



Keynote Address: Reclaiming the Space - Why Community and Adult Education Matters

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Overview

- The Context of Adult and Community Education – Neoliberal market-led human capital model of education
- Implications – reducing citizens to customers
- Governance through Measurement – technologies of measurement are not morally or educationally neutral: Tyranny of numbers
- Citizens are more than employed workers – recognising caring and relational lives
- The Class, Race and Disability concerns of Adult and Community Education
- Exploring myths that harm people in school and lead to early leaving – equality of opportunity, meritocracy, social mobility, hierarchies, ability/intelligence
- Conclusions

Neoliberalism is deeply embedded in Irish public policy thinking, including education

- Neo-liberalism is based on the idea that human well-being can be advanced through enhancing **individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills** within an economic system **characterized by strong private property rights** and limited state regulation of businesses and financial capital....' (David Harvey, 2005)
- **Low value placed on non-market knowledge- such as adult and community education**
- **Reducing Public Expenditure (Taxes)** is one of the principal goals of neo-liberal capitalism (creation of a small, cheap state); a related goal is to **turn public services into private-for-profit services**
- Neo-liberalism attempts to explain how the world is, and prescribe how it should be: **it is both a normative (moral) and analytical (explanatory) capitalist framework**

Ireland's move to a human capital-led neoliberal model of education is set in the context of endorsing a neoliberal model of public governance

Belief in running the country like a business has its origins in the late 1990s

- The **Public Service Management Act (1997)** instituted a technicist approach to public governance that was strongly driven by business rhetoric in Ireland:
 - **Advocates of 'running the government like a 'business' and practitioners of the NPM [New Public Service Management] have sought, at least in part, to have the public service operate according to 'market-like-models'.** *NPM is based on an economic understanding of governance in which the market – or approximations to it – is regarded as the ideal mechanism for the allocation and delivery of public services. Central to this approach is the perception of the citizens as customers.* (Collins, 2007: 31).
 - Education's role is to produce people who are entrepreneurial and business oriented

Collins, Neil (2007) 'The public service and regulatory reform' in Collins, N., Cradden, T. and Butler, P. (eds.) *Modernising Irish Government: the politics of administrative reform*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan

Examples of the influence of neoliberalism in Irish government policy: **defining citizens as consumers**

Citizens with Rights and Needs are redefined as Customers

- **Revenue Commissioners** – There were 2111 references to 'customers' on its website (November 2023)
- **Department of Further and Higher Education Research, Innovation and Science** has a Customer Charter (Nov. 2023) <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/0d96a-our-customer-service-promise/>
- Department of Education, Department of the Environment, Department of Agriculture etc. all have customer charters
- **Parole Board** has a Customer Charter
- **Health Service Executive (HSE)** has multiple sites and 100s of references to customers

One cannot be a customer to a human right as it is not something you purchase off a shelf – it is a non-negotiable entitlement

Neoliberalism introduces a new type of moral regulation in public services like education

- When schools and college employ business models of operation (new managerial models) they become **disciplined through market morality**
- **First goal** is to produce 'market ready' employable citizens- deprioritizes non-marketable forms of education including adult and community education that is not labour-market relevant
- By adopting business models of operation internally , schools and college **do not just service the market**, they begin to emulate its core norms and values
- A focus on product/output leads to a profound **shift in the cultural norms of services** , from nurture and development of students to creating *human capital*: 'outputs', meeting KPIs (key performance indicators), targets, 'deliverables'
- **Capitalocentric thinking begins to** dominate public service and educational thinking – people are defined as bundles of human capital

Educational culture shifts under new managerialism and neoliberalism

- Teacher-student relationships become defined in **transactional terms** – mean- to-an-end (high productivity, outputs: completions, credentials etc. become the principal focus)
- A focus on market efficiency over-rides and weakens other values
 - **First order social and moral values are reduced to second-order principles:** relations of trust, integrity, care for students, and equality principles become subordinated to monitoring, surveillance, regulation, control and competition
 - With the glorification of performativity and outputs **the amoral becomes the necessitous** – documenting scores, attainments, grades, ranks, etc. becomes an industry in itself
 - **Bureaucracy grows** – it takes time and money

