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Editorial Comment

ROSEMARY MORELAND, EDITOR

The current edition of the journal focuses on the theme of 'Measuring success in adult, community and further education'. In times of rising cost of living, low wages and insecure employment, the emphasis on adult learning is on accredited education and training, that can lead to employment and career development or transition. This can lead to a narrow focus on how we measure adult learning, where success is limited to those who complete a qualification and can contribute to the economic development of society. However, our call for abstracts deliberately chose a much broader view of measuring adult learning, as we are mindful of the 'soft' as well as 'hard' outcomes of adult learning and the myriad of ways in which adult learning contributes positively to mental and physical health, personal and collective development of individuals and society. The questions provoked by how we measure success in adult learning provides us with a platform to debate these issues and consider the topic at both macro and micro levels.

With this in mind, the sad and untimely death of our dear colleague, Liz O'Sullivan, whose commitment to adult learning for the most marginalised and excluded, demonstrated through her life's work, the importance of challenging the reductionist methodology of performativity measures. We are honoured to introduce this year's edition of the journal with a very fitting tribute to her work in adult education, in the Guest Forward by Liz's colleagues and friends, Liz McSkeane, Nuala Glanton and Celia Rafferty. We dedicate the 2022 edition of the Adult Learner Journal in memory of the life and work of Liz O'Sullivan.

We also wish to mark the departure of AONTAS' Chief Executive Officer, Niamh O'Reilly, who was also Chair of the Adult Learner Journal. In addition to the excellent advocacy and policy work carried out by Niamh, throughout her years

in AONTAS and in particular, her leadership over the last six years in fighting for the needs and rights of adult learners, Niamh has wholeheartedly supported and promoted the Adult Learner Journal, and we are deeply indebted to her. We wish her well in her new role at Maynooth University and are delighted that Niamh has contributed a reflective article, charting her work in AONTAS but more importantly, the achievements and successes gained on behalf of AONTAS and adult learners throughout Ireland.

The journal consists in two parts: Part One consists of seven articles and Part Two consists of 3 book reviews. Part One considers the theme of measuring success in adult learning, both theoretically and through articles focusing on practice. Dempsey, S. Collins, and Malone's outlines a case-study of an accredited adult education programme in the area of family support. They explore the power of transformative learning, coupled with the establishment of communities of practice, which together have the power to create positive changes not only in those who complete the programme, but ultimately in the families with whom they engage. Brennan and O'Grady's article challenges the narrow measures of success in further education and training in the Republic of Ireland and explores the concept of psychological capital, as an additional means of measuring adult learning. Although originating in the field of psychology, the authors highlight how the concept of psychological capital has much in common with adult learning theory and they recommend practitioners, providers and funders of adult education to give serious consideration to embracing this concept in adult education practice. Murray's case study on human rights and social inclusion education argues the necessity of bottom-up human rights education, founded on community education principles of dialogue, solidarity and valuing the experiential learning of participants. His paper demonstrates the need for programmes that do not simply measure success as completing a programme or gaining employment, but also includes building self-confidence, social networks and enhancing self-worth.

Flynn, J. Collins and Malone's study of online learning during COVID-19 focuses on adult learners' understanding of success. Their study highlights that despite the flexibility of online learning, learners' concept of success was intricately linked to their identity as students, which was negatively impacted by the lack of opportunity to be on campus and inter-relate face-face with other students. Day and Naeb's highlights the issues facing low literate adult learners on ESOL programmes, identifying how assessment strategies have created additional challenges for those who have low levels of literacy in their

mother tongue and are unfamiliar with the process of testing. This small-scale study recommends creating alternative assessment methods for such students, which seeks to capture the small steps in learning they have made, rather than negatively reinforce their inability to demonstrate knowledge. An alternative perspective is provided in Coss' article examining the learning experiences of women returners, who had previously succeeded in the education system. The study of this under-researched group of adult learners provides a clear indication of how the reductionist approach of equating qualifications with success fails to recognise hidden disadvantages. Using a life histories approach to uncover the learner voice, this study bears testament to the wider benefits of adult learning. Finally, Fitzsimons and Nwanze's article draws us into critically reflecting on the ways in which structural racism is deeply embedded within Western society. Whilst the article does not overtly examine measures of success, it is very apt that we conclude Part One of the journal by reflecting on the role of adult and community education in tackling hidden, as well as overt racism. If we believe that adult education can and should be measured by the extent to which it challenges social injustice, Fitzsimons and Nwanze's critical pedagogy and personal reflections provide adult educators with the tools to take up this challenge.

In Part Two, Mary Harkin provides us with a critical review of Fragoso and Fonseca's article on *Combating Ageism Through Adult Education and Learning*. Jones Irwin has contributed our first book review of Irwin and Todaro's (2022) book *Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Education in Contemporary Context. From Italy to the World*. Jane O'Kelly provides critical insight into O'Sullivan and Rami's chapter *Key milestones in the evolution of skills policy in Ireland*, in Walsh's (2022) *Education Policy in Ireland Since 1922*.

Guest Foreword: Liz O'Sullivan – A Lifelong Adult Educator

LIZ MCSKEANE, NUALA GLANTON, CELIA RAFFERTY

Introduction

As many of you already know, on Stephens's Day last year we lost our highly respected colleague, Liz O'Sullivan, following a long illness that she faced, as she did most things in life, with selflessness and grace. As Adult Education Officer with City of Dublin Education and Training Board (ETB), Liz was a lifelong adult educator who believed passionately in the transformative power of education. Throughout her long career with the City of Dublin VEC and later, the CDETB, she devoted her work to promoting social justice and educational opportunities for the people of Dublin, particularly for those without a voice and people with literacy difficulties. Her thinking was influenced, among other things, by the writings of Paulo Freire, and also by a deep personal belief in the power of education as a catalyst for transforming the life of individuals, and for social change. She died too soon to have the opportunity to retire and enjoy a celebration of her life's work, so we would like now to reflect on how her work lives on in the lives she touched.

Career

Throughout her career in City of Dublin ETB, Liz worked on the most pioneering and innovative projects designed to promote and nurture community-based learning. Her teaching career began in 1981, in the prison education service of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (VEC), the year after she completed her Higher Diploma in Education. During that first year, she worked in the Training Unit of Mountjoy and from 1982 she taught in Mountjoy's main prison teaching English and General Subjects. This was the early days of Irish prison education, when teachers had to design their own programmes and develop new ways of engaging with and encouraging learners. Liz was among those who organised debates and other educational and cultural activities to

broaden the horizons of the students. She worked with other teachers on many shared projects and her colleagues from those days will remember her acting the role of Minnie Powell in the Mountjoy production of Sean O'Casey's "Shadow of a Gunman".

During the years that followed, Liz embarked on a Master's in Education/ Counselling at Trinity College Dublin. This informed her work in the late 80s, when she became one of the first cohort of Youthreach Coordinators employed by City of Dublin VEC. She, like the others, had to start work on this pioneering service from scratch, even sourcing a building to house her Youthreach centre in Ballyfermot. This marked the beginning of Liz's long involvement in the Ballyfermot community. Her research in counselling prompted her to lobby the City of Dublin ETB - successfully - to include counselling support as a core element in Youthreach provision and in providing support services across adult education provision, significant features which continue to the present day. As this was in the days before NCVA or FETAC or any Irish qualification system tailored to the needs of the Youthreach cohort of young early school leavers, the new Coordinators had to design a customised curriculum, in association with the CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit. All this work chimed with Liz's passion for social inclusion and her belief in the strength of a bottom-up approach to educational innovation, especially the power of a group of people coming together to share and improve, experiences of the human condition.

In the early 1990s Liz was appointed citywide Youthreach Coordinator, and worked with the team of local Youthreach Coordinators to develop and improve the Youthreach provision in the city. Based in the CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, she established links with CDVEC Psychological Services to ensure access to counselling support for students, as well as organising in-service training in literacy provision designed for tutors working with the particular Youthreach target group.

Those who worked with her during those years and later on will recall how Liz was always dedicated to making life better for others, especially people who, for whatever reason, found it difficult to advocate for themselves: people in the prison system, adult learners, young people at risk, people with mental health difficulties, communities and many, many others. Liz's work, her compassionate approach to it, and the person that she was, had a huge impact on so many people's lives. She was committed to educational equality and inherently understood that giving people the same opportunities does not

amount to equality, when the social and cultural capital available to people with mental health difficulties and other vulnerable people, are so different - when the playing field isn't level.

After taking few years' career break, Liz returned to City of Dublin VEC to carry out research on Adult Literacy Schemes for Head office. Soon after, she was appointed Adult Education Officer for the South-West city, managing the Adult Education Service in that area. The Adult Education Service delivers the City of Dublin ETB's strategy to actively target those adult learners who are most alienated from the education system. It provides educational opportunities in adult literacy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), community education, adult education guidance, BTEI and basic education programmes in the workplace. Liz embraced this influential managerial role with commitment and passion for many years, until illness cut her work short in the early days of the pandemic, March 2020.

Representation and Advocacy

Alongside her designated role as an Adult Education Officer in the Adult Education Service, during her long career, Liz was involved in many professional and developmental organisations, both in representing the service, and in providing expertise in flagship developments in curriculum, assessment and community education. She was a long-standing member of the Adult Education Officers Association (AEOA), which she served as Vice-President from 2017 to 2019 and President from 2019 to 2020. Her leadership and compassion in that role inspired ground-breaking research into the changing and challenging work of the AEOs. This resulted in the establishment of Balint groups to support AEOs, and also, the creation of important links with other organisations and agencies.

Her colleagues from AEOA will recall how Liz was always thinking of creative ways to articulate our views diplomatically, her determination, and how she just wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. If she had a good idea – and she had a gift for noticing a gap or a need that would improve things, and a great strategic mind for working out how to bring that into being – she wasn't put off by any obstacle. If there was a way around, above or below, Liz would find it. She was also meticulous – her attention to detail was legendary. She always brought the full force of her creativity, her idealism, her fierce intellect, to everything she did, absolutely determined to see that the people she was working for, on behalf of, got nothing but the best. And they did.

In 2015 and 2016, Liz, along with Mary Walsh, represented Adult Education Officers at the Labour Relations Commission and the Labour Court to defend the crucial educational elements of the role of Adult Education Officer. This was at a time when the prevailing zeitgeist had begun to prioritise skills for the economy, at the expense, it was feared, of the personal and social dimensions of education. Liz fought to have the value of adult literacy and community education recognised within the new market model of performativity, which demanded easily quantifiable metrics. She argued passionately for the priorities of the individual learner, carefully unpacking the implications of emerging concepts and terminology that threatened to undermine support for social inclusion, the wider benefits of learning, critical thinking and a broad concept of education that encompassed the whole person.

Liz's work as a representative and advocate for educational equality extended to national level. She was a long-term member of the National Advisory Committee on Literacy, and also, a board member of several national organisations: the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation. She was also a member of the editorial board of the Adult Learner Journal.

One of the qualities that made Liz such great company and such fun to be with was her passion and her zest for life. She gave everything she did – her friendships, her studies, her family, her work – 110% and she inspired the same passion in those around her. Work wasn't really work when Liz was on board – it was a mission. Always professional and elegant, Liz could be surprisingly mischievous at times. Her emails were full of ellipses and exclamation marks and often, she would have a glint in her eye and the hint of a smile when making an astute observation. At one meeting, when some colleagues were being patronizingly dismissed as "social warriors", she quipped that she wanted to be in their group.

Liz has left us too soon, but in the time she had, she accomplished so much and made a difference in so many lives. It was a privilege to know her.

She is survived by her husband Ciarán Leonard and her daughters Aisling and Anna, her mother Elizabeth, sisters Marie and Bernadine, brother Bernard and extended family.

Reflections from Previous Chair of ALJ and CEO of AONTAS

NIAMH O'REILLY

Introduction

There is power in adult learning, and in order to shape a more equitable adult learning system, community education, the Learner Voice, and effective advocacy are vital. As I move on from AONTAS, after over 17 years with the organisation and over six years as CEO, I reflect on the importance of adult learning and polarised perceptions of it, and key advocacy achievements. Below, I share insights that can hopefully serve future advocacy efforts for educational equality.

A holistic understanding of learning

People's experiences of learning link with their life stories, especially the systemic challenges that may have negatively impacted their past interactions with the education system. Yet, through all my years of working with adult learners, they overwhelmingly report positive experiences of returning to learning, including gaining confidence, a sense of belonging, friendships, support and a feeling of connectedness.

Learners talk about the transformative power of education, of having agency over their lives, the ability to voice their opinions, shape their communities, gain decent work and find comfort. As Winnie Coakley from the Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) notes, "adult learning is a place of healing" (AONTAS, 2020a).

Over the years, thousands of learners have described in different ways the need for a holistic understanding of learning. This resonates with UNESCO's pillars of education – "learning to be", "learning to do", "learning to know", and "learning to live together" (Delors, 1996). An additional dimension to this understanding was discussed at the CONFINTEA global conference on adult

education in 2022, "learning for [personal and social] change." Reflecting on this understanding of a holistic approach to learning, I recall the definition that the Community Education Network developed when it was first established:

> Community education is a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness. It is community-led reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals and their community. Through its ethos and holistic approach community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a social teaching and learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based. Community education is grounded on principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness. It differs from general adult education provision due to its political and radical methodologies (AONTAS, 2011, p.3).

When I volunteered as a literacy tutor in the early 2000s, I witnessed the inhumanity of poverty and unfulfilled human potential, the need to address economic barriers to participating in education, and the undeniable transformative power of holistic adult education and guidance. Moving from practice to advocacy, in AONTAS, I learned about the power of the collective, to work towards educational equality together by learning from each other, and to advocate authentically in a learner-centred way. The great community educator Marie Gill, Director of D8CEC, who sadly passed away in 2014, spoke about the need for succession to support the future generation of adult learning educators and advocates. A past student now leads that organisation as Director, Marie's legacy builds the capacities of communities to be part of shaping their own local education provision. It is apparent that the adult learning community within AONTAS is highly invested in its future and is relentless in its passion for equality as it does not serve itself; uniquely, it is part of the education field that is solely focused on its benefit and responsibilities to learners and communities. In essence, all those involved are advocates for its survival and growth, particularly within the social justice principles that inform its practice.

I believe every learner's potential is exponential and taking a multi-faceted view of education is essential for empowering all learners to find their voice, share it, and use it to shape practice and policy. The range of learner voice activities are broad: at micro-level within a group or class; to meso-level encompassing interactions with the educational organisation; to macro-level in shaping national policy. However, it is the process of empowerment in adult education that brings forth a more transformative model of learner voice. The characteristics of learner voice

for empowerment that I witnessed include elements of dialogue, participation and inclusivity, that requires recognition of power relation in education and the possibility for change and transformation (Robinson and Taylor, 2007) via the emancipatory processes of adult and community education.

In Ireland, we have a collective history and knowledge of adult learning, which is a firm foundation for creating a more equal society. A large part of this is through community education, which was developed over decades and built on the work of pioneers in educational equality and social change, primarily women. At AONTAS I learned about the power of the collective, learning from each other to advocate authentically in a learner-centred way.

When I set up the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) in 2007, I was learning about the constant challenges facing community education provision. Members of the CEN were primarily independent, local, nongovernmental organisations with educational offerings that formed part of their broader work towards social inclusion. There was tension between responding to local needs and the limitations of funding. There needed to be a way to voice these issues and for community education to gain further recognition, respect and resources. The CEN provides an opportunity for this, and the feedback shared informs AONTAS's advocacy work and specific calls for change with policymakers and funders.

At AONTAS, we advocated for multi-annual, sustainable funding for community education. The power imbalance between funders, mainly ETBs, and community education organisations is an issue that remains today. It impacts on access to suitable funding, reporting requirements, autonomy to employ educators, and impediments in offering accredited and non-accredited courses across the National Framework of Qualifications. Over the years, I continually witnessed the value of positive local relationships between education providers and funders, which ultimately benefits learners. We need accountable autonomy, and equal partnerships between funders and community education organisations. We need funders to have more understanding of the community education mission and the complexity of work, as well as the time needed to achieve positive educational outcomes for learners, despite broader social challenges.

The unique features of community education must be maintained. Other jurisdictions neglected it at their peril. AONTAS has frequently been asked to speak about Ireland's community education system as a model of effective engagement

with marginalised learners at EU events. Ireland's expertise in this is recognised and valued across Europe, yet we need to ensure that it is strengthened at home.

Tensions driving adult learning advocacy

Over the years in AONTAS, and at international level (EAEA, ICAE) the perpetual advocacy debate centres on different understandings of adult learning, from the philosophy of education to the competing impact of neoliberal policies on adult learning practice. I will not attempt to cover the gamut of topics raised but will consider my position within advocacy work as a pragmatic action to influence policy for the benefit of adult learners and educational equality. It is not a simply a theoretical debate; in advocacy, how policy decisions impact learners in practical terms is the main focus. A humanistic view is central to the great theories of education by John Dewey, Paulo Freire and bell hooks, to name a few. This is a proven effective approach in reaching marginalised learners.

Education is a powerful route out of poverty, but we know structural barriers, such as sexism, racism and classism, impact a person's ability to gain sustainable employment. If we are to create greater equity in education, a learner-centred approach is vital. We need their lived experiences that describe the complexity of issues that impact access, participation and success in education and their suggestions to address such issues.

On the other hand, there is a view of adult learning as a tool for the economy. The recent OECD Skills Strategy (2022) for Ireland offers a human capital view of education that sees skills as separate from human beings who learn, develop and grow through education. Not only is this one particular world view, and one which would benefit from different understandings of education, the language seems at odds with the challenges the world is currently facing. A core challenge cited is as "Ireland's supply of skills and our advantage in the global war for talent, including issues around labour shortages and access to a skilled workforce" (OECD, 2022). It links to policies that reify skills as commodifiable "things" that exist independently from the people who learn them and the social relationships through which they are developed (Wheelahan, Moodie, and Doughney, 2022).

This utilitarian view can inhibit holistic educational provision. AONTAS members report that it is difficult to gain funding for non-accredited courses without a vocational aspect. Members have discussed issues around the duration of courses (full-time prioritised over part-time), the different values placed on pedagogic practice (instructional over dialogical), and course success

being measured in terms of progression to employment without regard to the multitude of factors that influence this.

Gender inequality is also evident in national public policy priorities with, for example, the focus on apprenticeships—which involve fewer than 10% women—compared with the poorly-funded community education sector, which is predominantly provided and attended by women.

Recently, there has been a move towards more holistic transformative policies by Minister Simon Harris TD of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), and we saw this reflected in a keynote speech from the Secretary General Jim Breslin at the AONTAS AGM in May 2022. DFHERIS also foregrounded inclusion in education in its objectives, in the current Statement of Strategy (DFHERIS, 2021), and the funding parameters of the Mitigating Education Disadvantage (now REACH) Fund. However, from my experience, I believe the implementation of policy at a local level can be far more impactful to learners than at national policy.

However, polarised views on the purpose of adult learning persist. Recent AONTAS research with the Learning and Work Institute UK states that, from a general population sample, 65% participated in adult learning in the last three years for work or career reasons (LWI, 2022, unpublished). Broadly, those learners are primarily employed in professional occupations, are aged 25-34 years old and are university graduates based in Dublin. This suggests a skills agenda mainly benefits those who have already benefited most from the education system. Of course, decent work is a vital outcome for learners, but the path to achieving this is not straightforward.

Countries with high lifelong learning rates such as Finland (28% compared to 12% in Ireland) build a culture of learning by supporting non-formal education. The Forum research with thousands of learners shows that people who left school early seek supportive courses to build their confidence for returning to education. The skills agenda cannot fully translate into inclusive practice and does not address the complexity of inequality or the aspirations of learners.

Unifying themes across the tertiary education system

The COVID-19 pandemic has been "the largest disruption to education in history affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries" (United Nations, 2020), with the most marginalised groups experiencing exacerbated disadvantage.

In March 2020, the Department of Education and Skills established the Tertiary Education System Steering Group, among other groups, to support education provision through the crisis. I was tasked with establishing and chairing the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (MED) Working Group, which comprised representatives from across the tertiary education system, identifying issues affecting marginalised learners and offering high-level solutions.

Based on the twenty-one working group meetings in early 2020, AONTAS produced ten papers on a range of themes including digital learning, assessment, learner engagement, community education, educational equity, tutors and practitioners, financial barriers, mental health, progression, and remote learning. The papers identified key issues and proposed recommendations (AONTAS, 2020b). Many of these were supported in the July Stimulus package in the Budget 2021.

We still need a specific focus on disadvantaged learners across community, further, and higher education. This was a key learning from the MED group. I developed a Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework (*Figure 1*) which brought together six pillars affecting access to education, and ways the sector can respond.

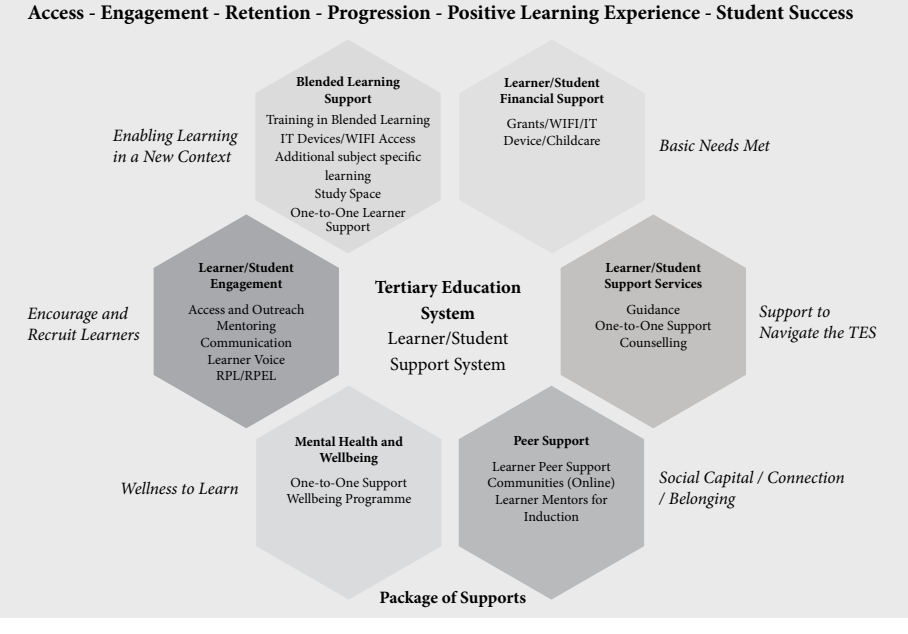

Figure 1. Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework

In order to monitor the impact of COVID-19, we need learner-informed, qualitative and quantitative research specifically on disadvantaged learners. As the MED group finished in December 2020, there was broad agreement that the new Government department, under the leadership of Minister Harris TD, could elevate social inclusion in education.

The MED group provided a unique structural focus and holistic, learner-centred, rights-based, cross-sectoral approach, drawing on the expertise of community education organisations, FET providers, higher-education institutions, civil-society organisations, learners, and other experts. This offered a coherent structure underpinned by experience and evidence to inform the Department's policy priorities. A proposed policy platform, "Progressing a More Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge", with inclusion as a key objective, was launched on 25th May 2022.

