity and discuss the potentiality of the concept in challenging stereotypical norms and the ways in which this positioning provides me with a singular vantage point. I will look at examples of educational approaches, from our own programme underpinned by adult education principles derived from Freire (1972) and Noddings, (1984) and the UL initiative, on the integrated framework. I will consider the possibilities of otherness, and finally, on my own experience of alterity, which has enabled me to reflect on why I do what I do and how the notion of embracing otherness has been a personal motivation.

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1 The ‘Beoirs’ back to education and training programme was run by Bray Travellers Community Development Group and sponsored by FAS, County Wicklow VEC and the Bray Area Partnership and Pobal.

## Otherness

The old adage “no news is good news” is particularly true of the portrayal of Travellers in the media in general. As Hayes (2006) points out they are portrayed as ‘Other’, different from the norm, leading to their subaltern status in Irish society. In her ground-breaking work *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir outlines how a patriarchal and male dominated society defines women as ‘Other’ i.e. other than the male perceived as the norm.

The quality of otherness is relevant to the status of Travellers. For example, when a member of the Traveller community becomes seriously ill, their extended community rallies round. This has been known to cause alarm among health professionals when a large number of Travellers flood a waiting room in a hospital. That a group of individuals who are trying to be supportive can be perceived as a threat can be explained in the context of “othering”.

In his book *Irish Travellers: Representations and Realities* (2006, p.113), Michael Hayes examines the social construction of the Irish Traveller as “Other”:

*A visitor to Ireland today who chanced to pick up a newspaper would see little in the non-Traveller’s depiction of Travellers that would differ from the common and historical portrayals of the Traveller community as “Other”. At its simplest and worst, present-day perceptions of Travellers continue to build on a collection of primarily negative constructs – e.g. disorder, nomadism, laziness, dishonesty, backwardness, dependency, etc.*

It is not uncommon for those who have been identified as “Other” e.g. women, Travellers, people with disabilities, gay people and all marginalised people to suffer from internalised oppression. As Mason (1990, p.27) puts it:

*“Internalized oppression is not the cause of our mistreatment, it is the result of our mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external oppression that forms the social climate in which we exist.*

*Once oppression has been internalized, little force is needed to keep us submissive. We harbour inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives”*

Internalised oppression is based on real fear. As I said in the introduction, some of our participants hide their identities outside of the programme environment

because of the fear that negative perceptions in the world of work will turn into those very weapons of re-injury and negative self-image. Part of the work of education is to nurture confidence and pride among Travellers, and to facilitate them to challenge negative media constructions. The next section will discuss the role of the media in creating those negative constructions.

### **The role of the media in social construction**

The media “re-present” images and stories back to society and play an active part in constructing meaning in the world in which we live. Creedon (1989, p.18) suggests that not only do the media contribute to the construction of reality but also to a dominant consensus view of what reality is:

*Mass communications theorists who take a cultural approach to communication also argue that reality is nothing more than-and nothing less than-a “collective hunch”. They suggest that when countless personal and interpersonal interpretations are communicated via mass channels meaning tends to become homogenised and consensus values prevail.*

Touchman argues that even a non-fictional genre such as news is not just an objective reporting of the facts but is a construction of reality. News is ‘...a depletable consumer product that must be made fresh daily’ (1978, p. 149). Thus, the constant renewal of the ‘re-presentation’ reinforces the homogenised consensus around stereotypes, almost without question. Further, Habermas defines the public sphere as a realm of social life in which public opinion is formed. Of the role of the media Habermas says: ‘today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere’ (1984, p.49). He is highly critical of what he calls the ‘refudalization’ of the public sphere, whereby public opinion is manipulated by the mass media. This is particularly relevant to the portrayal of Travellers, where the norm creates the otherness where Travellers are concerned. For example, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* portrays some Travellers in a voyeuristic, mocking manner, on Channel 4. This is buttressed further by new media, e.g. ‘tackyweddings.com’ that is devoted to sneering at the kinds of wedding dresses that Travellers wear at their marriage ceremonies. And there are more explicitly racist sites. These are the fundamental issues that education, and in particular, adult education, needs to address, which I will discuss in the next section.

### **Challenging the myths through education**

Until recent times Travellers themselves have had very little say in how they have been portrayed. Hayes (2006) has tracked their depiction in the early Irish state

as a regressive group, out of kilter with the emerging modern nation. Further, they have been considered as a counter-cultural group: ‘a society within a society’ (O’Aodha, 2007, p.9). Thus, with this negative stereotyping, it is not surprising to find people wanting to hide who they really are as oppression becomes internalised. An aspect of hiding, or disguising the self, is interesting in the context of Cant, Gammon (or Shelta as it is referred to in academic circles) the Traveller language. It is obvious that many of the words are an inverted form of Irish. St John O’Donnabhain (2007, pp. 97-8) explores the aspect of Cant as a secret language and a means of protection against the dominant society:

*...the repeated testimony of Travellers such as Pecker Dunne, that Shelta functions to help keep Travellers’ lives private and for secrecy, can leave us in very little doubt that disguising is (and has been for some time) a very important part of Shelta use in the course of daily life.*

However, he then goes on to examine how Cant can function as a binding agent, creating a sense of belonging to a specific group amongst those who speak it.