Governance through Measurement – serious implications for education

- Because numbers have the **status of absoluteness and unassailability**, they have an unwarranted truth standing that does not apply to narrative (oral or written) text – they are hard to change
- Numbers present a **semblance of objectivity** – a myth that what can be hierarchically ordered can be readily judged –they can be easily misinterpreted
- **Numbers are signifiers of value**; they operate symbolically by locating people and colleges as lesser or greater, through ranks, completion rates etc. – they intensify competition and undermine cooperation
- **Numbers are powerful in their trans-world communicability**: they can be easily interpreted cross-culturally
 - With indices and numerical rankings, **new social subjectivities (types of people) develop – Quantifiable Persons**

The Technology of Measurement is not morally neutral: **it conceals Immaterial work in education (that is emotional work, care work, support work, social justice work)**

- **Measures** (ranks, grades, numerical scores) **operate both as representation of reality and as a set of values**
- **They have a Performative power** –recreate and reinforce what is already measured developing new imaginings about institutions, people, departments etc.
 - *Because targets, outputs and ratings are public events -they regulate through lauding and shaming simultaneously*
 - **The care and developmental work of community and adult education cannot be readily enumerated.** Its value is within the relationships themselves, and is long-term and diffuse- it can only be known over a long time

Absence of measures for immaterial and unmeasurable educational work depresses its value – it is defined negatively, or not at all

Reflected in the **Absence of Targets or Criteria** for assessing the **caring qualities** of educational institutions or the **social justice outcomes** of programmes for example

Numbers are neither neutral or innocent

- Performance indicators, league tables, ranking indices etc. create a common but grossly simplified cognitive space for judging individuals and organisations – **especially unsuited to care and development-based organisations such as schools and colleges**
- **The care and developmental work of community and adult education cannot be readily enumerated.** Its value is within the relationships themselves, and is long-term and diffuse- it can only be known over a long time
- Using numbers to rank schools or colleges or programmes leads to a **Reification of identities** through familiarity and ubiquitous citation of numbers, even if neither objective nor valid

Conceptions of Citizenship (Ontological assumptions) impact on how we define people educationally – Care-free non-relational view of the citizen

Citizenship is equated with paid work especially with profitable work (Attack on public service workers, community and voluntary work reflects the lack of respect for work that is not profitable/business led)

Neo/Liberal capitalist view of what constitutes a valid citizen prevails within Ireland/EU: **full citizen = employed adult**

Caring and Community work is not citizenship-defining – yet care is a fundamental value of all known societies, and it is work that is necessary for human survival

Dependency in childhood, illness, old age, is endemic to the human condition and *we are all interdependent*

YET

Education for the care and love work that produces people in their humanity is **vital**, (not just education for paid care work) **for the mental health and well-being of society; is it part of FET or adult and community education?**

Community and Adult Education is a social class, racial and disability matter

- Social class is a taboo subject yet social class inequalities are endemic to Irish society: class segregation in health care, in education, in housing and significant class differences in life expectancy
- **Working class avoidance** in housing: walls, gates, fences to keep out those who are deemed subordinate in class terms
- **Class avoidance**, racial and dis/ability avoidance in school choices
- **Racial and dis/ability avoidance** reflected in choice of schools
- **Euphemisms for class reveal our fear of naming class both positively and negatively:** disadvantaged, the poor, rough area, knackers (Anti Traveller, racist as well as classist), 'council housing', losers, etc.