Supporting community education through advocacy

During the pandemic, I led on effectively advocating for a fund to support community education organisations to engage and retain learners. This resulted in the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF), an allocation of 8 million in 2020, and of 6.85m in 2021, with Minister Harris committing that the fund will be a "regular feature of our education system" (DFHERIS, 2021).

This funding was welcome, and vital to supporting community education organisations to meet increased learner needs. According to the AONTAS Community Education Network Census findings (2021), community education has the highest representation of disadvantaged learners in the tertiary education sector. Furthermore, based on recent Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI) data (2022), the number of QQI FET major awards in 2021 at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 1 to 3 was 50% less than pre-pandemic levels in 2019, and for NFQ Level 4, there was 25% fewer major awards (AONTAS, 2022). This suggests the significant negative impact of the pandemic on people with lower levels of education.

In January 2022, after the second round of MAEDF, AONTAS conducted a survey to gain the perspective of community education groups. The survey respondents were overwhelmingly appreciative of the MAEDF (AONTAS, 2022). One respondent stated that "this fund made a huge difference to many community education groups who have such limited access to funding to

improve their resources and support learners" while another stated: "This project may not have survived without the MAEDF" (AONTAS, 2022, p.12).

Over 80% of respondents used the MAEDF to reach marginalised learners, including older learners, refugees, Travellers, people in receipt of social welfare, people with additional needs or disabilities, lone parents, people experiencing mental health challenges. The funding was used to address digital poverty, supporting on-site learning in a safe manner, wellbeing supports, engaging learners through outreach, introducing new courses in response to learners' needs, hybrid learning and learner assistance support. 76% of the MAEDF was used to provide devices.

The fund was not perfect. It needed to be broader, and with improved timelines. However, survey respondents noted a range of learner benefits including improved social engagement, mental health, wellbeing, personal development, confidence and self-esteem, and digital literacy.

Although a relatively small investment, this fund made a big impact. Almost 80% of respondents received funding of €10,000 or less, with the average of €2,579. A quarter of survey respondents reported that the MAEDF provided more than 21% of their total funding. Therefore, it is vital that ongoing financial support is offered to community education organisations and that ETBs are supported to distribute funds to those most in need. It will take long-term planning to fully redress some of the damage from the pandemic. Community education must be at the heart of this.

Closing

Central to advocacy is to act, to empower, to be relentlessly angry. Our collective commitment and passion in adult learning is something to be proud of, but must be respected, nurtured, and its future secured for the next generation of advocates, educators and learners. Over the last number of years, we have seen community education clearly recognised in policy, a specific action in the FET Strategy to address long-standing issues for community education organisations, such as the need for autonomy, sustainable funding, the ability to provide accredited provision to meet learner needs, the ability to respond to local need and maintain that unique pedagogic approach that is underpinned by social action.

Over my time in AONTAS, the team and funding increased by 70% and grew our membership base. As a civil society organisation, we managed all the

governance and accountability requirements that come with the responsibility of receiving public funding. We made an impact at EU level through policy, but there is so much to do. It is important to recognise the need to work on a shared island basis; learners across the island need our collective support. Sometimes such challenges seem insurmountable; there are no quick fixes to issues stemming from structural inequalities. There are no quick fixes to issues stemming from structural inequalities. However, in Ireland we have a collective history and knowledge that is a firm foundation to continue to develop an adult learning system that creates a better, more equal society. Community education was developed over decades and built on the work of pioneers in educational equality and social change. Recognising, valuing and resourcing a diversity of provision across the adult education system, from community education, ETBs, and higher education institutions that keep the learner at the heart is vital.

I do know the ingenuity and innovation of those in the field of adult learning help us to find answers to challenges of inequality. This has been a hallmark of our history. John Dewey, contended that education is a means to support equality. We have a collective history and knowledge that is a firm foundation to continue to develop an adult learning system that creates a better, more equal society.

Moreover, over the years, I have witnessed the incomparable commitment to learners and the passion that drives educators in Ireland; it is something to be hugely proud of, but must be respected, nurtured, and its future secured for the benefit of the next generation of advocates, educators and learners.

I would like to share a few final thoughts for the future of adult learning:

1. The skills agenda is a simplistic understanding of education that does not manage the complexity of inequality nor the aspirations of learners and is short-term.

2. Support for community education is vital and requires a relentless collective effort as it must be maintained at all costs. It was developed over decades and built on the work of pioneers in educational equality and social change. We know that other jurisdictions neglected it at their peril. Ireland's community education system is recognised in Europe, we need to ensure that it is maintained and strengthened at home.

3. Every learner's potential is exponential. We need to trust educators to enable it and empower learners to thrive. Adult learning is a human right.

In closing, I would also like to express my gratitude to the adult learning community at national and international levels. The collective efforts of educators, advocates, and learners have inspired and shaped my advocacy work, and that of AONTAS. I would like to thank the AONTAS Chairperson, current and past, and the Board, for all your support. To the AONTAS team, I appreciate the time we had together and all we achieved. Thanks to the members and stakeholders, including DFHERIS and SOLAS. Special thanks to the resilient adult learners who have inspired my work.

I would encourage you to support AONTAS in the next chapter as it continues working to make educational equality a reality for all.

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SECTION ONE

Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning

Communities of Practice and Communities in Practice: A Case Study of the Co-Creation of an Adult Education Family Support Network Programme

MAEVE DEMPSEY, SANDRA COLLINS, AND LINDSAY MALONE

Abstract

The Faculty of Lifelong Learning at the Institute of Technology Carlow co-created a Level 8 Certificate in Prevention, Partnership and Family Support with Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency. The part time programme was aimed at Child and Family Support Network (CFSN) members in Co. Carlow. The overall approach taken throughout this programme involved the use of specialist guest speakers and was purposively framed around the adult education principles of transformative learning and communities of practice, recognising the social and group cohesion that exists through shared endeavours and commitments of practitioners within CFSNs.

Keywords: Family Support, Prevention, Partnership, Social and Group Cohesion, Co-Creation in Higher Education, Community of Practice, Adult Education, Transformative Learning, Child and Family Agency.

Glossary of Terms

Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs):	Child and Family Support Networks help to support services engaged in family support through ensuring these services are easily accessible and integrated at the front line in their own communities. This is achieved through adopting a localised, area-based approach. CFSNs are also the unit building blocks of the National Service Delivery Framework (NSDF) and the frontline operational structure that ensures integrated service delivery.
Commissioning:	The aim of Commissioning Guidance is to ensure that the total resources available to children and families are applied to improving outcomes for children and families in the most efficient, effective, equitable, proportionate and sustainable way.
Communities of Practice (CoPs):	A community of practice is a group pf people who "share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly".
DCYA:	Formerly the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, now known as the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, their mission is to enhance the lives of children, young people, adults, families and communities, recognising diversity and promoting equality of opportunity.
Meitheal:	Meitheal is an old Irish term that describes how neighbours would come together to assist in the saving of crops or in other tasks. In a Meitheal, a lead practitioner will identify a child's and their family's needs and strengths and then bring together a 'team around the child'.
National Service Delivery Framework (NSDF):	Tusla is supporting the development and implementation of a single, transparent, consistent and accountable National Service Delivery Framework (NSDF), focused on improving outcomes for children. An important part of this NSDF is the area-based approach which is most clearly seen in how CFSNs are being developed and how the Meitheal National Practice Model is being implemented.
Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS):	This is a comprehensive suite of early intervention and preventative services being undertaken by Tusla and its partner agencies. The aim of the PPFS is to prevent risks to children and young people arising or escalating through early intervention and family support. The best way to improve outcomes for children is to intervene at an early stage to try to resolve problems and prevent harm. A way this can be done is by working with parents and communities to support children at the earliest possible stage.

Section One

1.1 Introduction

The Faculty of Lifelong Learning at the Institute of Technology Carlow co-created a Level 8 Certificate in Prevention, Partnership and Family Support with Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency. Funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs under the 'What Works Initiative', the part time programme was targeted at Child and Family Support Network (CFSN) members in Co. Carlow.

The module was developed to both strengthen and link academic theory and practice which supports the evidence base of prevention and early intervention service provision. A key component of the module was the collective gathering of CFSN members, with the objective of providing opportunities to create organic opportunities for members to get to know each other in an alternative context, removing barriers such as sector representation; funding or time restraints, and promote the development of professional relationships for future working partnerships.

On completion of the module, participants will have:

1. Developed their theoretical knowledge of the impact of early intervention and prevention for children and families - increasing their capacity to deliver quality, evidence-based practice.

2. Created new and enhanced existing working relationships with their partners in the community, developing a better understanding of services in their own area and an in-depth knowledge of the procedures involved in accessing and engaging in these services.

3. Reduced duplication of service delivery, improving efficiency of funding and staff resources, ensuring more children and families have quicker access to services, promoting the early intervention response.

4. Identified blocks to engagement in interagency work and strategies on how best to overcome these barriers.

This paper will provide a practice-based examination of this project in the form of a case study. The first section will examine the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS), an evidence-led approach to early intervention and

prevention work which has been implemented across Ireland by Tusla. It will critically examine the existing literature, tools and approaches relating to family support and early intervention to frame the context of the overall project and its significance to the CSFN members. The second section will engage in analysis of the practical aspects of the co-creation and facilitation of the Certificate in Prevention, Partnership and Family Support, highlighting the importance of enhancing the student learning experience through relevant industry collaboration whilst ensuring academic quality is maintained throughout module creation and delivery. Section Two will also appraise the quantitative and qualitative data which was captured before and after the programme to examine the learner voice and their experience of the project, specifically through the completion of an online survey reflecting pre-course knowledge and on completion of the module, an online survey gauging subsequent knowledge and allowing for feedback from participants. The third and final section of the paper will explore how the overall approach taken throughout this project was purposively framed around the adult education principles of transformative learning and Communities of Practice (CoP), recognising the social and group cohesion that exists through shared endeavours and commitments of practitioners within CSFNs by the strengthening of relationships and sense of solidarity amongst its members. Transformative Learning is primarily associated with adult education and refers to the perspective transformation that occurs through exposure to new concepts, and the succeeding engagement and discourse within the educational setting that results in original views or beliefs being challenged, transformed, and reformed. The use of CoP to comprehend the approach adopted by the CFSNs relates to the acceptance that learning is social and comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life. The principles of a CoP are identified within the existing CFSNs, acknowledging the theory behind the work already undertaken in communities by service providers.

1.2 Overview of PPFS

Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) was developed by Tusla with a vision to transform services for children, young people and families, who request support from Tusla and its community partners, but do not require or meet the threshold for child protection intervention. PPFS creates pathways to support and engagement for children, young people, and their families, embedded in an ethos of early intervention, prevention, partnership and collaborative working which delivers on the Principles of Family Support, identified by Pinkerton et al. (2004). These are:

1. Working in partnership with children, families, professionals and communities;

2. Family Support interventions are needs led and strive for minimum intervention required;

3. Requires a clear focus on wishes, feelings, safety and well-being of children;

4. Family Support reflects a strengths-based perspective which is mindful of resilience as a characteristic of many children and families' lives;

5. Effective interventions are those which strengthens informal support networks;

6. Family Support is accessible and flexible in respect of timing, setting, and changing needs, and can incorporate both child protection and out of home care;

7. Facilitates self-referral and multi-access referral paths;

8. Involves service users and front-line providers in planning, delivery and evaluation on an ongoing basis;

9. Promotes social inclusion, addressing issues of ethnicity, disability and rural/ urban communities;

10. Measures of success are routinely included to facilitate evaluation based on attention to outcomes for service users, and thereby facilitate quality services based on best practice (Pinkerton, 2004, cited in Tusla, 2013, p.12).

Early intervention and prevention practices which engage children, young people and their families, across all levels of need, improve systems which link families to the right services, with better co-ordination and information sharing, strengthening partnerships working across sectors and develops opportunity for workforce and cultural change (CES, 2013). Implementation of early intervention and prevention work practices has yielded positive outcomes by reducing the need for services later in life for individuals. Coupled with better outcomes for individuals, early intervention and prevention has also achieved societal and economic benefits for communities and wider society in general, reporting improved lifelong outcomes and enhanced economic benefits in areas

such as early childhood care and education; educational attainment; parenting; and child behaviour (Rochford et al., 2014).

Learning and professional development achieved through engagement on this programme enhances working knowledge and bolsters the opportunity for implementation of early intervention and prevention practices across the working community of child, youth and family support service providers and practitioners in Carlow.

1.3 Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs)

PPFS act as a conduit to deliver services which support children, families, and young people, ensuring a timely and appropriate response to need. CFSNs work through interagency collaboration to activate the delivery of services. Interagency collaboration presents benefits and challenges for the practitioners and agencies tasked with implementing services. CFSN members are at the coal face of delivery of services, they are opening the door to the children, families and young people requesting support, making it vital that they are adequately supported and resourced in their service provision.

Tusla's PPFS services are delivered within a framework co-ordinating and facilitating multi-agency and multi-disciplinary engagement (Tusla, 2017), via three main work streams: participation; parenting; and Meitheal and the area-based approach. Captured in the area-based approach are the CFSNs, formed in each of the Tusla Integrated Service Areas (ISAs). The multi-agency networks are open to membership from organisations providing services on behalf of children, young people, and families, within the community and voluntary and statutory sectors, with the core principles of providing timely services and interventions locally for children, young people, and families and that there is no 'wrong door' for families seeking support. These Networks operate an intra-network referral process to support families accessing the most appropriate service for their need (Cassidy et al., 2018). Engagement in the Network supports practitioners in their role of protection and support to children, young people and families, to strategically target and respond to extrinsic factors which impact on children's wellbeing and safety (McGregor and Devaney, 2020). Local areas benefit from the work of the CFSNs, as needs and gaps in services are identified and addressed collaboratively through the perspectives of the interdisciplinary membership.

Participation on the PPFS module at IT Carlow supports the organic development of professional relationships through formal facilitated sessions

and informal networking opportunities arising over the course of the module. Sharing learning and experience to inform the delivery of practice among CFSNs outside of the college environment helps to transform theory into practice.

1.4 Communities in Practice

CFSN members contribute to the Tusla Meitheal process for individual children and young people within the community. The Meitheal group consists of the child or young person; their parent or guardian and all other relevant stakeholders who provide supports to the child and their family work together to identify needs and an action plan to achieve outcomes which improve the situation for the child or young person and their family (Tusla, 2017). CFSNs facilitate collaboration between practitioners and families through Meitheal and individual family support interventions, which actively engages children and their family throughout their process, implementing participation strategies for children, young people and their parents, to ensure that a child-centred, rights-based approach is delivered so that all children and young people are safe, supported and are achieving to their full potential (Tusla, 2017).

This collaboration between families and practitioners is necessary to deliver a response to need and creates opportunities to grow and strengthen capacity within communities (Boydell, 2015). The co-created PPFS module addressed core theoretical understandings and explored evidence based practice associated with the interagency delivery of Meitheal, relating directly to learning outcome three, whereby on completion of the module, participants will have created new and enhanced existing working relationships with their partners in the community, developing a better understanding of services in their own area and an in depth knowledge of the procedures involved in accessing and engaging in these services.

1.5 Social and Group Cohesion

Statham (2011) acknowledges the value of interagency and collaborative working for service users, by improving access routes to services and creating a speedier response to need; for agencies by improving engagement with service users; less duplication; improving efficiencies; and finally, for practitioners in enhancing knowledge and skills; improving job satisfaction and opportunities for career development (Statham, 2011). In the 2018 review of the implementation of CFSNs, Cassidy, et al. identified CFSNs as having the potential to be a significant factor in the development of early intervention and prevention strategies in

local areas, resulting from collaborative working and collective identification of need in local areas. However, this study has named challenges for the Networks which can hinder the achievement of positive outcomes. Members of CFSNs have voiced their frustrations on a lack of clarity around the role and purpose of CFSNs and how it relates to the delivery of services via Tusla's PPFS approach. Issues were identified relating to securing and maintaining membership of relevant stakeholders. Long term concerns were noted around the absence of financial commitments to support the implementation of proposed activities developed through the networks. Collaborative and interagency working lends to a proactive response to addressing need and providing efficient and effective services, however CFSN members have reported they are unclear on their role and how they are representing the wider PPFS framework in their day-to-day work.

Statham (2011) reports challenges to interagency working through: commitment obstacles, with different levels of buy in and agency management not supporting the process; organisational challenges, differing approaches and remits among agencies, and obstacles to information sharing; contextual barriers which are created by constant organisational change, financial uncertainty and changes in political steer. Herein lies the requirement of the integration of CoP as a core concept for the PPFS module. This will be explored in greater detail in section 3.

1.6 Recommendations to Support and Enhance CFSN Practices

Cassidy et al. (2018) identified recommendations which will further support and enhance the practices of CFSNs. These recommendations highlight the requirement to resource CFSNs through comprehensive education and training programmes and funding; promote engagement; enhance the crossover between CFSN and Meitheal; and provide clarity on the role, purpose and contribution of each CFSN member in the process:

- A specific budget should be provided to support, for example, training events organised for CFSNs and to enable a response to be made to needs identified in the network. This would help to prevent participation fatigue and possibly increase members' long-term commitment to the network,

- Consideration should be given to organising broader training events across a Tusla ISA, with more specific actions tailored to local needs initiated within individual CFSNs. This would allow the efficient pooling of resources across an ISA, reduce the organisational burden on members of individual networks,

and facilitate the establishment of links between a broader range of professionals and practitioners across a wider area,

- The objective of the CFSNs should be clearly established and emphasised so that members are aware of their purpose for attending. Within this, the relevance of practitioners working at different levels of need must be further explored and supported so that professionals and practitioners recognise the value to their own work with families,

- The implications of boundaries across Tusla and other statutory services' catchment areas should be addressed, with contingencies worked out for how relationships across and between these can be managed in an efficient and effective manner,

- The formal relationship between the CFSNs and the Meitheal model should be explored further at the individual network level and across the wider system. The extent to which they should be formally linked should be examined in order to ensure that the CFSN has an appropriate balance in supporting the Meitheal model and improving service provision for families with unmet needs outside of the remit of Meitheal,

- Efforts to increase engagement with the CFSN model should continue to be made among statutory services and agencies, particularly at a higher management level, so that all relevant stakeholders can be facilitated to join the networks (Cassidy et al., 2018, p.19).

1.7 The Programme

The above recommendations identified a distinct need for a targeted educational programme for CFSN members which resulted in a collaborative partnership between Tusla and Institute of Technology Carlow. This approach was informed by Institute of Technology Carlow's (2018, p.18) Strategic Priority of co-designing programmes and curricula with stakeholders. The aim of the programme was to enable practitioners who are actively engaged in the CFSNs, from community, voluntary and statutory services, to develop their knowledge and skills. More specifically, practitioners would develop the knowledge of theories of early intervention, specifically on the subject of family support. They would have the skills to develop evidence-based programmes in their own practice to meet the needs of their service users earlier and more efficiently. They will also have developed skills in monitoring the implementation of

service provision and applying continuous improvement planning, ensuring fidelity to evidence-based practice. This aim was informed by evidence that 'prevention and early intervention draws on a range of well tested programmes which are low in cost and high in results which can have a lasting impact on all children, especially the most vulnerable' (Tusla, 2017, p.10). From this, the following five-week programme with specialist guest speakers was developed:

Week	Topic	Guest Speaker and Role
1	PPFS National Delivery Framework Critical Reflective Practice	**Amy Mulvihill** *National Project Officer, PPF*
2	Child and Youth Participation – Lundy Model of Participation Children's Rights Article 3 and Article 1	**Michelle Sheehan** *National Lead on Child and Youth Participation*
3	National Commissioning Strategy Local Implementation of Commissioning Strategy Communities of Practice	**Eifion Williams** *Service Director for Commissioning* **Joan Dunne** *Senior Manager PPFS Carlow/Kilkenny/South Tipperary*
4	Signs os Safety Social Work and Early Intervention Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory	**Emily Hart** *Signs of Safety Practice Learning and Development Practice Lead* **Hazel Graham** *Social Work Team Leader Duty Intake and Assessment Team*
5	Adverse Childhood Experiences and Early Intervention	**Dr. Sarah Morton** *Director of Community Partnership Drug Programmes – UCD.*

Section Two

2.1 Rationale

The rationale for the programme's inception was to enable practitioners who are represented on the Child and Family Support Networks to develop critical knowledge and practical skills in order to inform and enhance their own practice. The programme itself was evidence based and framed upon Cassidy et al.'s (2016) assertion that working collaboratively is an effective means of supporting children and young people and reduces siloes, often acting to complement their existing practice. Further to this, Social Care Ireland (2021) affirm that programmes like this, which offer continuous professional development opportunities, provide an important role in ensuring that practitioners are up to date with new, innovative tools which can ultimately enhance their professional skills and competencies.

2.2 Ethos

The project was initiated by the Senior CFSN Co-ordinator in Carlow on behalf of Tusla. As evidenced in the previous section of this paper, PPFS is an approach which relates to family support and early intervention which has particular significance to the CSFN members. The project was borne from an ethos of continuous professional development which originated from a need which was recognised within the Carlow CFSNs; and with the support and guidance of the Senior PPFS Manager for Carlow, Kilkenny and South Tipperary; the PPFS Regional Implementation Manager for the South; and the Tusla Area Manager. Underpinned by the Tusla National Strategy for Continuing Professional Development (Cullen and O'Grady, 2016, p. 2), the ethos of the project focused on staff 'at all levels in the development and delivery of high-quality services and will be supported to be reflective practitioners'. Similarly, the project is underpinned by one of Institute of Technology Carlow's (2018, p.15) core values of nurturing 'relationships with the communities we serve. We seek out and foster rewarding partnerships with our local, regional, national and international stakeholders. We encourage diversity and value the contributions made by all our learners, stakeholders and staff to our continuing success in empowering informed and engaged citizens'.

2.3 Co-Creation in Higher Education

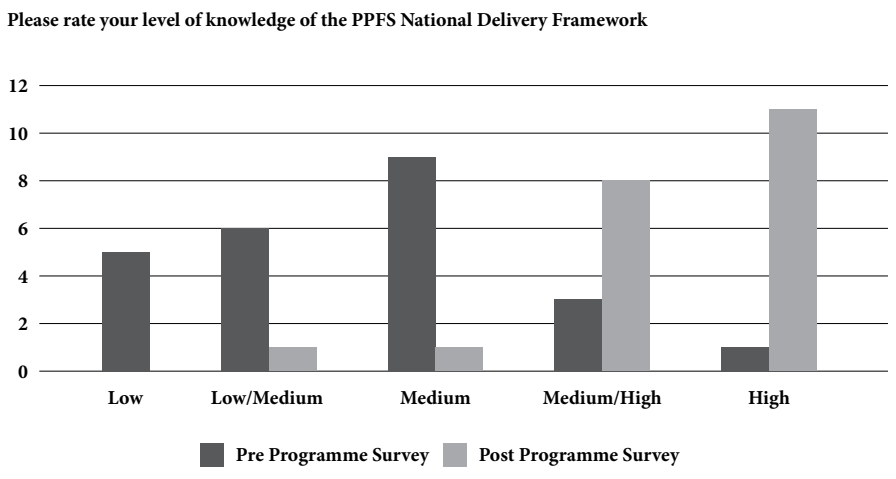
In the context of co-creation between higher education institutes and industry, there is minimal literature on how to best achieve this process, despite growing recognition that industry involvement can, and should, play an integral role

in higher education in general (Shrivastava et al., 2022). A primary concern of the co-creation process was ensuring the development of a suitable and relevant module for students (practitioners) whilst marrying academic rigour to industry relevance and application of theory to practice (Shrivastava et al., 2022). In essence, this meant that the content needed to be constructively aligned to a Level 8 Certificate on the National Framework of Qualifications whilst maintaining significant focus on the learning that occurs outside of the conventional classroom, and within the communities the students practice in. From an assessment perspective, this meant recognising the learner's transformative learning journey through weekly reflective journals, incorporating opportunities for the learner to implement changes in their practice, reflecting on this and identifying solid learning outcomes. An essay critiquing and reviewing the relevant literature and theoretical concepts that underpinned the PPFS module ensured the academic rigour required of a Level 8 Certificate.