This resonates with my experience in adult education. For example, near the beginning of our previous programme, I was approached by a couple of younger participants who were bemoaning their loss of knowledge of Cant. I recall the exact words of one young woman “We don’t know our own language”. Furthermore, they requested if there was any way that we could teach it to them. With the approval of the whole group, in consultation with Dr. Michael O’ hAodha of the University of Limerick (I will discuss this connection later in the article) and with the unstinting help of an enthusiastic tutor we devised a course outline in Cant. Following negotiations with the C.E.F. of County Wicklow VEC and FETAC it was agreed that an exploration of the language could be included in the *Living in a Diverse Society* module. That is, the private and binding language was re-introduced through the basic principle of adult and community education, starting with participants’ own starting point (Freire, 1972), enabling learners to identify their needs, and meeting those needs through a learning programme. This is the fundamental tenet in challenging the norms that create otherness. This underpinned another innovative programme around creating narrative.

In December 2008, Bray Travellers Community Development Group published ‘Beoirs’ Stories, a collection of narratives written and recorded by the women on the training programme. ‘Beoirs’ is the Cant word for women, and the booklet was



a collection of factual and fictional stories documenting some of the heritage and traditions unique to Traveller women culture. Heneghan discusses the relevance of publications relating to Traveller culture, to Travellers who are in education:

*To the Traveller community, these books, particularly the two biographies, are recognised as 'one of our own' and it is to be hoped that all such publications will feature in schools in the years to come to enhance a greater understanding of Traveller culture and history (2007, p.66).*

With the assistance of talented and caring tutors, the Beoirs programme attempted to address some of the needs of Traveller women, outlined above, by running a module in *Personal Development* and providing an opportunity for participants to explore their own culture through, for example, the *Living in a Diverse Society* module. Again, the role of education is central to building the capacity of the participants to deepen their own knowledge through their own story or narrative (Freire, 1972) in addition to providing resources for their wider community.

However, the ability to stay focused on the positive requires confidence. In my experience, once again because of internalised oppression Travellers sometimes suffer from their own negative thinking. *Cognitive distortion* and strategies to overcome it as outlined by Ellis (1962) have some relevance in this regard.

*The task of the helper who seeks to change the beliefs and appraisals of the person in need is to modify the thinking and belief system of the person. This is done by disputing the beliefs... (Murgatroyd, 1985, p.78)*

Noddings' (1984) ethics of caring underpin the approach that we take in our programme. She argues that moral decisions, in addition to logic and values should also include reciprocity and relationships with others. Reciprocity includes a willingness on behalf of tutors/teachers to learn about another culture and language. Training needs to be based on a model of education that views the participants as adults with knowledge, skills and life experience. Additionally, tutors need to acknowledge the expertise of the participants in the subject area of their own identity and culture and act as facilitators to build on and strengthen existing capacity. As educators, we take on a role similar to Murgatroyd's helper. We encourage the participants to develop a knowledge of and pride in their own culture and an understanding of their sense of alienation and consequently we can strive to counteract their feelings of negativity and shame.

## Making connections

Our own learning and development was also relevant in this context. In 2009 we learned that there was a specific seminar room and collection Library in U.L. devoted to Traveller culture. A number of our participants and a couple of tutors travelled to Limerick to see it and to meet Dr. Micheal O hAodha and John Heneghan, Co-ordinator of the Traveller access programme. John Heneghan was so struck by the potential for leadership within this group that he later contacted me. At a subsequent meeting, he outlined the framework model for Traveller inclusion that he has developed (ref: *Fig. 1*) and we discussed possible modes of dialogue and interaction as relating to our group.

**Figure 1: Limerick County Traveller Interagency Framework**

GOAL's	Accommodation	Health	Education	Employment	
Rapport Building					<b>Processes</b>  • Homework clubs • Credit-earning: Woodwork Metalwork • Tutoring • Mentoring • Subcommittees • Development • Leadership training
Empathy					
Collaboration					
<i>Interagencies</i>					
B'HRA	DES	DSF	FÁS		
Garda	HSE	LCC	Lim Yth		
UL	VEC	WLR			
Sustainability and Continuity					
Monitoring					

*Source: John Heneghan, University of Limerick, April 2010, adapted.*

As Heneghan (2007, p.68) puts it:

*...it has been the growth in the number of participants, partners and advisors from the Traveller community itself that really strengthens the project.*

In simple enough terms, this 'Limerick County Traveller InterAgency Framework' created by John Heneghan at the University of Limerick, is based on a number of principles. First is that dialogue, mutual dialogue, is absolutely essential – conversations and discussions over time with local Travellers, and all institutions involved in Traveller affairs, are a prerequisite to starting off real 'action' in the area of educational access; education, in turn, links to issues related to accommodation, health, and meaningful work/business/employment. Most central here is dialogue with Travellers themselves, creating some rapport which over time builds mutual trust, without which one is simply wasting one's time; without empathy and trust, substantive communicative action on the key pillars of the framework cannot emerge, nor will they be sustained over time. It addresses the cultural barrier of Travellers perceived as a 'society within a society' as referred to above.