The Myth of Equality of opportunity – class outcomes

Equality of Opportunity Objective is generally defined in terms of enabling people to make personal gains (to become *socially mobile*) within education or in employment

It is focused on making the competition for privilege fairer but not on equalising it

People from working class backgrounds in Ireland have made significant educational gains but mostly when more advantaged groups have maximised their gains at a given level of education

- **Relative social class advantage has been maintained in Ireland**, expressed especially in attainment in public examinations/tests of attainment , and in the type and level of 3rd level education attained, and progress to 4th level education (Byrne and McCoy, 2017)

Byrne, D. and McCoy, S. (2017) Effectively Maintained Inequality in Educational Transitions in the Republic of Ireland. *American Behavioral Scientist*. Vol. 61(1) 49–73

All you need is ability and hard work to get on!

Meritocratic Myths

- Meritocracy is premised on *false essentialist assumptions regarding 'talent' 'ability'* - 'talent is not a fixed entity-lack of so-called 'ability' is an outcome of lack of opportunity to develop capabilities in the first instance
- Lack of *ambition/effort* is a function of the lack of visible and available opportunities - people do not aspire generally for the unattainable
- Meritocracy falsely assumes that the successes and failures of one generation can be separated from the life chances of the next

Social mobility – a liberal goal for the relatively advantaged ?

- When we promote the idea of social mobility, we largely ignore the identity crises and social isolation problems that arise in relation to social mobility (often for working class people or Travellers, or for other minorities, those whose skin colour is brown or black in a white society) who, if they do succeed, enter into hostile learning and work environments
- Meritocratic values reinforce anti-solidarity values more widely in society –create illusions of grandeur, or merit, Arrogance among the 'successful' (See the book by the philosopher, Michael Sandel: Sandel, M. 2020 *The Tyranny of Merit*. London. Penguin)
- Meritocratic ideology undermines equality as it individualises relative failure (the vocabulary of 'losers' emerges to name and shame the unsuccessful)

Contesting the Hierarchical Staging of Education

Hierarchies of language reflect hierarchies of thought and hierarchies of moral and educational worth

‘Higher Education’ concept implies superiority, superior knowledge learned by superior people

- Those operating at the ‘pinnacle’ of power and status

‘Further Education’ – denotes education beyond the basics of compulsory education, but the lower status and significance for this type of education and learners in this field

Community and Adult Education – denotes education for those who are alienated from schooling - ‘failed’ in school (were failed by school)

Contesting Myths about Abilities and Intelligences

There is no such thing as pure generic intelligence that applies across all spheres of human capability (Howard Gardner, Harvard).

- YET, Definitions of intelligence and ability as fixed entities largely determine the parameters of people's educational horizons: especially the view that intelligence is the ability to engage in *forms of abstract mathematical or verbal reasoning*
- ***Unscientific definitions of human intelligence are harmful and pervasive; they destroy many students' self-esteem & their sense of moral and social worth***

Degrading **ableist** language is widely used in education based on intelligence myths:

- *Stupid, dumb, weak, low ability, dull, dim, slow, lacking intelligence, thick*
- *Accompanied by the elevation of others – bright, brilliant, clever, able, gifted, high ability*

Tests of intelligence or Aptitude merely measure prior 'attainment'. The more you practice aptitude tests or so-called 'intelligence' tests, the better you perform!

Conclusion: Why Equality in Education Matters at all stages especially in adult and community education:

Education is a Vital *Personal* and *Public* Good regardless of its market value

1. Education is a **basic human right** and is recognised as such in international legal agreements that Ireland has ratified
 - a. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Article 26)
 - b. *The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (Article 13)
2. Education is **indispensable for realising other rights** – housing, politics
3. Education has an **intrinsic value for the development of the individual** – enables people to exercise capabilities, choices and freedoms
4. Education **enables people to overcome other social disadvantages** **collectively and individually**
5. Education **credentials are vital for accessing other goods**, including employment, and being engaged in public life
6. Education is a **Public Good** as well as a Personal Good- **it enriches cultural, social, political and economic life**