2.4 Learner Voice

Institute of Technology Carlow (2018) are committed to delivering transformative education based on a dedication to the creation of an environment where learners 'can acheive their full potential' (Institute of Technology Carlow, 2018, p.18). In order to achieve this, learners from the programme were asked to engage in a formal feedback process in order to firstly ascertain the level of knowledge of the various components before and after the completion of the Certificate programme. The results, presented below, clearly exemplifies how the programme achieves its aim to equip practitioners with the knowledge of theories of early intervention specifically on the subject of family support.

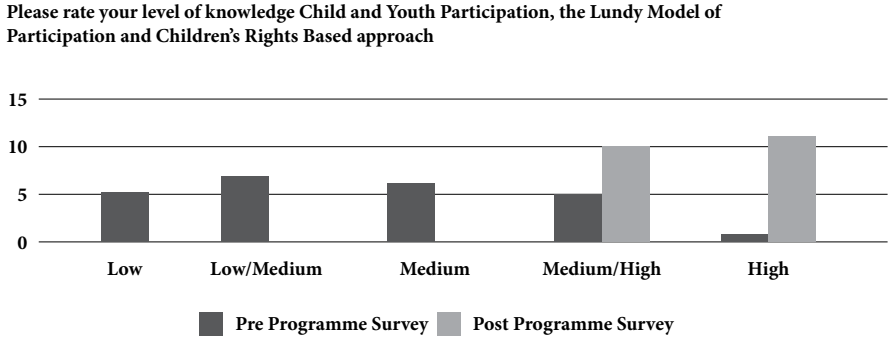
Level of Knowledge of the PPFS National Delivery Framework (Figure 1)



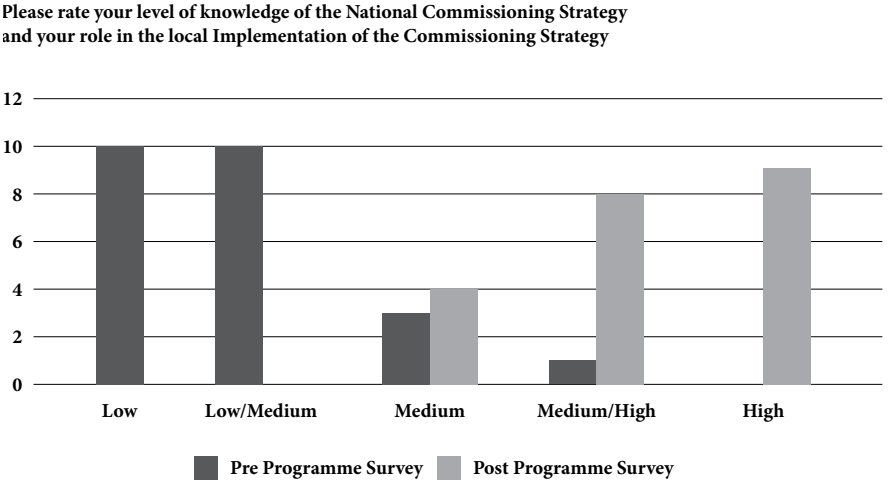
These findings are further strengthened by the qualitative findings where one learner revealed that:

> put simply, since becoming aware of my lack of knowledge around the PPFS Framework I am extremely motivated to learn more. As a result, I feel my knowledge base is developing significantly and I am more confident when supporting mothers and informing them of the different services Tusla provide.

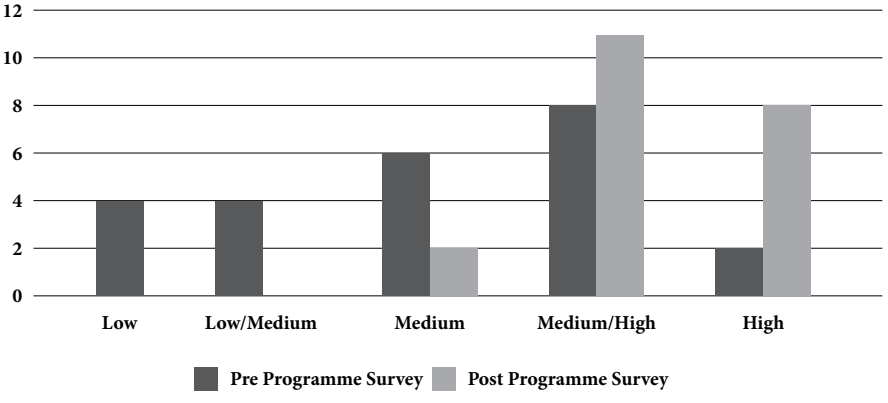
Level of Knowledge of Child and Youth Participation, the Lundy Model of Participation and Children's Rights Based Approach (Figure 2)



Level of Knowledge of the National Commissioning Strategy and your Role in the Local Implementation of the Commissioning Strategy (Figure 3)



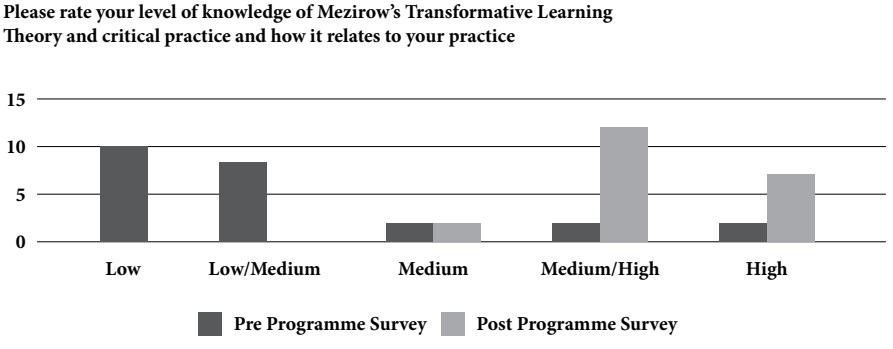
Level of Knowledge of Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Role of Early Interventions (Figure 4)



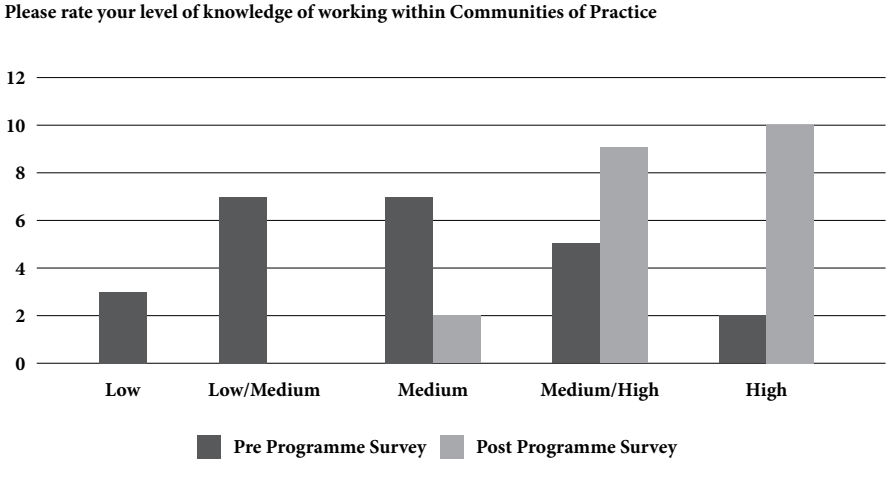
The other element of focus for the programme was to focus on practitioner skill development so that they could create evidence-based programmes in their own practice to meet the needs of their service users earlier and more efficiently.

Coupled with this, the aim was that they would develop skills in monitoring the implementation of service provision and applying continuous improvement planning, ensuring fidelity to evidence-based practice. The increase in their own confidence levels in understanding and using these skills and competencies is also evident.

Level of knowledge of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory and Critical Practice and how it Relates to Practice (Figure 5)



Level of Knowledge of Working within Communities of Practice (Figure 6)



From a qualitative perspective, learners further noted that:

> the theoretical understanding of the concept gave me a great insight of its importance and application in practice. The application of commissioning in my day-to-day practice will benefit me as a practitioner, as well as the agency that I am working for in, engaging in different support practices for families, and in identifying the best possible intervention for the individual, even though it might be provided by me or the organization that I am working for.

Similarly, the transformative effect of this learning experience is evident as another learner noted:

> I thought I knew about the services available in Carlow for children, young people and families, but I didn't know the range of services and how flexible and diverse they are. I have learnt so much from the course, our excellent lecturer; the guest speakers; the recommended reading and most of all from the other students, it was such a privilege to hear how others delivered their services and how they overcame obstacles to achieve amazing results. I have never before been involved in a learning environment as powerful as this.

This section has addressed the practical aspects of the co-creation and facilitation of the PPFS. By presenting the quantitative and qualitative data, it has demonstrated how the project has not only achieved its aims, but it has kept the learner voice and experience at the centre of it journey.

Section 3

3.1 Delivery of PPFS Programme

The facilitator delivered this programme through adopting a transformative learning perspective, as defined by Mezirow (1991) as an approach which positions critical reflection as a distinguishing characteristic, acting as a vehicle by which one questions the validity of their worldview. The students' life experiences provided a starting point for transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997). When transformational learning is part of a course of study, the role of the teacher is to establish an environment characterized by trust and care, and to facilitate sensitive relationships among the participants (Taylor, 1998). This is primarily achieved through rational discourse which serves as the primary catalyst for transformation and is necessary to validate what and how one

understands, or to arrive at a best judgement regarding a belief. This brings in the social and group element of transformative learning, as shared and interactive discourse becomes central to making meaning and developing understanding (Mezirow, 1997). Through this combination of reflection and discourse, the students were able to make shifts in their mindset which produced a more inclusive worldview, allowing for a greater understanding of the diversity and complexities which can lead families to require support under PPFS, resulting in an empathetic approach towards family support as an effective prevention and early intervention measure to promote best possible outcomes for children and young people.

The use of transformative learning as a theory was also considered important for practitioner awareness as through engaging in suitable interventions with families involving respectful discourse, practitioners become a catalyst or starting point for transformative learning in the lives of the families and individuals they support with the desired outcome being a shift in views and subsequently behaviour. Therefore, it is necessary for practitioners to have first-hand insight and experience in order to understand their client's experiences and to effectively facilitate the process. To achieve this, Mezirow (1997) describes a transformative learning environment as one in which participants have full information, are free from coercion, can become critically reflective of assumptions, are empathetic and good listeners, and are willing to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view. This mirrors the approach required for effective collaborative practice and service delivery within CFSNs. In line with transformative learning principles, this course was structured towards fostering personal development of the students rather than developing specific competencies.

3.2 Communities of Practice

A CoP is defined as a group of people who come together to share common interests and goals aimed at improving their skills by working alongside more experienced members and being involved in increasingly complicated tasks (Lave and Wenger, 1991). CoPs are identified through the existence of three distinct, key elements: domain, community, and practice. The individual CFSN members and their work with families and young people in the community represent the *communities in practice*. The process, impact and functioning of the CFSNs is underpinned by the concept of *communities of practice*, recognising the common goal of family support and best practice that all members share (domain), the wealth of knowledge specific and nuanced to

their local community (practice), and the vital professional relationships that are built through a collective partnership approach where members promote best practice and learn the intricacies of local family support work from each other (community).

Learning is 'an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 50) or, more simply, a process of social participation where the nature of the situation impacts significantly on the process itself. CoPs enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, recognizing that, given the proper structure, they are in the best position to do this (Wenger, 2015).

It is the combination of three elements that constitutes a CoP:

1. **Domain:**
   Refers to a shared endeavour, goal or area of interest. In the context of PPFS and the CFSNs, this refers to achieving best practice in family support.

2. **Community:**
   Reflects the relationships that are created through consistent interaction, discussion, and information sharing which results in a supportive community where members can learn from each other.

3. **Practice:**
   Refers to the requirement for participants to be practitioners as it forms the space where learning and knowledge can be both created and implemented whilst ensuring shared context and understanding.

This results in what Wenger (1998) coined as mutual engagement which refers to norms and social interactions built by community members and leads to the creation of shared meaning on issues or problems, effectively binding its members together as a social entity, achieving social cohesion (Agrifoglio, 2015). This was further enhanced within this programme through the use of specialist guest speakers from Tusla each week where experienced members shared direct practice knowledge, relevant and specific to PPFS. Similar to CFSNs, CoPs are privileged sites for developing, maintaining, and sharing practice-based knowledge. Through adopting a CoP approach, practitioners can address the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and

sharing, as well as the more explicit aspects (Wenger, 2015). This aligns to the aforementioned Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) led What Works (Tusla, 2013) initiative which:

- is about working together to ensure that Ireland is one of the best countries in the world for our children and young people to grow up.

- is about bringing together, sharing, questioning, and using all the evidence we have about what works to improve children and young people's lives today so that they may have brighter tomorrows.

- is about fostering persistent curiosity amongst those working to improve the lives of children and young people in Ireland.

- is about supporting those working with and for children, young people, and their families in doing the right things, in the right way and at the right time.

3.3 Conclusion

Learning outcomes of the PPFS programme included to create new and enhanced existing working relationships with partners in the community, develop a better understanding of services in participant's own area and an in-depth knowledge of the procedures involved in accessing and engaging in these services whilst identifying blocks to engagement in interagency work. As a result of completing this programme, practitioners were motivated and refreshed by engaging in continuous professional development, through acquiring knowledge on the most recent research and approaches, supporting communities of practice and the engagement in and development of CFSNs, subsequently enhancing working relationships and network outputs. This paper adds to the existing literature surrounding success in adult, community, and further education by demonstrating how a lifelong learning programme was co-created, facilitated and evaluated in a meaningful and impactful way, with the adult learner at the core.

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Psychological Capital: The Missing Link

AISLINN BRENNAN AND MAEVE O'GRADY

Abstract

The funding model for further education and training (FET) in the Republic of Ireland currently describes provider and learner success in narrow quantifiable terms as captured on the national Programme Learner Support System (PLSS). FET practitioners have grappled with the restrictive rigidity of these outcomes and measures of success for adult learners. This article investigates the concept of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) as a means of widening outcomes and measures in FET.

Keywords: Psychological Capital, Psychological Resources, Forms of Capital, Psychological Outcomes, Measures of Success

Introduction

The what, the why, and becoming

The changed policy context of adult, community and further education in Ireland has resulted in an increased emphasis on labour market activation and enabling active inclusion of the populace through socio-economic participation. The impact of the changes has generated concern amongst practitioners that soft indicators of success are being ignored in favour of hard, objective outcomes. The article describes the policy context and the reactions of practitioners, and then considers Psychological Capital (PsyCap) for its rigour and reliability in workplace and academic settings.

Links are made between the implications for using PsyCap in educational settings and good practice in adult and further education. The article provides a shared language for educators, including further education and training

(FET) practitioners, that reflects what they may already do in practice. PsyCap is placed alongside other forms of capital that can be provided in education showing the move from providing learning that hitherto may have been thought as being about personality rather than as a competence. However, the issues and dilemmas in so doing must be addressed. While the learning domain of attitudes is being considered by the European Commission, much use of PsyCap can be made by the practitioner, the provider, and the funder to enable success to be defined in what hitherto has been regarded as soft outcomes.

The article draws on the doctoral research areas of both writers: one based in quantitative research, the other based in qualitative research. Gaps in research and practice are identified, along with recommendations about possibilities for practice. Both writers are involved in initial teaching qualifications for adult and further education, and both are active practitioners in the adult and further education sector, both statutory and non-statutory, in Ireland.

We make several assumptions in this article. The first assumption is that adult and further education pathways are excellent opportunities for the populace in general and for educationally-disadvantaged learners in particular. FET, adult and community education can facilitate transformational learning for adults. This is the context for considering the concept of PsyCap and its potential. The second assumption is that many adult educators are challenged by the emphasis on measuring success in terms of hard outcomes rather than soft outcomes. PsyCap is offered to them as a means of providing a language for what they may already be partially doing, but without a mechanism to capture these efforts, they receive little recognition for their successes. The article therefore draws on the sociology of adult and community education, and critical educational theory in particular, to examine PsyCap from equality and critical perspectives. The article concludes by identifying possibilities for its application at different levels of practice. A further assumption is that other readers, like ourselves, are conflicted by the use of the term 'soft and hard outcomes'. However, motivated by the purpose of considering an innovative concept that will be of service to practitioners, we use these terms from the policy literature because it provides a language for some of the outcomes that practitioners can recognise and that reflects the voice of learners. PsyCap could frame the search for capturing soft outcomes.

Context

Ireland's education policy has enabled substantial gains to be made in the field

of adult and further education for adult learners previously unable to access courses and improve their life chances. We now have a coherent set of vocational qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The qualifications framework makes visible the pathways between qualifications gained in lower and upper secondary schooling, and qualifications in further and higher education. Amalgamating the original FET providers, Vocational Education Committees (VECs), with the state training authority (then FAS) to generate Education and Training Boards (ETBs) has simplified the provider picture. The creation of the state's further education and training agency, SOLAS, provides clarity about policy directions and links to funding.

While wider educational outcomes can be facilitated by the NFQ, funding prioritises employability and the funding for courses in the NFQ framework is linked to labour market activation policies and employability outcomes. The assumption here is that the solution to the poverty of many adults is gaining employment, so that funding is targeted towards vocationally-oriented qualifications. Adults who are social-welfare dependent are therefore likely to be directed to such qualifications and FET.

Certification, progression and employment are the outcomes sought by funders in further education. An adult learner, however, may gain a qualification but not have the hope, agency or persistence to compete in the jobs market, the confidence to gain and retain employment, or may not be sufficiently academically skilled to avail of qualifications' opportunities following redundancy. While standard education practice accepts the predictive power of qualifications (Steadman, 1995), providing the opportunity to gain skills for a specific area of occupation may not be enough. Personal skills and psychological resources are also required.

The European Commission has added personal skills to the list of key competences for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2018). Prior to 2018, there were eight competences in the list in the European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, all considered equally important, but personal skills were not mentioned. To enable competences to be achieved by learners, providers are expected to identify the learning outcomes that underpin them in terms of the constituent knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge is defined as facts and theories, skills as the ability to use the knowledge, and attitudes as the disposition to act, and the latter can include values, thoughts and beliefs. The Commission are now revising the list of competences and replacing

'Learning to Learn' with 'Personal, social and learning competence':

> Personal and interpersonal skills, sometimes referred to as 'life skills', socio-emotional, 'soft skills' or 'transversal skills' have become more important in today's society. They can respond to the growing needs of individuals to deal with uncertainty and change, remain resilient, develop personally and build successful interpersonal relations (EC, 2018, p.39).

The area in Ireland where there is more emphasis on personal skills over vocational skills is in the informal adult education sector, where time is provided to build confidence and academic skills. The fields of adult, community education and adult literacy developed considerable competence in building the general learning skills of adults because practitioners are encouraged to attend to the process of learning, and not just the content. For example, starting where the learner is at by building on the strengths of the learner, and tailoring the teaching process accordingly. They attend to the affective side of learning, especially with learners who may not feel confident in a formal educational setting.

In adult literacy, adult and community education, formal measuring of outcomes has been an issue for some time as they have become subject to the same demands made of higher NFQ- level programmes in terms of results, and the first FET strategy (SOLAS, 2014) stated that funding would be allocated on the basis of results and was thus focused on hard outcomes. This model, previously associated with higher-level NFQ programmes, has now become applicable to adult literacy, community education, and further education. A common outcome described by learners in adult literacy and by learners in community education, is 'confidence'. The Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Strategy (SOLAS, 2021) makes reference to 'confidence' throughout. In her research for the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) on the wider benefits of learning, Byrne states that the highest rating given by learners is to the outcome of increased levels of self-confidence (Byrne, 2018). The Adult Literacy Strategy calls for a core skills framework, but it could be cognitive skills that are implied. It is notable that all of the policy actions are linked to health and wellbeing.

Research by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, exploring the outcomes of Department of Education & Science-funded community education, identified the role in facilitating 'persistence and retention' in

the way in which 'dispositional barriers are addressed'. This research lists a considerable range of mental health outcomes (AONTAS, 2011, pp.147-9). SOLAS researched assessment in adult literacy at NFQ levels 1-3, in order to consolidate initial screening, placing and diagnostic assessment instruments (McSkeane, n.d.). The focus, however, is still on assessing cognitive skills rather than psychological resources. Wellbeing was identified as an outcome in O'Grady's doctoral research in women's community education (O'Grady, 2018). The research was in response to questions by practitioners for the provider to reflect upon in relation to wider developmental outcomes standing against 'hard outcomes'. Recognition for what community educators call 'pre-development' outcomes in the non-statutory community education sector is an issue in the context of funders' demands for accreditation and having to work with funders' indicators of success that are performance-centred rather than reflecting the outcomes reported by learners themselves. Grummel (2014) states that such issues are inevitable following the shift of attention away from the learner and learning processes caused by the policy changes. There is an appetite from practitioners and providers to have a framework for naming 'success' beyond performance and progression.

Transformative adult education provides time and space for learners to identify and overcome dispositional barriers to participation and progression without feeling pressured to submit work for certification. However, O'Grady's (2018) research focused on the impact of a learning culture on dispositions rather than researching the methodologies of feminist pedagogy that enables dispositional and information blocks to be changed.

Multiple frames for describing wider outcomes or benefits of learning exist, conceptualised as different forms of capital. For example, in researching the wider benefits of learning, Schuller et al. (2002) identified social capital as one of the three types of benefits (the others being human capital and personal identity) that adults derive from learning. This they mean as: 'civic skills and engagement, social networks, and social values such as trust and tolerance' (Schuller et al., 2002, p.44). Where does PsyCap fit in relation to the wealth (or capital) of a society or of an individual? From the traditional view of capital being economic wealth or 'what you have', human capital from education is the wealth-generating potential of the populace based on 'what you know', represented by their educational qualifications. Cultural capital is what you know about wider society and its structures, and how to use it for individual advantage. Social capital, 'who you know' gives the ability to some in society to

use social networks to their advantage. PsyCap, 'who you are', is about the self-knowledge needed to be a 'responsible learner', an individual able to navigate successfully through life's challenges. Education has traditionally concerned itself with providing human capital, but the need to address cultural, social and psychological needs is becoming more accepted. Education is also concerned with who students are becoming.

The current FET Strategy, Future FET: Transforming Learning (SOLAS, 2020), recognises the space in further education for adult returners:

> It can offer personal development and fulfilment, a link to community and social networks, and a range of supports that reflect the diverse base of its learners (SOLAS, 2020, p.10).