In the meantime, some of those participants have moved on and with Traveller community development workers have been trained as Diversity Trainers in Traveller Culture. This action is supported by the County Wicklow Traveller Interagency and aims to provide training to Travellers enabling them to, in turn, provide awareness training about their own culture and traditions. It also aims to promote an understanding of Traveller culture among school goers and the wider community. The University of Limerick generously provided transport and tuition in leadership skills to those involved. Once again, a talented and enthusiastic tutor greatly assisted in the process of encouraging and supporting the Travellers involved in speaking about their own culture with pride.

### **Reflections**

I have become a fan of YouTube. I rarely watch the items with the most hits but I look up the music videos of favourite artists and sometimes I come across speakers with interesting ideas. One such idea is from a man called Simon Sinek (2010) who argues convincingly that inspiration is derived from why we do things rather than what we do. Reflecting on why I do what I do has caused me to examine my views at a deeper level and to consider the importance of why I felt inspired to work with Travellers.

In the now famous *Stanford Commencement Address* (2005) of the late Steve Jobs, he exhorts his audience to be passionate about what they do. I believe that when we hide even a part of ourselves, there is a resulting guardedness that restricts spontaneity and limits our ability to be truly passionate. Barthes discusses passion and hiding:

*To hide a passion totally (or even to hide, more simply, its excess) is inconceivable: not because the human subject is too weak, but because passion is in essence made to be seen: the hiding must be seen: I want you to know that I am hiding something from you, that is the active paradox I must resolve: at one and the same time it must be known and not known: I want you to know that I don't want to show my feelings: that is the message I address to the other. (1977, p. 42)*

Through personal experience, I have become passionate about the celebration of otherness but I am acutely aware of the negativity and even shame that many Travellers have to overcome in order to be able to celebrate their difference.

### **Two examples of the positivity of having 'Other' perspectives**

Since I was a child I have had an abiding interest in astronomy. I watched a programme, part of a series called *Beautiful Minds* on BBC Four, transmitted on 12 April 2010, which was about the Irish astrophysicist Jocelyn Bell Burnell. In December 1967 as a postgraduate student she discovered Pulsar stars, though it was some time before the news filtered out partly due to the fear of ridicule (in the form of little green men) on behalf her male academic supervisors. Ironically, and reflecting the misogyny of the times, it was they and not she who were awarded the Nobel Prize for the discovery in 1974.

In the programme, when questioned closely about why she specifically had made this discovery, Jocelyn Bell Burnell made a couple of points that I found intriguing. One was that as a student she did not have a reputation to lose and therefore was not constrained by that fear. What really struck me, however, was when she said that as a woman she felt that she had brought a different way of looking at things to the proceedings. Is it just possible that not 'being an absolute human type' (de Beauvoir, 1949) was an advantage?

The second example of alterity is the Ron Davis' story. The interviewer asked him why he had named his book *the Gift of Dyslexia* (2010). Born with a form of autism he explained how, in middle age he realised that the talents that allowed him to be creative and view things from different perspectives were what caused

his disorientation regarding the written word. He overcame his dyslexia by formulating mental pictures of words. He co-founded the Reading Research Council in 1982 and helped to develop methods that are now of assistance to people suffering from Dyslexia worldwide. Davis and Braun explain the phenomenon:

*The talents which create the vulnerability for confusing symbolic information are assets in other ways. For example, individuals who “see” the dimensional attributes in our world understand intuitively how things work...Tasks which require the ability to visualise something in a creative or different way are often simple for individuals with these talents (2010, p.xii).*

### **Conclusion**

Involvement with the Traveller community has been a huge learning experience for me. Furthermore, it has given me the opportunity to reflect on how my practice sits on a theoretical framework and reflects my beliefs. Having initially struggled with my own alterity as a lesbian, I have been fortunate to realise for a long time that being different can give one another perspective. For example, concepts such as *dominant discourse* were easy for me to grasp as I grew up in a world where the heterosexual voice was virtually all pervasive. Involvement with gay politics taught me that minorities need to raise their own voices and can offer equally valid perspectives. The ability to look at things another way can be an enormous resource and I believe that it is only when we embrace our difference that we can fully exploit the potential that lies within it. If I am to start with why, then this is why and I believe this passionately.

In the course of running some parenting skills classes, a tutor came to me to complain that a sister of one of the participants was interfering in the relationship between a mother and child. I tried to explain to her that extended family bonds are much stronger in Traveller society. While the tutor in question perceived this as a negative influence, it is possible to look at this from another angle. Many Traveller mothers derive a great deal of support from their sisters, mothers and female relations in general in terms of childminding, advice and exchange of information. This is not at the expense of children as the extended Traveller family appears to be very child-centred.