The data collected by SOLAS on the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) data management system enables the identification of FET outcomes and impacts (SOLAS, 2020, p.20), but only in relation to the goals stated in the Strategy. Successful outcomes for learners are defined as 'performance-centred' (SOLAS, 2020, p.57): employment, progression on a learning pathway, and the award of certification (SOLAS, 2020, p.27). The need for measuring wider outcomes is to reflect more 'learner-centred' (SOLAS, 2020, p.57) values: 'improved learner confidence, empowerment and engagement; increased appetite for additional study; community development; and enhanced societal engagement and integration' (SOLAS, 2020, p.28).

The Strategy describes an example of a qualitative tool developed for the State's Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) for capturing personal development in the learning journey in terms of literacy and numeracy confidence; confidence, goal setting and self-efficacy; communication skills; connection with others; and general work readiness (POBAL, 2020). This section demonstrates that a wider breadth of outcomes are recognised and valued in policy, research and practice. Instead of framing wider developmental outcomes as a personal journey or as the development of personal attributes, we argue for a more robust framework for psychological resources or, more specifically, for psychological capital, which is described in the following section.

PsyCap: The Concept

Psychological Capital, or PsyCap, is an overarching construct which is comprised of four individual, interconnected personal/psychological resources: efficacy (confidence), optimism, hope and resilience. Luthans et al. (2015) define PsyCap as:

> ..an individual's positive psychological state of development that is characterized by: (1) having confidence (efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success (Luthans et al., 2015, p.2).

PsyCap has been given the acronym HERO in the literature which provides an abbreviation of the psychological resources of hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism that contribute to the construct of PsyCap. These psychological resources and their associated beneficial outcomes are now explored.

Hope

In their 1991 research, Snyder et al. offered a definition of hope within a goal setting framework that viewed the concept as having the two dimensions of agency and pathways. Agency was described as 'a sense of successful determination in meeting goals in the past, present, and future' and pathways as 'a sense of being able to generate successful plans to meet goals' (Snyder et al., 1991, p.570). Snyder's research suggests that for hope to be present both the will (the agency) and the way (the pathway) to succeed must be operationalised in the individual. Hope is associated with higher cumulative GPAs and increased likelihood of graduating from college amongst US College students (Snyder et al., 2002; Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans and Jensen, 2002; Youssef and Luthans, 2007).

Efficacy (Confidence)

The idea of self- efficacy (also referred to as confidence in the literature) was first presented by Bandura in 1977 and researchers on motivation have continued to build on his work. Efficacy relates to how an individual judges their capacity to execute a task, achieve an outcome or succeed. This judgement determines their behaviours and the associated outcomes. In instances where this judgement

perceives a task, activity or action as being beyond an individual's capabilities, it may be that they won't contemplate an attempt, believing it to be a pointless and fruitless endeavour. Essentially it is like the adage often attributed to Henry Ford: 'Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right.' Self -efficacy plays an important role in determining an individual's attitudes, motivations and behaviours as it:

> ..influence[s] the courses of action people choose to pursue, the challenges and goals they set for themselves and their commitment to them, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, the outcomes they expect their efforts to produce, how long they persevere in the face of obstacles, their resilience to adversity, the quality of their emotional life and how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the life choices they make and the accomplishments they realize (Bandura, 2006, p.309).

Self-efficacy is a predictor of individual wellbeing, workplace performance, supports prosocial behaviours and has also been shown to enhance academic performance (Bandura et al., 1996, cited in Newman, 2014, p.25).

Resilience

Life and setbacks go hand in hand and for most individuals the experience of adversity is unavoidable. Resilience is an individual's capacity to adapt in such circumstances in their lives and essentially whether s/he can bounce back. Resilience is a state and Luthar et al. (2000) defined it as 'a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity' (p.543, cited in King et al., 2015, p.784.) Individuals who are resilient may not only weather their setbacks but throughout these they may even thrive and grow (Avey, Luthans and Jensen, 2009).

Optimism

As individuals live their lives, events and happenstance, some predicted, and others less so, are inevitable. The way in which a person views such occurrences or explains them to themselves and others, also known as an individual's explanatory style (Seligman, 2006), can be optimistic or pessimistic. A person with an optimistic explanatory style views negative events or setbacks in their lives as temporary, related to a specific situation or part of their lives and externally caused whilst viewing positive events as permanent, pervasive (relating to their whole lives) and personally influenced. On the other hand,

a person who has a pessimistic explanatory style views positive events as temporary, and externally caused and those negative setbacks as pervasive, permanent and personally caused. In their work, Shifren and Hooker (1995) define optimism as 'the current expectancy that positive outcomes will occur in the future' (p.61) and this view of optimism as an individual's generalised positive outlook in life is supported by Higgins and colleagues (2010, p.750). Brennan (2017) describes optimistic individuals as 'flexible, hopeful, motivated and persistent' and outlines a link between optimism and psychological wellbeing, physical health, success and happiness in life (p.226).

Evolution of PsyCap

PsyCap emerged from the fields of positive psychology, Positive Organisational Scholarship (POS) and Positive Organisational Behaviour (POB). Up to the mid-1990s, the dominant focus of researchers and practitioners in the psychological fields rested on pathologies and exploring what was wrong with individuals. They used this deficit approach, focusing on individuals' psychological weaknesses and problems, with the aim of helping them to overcome problematic behaviours and the resultant negative outcomes in their lives. This approach began to change in 1998 when Martin Seligman made a call to action for researchers and practitioners in the field of psychology to shift their focus from pathologies to potential. The field of positive psychology emerged after Seligman, known as the Father of Positive Psychology, called for an exploration of the possibilities of human potential and the ways in which individuals could be supported to flourish in their lives. This new strengths-based approach centred on the psychological resources and strengths that could result in positive behaviours and outcomes for individuals and lead them to living more purposeful, meaningful, and worthwhile lives.

As the new field of positive psychology emerged, organisational scholars and practitioners in organisations soon began to notice the influence of positive psychology in human flourishing at individual levels and its role as a catalyst for positive outcomes. Their research was concerned with understanding how organisations could effectively meet their goals and objectives and they began to explore the possibility that positive psychology might be able to make a valuable contribution to these endeavours. They believed that organisations who wanted to flourish could learn and draw the lessons from the field of positive psychology. This desire to foster positive behaviours in the workplace and yield the potential benefits associated with such behaviour led to the emergence and growth of POS and POB.

POB and POS researchers seeking to reap the benefits associated with psychological resources were particularly interested in those personal and psychological resources that could be measured, developed and managed for performance improvement in the workplace (Luthans, 2002b). Early research on PsyCap indicated its potential to predict desired attitudinal and behavioural outcomes and performance at work. Each of the elements of PsyCap had reliable and valid measures. Luthans and his colleagues developed and empirically validated the four-dimensional, 24-item PsyCap Questionnaire (PCQ) measure (Luthans et al., 2007) noted by Newman et al. as being the 'most widely used self- report measure' of PsyCap (2014, p.127). This led to further research of PsyCap as a predictor of organisational success.

Meta-analyses have shown that an individual's PsyCap impacts their attitudes, behaviour, performance and wellbeing (Luthans and Youssef -Morgan, 2017) across a range of contexts. In their 2011 meta-analysis of 12,567 employees across 51 studies, Avey et al. (2011) noted that employees who are 'higher in PsyCap expect good things to happen at work (optimism), believe they create their own success (efficacy and hope) and are more impervious to setbacks (resilience) when compared to those lower in PsyCap' (p.132).

PsyCap in Educational Settings

Motivated by the research findings concerning the individual and organisational benefits associated with PsyCap in the fields of psychology and organisational behaviour, researchers are now exploring the potential of PsyCap in educational settings for staff and students. In her doctoral thesis, Brennan (2017) explored the psychological resource of optimism, considering its influence on teacher work engagement in the context of the Irish Further Education sector. Analysing data gathered from 156 respondents working in teaching roles in ETBs, Brennan found that teacher optimism directly predicted teacher engagement, and optimism was also operating as a mechanism through which leadership influenced teacher engagement. Her study showed the importance of the psychological resource of optimism in directly influencing teacher work engagement, and also revealed that employee optimism helped educational leaders to enhance their employees' engagement. Brennan is now building on this research by working with colleagues Garavan, Egan and O' Brien to explore data collected from over 430 ETB staff around the role of PsyCap and its constituent HERO components, organisational and social resources in employee wellbeing. Her work in this area led to a desire to explore the potential of PsyCap to support learner outcomes in Irish FET.

A number of researchers have turned their attention to the potential benefits that could be realised through student PsyCap in educational settings. Researching in the context of third level education, Luthans et al. (2012) collected data from American undergraduate business students and found a positive link between their PsyCap and academic performance. In 2019, Martinez et al. analysed data collected from university students in Spain and Portugal and the results confirmed a positive relationship between academic engagement, PsyCap and academic performance. PsyCap was also confirmed as mediating the relationship between academic engagement and academic performance. A recent study that considered the non- traditional third-level student accessing online programmes by Black et al. (2020) carried out a narrative critical literature review to explore the role of the PsyCap model on online university students' persistence and concluded that the inclusion of the development of student PsyCap in 'revamping curricular and instructional approaches to online programmes…has tremendous value for all societal stakeholders' (Black et al., 2020, p.13). Research in a high school context was carried out by Datu and Valdez (2016) who gathered data from 606 Filipino high school students and confirmed that the respondents' PsyCap was a positive predictor of academic engagement, flourishing, interdependent happiness, and positive affect. Describing the possible processes through which student PsyCap could influence academic performance, Martinez et al. (2019) promoted its potential as a catalyst for positive outcomes for FET students.

These studies highlight the important role that PsyCap can play in predicting positive academic and wellbeing outcomes for students in third level and high school settings and the processes through which this occurs. This research contributes to the authors' view that PsyCap has the potential to make a valuable contribution to learner flourishing, wellbeing, academic engagement, academic performance and success in the Irish FET sector and to widen outcomes and measures in FET.

PsyCap's link to adult education theory

Learner-centred approaches have long been recommended in adult education settings. One aspect of being learner-centred is using the strengths-based approach, which links it to positive psychology. The wealth model, or strengths-based approach in adult education, is that adults 'bring many different experiences and strengths into the class with them' (O'Grady and Byrne, 2018, p.7) which can become known to the tutor and new content related to it. This shows a respect for the learner and their achievements. This model conveys to

the learner that curiosity and the desire to grow is the essence of being human. This foundation enables adults to learn what is 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 1977), the knowledge that can be applied to change their lives for the better. The model contrasts with the deficit view of the learner, which blames the learner for educational failure. Adult educators are skilled at contradicting the effects of the deficit model and helping learners overcome internalised negative views of themselves and their capabilities. Training adult and further educators requires a poststructural view to be taken, to help learners locate their skill gaps and attitudes as coming from social and political arrangements and, at the same time, as something they have the power to change. For example, pathways cannot be used if they are not known by the learner, nor can unknown supports be requested. According to Lynch and O'Riordan (1996), educational practice blamed the learner for not availing of opportunities without taking into account the structural barriers, or, as Bourdieu (1986) calls it, their lack of cultural capital, the know-how about overcoming the structural barriers.

Many structural barriers to participation have now been removed, but negative perceptions of adults who fail to engage or participate continue. Negative views of the learner are challenged by training for educators in how to plan and teach differently. For example, providers, as mentioned earlier, are called on to use learner-centred approaches in their curriculum planning and assessment and move away from the deficit view of the learner towards a structural view, to the actions that can be taken by the educator. As the expectation that providers have the capacity to change to more learner-centred curriculum planning and assessment, so too is there more understanding of the contribution that education makes in society and the outcomes of educational participation for different groups. Education, according to Freire (1970), is never neutral. It is always political. It always involves decisions about the distribution of educational resources, so that some benefit more than others (Freire, 1970). It is also about views relating to who is intelligent and therefore capable of learning.

Lifelong learning in the dominant discourse depends on the supported and able learner, identified by Warren and Webb (2007) as the 'responsible learner'. This learner must have sufficient learning skills and supports, and the attitude that they can use them appropriately. Such supports, skills and attitudes are not evenly distributed. They vary by critical factors of class, gender, race and other factors outside of an individual's control. They are the cultural and social factors that surround each learner, enabling or inhibiting their ability to make the most of an educational opportunity.

In this wider structural view of the learner, education is seen as the means of providing necessary skills and supports. Many will be familiar with the idea that the role of education in society is to raise the human capital of the society. All are believed to benefit by the increased level of education of the population. Human capital contributes to the overall wealth of the country. What of the individuals in the society?

The challenge presented to practitioners by PsyCap is to reframe what may have been understood as personality traits that are fixed, into malleable states. Bourdieu's work on forms of capital has been influential in understanding how contexts shape the expectations and approaches of individuals and 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.243).

Bourdieu argued that privilege, including the control of wealth, is transmitted by means of cultural capital, with the know-how of how society works and how to benefit from educational opportunities being convertible into wealth through qualifications and professions that are not just meritocratic but where advancement relies on social and cultural resources, thereby closing off possibilities for many. A poststructuralist approach such as Bourdieu's offers a dynamic vision of the possibility for change in contrast to a pessimistic approach that sees improved circumstances out of reach. The first step in change is finding a space for transforming a limiting mindset and reframing one's dispositions to be more realistic and optimistic. Adult and further education offers the individual the opportunity to acquire skills for work; how far does this go, however, if it does not offer the skills to reflect and revise one's assumptions about one's self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience?

Adult educators are already familiar with Kolb's (1984) reflective learning cycle, whereby learners can reflect on an experience, analyse it in light of different perspectives, and take informed action. Mezirow et al.'s (1990) perspective transformation theory tells us that adults are often motivated to learn their way out of a dilemma by undergoing such reflective cycles; educators can work with the idea by problematising the familiar for learners, creating artificial dilemmas, and using a learning process to identify assumptions and consider different perspectives. Mezirow (2009) identifies how each person's frame of reference consists of 'a habit of mind and resulting points of view', which can be changed when open to different perspectives (p.92). Multiple perspectives from theory, practitioners, peers, and benefits from interacting, become available in the adult education setting. The socio-emotional aspect of the adult education

space and its impact on learning is understood by many practitioners. It can involve welcoming people, getting to know them by name, supporting learners at times of difficulty, and celebrating the achievement of learners. For many, this is an equality issue in education (Lynch et al., 2009). The affective or emotional domain is an area where a practitioner can help redress inequalities and their effect on learners. Feeley's (2009) research demonstrates the paralysing impact on the ability to learn caused by experiences of being raised in an industrial school as a child. Many such adults lack 'nurturing capital' (Lynch et al., 2009) which in turn impairs the ability of the adult to learn and work in solidarity with others, or acquire the kind of social capital that converts into better outcomes. Nurturing capital is the basis for acquiring all other types of capital, and self-knowledge, or knowledge about the self and how to meet one's needs, is at the core of it.

Wells and Claxton's (2002) Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) identifies how some contexts provide rich social learning processes and resources for individuals, while other contexts may not. In this research, peers identified good teachers whose common characteristic was found to be their focus on the social and emotional aspects of learning.

Three domains in learning were identified by Bloom et al. (1956): the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor. Formal education has privileged the cognitive and the psychomotor; but the idea that emotional development is also an educational activity has been neglected, according to Baker et al. (2004). The definition of curriculum as equally-weighted between process and content that is favoured in andragogy, called 'process and content' (Jarvis, 1985, p.50), is also less well recognised. Content-led conceptualisations of curriculum are more valued in the dominant lifelong learning discourses, according to Burke and Jackson (2007).

Warren and Webb (2007) state that the concept of 'the responsible learner' underpins the discourse of formal education while being unstated. Implied is that a learner has sufficient psychological and social resources to benefit from their formal learning opportunity. Much of adult and further education targets adults who are not confident learners, even those who have achieved an upper-second level qualification and appear to have adequate cognitive skills. Emotions can be used for emancipatory learning purposes, but contemporary lifelong learning discourse emphasises outcomes for individuals, e.g., employability (Grummel, 2014). Low levels of psychological capitals can be

put in a wider context, which can generate a reflexive learning process. Giddens states that reflexivity is a skill needed by everyone in contemporary society because structures require individuals to make choices (2006, p.123): failure to make a choice is a choice in itself for which individuals get criticised or face loss of social welfare benefits.

Findings

The evidence points to the important role of psychological resources, specifically PsyCap, and multiple valuable attitudinal, behavioural and performance-related outcomes. Fostering PsyCap in a learning context enhances learners' hope, optimism, self-efficacy and resilience, and leads to learners who believe in themselves, have positive outlooks and are determined to succeed. Positive associations between PsyCap and academic success and employability signal its potential to catalyse existing measures of success in the Irish FET sector while the link between PsyCap and academic engagement, career success and wellbeing reveal its potential to contribute to desirable outcomes reflected in strategic priorities at national and local levels.

Rather than being a trait, PsyCap is a malleable state, capable of development that responds to intentional interventions and can be measured using existing valid and reliable scales that have successfully captured this development. PsyCap could yield multiple benefits for FET both as an agreed outcome of success and as a lever to broaden existing measures of success in FET. The affective domain in learning has been neglected in curriculum and assessment, as has its potential for enabling learners to gain specific psychological capital. Practitioners who attend to the social and emotional aspects of teaching and learning and help learners build psychological resources do not receive recognition for these outcomes, beyond the gratitude of their learners. The literature of PsyCap makes a language available to practitioners to recognise, frame and build on their good practice.

PsyCap is a form of capital that complements and builds on other forms of capital. It sits alongside those forms of capital that enables both the individual to set and achieve goals, and wider society to achieve policy outcomes.

Based on these findings the authors suggest that PsyCap is worthy of exploration in FET and discuss a number of recommendations, also illustrated in *Figure 1*, at the level of practitioners, providers and funders as to how this could begin.

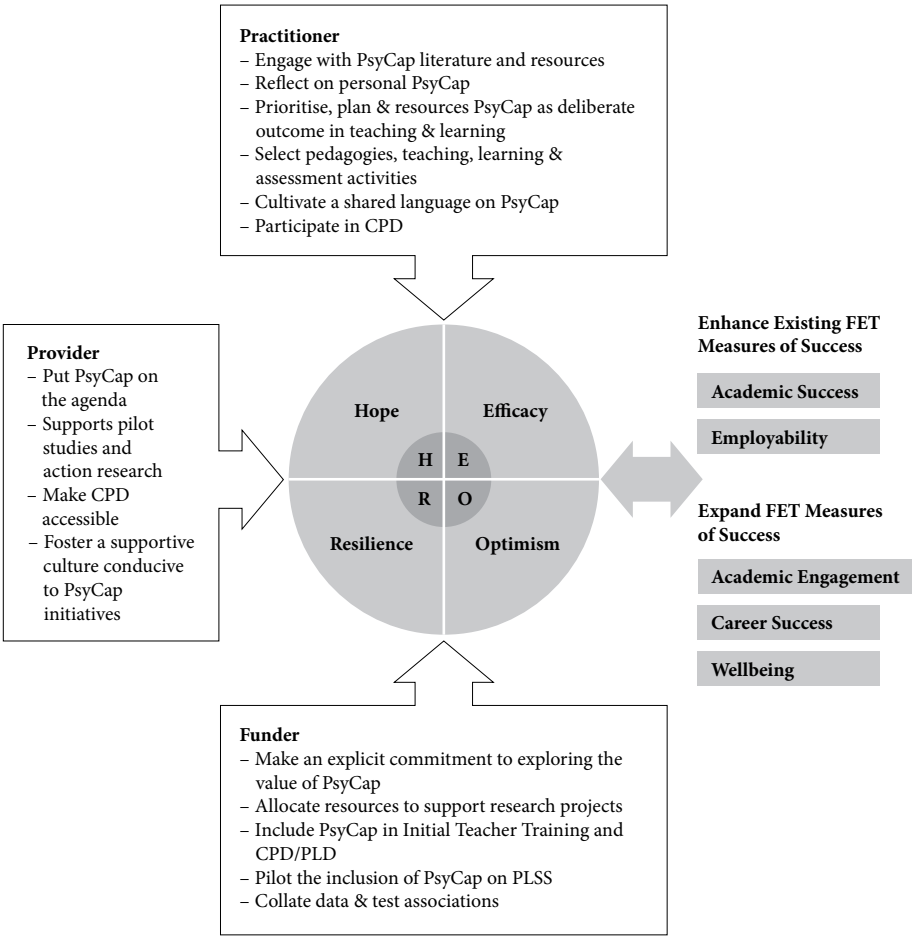

Figure 1. The development and outcomes of PsyCap in Irish FET

Recommendations

The micro level of the FET teaching practitioners is fundamental. It is recommended that the practitioner explores the literature signposted in this paper to engage with opportunities to enhance their personal understanding of the construct. It is the socio-emotional and affective awareness of the educator that enables the learner to assess their own HERO levels and reflect on how to build them. Practitioners can engage with activities and resources to facilitate reflection on their own PsyCap; scope out the types of professional and life events and activities that gave rise to its development; identify opportunities for further development; and recognise its value in contributing to their wellbeing, life and career outcomes.

Although many existing FET Practitioners are already actively engaged in enhancing learner psychological resources including hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism (PsyCap), this does not currently occur in a planned and intentional way. The shared recognition of learners' PsyCap as state-like, malleable predictors of success and wellbeing in adult education means that PsyCap can be strategically prioritised, planned and resourced as an intentional outcome in FET teaching and learning.

The route to existing learning outcomes in FET curricula present opportunities for skilled practitioners to proactively build and enhance learner hope, optimism, resilience and efficacy. Regardless of the programme or module concerned, the selection of the pedagogies, teaching, learning and assessment activities can have regard to the development of these attributes in the learner. It is recommended that practitioners consider opportunities to introduce and develop PsyCap in curriculum planning and assessment, especially with peers, and introduce content on the construct into their teaching process and outcomes.

At present there is no shared language on psychological resources in FET and it is recommended that practitioners play an active role in cultivating this amongst their learners and professional peers in the everyday context of their teaching and learning environments. This practice can contribute to an enhanced shared understanding of PsyCap, recognition of its value as a measure of success, reflect the voice of learners, and bridge the current language of hard and soft outcomes for all stakeholders.

The provider has a role to play in supporting their teaching practitioners to gain an enhanced understanding of PsyCap. The authors recommend that the FET Co-ordinator/Manager puts PsyCap on the agenda, supports pilot studies and action research, makes continuous professional development (CPD) accessible, and fosters a supportive culture to resource, practice, implement and share good practice on PsyCap initiatives. This CPD needs to facilitate practitioners to use the concept, create interventions to boost PsyCap, devise instruments, evaluate effective teaching and provide a framework to add to their toolkit in facilitating personal development and reflective practice.

At the macro level of the funder and policymaker, it is critical that there is an explicit commitment to exploring the value of developing and managing learner PsyCap as a practical mechanism to realise desirable FET outcomes. The authors recommend the allocation of resources to support research

projects exploring PsyCap and psychological resources, its inclusion in Initial Teacher Training and CPD/PLD programmes, practitioner action research and the dissemination of findings in the FET community. PsyCap in FET can be explored using the theoretical frameworks of Hobfoll's Conservation of Resource Theory (2018) and the suggestion of resources building upon one another, and Frederickson's Broaden and Build theory of positive emotions (2001, 2013). In addition, it is recommended that SOLAS pilot the inclusion of PsyCap as a measure of success in FET on the PLSS data management system. The collection of the initial data could then be used to test associations between PsyCap and the other captured outcomes.

Conclusion

The literature on PsyCap is drawn from the quantitative research tradition in psychology and POB, with trials seen as robust and reliable. It is at an early stage of use in educational settings and the gap remains about being trialled in adult and further education in Ireland. PsyCap can be placed in the toolkit of good practice, and it has the ability to name learner goals, educator goals, and FET Strategy goals. It can contribute to socio-cultural approaches in education by providing a shared language between all stakeholders for the kind of success reported anecdotally by learners.

Its limitations lie in relying on psychological approaches in education to the detriment of structural and political analyses, by over-emphasising individual responsibility that would serve only to exacerbate educational failure. It therefore must be part of a strengths-based approach that enables adult learners recognise what they have already achieved. It is also noted that we have not yet tested HERO with learners to assess the extent to which HERO reflects learners' definitions of success.

Deployment of PsyCap in adult and further education requires stakeholders to reflect on how they stand with the role of the emotions in learning. Our view is that any educator, provider, and funder who is concerned with developing the confident learner if not the 'responsible learner' will be able to use the concept. The challenge will be to develop measurement instruments that are appropriate and easy to use by learners and educators.

PsyCap offers learners and educators a shared language for recognising, discussing and reporting on what are exciting and transformative outcomes. The research on PsyCap gives us confidence that its deployment in adult, community and further

education will build the psychological resources of learners, that practitioners will find a way of recognising PsyCap outcomes and celebrating them, and we hope that providers and funders will be able to devise mechanisms to capture learner success in building their psychological resources.

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Community Education for Human Rights and Social Inclusion: An Cosán's Right to Work Education Project

THOMAS MURRAY

Abstract

This article explores the nature of successful human rights education through the lens of a single case study. In the context of new legislation governing the right to work, An Cosán's Right to Work Education Project partnered with more than forty International Protection Applicants (IPAs) living in Direct Provision centres across Ireland. Funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the programme sought to address participants' human rights and social inclusion alongside their employment and self-employment opportunities. The programme was delivered over 9 days of workshops. Using adult community education methods, practitioners facilitated participatory learning spaces where IPAs and other stakeholders involved in human rights and social inclusion could explore legislation, practice, and experience together. Blended learning options were offered to those participants unable to attend in person. The article draws on participant voices and practitioner reporting to outline the project's short-term impact. Concentrating on human rights education, it analyses what worked and why. Finally, recommendations are made in relation to promoting human rights education 'from below' in adult community education spaces.

Keywords: Adult Community Education, Human Rights, Social Inclusion, Right to Work, Blended Learning, Refugee, Asylum Seeker, International Protection Applicant

Introduction

An Cosán (Irish: 'The Path') is a community organisation offering people of all ages diverse programmes in early years education and care, parenting, community, further and higher education. For over thirty-five years, the organisation has sought to use the power of transformative education to end the

injustice of poverty. In recent years, An Cosán has also moved online to bring its adult community education ethos beyond its home in Jobstown, Tallaght to communities across Ireland. An Cosán's student body consists of those most marginalised in our society: socio-economically disadvantaged students, lone parents, and students with asylum seeker status, often living in Direct Provision (DP) centres (Kovacic et al., 2020). The following paper examines a single case study of An Cosán's work, the Right to Work Education Project, to explore the nature of successful human rights education.[1]

In 2019, An Cosán partnered with more than forty International Protection Applicants (IPAs) living in DP centres across Ireland. The Right to Work Education Project aimed to co-create a blended learning programme addressing participants' human rights and social inclusion concerns alongside their employment and self-employment opportunities. This article draws on participant voices and practitioner reporting to outline the project's short-term impact and to analyse what worked regarding human rights education. It highlights the role of holistic, wraparound learner supports and an inclusive programme learning environment. The article further suggests that successful human rights education requires adult community education methods, specifically modelling a dialogic, solidaristic approach to learning and project decision-making. Documenting this experience is intended to facilitate deeper reflection and dialogue among practitioners on the nature of successful educative practice for human rights and social inclusion today.

Listening to the Voices: Project Origins and Pre-Delivery

The Right to Work Education Project originated in An Cosán's staff listening to IPAs within our student body and network of collaborative partner organisations across Ireland. This network included affected-led, civil society groups such as the Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland (MASI). During 2017 and 2018, An Cosán delivered several blended learning programmes in community development to learners in DP centres in Galway, Monaghan, Kerry, and Dublin. Meanwhile, in February 2018, after an asylum seeker initiated a legal challenge, the Supreme Court declared the ban on work for asylum seekers unconstitutional. The new legal framework, introduced to satisfy the EU Refugee Reception Directive, recognised asylum

1 The Right to Work Education Project was funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) under the 2018 Human Rights and Equality Grant Scheme. I would like to acknowledge all An Cosán staff, community partners, and learners who took part in the project as well as the support of the IHREC for enabling it to happen.

seekers' right to work while retaining restrictions on full and instant access to the labour market. Beyond legal restrictions, the institutionalisation of asylum seekers in DP creates a career gap for people seeking employment after receiving their status as a refugee (Buczkowska, 2018, pp.39-40). Furthermore, long periods of inactivity undermine people's well-being and mental health, damaging their self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as confidence in their own abilities (MASI, 2019).

In these circumstances, IPAs' access to relevant education, training, work experience, and networking opportunities is important. Cognisant of this context, An Cosán developed the Right to Work Education Project in response to learners' and community partners' expressed hopes and concerns. We sought to partner with IPAs currently living in DP and to co-create the programme. Informed by adult community education principles, this approach centred a dialogic, solidaristic approach to learning and project decision-making. The proposed programme aimed to address participants' collective human rights and social inclusion issues alongside their individual plans to pursue employment and self-employment opportunities. An Cosán applied to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission under its 2018 Human Rights and Equality Grant Scheme. The Right to Work Education Project received 20,000 euro in funding. The funding determined the project's scope and timeframe; all work packages and reports were due for completion by November 2019.

The Right to Work Education Project occurred over three phases in 2019. The initial pre-delivery phase (January to April) centred on stakeholder consultation and participant recruitment. As project lead, I held exploratory meetings with IPAs, including current students at An Cosán, and potential collaborative partners. These included affected-led civil society organizations, notably MASI and the active 'Right to Work' civil society campaign. The delivery team held further meetings with NGO stakeholders with relevant expertise, notably the Irish Refugee Council and the European Network Against Racism, as well as with business representatives that expressed an interest in supporting the project, including Business in the Community, Accenture, and LinkedIn. In keeping with a co-agency approach to learning and decision-making, applicants were asked to complete an online questionnaire before joining. Respondents had an opportunity to outline their reasons for taking part, their future career plans, as well as their study interests and preferred choices of workshop topic.

IPAs seeking to join the programme expressed a diverse range of hopes, capacities, needs, and concerns. Many articulated a desire to learn more about their rights:

> I would like to learn more about right to work in Ireland and Irish society. I am very interested to humanity issues and challenges in Ireland (Respondent A).

> I want to know all about my rights in Ireland and the things that I am able to do as a refugee (Respondent B).

> To learn more about working rights (Respondent C).

Participants collectively and consistently expressed their shared concern to be treated fairly and offered the same opportunities as a white, Irish person when seeking employment. This latter point is further evidenced in *Table 1* by the high priority given to themes such as 'human rights and equality in Ireland' (chosen by 80% of respondents) and 'rights in the workplace' (68%).

Table 1. Responses to the question 'Which of the following workshop topics might interest you?' (Please tick as many of the following as you wish). Total of 44 responses received.

Would-be participants further expressed interest in developing applied knowledge and skills needed to source and secure work:

> I want to increase my personal skills. I would like to find a job (Respondent B).
>
> To improve my employability skills (Respondent C).
>
> How to search [for] a job in Ireland and having the knowledge of rights in the workplace will be of great help to me as l am in the process of seeking a job (Respondent D).
>
> I want to enhance my skills and improve my employability capacity (Respondent E).
>
> I would like to learn more about caring [for] elder people (Respondent F).

A smaller number of respondents sought to learn more about self-employment:

> I must learn about starting a business in Ireland (Respondent G).
>
> I want to start something on my own, either in a full-time employment or doing my own business (Respondent H).

The survey data further highlights how participants held a wide variety of educational qualifications, work experiences, and expectations concerning future employment. This diversity was reflected in participants' choice of future career path (*Table 2*).

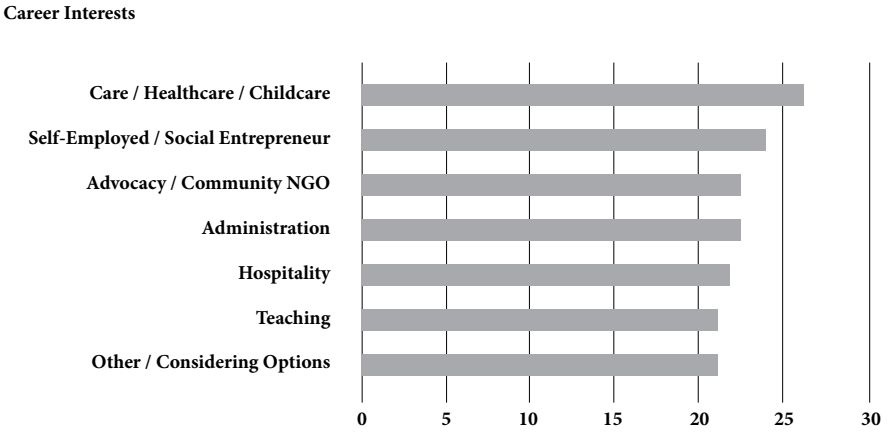

Table 2. Participants' Career Interests

Among the other motivations for taking part provided by applicants, some wanted to pursue personal development and to achieve greater independence:

> The programme itself is mature for adult like me who has a past. I have so much passion for anything that pertains education (Respondent I).
>
> I am interested in self-development (Respondent J).
>
> I want to do something when the asylum process is over and be able to do something positive (Respondent K).
>
> I don't want to depend on the state; I really want to work for myself, not depending with social money (Respondent L).

Other learners expressed their desire to integrate into and contribute to society:

> I would like to integrate into society and to be able to work or help other people (Respondent M).
>
> I believe this programme improve my skills and make me become a meaningful and useful person in society. I am desperately looking forward to it (Respondent N).
>
> I would like to include myself in society (Respondent O).
>
> I want to be useful to myself and the society (Respondent P).

> I look to the prospect of both achieving my aims and contributing immensely to the community (Respondent Q).

These comments illustrate the powerfully felt need among IPAs for dignity, meaning, and community, for overcoming the institutionalized and often isolating circumstances created by DP and the resulting harms to self-esteem.

At the end of the pre-delivery phase, early consultations with stakeholders and potential participants yielded three positive developments. Firstly, open engagement facilitated the recruitment of 20 learners to the Right to Work Education Project's first workshop on Friday, 31st May. Word-of-mouth among existing participants helped the project recruit a further 20 learners as the summer progressed. This approach similarly helped engage expert stakeholders as potential contributors to the programme. Secondly, consultation and dialogue helped identify participant interests and informed the programme's design and workshop themes. The survey data showed that the delivery team needed to achieve a balance between those participants primarily seeking to pursue training for employment and self-employment and those interested in learning more around human rights and social inclusion. Thirdly, this process underlined participants' high support needs arising from the institutionalization of asylum seekers in DP. The journey to social inclusion, as one learner observed, is like 'crossing a broken bridge'. Internally, team meetings now took place concerning workshop design, including the implementation of timely wraparound supports and the creation of an inclusive learning environment.

Crossing a Broken Bridge: Programme Delivery

The Right to Work Education Project's second phase (May to August) effected programme delivery. An Cosán responded to participants' expressed needs by providing wraparound supports and by creating an inclusive, participatory learning environment. In practice, a team of community educators, education technologists, and student support officers organised and delivered a series of collaborative workshops with some 40 project participants. An initial series of 5 day-long face-to-face workshops were held between Friday, 31st May and Friday, 28th June. A further 4 day-long workshops occurred from Friday, 9th August to Friday, 31st August. All workshops took place in An Cosán's Virtual Community College office on Usher's Quay in Dublin 8. Learners travelled from DP centres in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Longford, Sligo, Waterford, and Wicklow to attend. An option to join the class by webinar was also offered.

Workshops centred on participatory, group-based discussion of challenges faced by IPAs in realising their 'right to work' as well as relevant solutions. Bulelani Mfaco (MASI), Ellie Kisyombe (Irish Refugee Council), Aga Wiensyk (European Network Against Racism Ireland), and Alphonse Basogomba (Buheri Consultants) all provided invaluable guest presentations on self-employment, labour market access, anti-discrimination practice, refugee and migrant rights advocacy, and the right to work. An Cosán staff members, notably Suzie Cahn, Social Enterprise coordinator, and Mark Kelly, Skills to Succeed Academy coordinator, provided specific advice, information, and support concerning participants' self-employment options as well as their employability skills, including career guidance, job-searching, CV writing and interview skills. As project lead, I drew on my background in human rights to facilitate group dialogues on the themes of 'human rights and equality in Ireland' and 'rights in the workplace'.

In seeking to overcome barriers to education experienced by marginalised adult learners, An Cosán has developed a broad ecosystem of supports (Kovacic et al., 2020). Several specific wraparound supports require highlighting with respect to the Right to Work Education programme's delivery. Project funding enabled participants to avail of free transport to and from workshop venues. Most participants joined the workshops in person, frequently travelling long distances to do so. At the same time, An Cosán offered participants a blended learning option. Learners unable to attend in person were given an option to join online by webinar. Learners were also offered access to relevant educational technology and to one-to-one support from educational technologists. The provision of supported online access to workshops in this manner facilitated the inclusion of several participants. Finally, in keeping with An Cosán's long-standing ethos of hospitality, the project aimed to create a place of hearth and home for participants. The project delivery team was greatly assisted in this respect by the learners themselves. Moreover, project funding enabled us to partner with 'Cooking for Freedom', a cooking group led by women in Direct Provision in Hatch Hall, who provided additional catering and hospitality for learners.

In adult community education, process matters: what we do is of equal importance to how we do it. Building on foundational community education concepts and practices, educators facilitated participants' building active, dialogic relationships with themselves, with each other, and with language, ideas, and the world around us (Freire, 1996). Throughout, participants

were offered the opportunity to speak freely with their peers, to articulate their personal experience, and to understand the right to work and its denial within those shared experiences. Small group, peer-to-peer discussion enabled participants to share information and solve real-life problems. These included problems created by lack of information, such as access to language classes, or by the inconsistent application of government policy, such as setting up bank accounts. These 'private troubles' in turn formed the basis of thematic, collective discussions of rights in the workplace and human rights and equality in Ireland, ensuring their further contextualisation as 'public issues' (Mills, 1959).

A vital aspect of the Right to Work Project's modelling a dialogic, solidaristic approach to learning and project decision-making was its attempt to uphold a principle of representation ('nothing about us without us'). The aim was to facilitate a diversity of voices, experiences, and identities within programme delivery. Guest contributions were arranged with refugees and migrants currently navigating the Direct Provision system as well as those who had already done so. Participants reported the particular importance of hearing from guest speakers who had previously been in Direct Provision, specifically responding to their capacity to speak from experience about their challenges and successes in seeking employment or self-employment in Ireland as well as their diverse experiences of human rights and equality. Participants drew on these discussions to problematise the current legislative framework governing IPAs' right to work and to develop alternative recommendations. Towards the project's conclusion, the group's recommendations were submitted for inclusion in the Collective Civil Society Alternative Report to the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Several important challenges to practice arose during this period. Firstly, while the initial proposal suggested working with 80 IPAs, through the course of delivery, it became clear that the team needed to work more intensively with a smaller group of 40 learners given the widely varying needs expressed in our recruitment survey and exploratory discussions. Secondly, while the original proposal identified two locations in Galway and Waterford for delivery of face-to-face workshops, this did not occur. Community Partner organisations were unavailable during the project's timeframe owing to annual leave, staff turnover, and the closure of community organisations during August. While all IPAs in Galway and in Waterford could join the Dublin workshops either in person or by webinar, several chose not to avail of these options. Ultimately, ten participants did not complete the programme. Reasons given for withdrawing

generally foregrounded external circumstances arising in DP, including lack of public transport, absence of local childcare, and competing commitments, rather than dissatisfaction with the project. Two learners exited after securing employment. These challenges offer valuable organisational learning for future projects. Lessons learned include ensuring an appropriate fit between budget allocation and recruitment targets, securing early confirmation of new delivery sites, and foregrounding the online educational supports available to distance learners early in recruitment conversations.

Celebrating Success and Evidencing Impact

Celebration is an important and sometimes overlooked aspect of the care work underpinning an inclusive learning environment. During the third and final phase (September to October), An Cosán organised a concluding Award Ceremony for project participants in the offices of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). This half-day workshop combined guest speaker inputs - Rosemary Kunene (Participant / Voice of Migrants Ireland) and Michael O'Neill (IHREC) - with world-café style, small group discussions to reflect on what learners had achieved through the project as well as on what issues remained outstanding and how these could be addressed. Partner organisations represented included MASI, Voice of Migrants Ireland, Our Table, AONTAS, SPIRASI, the Irish Refugee Council, Places of Sanctuary Ireland, Business in the Community Ireland, New Communities Partnership, and Create Sound. The Project concluded with an award ceremony to celebrate learners' completion of the programme and to acknowledge and enjoy participants' learning together. Twenty participants collected awards on the day with a further ten awards delivered to participants in absentia.

Informal participant feedback to all An Cosán staff was extremely positive throughout the programme. Learners also responded anonymously to a concluding project evaluation survey. This feedback provides evidence of the Right to Work Education Project's short-term impact. Participants reported enhanced knowledge of their individual employability and self-employment skills and opportunities:

> Thanks so much for all your help and mostly understanding new skills I didn't know before. Stay blessed and your crew. (Participant A)

> The whole package was really great - CV writing, interview skills, employment skills etc. (Participant B).

Learners also reported enhanced understanding of their human rights, including their rights in the workplace. Participants gained new knowledge of the various support structures available to them to help realise those rights at community and state levels.

> Of course, I have gained knowledge on my rights as a worker (Participant C).

> I am better informed (Participant D).

> I am now aware of organisations and groups that I can talk to (Participant E).

In addition to the specific education and training imparted, programme participants widened their social networks through meeting diverse participants from across Ireland. Learner feedback underlines how the project's participatory educative process facilitated their developing confidence and social capital:

> The project was delivered in a participatory manner, and participants were free to openly express their feelings and learn from each other. Participants felt included and listened to (Participant F).

> The workshop was helpful. I had a wonderful time learning and connecting with other people of great skills (Participant G).

> I have gained so much connections with different people during the course (Participant H).

In the context of the institutionalised and often isolating circumstances created by DP, it is worth noting that this aspect of the programme was the most commented upon.

The Right to Work Education Project's medium-to-long term impact will likely emerge from the new relationships created during its delivery. Participants were introduced to representatives of supportive organisations and human rights advocates, including members of MASI and IHREC. Participants used the awards ceremony to discuss and progress potential human rights cases with IHREC, including cases concerning the availability to people in DP of driving licenses and disability accommodations. Enhanced social capital further included networking with community groups in the locality of students' DP centres. Course participants in DP in Rosslare, for example, made connections

with supportive An Cosán learners at the neighbouring South End Family Resource Centre in Wexford. A local refugee and migrant solidarity project subsequently emerged from these relationships.

Human Rights from below

Reflecting on the Right to Work Education Project's genesis, delivery, and impact, it is appropriate to evaluate it as a case study in human rights education. In doing so, I wish to make a distinction between treating human rights as a specialist branch of law or international relations and realising human rights through the application of community education principles. The former, conventional view of human rights education – teaching people about their rights – can readily reflect a top-down commitment to monologue: 'It suggests that our human rights have already been defined for us by some authority that understands our rights better than we do ourselves, and that we should accept this definition uncritically' (Ife, 2003, p.202). Such an approach to human rights education parallels what Freire (1996) describes as the banking concept of education, where the educator's knowledge of what 'human rights' mean is transferred from their head to the students without transformation or critique. In contrast, teaching human rights from below requires an active, dialogic relationship between teacher and learner: 'rights need to be understood in the context of people's lived experience, especially their personal experience of human rights abuse or violation' (Ife, 2009, p.203).

Experience gained through An Cosán's Right to Work Education Project supports the claim that successful human rights education requires the latter model, specifically modelling a dialogic, solidaristic approach to learning and project decision-making. In place of simply 'banking' knowledge concerning human rights or employability, the project team sought to model human rights, dignity, and inclusivity throughout. Modelling human rights is recognised to be one of the most effective forms of human rights education:

> 'The old adage "do as I say, not as I do" is bad education practice in any context, but quite disastrous when we are dealing with human rights. People whose schooldays are long behind them will often have only a vague memory of what they were taught, but will have a very clear recollection of how they were treated. It is how people are treated that makes a lasting impression: whether they were treated with kindness or cruelty, whether they felt listened to or not, whether their ideas were valued or ridiculed, whether they were discriminated against or accepted on their own terms and whether they were encouraged to think creatively or to conform' (Ife, 2009, p.204).

Globally, as Western states and societies increasingly rely on militarised borders and carceral institutions or retreat into chauvinistic nationalisms, community education will likely further involve practitioners and learners in urgent questions of human rights and social inclusion. Traditional community education principles – dialogue, participation, inclusivity, social action – remain essential to meaningful human rights education and to the realisation of human rights in the 21st century. Ultimately, by foregrounding the lives and experiences of those directly affected, human rights education from below illuminates ways of realising rights against and beyond the deep structures of power that shape our world.

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Part-Time Learners' Perceptions of Success During ERT

SUSAN FLYNN, JOSEPH COLLINS, AND LINDSAY MALONE

Abstract

The Faculty of Lifelong Learning at South East Technological University's Carlow campus, is one of the largest providers of part-time learning in the Irish Higher Education sector. A large majority of our lifelong learners, 88%, are adult learners over the age of 23, therefore the perspectives of our part-time learners offer us valuable insights into adult learner experiences in the Irish Higher Education sector. The outbreak of COVID-19 saw us pivot our provision to an emergency remote teaching (ERT) model in the first wave of the pandemic. The faculty undertook an extensive study of its learners in 2021 to examine the impacts of ERT on learners, and this article takes a qualitative approach to the findings of this study, looking specifically at learners' comments about success, and the barriers to success which ERT posed. Our study provided an opportunity to learn about our learners' conceptions of student identity, and how they interpret success as part-time learners.

Keywords: Part-Time Learning, ERT, Online Pivot, Success

Introduction

The changes in delivery for many Higher Education Institutions (HEI) during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21 included an 'online pivot' to ERT (emergency remote teaching). The Faculty of Lifelong Learning at South East Technological University's Carlow campus is one of the largest providers of part-time learning in the Irish sector, with 6,114 lifelong learners enrolled in 2020 (see *Table 1* and *Figure 1*), of which 88% were adult learners over the age of 23. A 2015 definition provided by the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (Higher Education Authority [HEA], 2015, p.35) states that adult learners are defined as 'those aged 23 years or over on 1st

January of the year of entry to higher education'. Defining the lifelong learner is seen to be a complex issue due to the wide diversity of studies that are available however the authors identifies that the definition provided by the HEA (2015) correlates more specifically with the aims of this research.