If we focus on the positive we can see that Travellers demonstrate a strong sense of community and extended family bonds when they rally around a sick relative. In this way they demonstrate their ‘ethics of caring’. If we can begin to

appreciate what Travellers have to offer us through their rich cultural diversity then perhaps we can begin to give them the support and encouragement necessary for them to share their unique perspectives. If we can encourage them to focus on the positive aspects of their culture, perhaps we can help them to counteract the negative ways in which they are perceived. As one of the participants on the Beoirs training programme put it, *Education should be based on respect*.

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# SECTION THREE

*Book Reviews*

# Global Perspectives on Higher Education and Lifelong Learners

EDITED BY MARIA SLOWEY & HANS G. SCHUETZE (2012)

ROUTLEDGE ISBN 978-0-415-67507-9

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With the tumult of the first years of the twenty-first century, from prosperity to banking crisis, it is easy to lose sight of the institutions, besides the economy, which form our society. Further, the focus on money shifts the construction of values from society and citizenship to consumption, growth and expenditure. This book re-directs the focus to the pivotal social institution that shapes the lives of every member of society, namely, education, without which the social good could not be achieved. Maria Slowey and Hans Schuetze revisit their earlier publication of 2000, to explore the changes if any, to the social contract towards equality through education. This publication provides an invaluable resource that enables us to contextualise the issues with the comparative global perspectives. In particular, it integrates lifelong learning with higher education, an undertaking crucial for adult educators with our interest in post-compulsory education along the lifespan, access and equality.

This integration enables an analysis of the role of higher education in society. It unpacks the social project of the formation and reproduction of the next generation. The turbulence arising from the encroachment of neo-liberalism into social life obscures this function, transposing it into a vocational training goal for the so-called knowledge economy.

The editors, however, are taking an interrogative approach to the issues and trends in higher education and lifelong learning, particularly the marketisation and privatisation that has blurred the borderlines between social good and private profit. Thus, the collection engages with these issues with the comparative accounts from across the globe. Higher education is framed as the key route to social and cultural capital for the social good and democracy, and participation in lifelong learning, in this volume, focuses on one particular aspect,



that of higher education for people who have not progressed directly through the traditional routes, including mature students, and part-time and distance students. Lifelong learning, in spite of the focus on human capital, is used as a key indicator of access for adult students, but also indicative of access by other marginal or minority groups. This dual frame enables the examination of the distribution of benefits of education as a social institution over the population, and this provides a structure to show the 'one step forward, two steps back' (p. 282) that characterises the field globally.

The book is organised along regional lines, Europe, North America, Pacific, together with perspectives from two 'BRICS' countries, South Africa and Brazil with the back-up of substantial data on diverse aspects of the backdrop from enrolment trends to the status of higher education in broader landscape in life-long learning. These figures and tables make fascinating reading on their own, and convey the complexity of the topic in the overall context. They provide a tip-of-the-fingers presentation of national and comparative trends. For example, Figure 6.1 of the Swedish education system shows the flow between the different stages of education, and, with our Irish lens, we can see how our system is piecemeal in comparison. Indeed a similar exercise for Ireland would have to be depicted with ghost categories, namely, early childhood education and adult education. That is, education in Ireland is seen as the holy trinity of primary, second-level and tertiary, and the Irish DES does not truly recognise anything else. The Department would do well to take a look at Figure 16.1, which maps higher education in the broader landscape of lifelong learning (p. 287).

The viewpoints are presented from the inside, by a range of writers with various roles and backgrounds in higher and adult education. These contributors are mainly professors, researchers and lecturers of adult education in higher education, such as Hans Schuetze, the co-editor, whose academic career has taken him from Europe to Canada. Maria Slowey, with her own academic journey from Maynooth to DCU, via the UK, is ideally poised to provide an overview of the situation in Ireland. Her focus on the democratising of learning through innovative and creative practice, primarily developed in adult and community education, brings the actual numbers and groups concerned into the limelight. These numbers show that little substantial progress is discerned in relation to access to higher education by marginal students. For example, of new entrants to higher education, less than 5% of people were over the age of 30 in 2009. That is, in spite of the innovative and pioneering work at community education levels, commitment to equality and access, nationally, and the brief, but signifi-

cant wealth of the Celtic tiger years, sadly, higher education is characterised by inequality rather than fairness. This picture is replicated in many instances, and the editors conclude that the inequalities are stark. In developed countries, such as Sweden and Japan, equality outcomes are on surer ground, but otherwise, the inequalities are not just in terms of national trends, but also, worryingly, about a north-south divide.

This picture unfolds through the chapters. Chapter one is an introduction to the text, and it unpacks the idea that lifelong learning is an organising principle in the international organisations such as the EU, OECD, and UNESCO, for a potentially new approach to teaching and learning. They review the global developments, which have particular relevance for lifelong learning; they outline their methodology and themes, to be examined in the individual country case studies presented in the book; they examine the patterns which emerge from the case studies, and finally, they draw the themes together. Thus the first chapter provides a significant key to the text.