The faculty undertook a wide-scale study of part-time learners in early 2021, to examine learners' experiences of ERT. This article foregrounds the voices of learners, taking a qualitative approach to highlight learners' needs, feelings and lived experiences. As such, this research adopts a Freirean approach, acknowledging that learning and teaching are an ongoing dialogue. Such a dialogue is critical to the future of part-time learning in Ireland, as the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 suggests that higher education participation amongst adults will increase almost two-fold from 2015 to 2030.

Institute	**% of Lifelong Learning Students (i.e. % part-time students of total students)**
Technological University Dublin	29.5%
Institute of Technology Carlow *(now SETU)*	52.0%
University College Dublin	16.2%
University College Cork	19.5%
IT Sligo	54.6%
National University of Ireland Galway	15.8%
Munster Technological University	18.8%
Dublin City University	15.3%
Limerick IT	23.9%
University of Limerick	11.0%
Maynooth University	12.3%
Trinity College Dublin	8.7%
Royal College of Surgeons	33.8%
Waterford IT	17.0%
Dundalk IT	20.3%
Mary Immaculate College	19.1%
Letterkenny IT	20.1%
Athlone IT	16.9%

Galway-Mayo IT	11.0%
St. Angela's College	34.0%
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology	16.0%
National College of Art and Design	12.0%
All Irish HEIs	20.2%

Table 1. Percentage of Lifelong Learning students (i.e. part-time students) based on HEA enrolment headcount data from all Irish HEIs for 2020/2021. Note: HEA enrolment data excludes certain categories of students including apprentices and incoming Erasmus students. (Source: HEA.ie)

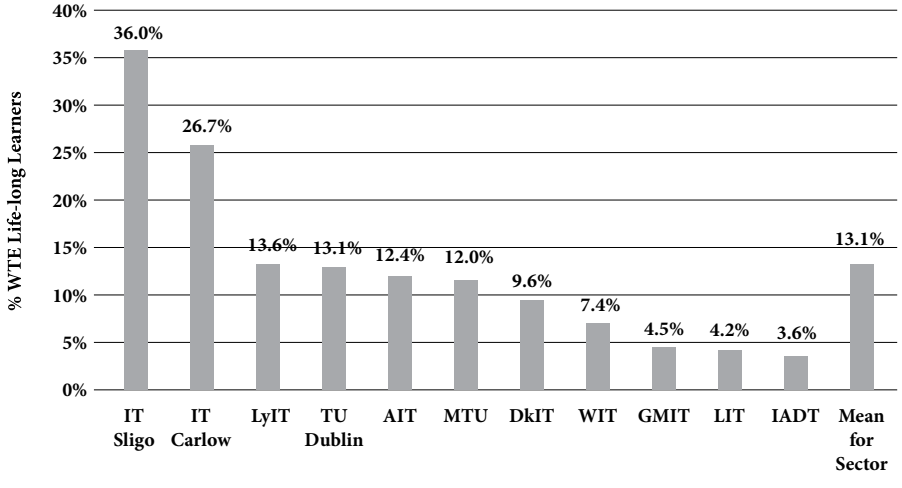

Figure 1. Percentage of Lifelong Learning students (i.e. part-time students) based on Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) in the technological higher education sector in 2020/2021 (Source: HEA RGAM 202)

The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 necessitated a transition to online delivery for teaching and learning from primary to third level education in Ireland and across the developed world. A wide range of studies have emerged on the impact of this pivot on teachers and learners (Kessler et al., 2020; Lemay and Doleck, 2020; Quezeda et al., 2020) and at South East Technological University's Carlow campus we studied the effects on lecturers (Flynn and Noonan, 2020; Flynn, 2021). While much research is emerging to examine the myriad effects of ERT on teachers and learners, there is a dearth of research on part-time learners' experiences. The pandemic has

brought uncertainty, isolation, and stress to many, not least to learners who must learn to navigate new technologies to keep pace (Flynn, Collins and Malone, 2022).

COVID-19 has clearly disrupted the academic life of students (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020; Chaturvedi et al., 2021). Studies examining the impact of COVID-19 reported decreases in study hours and increases in academic procrastination among students in higher education [HE] (Aucejo et al., 2020; Biricil and Sivrikava, 2020; Jia et al., 2020). In addition, the nature of online learning at home further encourages procrastination as students not only need to exert higher levels of self-control to overcome isolated learning and the challenges of online learning (Drumm and Jong, 2020; Rasheed et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2021), they must also resist interruptions present at home, e.g., family, television, work, social media (Meiier et al., 2016; Pan, 2020). Taken together, these studies evidenced that uncertainty was at higher than average levels during the pandemic.

It is recognised that online interaction in adult educational settings has not been widely examined (Diep et al., 2018). Part-time learners have been affected by the change in mode of delivery in a unique way. For the purposes of this article, Lifelong Learning is taken to mean 'on-going part-time learning as an adult that takes place in a higher education context'.

At South East Technological University's Carlow campus, we have a faculty devoted to Lifelong Learning which operates across three of our academic campuses: Carlow Campus, Wicklow County Campus and Wexford Campus, as well as on site in industry and with sectoral partners. Lifelong Learning programmes are offered in business, humanities, social sciences, law, engineering, computing and science discipline areas, offering programmes leading to major award qualifications at Levels 6, 7, 8 and 9 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, our educational technologists and instructional designers along with our Teaching and Learning Centre supported our teaching staff to deliver remotely. They worked assiduously to ensure a smooth transition to remote teaching. Online teaching was delivered to all learners through the development of synchronous and asynchronous teaching modes. Additionally, revised assessments for online use were created as well as training for all staff. Departments at all levels worked to

ensure that students were not disadvantaged at the point of assessment, while preserving the academic integrity and standards of their award. In so doing, we have been mindful of the principles and guidelines set out at a national level by Quality and Qualifications Ireland and the academic rigour required for all programmes of study.

Study of part-time learners

From January to March 2021, the invitation to participate in this study to gather and analyse data from our learners, to better understand their needs and to learn about how the shift to ERT affected them was extended to all part-time learners. The study aimed to gather and analyse information from our learners, to better understand their needs and the effects of ERT on their studies, identities, and lives. The input of our learners is always a critical element in the design and delivery of our courses. However, the pandemic and ERT have necessitated an urgent consultation with learners so that we may consider and acknowledge best practice going forward. We were interested in learners' perceptions of their own learning journey, especially during the pandemic, as one of the most reliable predictors of gains in learning is active student involvement. Involving learners at all stages of our planning will ultimately benefit both our institution and our learners, it will help to assist us in achieving student success and retention (Tinto, 1997). Astin's Student Involvement Theory (1984) further elucidated that desirable outcomes for HE institutions are viewed in relation to how students change and develop as a result of being involved. He argued that involvement requires an investment of psychosocial and physical energy which can vary from student to student. Critically, Astin argues that academic performance is correlated with the student involvement.

Our teaching is centred on Social Learning Theory (SLT) which suggests that persons learn through the observing the behaviour exhibited by others, referred to as 'role models', and the consequences of this behaviour (Payne and Walker, 1998). Coupled with this, it focuses on Freirean principles and so we recognise that dialogic encounters are an essential element of our work through which our interpretations can be tested and developed further (Fung, 2017).

> the practice of remaining open to being wrong and recalibrating one's understandings in the light of new evidence, or of new interpretations of existing evidence, needs to be reasserted. Dialogic encounters are vital; they test our assumptions and extend our knowledge (Fung, 2017, p.14).

Our Faculty of Lifelong Learning is built on a platform constituted by a dynamic dialectical approach toward the world, a praxical view of knowledge and a deep commitment to engaging and learning with and from our learners. This represents a specific approach to understanding Lifelong Learning students and the social world, from which general principles for teaching and learning can be generated.

Methodology and Methods

The COVID-19 pandemic caused students across the globe to transition from in-person classes to remote learning and this unprecedented change to HE saw institutions adopting multiple online teaching modalities and instructional platforms (Nguyen et al., 2021). We sought to understand students' experiences with, and perspectives on, those methods of remote instruction in order to inform pedagogical decisions for our future development of online courses and virtual learning experiences. The research design was a mixed method approach which encompassed a qualitative and quantitative approach in order to examine the impacts of ERT on learners. The questions were chosen in order to gather information and understand the impacts of ERT on learners, which included the challenges and the benefits. The challenge for institutional leaders is not only student engagement, but how to engage the different student populations on campus (Wyatt, 2011). By targeting all learners enrolled within the Faculty of Lifelong Learning, we were able to engage directly, offering the opportunity to volunteer participation in a survey and focus group. By examining statistics and comments in the survey and by gaining further rich detail in conversations in the focus groups, we successfully utilised a mixed methods approach which was grounded in an emancipatory framework. After a rigorous ethical approval process, we launched our anonymous online survey, receiving over 400 responses. The response rate is not unexpected as responses to surveys can be lower than other survey types. In addition, one third of the Faculty students are studying on short certificate/micro credential programmes and many may have completed these before the survey was carried out. A range of closed questions provided us with quantifiable data about the challenges of remote learning, while open-ended questions allowed respondents to provide richer detail and descriptions of their experiences. Two optional focus groups followed, which allowed respondents to discuss salient topics relating to the online pivot and their experiences of learning remotely. This emancipatory approach means giving learners a voice in identifying matters of concern, and identifying ways to address them, which will encourage autonomy and self-determination (Wals, 2020). It also empowers learners to be active in the design and delivery

of their education. The combined mixed method approach and emancipatory approach enabled us to gather information and understand the impacts of ERT on learners, which included the challenges and the benefits whilst also ensuring that the learners had a voice in the process which was central to the study.

While one limitation of this survey is that it examines only one HEI, the findings may be considered generalisable in the sense that they provide us with a rich picture of the contextual effects of this emergency situation on part-time learners in Ireland. For this reason, we also engaged the learners in focus groups so we could explore their experiences in a more open and interpretivist approach. All of the learners who engaged in the survey were invited to take part in these subsequent focus groups.

Findings

In line with the extant literature on mature learners in Irish HE, this study found that part-time learners, most of whom are mature learners (88% of our part-time learners are over 23), have different social and pedagogical needs to younger learners. It is important to consider the decision-making process that the mature student undertakes when deciding to pursue HE, as their deliberations are likely to provide the individual psychological context in which they interpret their experience as a mature learner since the vast majority of part-time students are mature students (Daly, 2015; Lee, 2017; Wood and Cattell, 2014). The prospect of going to HE or returning to education can be intimidating. Mature students may suffer from self-doubt, isolation and a feeling of being an outsider (Jacoby, 2015; Lee, 2017; Mooney, 2015). Osborne et al. (2004) examined how mature students weigh up the advantages and disadvantages associated with HE. Both negative and positive factors associated with the pursuit of further education are acknowledged and considered by the potential student. The students are categorised according to their main motivation for returning to education.

Negative factors impacting on the decision to become a student	Categories of mature student	Positive factors influencing decision to become a student
• **Fear of debt** • **No confidence due to old attitudes, school experience – 'not for me'** • **Unwelcoming institutions** • **Worries re juggling job/ study**	**Delayed traditional**	• *Interest in the subject to be studied* • *Long-term requirement to be equipped for career* • *Time to settle down* • *Parental support for some*
• **Some financial concerns** • **Lack of confidence – 'can I cope?'** • **Attitudes of family/social group**	**Late starter**	• *Cathartic experience as stimulus* • *Current opportunity – 'time for me'* • *Self-belief – 'If they can do it so can I'* • *Altruism*
• **Lack of self-belief** • **Financial 'Catch 22'** • **Timetable difficulties** • **Childcare problems** • **Juggling family, work, study**	**Single parent**	• *Need a good job to support family* • *Want to be a role model for family* • *Enjoy learning*
• **Need to work so time for study limited** • **Family pressures – never at home**	**Careerist**	• *Better long-term career prospects* • *Self-respect* • *Interest in studies* • *Employer support and sometimes requirement*
• **Lack of confidence** • **Costs difficult to manage** • **Need to work as well as study** • **Timetable issues** • **Doubts about job market when finished**	**Escapees**	• *New career with better prospects* • *Better pay* • *Need a change in direction – stuck in a rut*
• **Lack of confidence**	**Personal growers**	• *Interest in the subject* • *Opportunity presents itself now* • *Prove that I can do it*

Table 2. Influences (both positive and negative) on the decision to become a part-time mature student (Source: Osborne et al., 2004, p.2)

The discussions in our focus groups, as well as the 'open text' responses in the survey, indicated that a large proportion of our part-time learners have family commitments and part-time employment, so they are required to juggle a set of needs along with their learning. Though their educational backgrounds varied, their psychosocial needs broadly aligned, with many of the same concerns and requirements repeated in responses.

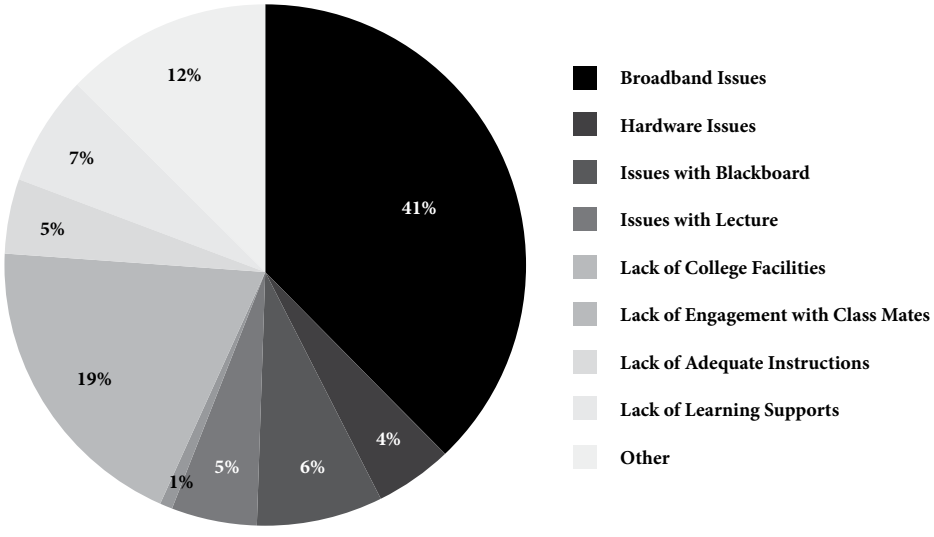

Figure 2. Survey data indicating barriers to participation in learning experienced by learners

Skills deficits are often perceived as the driving force of part-time learning and adult education and 'the skills agenda has dominated the discourse with the major funding focus on providing programmes to up-skill the unemployed to (re-) enter the workforce' (Moreland and Cownie, 2019, p.61). Rapidly changing labour markets and multiple challenges, such as digitalisation and its consequences for the future of work, technological changes, the environment, ageing societies and social inclusion, require strong skill foundations and constant updating and acquiring of new skills, knowledge and competences. Knowledge, market trends and new processes are being created at such a pace that businesses can barely keep up. Employers need employees with up-to-date product and market knowledge. They also need them to have the skills, capabilities and mindset to succeed in their specific job role.

Despite this perceived focus on skills deficits, our study concluded that for many part-time learners, the idea of being a student was very attractive, and the student identity was a motivating factor in enrolling for a course. Similarly, Kearns (2017) noted that mature students are a highly heterogenous group whose motivations for taking up HE study differ from the demands of the job market or 'narrow market fundamentalism'. Our findings illustrated that whilst part-time learners have been facilitated to complete their studies via ERT, many of their concerns are centred on psycho-social issues rather than employment opportunities.

Our study concluded that a majority of part-time learners prefer online delivery, for reasons of flexibility, time and cost. However, many of the comments in our online survey and focus groups indicated that they felt the loss of face-to-face interactions affected their perceived success, because the respondents consider success to include active student life, including interactions, being in campus buildings and informal contact with peers.

Attitudes to success

The survey asked a range of closed and open-ended questions about learner success and engagement with learning during the first year of the online pivot, and the focus groups which followed provided rich descriptions of learners' attitudes, experiences and feelings. The information garnered from our study illustrates the complexity of Lifelong Learners' attitude to success. This complexity is also explored in the National Student Success Strategy which suggests that student success 'requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community' (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2019, p.3). We take success to mean the accomplishment of one's aims, be that completion, graduation or attendance at a third level institution. The challenges and affordances presented by remote teaching and learning over the past academic year and a half have caused many learners to reconsider what success as a student means to them. Here we have employed an empirical approach to deeply consider the real-life context and consequences for our part-time learners. This paper focusses on one specific theme which emerged through analysis, based on the survey data and learners' comments in focus groups: lack of interaction as a barrier to success.

Lack of interaction as a barrier to success

In our survey we asked the open question: 'what are the drawbacks or challenges of remote learning?' The range of answers showed that our learners believe that

lack of interaction, with peers in particular, has been a barrier to their success. Many answers illustrated that the lack of support from peers and face-to-face connection was keenly felt, and that the loss of peer support was a severe drawback of ERT:

> I definitely miss the interaction with class members and the support felt by peers is missing.
>
> Not being able to get immediate help if needed from colleagues.
>
> You don't get to interact with your peers and know who is in your class.
>
> Lack of opportunities to chat to classmates meet for study groups etc.

The respondents' concerns were centred on the lack of opportunity for informal exchange and support from peers:

> Positive engagement with classmates and support was no longer available on a face-to-face basis.
>
> I miss the interaction of people.
>
> No face to face at work most of the time due to COVID, [I'm] spending way too much time in front of laptop.
>
> [Lack of] interaction with college classmates is definitely the biggest challenge. The social aspect of meeting people from a personal perspective.

This recognition of the learning lost through ERT illustrates a deep awareness by learners of the construction of learning through interaction. Peer group interactions have powerful socializing effects, and bring important socializing experiences (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2018). Our learners demonstrate good levels of metacognition in this regard:

> [It's] harder to learn outside of a class environment, harder to get to know classmates.
>
> Sometimes feel as though I don't have the full support of classmates. [It would be] nice to be able to show someone what you are doing and if you are going in the direction.

Cooperative learning is one of the cornerstones of a constructivist approach to learning, and positive interactions with peers can lay solid foundations on which to explore and contextualise new learning (Jolliffe, 2007). Our learners' responses acknowledged this in numerous responses which lamented the loss of engagement:

> [There is a] lack of human interaction with the rest of my class, difficult sharing ideas, etc. due to the sound and connection issues. As I learn from others, I enjoy being in the classroom environment. Difficult to join in on discussions online.

> You do not get to grow your connections as all classes are online and you won't meet any of your classmates.

These responses from our survey illustrate a level of frustration at the lack of opportunity for face-to-face class interaction. The loss of interaction as a sense-making or meaning-making activity was deeply felt. This tallies with earlier research (Leithwood and O'Connell, 2004; Kearns, 2014) which acknowledges that the complexity of mature student's motives for pursuing HE or Lifelong Learning are qualitatively different to their traditional age counterparts. Enhanced career options sit alongside intrinsic motivations, personal histories and past encounters with education (Kearns, 2014). Essentially, from Kearns (2014) work it is evident that no one size fits all in terms of Lifelong Learning and what it means to the learner. Lifelong Learning, offered as part-time qualifications, can not only offer improved employment opportunities, but also the potential to re-shape learners' own notions of education and the ways in which we can test knowledge to respond to new and complex problems. This is reflected in some of the responses below which demonstrate the learners' ability to engage in active learning in an online environment:

> [I felt] isolation and lack of classmates to check on assignments queries or if not sure on something. In physical classroom, can ask person beside you. Also, [you] can meet new people and [make] connections.

> Working alone can be more difficult without a study buddy to bounce ideas off of or compare work with.

> Interaction. There's nothing quite like being able to show an error on one screen, while seeing the solution on another & someone scribbling the method on a piece of paper in front of you.

> [I felt the] lack of engagement, learning through the questions of others. the group discussions in class, peer support.

In his seminal work 'What the Student Does', John Biggs (1999) illustrates how educative conceptual change takes place when 'students can work collaboratively and in dialogue with others, both peers and teachers. Good dialogue elicits those activities that shape, elaborate, and deepen understanding' (Biggs, 1999, p.61). Fung (2017) acknowledges the importance of socially constructed learning for the full development of the learner:

> Each of us has our own horizon, in any given moment, as we look out on what we know. However, through encounters with others we can start to share what we see and our horizons can begin to broaden, even to merge (Fung, 2017, p.14).

The study in this way provided rich details about learners' perception of success, part of which was related to their sense of identity as inter-relational students, or in other words peer learning. Social connectedness has been recognised as an important outcome on the basis of its link to subjective well-being and course satisfaction (Diep et al., 2018):

> No pure objectivity can be obtained as we are all subjects but, as we hold ourselves open to new possibilities, we advance knowledge through intersubjectivity. This philosophical position does not rest on a single research paradigm, method or learning theory, but on a disposition, a way of being, which precedes and can underpin a wide range of methods of enquiry into the world (Fung, 2017, p.14).

Collaborative Work

This study shows that learners miss the sociality of learning and the informal support gained from 'working problems out with the class' as one focus group participant mentioned. This is further supported by another who noted that:

> Never meeting my classmates but having to engage in group assignments is quite challenging. It has worked out well so far for me by using online platforms to meet but I'm aware of some students having difficulties in this regard - I think that different people approach assignments differently, some do work early on, others have a last-minute attitude, and this is difficult to organise when everyone's online. It's also a slow process doing a group assignment online.

Another focus group participant mentioned that:

> [I] miss the social aspect of walking to the canteen during the break and just getting everyone else's take on the day's material.

Some of the respondents discussed the practical difficulties of doing collaborative project work when asked the open question 'what are the drawbacks or challenges of remote learning?'

> [Being online meant] difficulty getting to know classmates, group projects are very difficult to do remotely.

> The social side and social interaction is never the same online.

The social aspects of remote learning, and the resultant lack of ability to model themselves and their behaviour on others in the class was apparent in responses:

> Lack of peer connection. A lot of opinions going unheard because of the use of the keyboard instead of being able to speak face to face.

> Can feel a bit alone as it's much harder to bounce ideas and questions off classmates, especially when we have never met.

Observing Peers

Social Learning Theory (SLT) suggests that persons learn through observing the behaviour exhibited by others, referred to as 'role models', and the consequences of this behaviour (Payne and Walker, 1998). The decision to imitate the behaviour of others is determined by whether a person sees someone else benefitting from their actions, known as 'vicarious reinforcement' (White, 1995), and the individual's self-assessment of his or her ability to reproduce a behaviour, termed 'self-efficacy' (Coolican et al., 1996; Coleman, 2003). This social aspect of learning is visible in some of the responses, as learners indicated the fear of being the first to ask questions in the online environment:

> If you have a question you feel silly to ask as no one else is [asking].

> It can be nerve wracking asking questions etc on big online platforms e.g. teams, WhatsApp etc.

As observation and imitation are key processes in informal learning (Coleman, 2003) one of the effects of ERT is that it is more difficult to observe the behaviour of classmates. The loss of the critical interactions with peers led to de-motivation:

> [I lost the] feeling of belonging to a group and even college, [I] lost interest in study.

> [Not being in college] meant a lack of motivation to do college work and lack of connection with the college group.

Locale

Learners' responses indicated that the Institute buildings themselves contribute to the learners' success as students. The changed locale of learning contributed to the sense of loss and isolation felt, as part-time learners appear to appreciate the 'escape' offered by campus. The campus buildings appear to play a significant part in the learners' student identities. In the focus groups, participants discussed the sort of learning that happens in the canteen; the informal sense-making conversations about the session's material and the shared understandings or problem areas that are 'worked out over coffee in the canteen'. Furthermore, campus buildings seem to bring an increased focus for learners:

> Lack motivation due to not having the building to go to. Studying in isolation.

> Home becomes a place of business, [with] many distractions.

> Being at home you unfortunately have background noise from the wider family. You are trying to juggle items at home while online doing classes.

Research by Stedman (2011) has emphasised the social construction of places, but less attention is paid to the potentially important contributions of the physical environment to place meanings and attachments. In this case the Institute campus itself instils significant emotions, reactions, and motivations among part-time learners. Locke (2015) argues that classroom structures and the physicality of teaching spaces are not benign, but rather the teaching space and the built environment confer their own pedagogical value. In this way, buildings 'convey their own messages, solidified and materialised through physical walls and demarcated spaces' (Locke, 2015, p.596). Similarly, Gieryn

(2002) writes that buildings 'stabilize social life. They give structure to social institutions, durability to social networks, persistence to behaviour patterns:'

> Buildings don't just sit there imposing themselves. They are forever objects of (re)interpretation, narration and representation - and meanings or stories are sometimes more pliable than the walls and floors they depict. We deconstruct buildings materially and semiotically, all the time (Gieryn, 2002, p.35).

The sociality which a campus offers has been highlighted in numerous studies, (Stedman, 2011; Bernardo and Palma-Oliveiro, 2013) and here, our learners also discussed the feelings brought about by being on campus. Our focus groups discussed the importance of the library for a student identity, and for a dedicated space to perform that identity, as opposed to the conflicting identity that they perform in the home. Several of our focus group participants highlighted that as their families were also working and learning at home, there was great difficulty in finding somewhere quiet where they would be 'left alone'.

Conclusions

This study has informed our approach to delivery as we move through the public health emergency. In this paper, we have focussed on how learners feel about ERT and its impact on their success, however it is important to highlight that overall, our learners concluded that ERT was more convenient for them than face-to-face delivery. The findings discussed here are centred on the often-surprising comments from respondents about the barriers to success that they felt. Success itself incorporated being an active 'student' and that encapsulated all of the activities traditionally associated with studenthood including being on the physical campus, rather than merely passing exams. Sociologists have long discussed how spatial arrangements influence social life, as:

> the connections between time-space location and physical milieux of action, are not just uninteresting boundaries of social life, but inherently involved in its constitution or reproduction (Giddens, 1984, p.127).

Our learners' views corroborated this, confirming that the campus buildings offer a psycho-social element to the learning experience, and contribute to the identity of 'students' which part-time learners enjoy.

Our findings have also underscored the value part-time learners place on informal peer-to-peer learning, and their own metacognition of the learning

process. Respondents showed in-depth and self-reflective awareness of the importance of the exchange of ideas and understandings amongst their cohorts. In this way the learners displayed 'high order cognitive level processes and activities' (Biggs, 1999). Further work is needed on lifelong learners' self-reflexivity and their needs for psycho-social stimulation. There is a delicate balance between the flexibility of remote teaching and the need for engagement with peers (Flynn, Collins and Malone, 2022).

As we move through the different stages of the public health emergency, our findings from this study continue to influence best practice in our delivery. We are in ongoing dialogue with programme teams and class representatives to find optimal teaching methods, which increasingly include opportunities for informal discussions, and online chat forums, as well as blended approaches to delivery. We are attentive to the need of access to campus buildings even when remote delivery takes place, and to a flexible supportive library and learning resource centre.

Our motivation for this study was to have an active dialogue with our part-time learners, and to understand their motivations, and reactions to remote delivery during a pandemic. We continue to consider the best means of delivery that will attend to all learners' emotional and psycho-social needs, and to put their interests to the forefront of our decision-making. In this sense, we are interested in maintaining a relational approach as 'it is important to establish a pedagogy that is critical, emancipatory and relational' (Wals, 2020, p.825).

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Reading Assessment System in ESOL Courses for Low-Literate Learners

RIM DAY AND ROLA NAEB

Abstract

This paper draws on the findings of a qualitative study exploring the reading assessment materials and criteria used in pre-A1 ESOL classes in the UK and their suitability to low-literate language learners. Open-ended questionnaires and multifunctional analysis of materials were used to investigate current practices and views. The findings reflect the struggle low-literate learners experience throughout reading assessments, and the need for separating literate from low-literate learners, adaptations to assessment materials to ensure fair assessment and the development of descriptors/criteria that capture the small steps achieved by this population.

Keywords: Low-Literate, Reading Assessment, Pre-A1 ESOL, LESLLA

Introduction

The Context

According to World Demographic Profile (2021), although the rate of illiteracy is reduced slowly worldwide (Young-Scholten and Kreeft Peyton, 2020), 75% of the population worldwide are living in poor or conflicted areas with limited access to formal education or literacy in their mother tongue. Unfortunately, women are more disadvantaged in this case (World Demographic Profile, 2021). Most of the women who were forced to migrate to different countries are illiterate (Young-Scholten and Kreeft Peyton, 2020).

These learners arrive in host countries with no/low literacy and/or no/limited formal education in their first language and are required to learn a new language and are referred to in literature and research as Literacy Education and Second

Language Learning for Adults learners (LESLLA learners henceforth[2]). Tutors who teach and support this population of learners identify some of the unique challenges they face which include a lack of print and language awareness and a lack of study and learning skills. These learners are placed on beginner language classes (Young-Scholten and Kreeft Peyton, 2020), such as pre-entry English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the United Kingdom (Robinson, 2017). ESOL classes at this level are more diverse than at other levels with regards to learners' educational background, schooling experiences and their command of literacy in their first language (Simpson, 2016). This is due to the diverse background they come from. Some would have acquired basic functional literacy skills on their journeys and some will arrive with no literacy skills at all. Educational language policies vary across countries in relation to provision and formal language qualifications and requirement. The discussion in this paper will focus on the situation in England, particularly the North East of England, with brief reference to other areas and countries.

ESOL Policy Since 2010

Illiterate or low-literate adult migrants need to become literate in the second language (L2) to be able to integrate in the host society and meet their daily needs. This means that it is essential that the research in the ESOL field should involve a focus on policy and practice to meet the needs of these learners (Simpson et al., 2008). The UK has special requirements of formal language proficiency for naturalisation, entering the country and obtaining the right to remain (Simpson, 2021). During the coalition government in the UK between 2010 and 2015, ESOL became central to government social integration policy, while in the last general elections (Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Goverment [MHCLG], 2019), ESOL was indirectly mentioned in the Conservative manifesto which outlined the importance of English language teaching to enhance integration and support migrants (Simpson, 2021). However, inconsistency has been an issue in the funding and policy support for migrants' English language teaching in the UK.

England's policies toward ESOL are different from Wales and Scotland. More recently, policy strategies have been developed in Scotland and Wales to underpin their ESOL approaches, such as addressing the aspects of qualifications and funding at a national scale (Simpson, 2021). In England,

2 LESLLA is an international forum that includes researchers who share similar interests in adult immigrants with limited schooling before entering the host country in which they live and the development of second language learning (Faux & Watson, 2018)

however, it is unclear where the responsibility for ESOL rests. Students' needs are poorly met because of the lack of support and fragmentation of the field, which shows that the ESOL aspect in adult education is still neglected (Simpson, 2021). This has worsened following the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. ESOL policy in England is shaped with reference to five published papers since 2014, which are all addressed in the Communities Strategy Green Paper (2018) that focuses on segregated communities and the significance of promoting British values, also stressed in the Casey Review (2016). The paper introduced a commitment to establish good practice in ESOL to support the action plan for integrated communities (MHCLG, 2019). The action plan includes guidance on how ESOL provision should be supported by the cooperation of different providers (Simpson, 2021). However, the report and the action plan include proposals and intentions of changes rather than commitments to action. In addition, the national ESOL strategy in England still shows no signs of materialisation, and the funding is still limited to support the strategy (Simpson, 2021). Based on the Green Paper's findings, the Learning & Work Institute (L&WI), placed an emphasis on partnership work locally and regionally under the commission of the Department of Education. The main source of funding for ESOL comes from the adults' skills budget of the Education Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). This is connected with Further Education (FE) college provision, and it does not fund practices that are not part of the FE domain (Higton et al., 2019). Funding for ESOL has dropped from £203 million in 2010 to £90 million in 2016, whereas the demand for free ESOL classes is still high and it requires more supply (Martin, 2017). As a result, a significant part of ESOL provision does not rely on government education policy and its funding, it depends on third sector organisations, including community and voluntarily groups. This suggests that there has been lack of resources, cohesion and consistency in supporting and funding ESOL since 2012 (Simpson, 2021). This becomes especially problematic when considering the delivery of non-accredited courses because even though pre-entry courses are not accredited, they are delivered in settings like Adult Community Education or FE, which means that features of formal learning, including assessment, remain (Education and Training, 2021a).

Assessment

Assessment is an important aspect for language teachers and second-language acquisition (SLA) researchers. From a pedagogic perspective, assessment is a continuous process that aims to document the skills and knowledge of learners to help teachers improve learners' skills (Gronlund, 1993). Teachers make use of assessments to reflect on learners' starting point, and monitor their progress,

which means assessment is an integral process to teaching and learning (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006). In language learning processes, testing is the most common type of assessment used. In such tests, learners need to respond to tasks set for the purpose of assessment, and then tutors will quantify the learners' responses to summarise their performance. The number that is quantified from the assessment is used to determine whether learners are competent to use the language in real-world communication (Fulcher, 2015) or pass a test. From a research perspective, an assessment is 'a systematic and replicable technique that allows researchers to elicit, observe, and interpret indicators of L2 knowledge … with underlying standards of practice that govern its development and use' (Norris and Ortega, 2013, p.573). SLA researchers benefit from assessment because it helps them describe the L2 features learners have acquired over time, deduce grammatical representations of learners, describe what have been acquired and what not and illustrate the changes that learners have gone through during a study (Norris and Ortega, 2013).

In England, ESOL awarding bodies have developed assessments to levels ranging from A1 to C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). As for LESLLA learners, they normally start on a pre-A1 ESOL course, which is a non-accredited course and does not involve a standardised assessment (see ESOL Policy since 2010 for more details). Therefore, in-house assessment is developed by providers to assess such learners in pre-A1 learners (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006; Education and Training, 2021a). However, the process is not simple, particularly with regards to LESLLA learners who often have difficulties reading and writing in their mother language, lack the experience of schooling in home country and consequently are not familiar with testing. In addition, some learners might be speaking a language that does not have a written script (Florez and Terrill, 2003).

Reder (2015) highlights the difficulties LESLLA learners face when learning to read and write in a second language for the first time. LESLLA learners struggle in second-language classes because they are trying to acquire literacy and second lanague at the same time in an unfamiliar instituitional context, in which learners are exposed to implicit assumptions about how the education experience and literacy are connected (Reder, 2015). Although the topic of how low-literate learners acquire a second language has been of interest to many researchers, such as Kurvers, Van Hout, and Vallen (2006), and Young-Scholten and Naeb (2013), little research has focused on the assessment materials that are used in ESOL institutions and their suitability for LESLLA learners. Studies

have shown that low-literate learners face challenges when they are aiming to be literate for the first time (Kurvers et al., 2006; Young and Naeb, 2013), but in a second language they require longer time than literate people to move a level up. Carlsen (2017) believes that this group is not provided with a fair chance in testing in language classes because the current national policy in the UK mandates that all adult educational courses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland be accredited and learners should be formally assessed to move to the next level, including ESOL courses (Higton et al., 2019). Funding to ESOL providers will be awarded when learners' achievements of qualification is provided (Higton et al., 2019). Therefore, providers are required to tailor their courses targeting the Skills for Life qualifications, which pose a problem to LESLLA learners who might take them more than a year to achieve A1 Level (Entry Level 1), the lowest qualification level in all assessment modes: reading, writing, listening and speaking (Allemano, 2013; Simpson et al., 2008; Simpson, 2015). This is problematic for learners at the lowest level, where some students bring with them a wide range of prior literacy knowledge while others have almost no experience of literacy in their mother language and very poor English language skills. The main barrier to assessing beginner readers appears to be the process of assessment itself (Allemano, 2013), which will be discussed further in the literature review. In other words, an inherent feature of typical traditional assessment in language classes is being able to recognise print and have a basic level of study skills that allow you to understand instructions which is not the case with LESLLA learners. By the time such learners take the level-promotion test, they are mostly able to make meaning from a text, yet they fail typical institutional assessments. Their failure to demonstrate their knowledge is because such tests are based on familiarity with tests materials and procedures as well as the presupposition of literacy. Aspects which will be further explained in the literature review. Studies conducted during the previous decade have shown the importance of expanding the CEFR to include assessment descriptors below A1 to capture the progress that such learners achieve (Gonzalves, 2017; Carlsen, 2017) because they have complex needs and they can make slow progress, especially at the beginning of their language learning journey (Tammelin-Laine, 2014).

Having established the main issues in relation to assessment of LESLLA learners, this paper focuses on the assessment materials and criteria that ESOL institutions in England use to assess their low-literate students and how suitable the assessment materials and criteria are for the LESLLA context. It adds to the increasing research on fair assessment for low-literate ESOL learners (Bagna et

al., 2017; Carlsen, 2017; Carlsen and Rocca, 2021; Gonzalves, 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2021), focusing on the suitability of the reading assessment tools to LESLLA learners in the pre-A1 ESOL. It also analyses the materials and criteria used in assessing learners and examines how effective they are in capturing the progress of learners.

Literature Review

Most ESOL bodies in the UK have stressed the importance of supporting language learning to enhance migrants' social integration because of the incoherence of the national policy regarding the ESOL provision (NATECLA, 2016). The current policy of the UK government states that all adults are required to work for a qualification in the post-16 education in England, including ESOL courses. Therefore, providers are required to provide courses targeting the Skills for Life qualifications, which involves assessment to measure leaners' progress and readiness to move to the next level, meet the national requirements, and receive the funding based on evidence of learners' achievement. However, the assessment seems to be a problem for LESLLA learners (Simpson et al., 2008; Allemano, 2013).

The majority of awarding bodies have developed very good practices in the assessment of English language skills of higher ESOL learners in the last few decades (Bedford, 2003; Khalifa and Ffrench, 2009; Stoynoff, 2009). Yet, there is still less focus on pre-entry assessments compared to other ESOL levels (Allemano, 2013).

Low-literate/educated ESOL learners, according to Robinson's (2017) report, lack some knowledge and skills that literate learners have. These include metalinguistic knowledge, knowledge of language, its operation, structure and use based on a functionalist perspective, and educational and study skills, the skills acquired by being in an educational setting (Allemano, 2013). In addition, ESOL courses in the UK are all accredited (Higton et al., 2019); thus, it is unsurprising that the process of examination is a major barrier to assessing the level of LESLLA learners because they are not used to being in a formal testing environment, and therefore, the accreditation policy is problematic to such learners (Allemano, 2013; 2018). When the tests used in assessment are standardised, then the concept of what should be measured and how to measure are clear (Faux and Watson, 2018). However, the pre-A1 provision is less formal than the higher levels of ESOL, as it is not accredited and there are no standardized tests for this level in England (Education and Training

Foundation, 2019). Therefore, each institution develops its own assessment standards to assess its learners through the initial registration process to determine the new students' level in English and the periodic assessment that determines the progress and promotion of learners (Allemano, 2018). Yet, the exam practices used are not based on research and their validity might be questionable (Allemano, 2018). Moreover, the methods used to demonstrate the wider outcome of achievements of learners are less developed (Education and Training Foundation 2019).

Theoretical Perspective: Social Practice Theory and Cognitive Processing Approach

Social practice theory focuses on the link between social situations and practice, including in the field of knowledge making (Schwab, 2010). The theory has had a noticeable influence on the teaching of literacy as Barton, Hamilton and Ivanovic (2000) and Grieve (2007) indicate, yet it had less influence in the design of tests, even though test designers have taken authentic reading as a main consideration in test design (Schwab, 2010). For example, a test may contain a restaurant menu with learners required to scan it in order to find delivery times or skim it to find vegetarian meals. Learners might also read for details to choose a meal after reading its ingredients or they might read critically to compare between different meals (Schwab, 2010). Hellerman (2006, p.379) has emphasized this idea by stating that 'Linguistic processing is embedded within and inseparable from social practices or routines in which individuals are engaged'. In addition, Grieve (2007) argues that even though assessment approaches usually include the skills that learners can do in a class, that does not necessarily mean that those learners have improved their literacy practices in everyday life. Faux and Warson (2018) emphasised the importance of relating the tasks to topics of the learners' social context that they have studied in class, such as health, family, transportation, etc. This can help learners get a sense of understanding in the uses and functions of prints. This view has been supported by Wallace (1992), and Cooke and Simpson (2008), who connected literacy assessment with socio-cognitive practice. Successful readers need to be able to decode what is written, deal with long texts, relate these discourses to cultural and social contexts and be critical when reading. To assess learners' abilities, test designers need to understand how L2 readers process the text and how they relate the written text to their lives (Schellekens, 2007).

Khalifa and Weir (2009) argue that the cognitive processing approach is of great importance in understanding the process of reading. They suggest that

cognitive psychologists and language theorists have done a wide range of studies to recognise what is involved in the process of reading. The context plays an interlinked role with the process of reading according to Khalifa and Weir (2009). They also discussed this point in relation to the validity of context of the various item types that can be found in an examination paper. This is a main point in the process of testing reading, in the sense that the contextual clues that readers require are usually not clear in the examination paper (Khalifa and Weir, 2009; Flores, 2021a). LESLLA learners might struggle to make meaning from the modes used in the test questions, such as written instructions, images or semiotics (Flores, 2021b), especially when learners do not have 'a significant sight word vocabulary, the ability to decode at word level as opposed to phonemic or even alphabetic decoding' (Allemano, 2013, p.69). This can affect the ways that LESLLA learners respond to test tasks. This has a vital impact on the level of interpretations, understanding and deduction that readers go through when they encounter a reading text.

Assessment in ESOL

To understand the challenges that face low-literate learners while learning a L2 and doing an assessment in the Pre-A1 ESOL course, it is important to specifically understand the assessment process. Based on the current ESOL policy, ESOL provision in England includes different phases and purposes of assessment (Higton et al., 2019). Assessment in ESOL can be divided into five phases: screening, initial/placement, diagnostic/tracking progress, formative/on-going and summative/level promotion/final assessments (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006).

In many post-compulsory education classes in England, learners with various literacy background might share the same class and aim to achieve the same qualification (Allemano, 2013). This has led unintentionally to raised average scores because literate people find the tests clear and straightforward due to their higher level of literacy skills (Allemano, 2013). According to Lambert and Lines (2000, p.53), the average score is determined by the 'cumulative frequency graphs showing the proportion of candidates at certain scores'. With the increase of European migrants in the UK who are generally well-educated, literate and use the Roman alphabet, the success/failure boundaries in ESOL assessments increased accordingly for all learner groups (Allemano, 2013). In other words, when educated/literate learners who are beginning to learn the host language are placed in the same classes as LESLLA learners, they often score higher in assessments in comparison to LESLLA learners.

Consequently, when an average score is used to determine the pass/failure mark, it is usually higher than what LESLLA learners are able to achieve (Allemano, 2013).

Bagna et al. (2017) suggest that there is a need to establish an assessment framework for pre-A1 level to establish homogenous classrooms to separate learners with literacy skills from those who lack them. O'Sullivan et al. (2021) state that some aspects should be taken into consideration when developing a test. For example, the context and the learners themselves should be considered when designing a test because these two aspects can have an impact on the performance in tests. Test development processes should first consider the population that aims to take the test from a 'physical, psychological and experiential' (O'Sullivan et al., 2021, p.262) point of view. In addition, not only language ability needs to be considered by test developers, but also the cognitive processing that learners go through to complete the test (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

The current ESOL awarding bodies in the UK, such as Ascentis, City and Guilds and Edexcel accredit students from Entry level 1 to level 2; pre-A1 is not accredited and does not have a standardised assessment (NATECLA, n.d., web). In the A1 level, which is the lowest standardised test in ESOL, candidates in the reading assessment might be asked to scan a text to find certain information, deduce meaning of new vocabulary or 'follow referencing within a text' (Allemano, 2013, p.73). Such skills can exist in the repertoire of readers of other languages, but those who lack these skills in other languages remain at a disadvantage when doing a reading test. In A1 reading tests, learners are expected to do tasks that include choosing the correct answer from a selection of distracting possibilities; thus, they have to exclude the wrong answers. Moreover, candidates might be asked to distinguish between a true or false statement or answer open-ended questions in a written form. These tasks could create a burden on candidates in reading and understanding the tasks, which affects the validity of tests. Moreover, the rubric that is used in A1 reading tests could be more of a challenge for learners than the test itself, which is an example of what Kortez (2008, p.221) called the construction of 'irrelevant variance', which is considered a significant threat to validity, specifically for assessments with constructed answers and contextualized scenarios (Geisinger et al., 2013).

Due to the unsuitability of the lowest level of standardised reading assessment for LESLLA learners, each ESOL provider develops their own assessment materials. Looking back at Kortez (2008), three main aspects that affect validity,

the one relevant to LESLLA learners is that the test is 'measuring something that should not be measured' (Kortez, 2008, p.220). It seems that the texts in the reading tests are related to learners' previous knowledge, but some tasks can hinder learners from demonstrating their ability to extract meaning and understand the text (Allemano, 2013). Allemano (2013, 2018), and Carlsen and Rocco (2021), add that due to the lack of experience in reading as well as the support of social practice, LESLLA learners are unable to relate the assessment tasks to the knowledge they gained from the texts and to demonstrate this through writing answers, in the same way as more educated learners might do. In other words, the complexity of the tasks hinders low-literate learners from accomplishing the tasks in exam, even though they might be within their real-life skills. Thus, the testing methods used with low-literate learners should be reviewed and developed to be able to demonstrate the true ability of those learners (Allemano, 2013, 2018; Carlsen and Rocco, 2021).

Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) indicate that literacy is being assessed in pre-A1 classes. The literacy assessments usually check the left-right orientation, matching letters, sound-symbol correspondence, differentiating between words and numbers, recognising words, differentiating between the upper and lower case and assessing basic knowledge of learners in the letter-sound association (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006). This is called a phonological awareness assessment, and is mainly used with learners at the lowest level of literacy to ensure they can make meaning from sounds in words and then in sentences. This includes tasks for recognising sounds in a poster, identifying pictures based on the initial sound, matching same sounds together, reading simple words and extracting meaning from a small text, and recognising some common basic genres (Faux and Watson, 2018). Although these assessment practices seem valid for learners who are familiar with testing procedures, they remain problematic for LESLLA learners. As pre-A1 assessment is being in-house designed, it is worth stating that ESOL tutors are not professional test designers, especially for LESLLA learners. Due to a lack of standardised assessment for the pre-A1, those in-house designed assessments are being used to assess the literacy and proficiency levels of students and are described by Flores (2012b, p.157) as 'less-than-perfect in-house assessments'. These are used as initial assessments that help determine the level of learners based on the number of questions that are answered correctly by candidates. However, students responses are not deeply evaluated or analysed during the process of assessment (Flores, 2021a). Such assessments are usually designed using various multimodal aspects, such as photos, clipart images, lines, numbers,

words, boxes and spaces, and with different layouts. The marking usually depends on numbers, while the answer format varies based on the different layouts and components of the questions (Flores, 2021b).