The regional categories are not equally divided, and Europe is the biggest, with six countries represented, from Sweden in the north and Portugal in the south, and Ireland, of course, which makes the book all the more interesting for Irish readers. The North America section illuminates the three huge territories, the USA, Canada and Mexico, while Australia, Japan and New Zealand represent the Pacific. The choice of these countries are particularly telling for the Irish reader again, as New Zealand is similar to Ireland in terms of population, development and climate, but mostly, due to the proximity to the bigger country that overshadows it and obscures their differences. Finally, the global South is represented by South Africa and Brazil, vital inclusions in order to triangulate the explorations from the global North. These case studies are both heartening in terms of the commitment of the writers in their roles as public intellectuals, to justice and equality, but also disheartening, in terms of the external crises that drain all that hope away, for want of forethought, a sense of responsibility, an obligation to all citizens, and, most sickeningly of all, the waste of money into superficial and trivial constructions of the public good.

The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Education in 1997 stated that lifelong learning is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society. It is essential in promoting democracy, justice, and scientific and technological development. Crucially, it is essential for building a world in which violent conflict and war is replaced by dialogue and the culture

of peace (p. 105). The chapter on Sweden asserts that it was easy to implement this vision, due to the tradition of non-formal adult education. However, globally, and perhaps even in the Nordic models, lifelong learning has been affected by the neo-liberal contagion, due in part to the absence of a truly resilient emancipatory philosophy, which, while it was originally perceived as a means of de-schooling society, promoting social justice and fairness, unfortunately, is now constructed in neo-liberal social policy as a means of the continuing invigilation of workers and educators, and providing skills for the labour market.

Nevertheless, Slowey and Schuetze end on an optimistic note. Their analyses leads them to believe that finding ways of meeting the needs of lifelong learning is far from being a problem to be addressed in elaborate programmes of integration and inclusion in higher education institutions, rather it is more likely to be a *solution*, relying as it does on the rich work and life experience and motivations of lifelong learners.

This book is essential reading for adult educators, for policy makers and for higher education institutions. The comparisons are telling, in a fundamental way. Experiential learning is essential in knowledge creation in lifelong learning. The next stage of wisdom is to learn from others' experience.

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# Contemporary Issues in Lifelong Learning

VICKY DUCKWORTH & JONATHAN TUMMONS (2010)

OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS ISBN 10: 0-33-524112-3

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This 120-page book has been written in response to the changing landscape of the lifelong learning sector. Currently, the government is consulting about initial teacher training and qualifications in the English Further Education (FE) system, which is delivering apprenticeships, academic courses and skills training in FE colleges, workplaces and adult education. Therefore, with the regulation of the profession in its current state of flux, this book provides a helpful and critical analysis of contemporary issues and debates. Over recent years successive governments have inexorably narrowed the lifelong learning agenda towards job readiness and economic productivity with the result that this has muted the role learning plays in basic human enrichment. It has also led to less attention to other fundamental educational issues, such the impact of research, the rich social mix of current adult learners and the changing role of tutors.

Duckworth and Tummons seek to address this imbalance although they also examine the wider significance of the employability agenda and shifts in the curriculum. Both authors are seasoned practitioners, with Duckworth's research interests including practitioner and collaborative research methods, participatory action research and linking research and practice, while Tummons' specialism is in exploring assessment as social accomplishment, using a range of models. Both are committed to egalitarian approaches to teaching and learning and this comes across, although in a short book, one only has a snapshot of the themes. However, there are useful tips in the eight chapters, each of which stands alone, and could be a springboard for further study.

The chapters are enhanced by the exposition of clear objectives and themes at the beginning, and throughout there is a generous peppering of case studies, tasks and suggestions to encourage critical appraisal of ideas. Thus, each chap-

ter attempts to be concrete and practical and, as the authors state, the issues are every bit as "immediate and important to the work of a teacher or trainer as are discussions about assessment validity, or learning theories, or motivation". These aspects, of course, tend to be the mainstay of teacher training with, for example, Malcolm Knowles andragogy model and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, arguably given excessive coverage in courses, despite more nuanced ways of thinking now about the learning process as a social and cultural activity rather than a human pursuit rooted in individual enterprise.

In Chapter 1, the authors examine models of adult educators' professionalism, where most people tend to have honed their specialism through another job or trade. They explore the differences between full teacher and associate teacher roles and current Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status or Associate Teacher Learning and Skills (ATLS) status. These lead directly to brief discussion of contrasting models of reflective practitioners, drawing on Kolb's (1984) long-standing model of reflection and Gibbs' (2007) more recent reflective cycle. (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own regulations, but the issue of reflective practice is a common theme for all teachers.)

Chapter 2 tackles widening participation, issues of empowerment and egalitarian approaches to teaching and learning. In a workplace with few 'jobs for life', adults are coming into education where institutional, pedagogical or practical barriers may seem overwhelming due to structural inequalities – namely, being poor, unemployed, unqualified, and sometimes not in great health.

Policy and practice are the preoccupation in Chapter 3 and how to apply relevant statutory requirements. It must be remembered that the regulations discussed are specific to England, and also, in this fast-moving sector, some of the bodies mentioned have changed their names since this book was published – for example, LLUK (Lifelong Learning UK) transferred in 2011 to the LSIS (Learning and Skills Improvement Service). The current state of play is best checked out on the Institute of Learning (IfL) website – this is the independent professional body for teachers, trainers, tutors and trainee teachers across FE and skills (England). Chapter 4 takes a critical look at the adult literacy and numeracy curriculum and how it shifts to meet the demands of a market-driven culture, and is not always responsive to individual and community needs. The general lifelong learning curriculum (Chapter 5) is no different in this respect, and the authors make the point that "it is often only through the resilience of the tutors that the stability of the students' experience can be maintained".

The final two chapters look at research-led teaching and the changing role/expectations of a professional in the lifelong learning sector. The authors provide sound practical advice on aspects such as, how to cope with the sheer diversity of learners, where to search for jobs in the first place, and the importance of valuing existing skills. They also draw attention to research which shows that just under half the workforce in FE Colleges in England feel over-worked, lack flexibility in their working lives and feel insecure about their jobs (Smith et al., 2008). This situation does not bring out the best in people or encourage them to commit to time-consuming research projects. Yet, as the authors state from their own experience, research can open us new vistas and allow the teacher to travel in directions that might initially seem impossible. To this end, they offer advice on time-management and the importance of working collaboratively with colleagues to counter isolation and a build-up of stress.

While this book is certainly a valuable source of contemporary debates for trainees on QTLS programmes, education students and staff undertaking CPD, it does not tell you everything you need to know to be an effective further education teacher. However, if the clear and practical approach of the authors in this short book is indicative of their style, then you may wish to see what else they have to offer. Jonathan Tummons has produced an in-depth publication on assessing learning (2011) and another on curriculum studies (2012), and due out in 2013, Vicky Duckworth and John Clarke will author a pocket-book guide with the intriguing title “How to be a brilliant further education teacher”, which sounds like a very positive approach to a very challenging job.

**DR VAL BISSLAND**

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# Lifelong Learning and Social justice: Communities, Work and Identities in a Globalised World

EDITED BY SUE JACKSON (2011)

NIACE ISBN 978 1 86201 454 1

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It is a brave and ambitious editor that puts a range of contested and challenging concepts together in a book title, an even more impressive one that actually succeeds in doing that title justice. I believe this is the case with *Lifelong Learning and Social justice: Communities, Work and Identities in a Globalised World*. Edited by Sue Jackson, it sets out to explore the complex and contested intersections between lifelong learning and social justice. Most importantly, in terms of its contribution to the field, is the challenge this book poses to the current, and very powerful, concentration on lifelong learning policy and practice driven increasingly by economic imperatives.

I am reviewing this book as a feminist and educator positioned within a university, coincidentally within a School of Social Justice, yet who spends a considerable amount of time and energy outside the university working collaboratively to develop programmes and pedagogies with professionals and students from various women's community groups. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that this edited collection spoke to me in such a significant manner. It is a book filled with spatial metaphor and significance and one which draws on multiple spaces of lifelong learning including institutional, community-based, formal/non-formal, practitioner and student centred. Consequently, it succeeds in speaking to a broad range of constituencies and in engaging a range of debates not usually drawn in the lifelong learning context.

An ambitious project spanning three main sections, the book comprises eleven chapters and is impressive in terms of both the breadth of conceptual terrain and of authorial representation across identities, experiences, nationalities, research approaches and disciplinary and institutional positioning. Whilst this could result in a rather fractured, disjointed project when taken as a whole, having the editor

literally top and tail each section with summary position pieces works as an effective device in providing an overall sense of coherence.

Jackson tells us that the authors in Part One, *Sustaining Communities*, are interested in 'developing wider understandings of how communities sustain themselves and their communities through engaging with lifelong learning, civic participation and inter-cultural connectedness, as well as through a commitment to social justice' (p13). One of the very interesting achievements of this first section is the level of engagement and advancement of some critical concepts as globalisation, community and sustainability. Indeed the final chapter in this first section by Sue Webb acts as an excellent conceptual bridge towards the concepts and ideas explored in the sections two and three. In a thoughtful and provocative piece Webb explores community engagement and the idea of a 'good university' and its significance within the context of neoliberalism. At a time when community and civic engagement is garnering increased attention within Irish education policy spheres, as evidenced through the publication of the Hunt Report (2011), *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, this section represents a timely conceptual contribution to the debate.

Part Two, *Learning and Working*, addresses the increasing trend by which lifelong learning and economic participation are intrinsically linked whilst at the same time locating lifelong learning within a rhetoric of social justice. These authors collectively argue that 'current conceptualisations of lifelong learning widen, rather than narrow, the gap between the most and least socially advantaged' (Jackson: p107) and that more radical policies based on principles of redistribution and recognition are necessary if lifelong learning is to be transformative. Positioning social justice within the context of both redistribution and recognition is a welcome intervention. Our measures to combat injustice of course often involve or demand the redistribution of material resources. However, combating injustices that are about cultural imperialism and oppressions connected to intersecting and shifting gendered, raced, classed and sexed identities demands measures beyond redistribution, measures that counter misrecognition tactics and disrespectful and invisibilising strategies (Young, 1990). This is one of the challenges to which this book speaks.

Given my background I was particularly engaged with the ideas and research contexts explored in Part Three, *Identities*. It works as an excellent final section managing to draw out the many connections across the book and offers much scope for further work and research. Tcherepashenets & Snyder's chapter (Ch8) resonates strongly with Blewitt's opening chapter arguing that globalisation plays an important role in shaping adult education philosophy and practice. Vicki Carpenter's



chapter (Ch9) extends the conversation on identity, offering some really interesting insights into teacher identity and professional development in New Zealand's low socio-economic communities. Adopting an explicitly subjective approach, she locates herself within the chapter text as she explores her own pedagogic practices and how she has strived to transform them. In a powerful statement she tells us 'my classroom...is a very privileged place for me to be...This is the ambit where I can close the door, and together we, the students and I, can be learners and change the world' (p213).

An important addition to this collection, Helen Aberton's penultimate chapter moves the research focus to that of women's informal learning. Returning again to notions of space, she draws on actor-network theory (ANT) as an alternative frame in which to study learning and learner identity. The breadth of lifelong learning contexts explored throughout the book is highlighted in the challenging and insightful final chapter, *Love in a cold climate*, where Olivia Sagan seeks to recognise two marginalised arenas, mental illness and love, within the context of lifelong learning and social justice. I found most interesting the inseparability of care and social justice as a strong theme in Sagan's writing and throughout the book. Again there are strong resonances with the Irish community education sector. The idea of 'angry compassion' seems particularly relevant from my experience of working with committed, dedicated community educators where the fusion of 'an ethics of care with a passion for justice' (p277) is a palpable and striking feature on the landscape of women's community education.

'Goodness', as a concept, is aired within the book, specifically in terms of what a 'good university' and 'good citizen' might mean for us as within HE. It seems to me that if a 'good book' is that which informs, prompts us towards greater insight and challenges us to think and act in different ways, then this is surely one such book. It marks a significant contribution to the existing, if somewhat limited, literature in the field. Accessible and informative, I think it will speak to anybody thinking about, working towards, or just interested in knowledge and learning and how we might become more effective citizens, teachers, community workers as we strive towards a more just and sustainable world.

I find myself concurring with the editor's assertion that the book serves as an effective reminder of the 'power within the space of possibility and emergence' (p7) a space, to which Jackson tells us, it seeks to contribute.

**DR AIDEEN QUILTY**

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# Sowing the Seeds of Social Change. The Outcomes and Impact of a Social Action Model of Community Education. AONTAS Report (2011)

<http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/sowing-the-seeds-of-social-change-2011/>

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This is a very timely report, examining the nature of community education programmes in the South of Ireland and in particular, investigating their propensity to encourage social change. The research, carried out by AONTAS is a follow-up to the AONTAS (2011) DES sponsored research examining the outcomes and impact of DES funded community education. This complementary report addresses the need identified in the earlier report, to investigate the outcomes of community education not wholly funded through DES. To this end, the research accomplishes its over-arching aims, by surveying 285 community education learners and the 27 centres/projects within the Community Education Network which they attended, as well as 6 purposive case-studies with of the participating centres and 4 purposively sampled interviews with key informants.

Although the authors state this report is a companion piece to the previous AONTAS DES sponsored research, it does provide a synopsis of the findings from the previous research, which make it easy for the reader to make comparisons between the two reports, without necessarily having to refer to the earlier work. The Introductory chapter also provides useful contextualization of community education in Ireland, with some reference to the UK tradition of community education, drawing on the work of the late Tom Lovett (2003, 1997). The report is organized under five main themes of the social action model, with quantitative findings from the research reported under each of the relevant themes, with a view to assessing the extent to which these features are visible within participating community education providers. Each of these chapters also provides a useful synopsis of any related findings from the DES research and whilst direct comparison is not always possible, this does provide

an important barometer, against which the current research can be measured. The following two chapters then provide qualitative evidence from the six case-studies and four interviews with key informants.

The findings suggest that the space for radical community education is becoming further eroded, as the human capital approach, focusing on social and vocational learning is pushed increasingly to the forefront. The authors issue a warning that DES funded centres may find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to carry out any community education for social change. This is particularly ironic, given that the findings also suggest that these centres are successful in reaching disadvantaged and marginalized sections of the community and are effective in addressing the barriers to second chance education, offering a means of social recognition to these learners. However, the findings also suggest that there is generally a significant gap between the individual development and the move to collective development, the latter of which is a crucial aspect of the social action model. The report makes a number of recommendations as to how this can be improved.

This report is fairly easy reading and should be of interest to a wide range of readers, including those working in the fields of community education and community development, especially managers of community education centres; policy makers; funders; academics and those studying adult and community education and/or community development.

**DR ROSEMARY MORELAND**

*Access & Community Development Manager, University of Ulster.*

# The Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education

CALL FOR PAPERS 2013 EDITION

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**The Adult Learner** is the Irish journal of adult and community education founded in the mid 1980s. It aims primarily to serve the needs of the adult education community in Ireland by providing a forum for critical reflection on the practices of teaching and learning. The journal aims to continue to make knowledge, research and writing accessible to the widest possible audience and emphasizes the implications of critique for practice. The journal has a long established practice of giving priority to subject matter that addresses disadvantage, social exclusion, equality, workplace learning and the study of the teacher/student relationship. Community education, literacy, citizenship and access issues are also of importance in the journal. The journal welcomes papers which are relevant to those working across the broad field of Adult and Community Education and which make a contribution to debates both in Ireland and internationally.

**The journal invites papers as follows:**

1. ***Academic papers which should be no more than 5,000 words in length (including references).*** Papers will engage with critical debate and analysis ideas on concepts, theories and/or practices of the field. These papers are often based on the findings from ongoing or recently completed research. They may be policy or practice focused and provide a forum for adult and community educators to become involved in critical analysis of policy and practice. They may also suggest ways to inform and improve the work of the sector. Papers should NOT exceed the word limit.
2. ***Shorter papers and case studies which should be no more than 3,000 words in length (including references).*** Such contributions will share examples of good practice and exchange of ideas about what works in various programmes, innovations and contexts. The papers should engage in analysis

of the practical aspects of adult and community education. Papers should NOT exceed the word limit.

3. ***Reviews of approximately 600-1000 words.*** These may provide a review of books, materials and resources that help identify and evaluate a wide variety of teaching and learning resources that may be of interest to adult and community education participants, providers and anyone interested in adult and community education.

All papers submitted will undergo a refereeing process involving two referees. If a contribution is accepted, in some cases this may be on condition that changes recommended by referees are taken account of.

The author should state clearly as to which sections they are submitting: Refereed articles, practice articles or resource reviews.

**All papers submitted should conform to the following guidelines:**

***Relate to the broad aims of the journal and relevant to the field of adult and community education.***

***Provide evidence of a coherent and focused argument and be supported by robust evidence.***

***Outline and explain any methodology used.***

***Be contextualised for both an Irish and international readership.***

***Be submitted in the outlined format ( see separate guidance).***

***Begin with a short abstract ( not more than 100 words ).***

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

Papers should be typed, 12 pt Times New Roman, double line spaced on one side of A4. Headings should be in bold and in the same format. They should include all references cited in the article in a reference section. Only those cited in the article should be included. The papers should begin with a short abstract (maximum 6 lines preceded by a 'key words' statement.)

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

The name, address, and email address of the author should be submitted on a separate attached sheet rather than on the manuscript and where appropriate should include the work-place of the author. A short statement about the author ( no more than 5 lines) should be attached.

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

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

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

Contributions should be sent by email or on disc to the address below latest by ***25th January 2013. Please note that contributions will not be accepted after this date.***

**Please mark for the attention of :**

The Editor, *The Adult Learner Journal*,  
AONTAS,  
2nd Floor 83-87 Main Street,  
Ranelagh,  
Dublin 6,  
Ireland.

Please send all correspondence to Elenora Peruffo, Secretary, The Adult Learner:  
[eperuffo@aontas.com](mailto:eperuffo@aontas.com)

# 2013 style guide for the Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education

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**All papers should follow the style guidelines outlined below:**

*Use one-and-a-half line spacing and 12-point Times New Roman font* on one side of page only. The exception will be indented quotations where single spacing will be used. Justify the left hand margin only.

**Do not use headers and footers.** All pages of article should be numbered consecutively and the page number inserted on the right hand foot of each page.

New paragraphs in text should be *one-and-a-half line spaced* from previous paragraph and *indented five spaces*.

An **abstract** of no more than **100 words** in italics should be inserted at the beginning of the article. Information about the author ( max 5 lines) should accompany the submission. Titles of article, subtitles and subheadings should be selected so that there are no more than three levels of headings, as illustrated here:

**Title of article:**

Centred and bold: Upper and lower case.

Author's name and work place in bold.

12-point Times New Roman font.

**In text:**

Main Headings: Upper and lower case, bold, justified to left margin.

Sub Headings: Italics, upper and lower case, left justified.

12-point Times New Roman font.





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

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

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

*The journal can also be viewed on the AONTAS website, where further details on how individuals can make contributions are made available each year.*  
[www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)



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