Challenges of Low-Literate Learners in Assessment

Failing/passing an assessment might have considerable consequences for LESLLA learners in terms of access to labour, education, benefits, family reunification, as well as their right to remain in the UK (Carlsen and Rocca, 2021). Kurvers et al. (2015) believe that LESLLA learners face specific challenges in the process of second language learning as they progress slower and their outcomes are lower than educated learners. Their benefits from language courses are less and their performance in tests is lower (Carlsen, 2017). The lack of success can be attributed not only to the lack of the skills tested, but also to lack of experience of testing and familiarity with tests formats that are used in language tests (Allemano, 2013). One of the most important reasons behind their failure is their lack of conceptual constructs of the test they undertake (Allemano, 2013).

There is a dearth of research on this learner population (Andringa and Godfroid, 2019); thus, the learning needs of LESLLA learners is less investigated than those of educated learners (Tarone, 2010; Allemano, 2018). Some providers use the process of portfolio-based assessment, while others prefer the examination process of all the language skills. The examination process is the most used technique to assess low-literate learners because it gives learners more in-class learning time and it reduces the record keeping, as well as the evidence of in-lesson achievements of learners. Allemano (2013) suggests that this is problematic for learners when it comes to the tests themselves, especially the reading test. This is despite the fact that both types of learners who are exposed to the examination process can read for meaning in real life situations. Allemano (2013) and Flores (2021c) conclude that low-literate learners need assessments that assess what they know, not what they are unable to produce.

Flores (2021a) conducted a study in the USA that examined the meaning-making process in language as well as literacy standardised assessments from the perspectives of LESLLA test-taker. Findings revealed that there is a tension between the intended and expected meaning of the studied visual and textual prompts of assessment and the responses of test-takers to these prompts. Assessment practices and textual composition have been unintentionally biased against learners with low literacy. Thus, Flores (2021a) suggests that

during test design and the development of an evaluative framework, the level of literacy of test-takers and the test socialization should be considered (Flores, 2021a). Without test literacy, even simple multimodal questions, such as the multiple-choice ones, can be complex for LESLLA learners because they lack knowledge about test genres and multimodal components of tests required to read the questions and answer them in the expected manner (Flores 2021b). Therefore, it is important to investigate the topic of test materials and criteria used to evaluate the language level of learners, as the topic of textual and visual designs of adult L2 and literacy learners in not widely studied, especially in texts used in the reading assessment. The lack of appropriate test design to this group affects not only meaning-making for test-takers, but also how learners' responses are evaluated (Flores, 2021b).

Having established that there is no standardised assessments in pre-A1 level in England and in-house assessment are being designed by tutors who lack experience in test tool design, LESLLA learners face challenges when being assessed in L2. Therefore, this paper will investigate the types of materials used in assessing reading in the pre-A1 level in England and analyse them in terms of the test genre, the semiotic resources utilised when designing the materials, and the criteria used to evaluate the test-takers' level.

Theoretical framework

The suitability of assessment materials and criteria will be assessed considering the Multi-Modal Critical Discourse Analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020; Pennycook, 2001), which provides a way to study the language and semiotic modes, like visual media, in a systematic and multi-layered way.

Social semiotics investigates the significance of social and cultural backgrounds in explaining meaning-making as a social practice. Semiotics is related to the signs and codes in social life, but social semiotics also covers the implications of social processes that form codes of communication and language. The crucial implication is that meaning-making is related to power, and as power shifts, meaning-making in languages also can change (Halliday, 1978; Hodge et al., 1988). Based on a multimodal perspective of social semiotics, meaning making is based on different modes which include resources that are determined based on a cultural and social basis (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). Such modes include texts, images, symbols, sounds, gestures and music. Each mode can convey the same meaning as the other but realising the meaning can differ from one mode to the other. For example, the mode of written texts uses words to convey

a message, while images do that based on their layout, colour, prominence, and composition (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). Such modes are multimodal because texts cannot be dissociated from the materials for which they are designed and images cannot be dissociated from the colour from which they are made (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). The social semiotics critical multimodal theory focuses on how semiotics can carry meaning through assumptions, intentions, as well as ideologies (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen, 2003). Also, language is used in terms of semantic, contextual, functional and semiotic aspects (Pennycook, 2001). The reading tests will be assessed through the lens of the systematic functional linguistics developed by Pennycook (2001) to investigate the genre elements of tests, the semiotic resources, including the multimodal composition and components, to investigate whether the tests are fair and valid for LESLLA learners. This study will utilise the multimodal critical discourse approach to analyse the assessment tools and criteria of the in-house designed reading assessments in pre-A1 ESOL courses in England. In the analysis, the grammar of visual design will be used as a concept to reflect on the images used in reading tests because visual designs generally reflect interaction, composition and representation. The images used in reading tests are tools of interaction between the test-takers and designer, while the composition of the visual images determine the relationship between the semiotics and the test questions. Composition is similar to grammar as it allows the depictions of people, places and objects to take part in the meaning-making process. Visuals as meaning-making semiotics are different from texts and speeches, but they are socially constructed and contribute to constructing meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). Grammar and syntax can be considered as two combined elements of meaning-making. As language grammar depicts how words are combined in phrases and sentences to make meaning, visual grammar reflects the way in which elements like things, individuals and places are combined to create statements of various complexity.

The Study

This study aimed to evaluate the materials and criteria used to assess the reading skills of LESLLA learners to answer the following questions:

1. What are the existing materials that are currently used to assess LESLLA learners?

    a. Initial assessment

b. Tracking progress/ learning gain (summative, formative) within the same level

c. Progression to other levels

2. What are the criteria used to design the assessments?

a. Initial assessment

b. Tracking progress/ learning gain (summative, formative) within the same level

c. Progression to other levels

Research Method

This research investigated the suitability of reading assessment materials and criteria used in pre-A1 ESOL courses in England. To do so, ESOL managers and tutors were approached to take part in the research. As an ESOL tutor in the North-East of England, I had contacts with ESOL managers and tutors in the region. Contact with local stakeholders was established via LinkedIn or WhatsApp and via email sent to ESOL, LESLLA and NATECLA forums that include a considerable number of ESOL practitioners in England with a wide range of experience. ESOL teachers and managers were asked to send samples of the reading assessment materials they use for the pre-A1 level and the criteria of success/failure. A convenience sample technique was used when approaching ESOL tutors and managers.

10 experienced ESOL tutors and managers who teach or have taught the pre-A1 level responded. All were aware of the accreditation aspect of the ESOL provision and the lack of standardised assessments for the pre-A1 level. They worked in different settings,such as colleges and community centres, and had between 2 to 15 years of experiences in teaching ESOL and between 1 to 9 years of experience in teaching the pre-A1 level.

As there are no standardised assessments for this level (Young Scholten and Naeb, 2020), practices vary. Some participants provided links to the online assessments that they used to assess their pre-A1 learners, while others sent the assessment documents via email. In terms of the content analysis of the materials, only a few samples were analysed.

Reading tests were analysed through the critical multimodal social semiotic analysis based on the grammar of visual images (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020) and the systematic functional linguistics (Pennycook, 2001). Data analysis for the test tools were organised based on the different types of test questions, that appeared in the shapes of multiple choice, fill in the spaces, matching, circling the correct answer and questions that required short written answers. For each of the genre questions, the research examined the content of the questions/instructions, the clarity of such questions/instructions/images/signs, the space provided for learners to respond to the test questions and the expectancy to perceive such questions/instructions correctly by LESLLA learners who are becoming literate for the first time but in a second language and lack testing literacy skills. All test elements were examined in terms of meaning-making for learners who will in their turn respond to them in a written form. Findings have implications for pre-A1 ESOL tutors who are responsible for designing test tools may help tutors understand how LESLLA learners make meaning from the reading test questions and how they respond to them using a written form of answers. Establishing these findings can be significant for critically reflecting on assessment materials and criteria, task prompts and other ways of communication between test designers and learners. This will provide a clear view of the literacy, language and communication tools that should be considered by test designers and evaluation framework developers to ensure that the assessment is not biased against LESLLA learners.

Participants were provided with an information sheet to clarify the aim of the study, stress the voluntary participation of the sample and the possibility to withdraw from the study if they wish to do so, without the need to justify their withdrawal. In the consent form, it was made clear that by providing the assessment materials and criteria, they give consent to take part in the study. The identities of participants remained anonymous, and their data was used confidentially for the purpose of the study only.

Analysis

Overview of existing materials

This section will focus on examples of the materials used in colleges in the UK to assess the reading skill in pre-A1 ESOL classes and the criteria used to design these materials.

Existing materials used for initial assessment

Based on the responses received, teachers indicated that when learners have no knowledge of English, they are enrolled in pre-entry courses without initial assessment as some colleges in England do. Others stated that there is no specific criterion used to design the materials, they adapt existing materials or self-design them. Thus, assessment practices vary. Assessments used can be divided into three categories: online holistic assessments, self-designed assessments, and adapted Entry level 1 assessments.

1. One college used the ESOL Scotland Assessment Framework as a guidance to design their own assessment materials at the beginning of the course and the level promotion, but they added images and instructions to them. The Scottish literacy assessment includes identifying letters and sounds, reading signs and numbers, and reading a short paragraph. However, there are no instructions for the test questions or even images in the ESOL Scotland Assessment Framework, as a tutor has to set the test with each learner individually and explain the tasks to learners. Even though this might be effective, it is not practical, especially in England due to the lack of funding. Thus, some tutors have adapted it and added written instructions to avoid this issue.

2. Another practise presented the use of holistic online assessments, such as Straightforward Quick Placement (2020), which is used by some colleges to determine the level of learners. All learners, no matter what their levels are, will sit this initial assessment and the evaluation is based on their score.

3. One tutor indicated that adapted Entry level 1 assessment practices are used for both initial and level promotion assessments. The failure in the E1 initial assessment indicates that the learner is in a beginner level (pre-A1). For example, here are some questions adapted from Excellence Gateway initial assessment that has been used in one of the colleges. This assessment includes four ads and multiple-choice questions that learners have to answer based on the texts. The answers are presented in photos rather than words.

Self-designed assessment materials/print awareness tasks

Most tutors' answers reveal that each teacher, organisation, or college develop their own reading assessments for complete beginners. This often includes activities such as: add the missing letter from the alphabet, match words with

numbers, match words with pictures/signs, read a short paragraph to the tutor, answer questions from the paragraph (very short answers are required), match a picture with the letter with which the word starts, add a missing sound to a word (a picture provided), read a short paragraph and fill in a table with information from the text (see examples below). In the first examples (*Figure 1* and *Figure 2*), learners are required to fill the gaps with the missing letters in a self-designed assessment (Activity A) and in an adopted activity from the Scottish Pre-entry Assessment Framework (Activity B). Instructions are written in English and are usually read by the tutor.

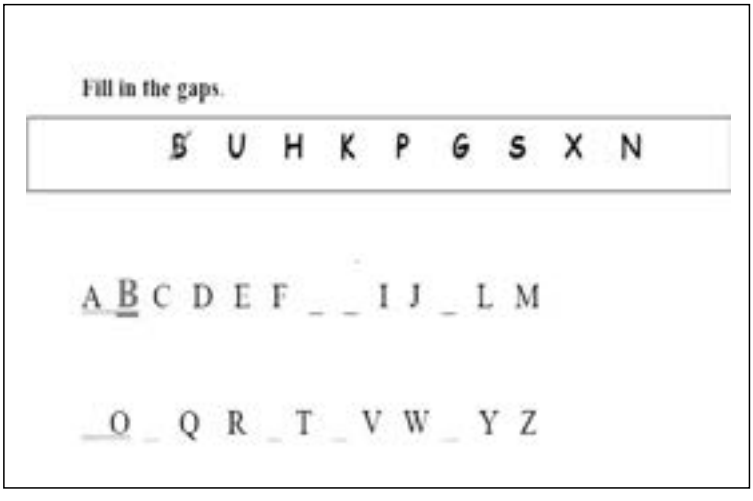


Figure 1. Activity A

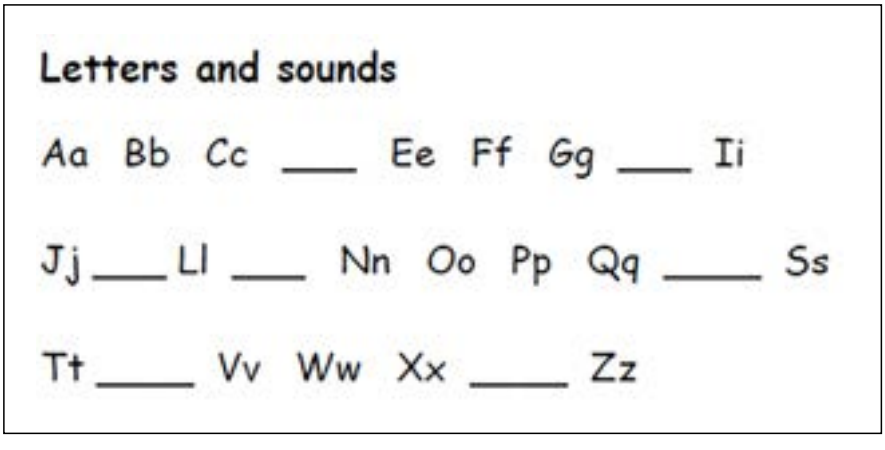


Figure 2. Activity B

Activity A is from an assessment that includes a set of directions including photographs and hand-written matching lines/answers. The words 'fill in the gaps' and 'match pictures with letters' are written in bold to emphasise the importance of the instructions. In this task, it is not clear in the instructions what learners should put in the gaps. In the top box, missing letters are written, and enough space is left between one letter, but without lines to separate letters, which can be confusing in terms of recognising that each letter stands by itself and is not part of a word. Also, all letters are in upper-case, which is an indication that learners have to write letters also in upper-case. Yet, this might be confusing because LESLLA learners might write the lower-case form of the previous letter. Also, the lines provided for answers are so short, which indicates that the answer should be short (just a letter).

A model answer is provided to show learners how they need to respond to the task using a different colour (blue). However, this task genre can be recognisable for learners with testing skills as they might be aware of the need to fill what is in the box in the empty spaces. For LESLLA learners, it might be unclear what they need to do (Flores, 2021b), especially as the test stops at the letter N, and does not continue to the end of the alphabet. In contrast, in the Scottish assessment (Activity B), both upper- and lower-case forms are written; thus, it is less confusing to learners as they need to write them both rather than only one form. Also, the space provided is bigger, which gives more space to write both forms of the missing letter. Moreover, the task includes all letters of the alphabet from Aa to Zz. Furthermore, written instructions are replaced with verbal ones, which may be clearer for LESLLA learners, but is impractical in classrooms as initial assessment cannot be done on an individual basis due to lack of funding (Simpson, 2021).

In Activity C (*Figure 3*), learners are required to choose from the box a letter, with which each word in the pictures starts.

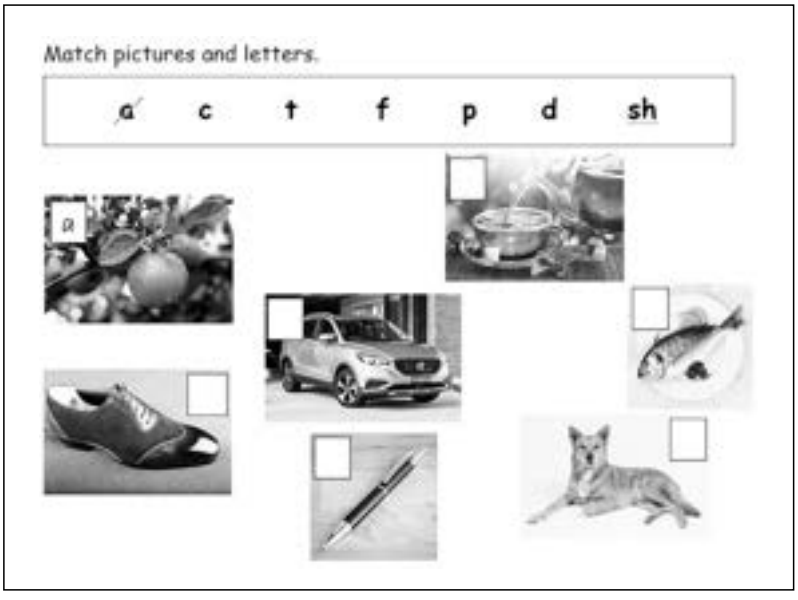


Figure 3. Activity C

The use of photos can make the task easier for the learners, but the fact that they are out of context is problematic to LESLLA learners (Flores, 2021b; Faux and Watson, 2018; Kurvers, 2015). Print awareness activities are challenging to LESLLA learners if they do not have a topic-based context (Faux and Watson, 2018). Therefore, the images in this activity should be related to a context that is studied in class, such as family or health. Also, it is not clear if the first picture is an apple or a plum which is confusing to learners. This is problematic especially as LESLLA learners interpret images in unexpected ways (Flores, 2021b), which affect their response to test tasks. In this task, the written instruction and also the seven letters in the box are written in bold, then, seven pictures are presented underneath with a box next to each picture, in which learners need to answer. The space provided is small to indicate that a letter is only needed for an answer. The model answer could be a guidance for learners. The layout of the question is based on the Real and Ideal concept of grammar of visual design (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020) where the question and pictures represent the Ideal or the general information, while the empty boxes where answers should be written are the Real or the specific information. The layout reflects the fact that learners have to read the question and look at the pictures and then write the answers, which should be related to what is above. However, according to Flores (2021b) knowledge of test genre and multimodal component is essential to read the

instructions and answer in the expected manner. Without testing literacy, responding to the question can be a challenge because images, demonstrated answers and bolding to differentiate instructions from the task are not helpful aspects for LESLLA learners because they lack not only test but also visual and multimodal literacies (Flores, 2021b) .

The complexity of Activity D (Figure 4), a self-designed task, is in the double action that is required; first to match the letter with the image and second the picture with the full word. The instructions do not make clear that two actions are required, although the model answer reveals that to be the case. The letters, photos and words are not horizontal; more vertical space is required between letters and words to have this activity more organised. Again, some images are misleading.

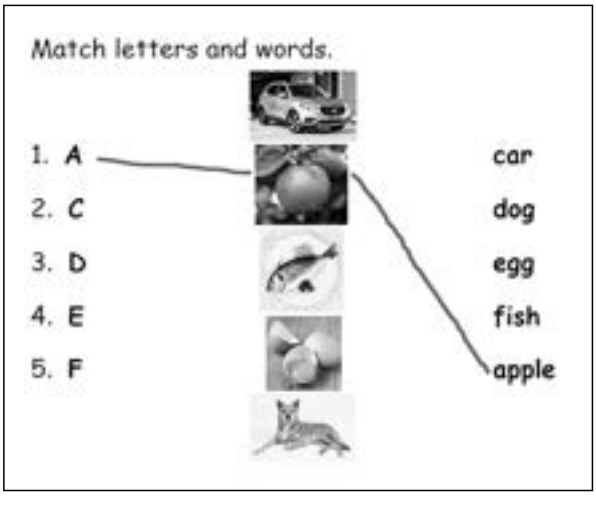


Figure 4. Activity D

A harder activity (E, *Figure 5*), a self-designed task, is shared by participants also used in initial assessment of LESLLA learners in Pre-A1 level, in which they have to add the missing vowels to the following words.

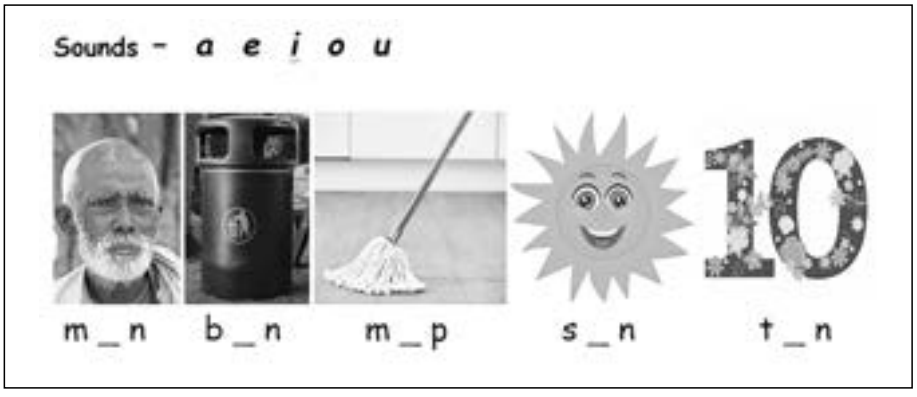


Figure 5. Activity E

The issues noted in the previous tasks also exist in this activity. These include the lack of a contextualised topic, the spacing between words and between the sounds of the top, the small spaces provided for the answers, the lack of LESLLA learners' abilities to interpret images in an expected way, and the lack of visual and multimodal literacies, especially with the picture of number 10 that includes flowers, personalised and unfamiliarity with the man in the picture. Yet, what is most problematic is that LESLLA learners are not fully aware that sounds in a word are divided into beginning, middle and end sounds (Schwarz, 2008, cited by Faux and Watson, 2018). Therefore, LESLLA learners might struggle to recognise what is required and respond in an expected way.

Self-designed assessment materials/Comprehension Tasks

Another example of the tools used in initial assessment is the following activities, a self-designed one (Activity F, *Figure 6*) and another from the Scottish Pre-A2 assessment framework (Activity G, *Figure 7*). Learners are required to read the text, extract information from it to fill the table (Activity F), while they need to read and copy in the other one (Activity G).

Reading

I am Ali.

I live in Huddersfield.

I like cooking and shopping.

I have two children.

Name:	Ali
Address:	
Likes:	
Family:	

Figure 6. Activity F

Reading

My name is Agnes and I come from Poland. I live in Scotland with my husband and my children. I have one son and two daughters.

Writing

_____

_____

_____

Figure 7. Activity G

It is important to provide recognisable images to trigger the responses of learners. The image of Ali in Activity F reflects ethnic diversity in the test task, and it is used by the tutor as a means to ensure diversity and inclusiveness to be appealing for learners. Also, the inclusion of people from an everyday situation has a positive impact on LESLLA learners in terms of response rate compared to tasks without such images (Flores, 2021c) as in Activity G. Moreover, the layout of the activity utilises the Ideal and Real principle of reading tasks starting from left to right and from top to bottom. The heading is at the top, 'Reading', the image and then answer are in the table at the bottom. According to the grammar of visual design (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020), the heading (Activities F and G) and the image (Activity F) are the general information (Ideal), while the table (Activity F) and the line (Activity G) where the specific information should be written are the Real. This layout gives learners the indication that they have to read the instructions and image (Activity F), and then write their responses below, which should be in reference to the top general information (Flores, 2021c). The main point in these tasks is that the contextual clues that readers require are not clear in the tasks, especially Activity G, which is problematic according to Khalifa and Weir (2009). LESLLA learners might struggle to make meaning from the modes used in the test questions, such as written instructions, images or semiotics (Flores, 2021a), especially when learners do not have 'a significant sight word vocabulary, the ability to decode at word level as opposed to phonemic or even alphabetic decoding' (Allemano, 2013, p.69). This can affect the ways that LESLLA learners respond to test tasks. This has a vital impact on the level of interpretations, understanding and deduction that they go through when they encounter a reading text.

Online Holistic Assessments

All forms of online holistic assessments are based on written instructions, which are sometimes accompanied with images to simplify the task for test-takers, such as in Activity H (*Figure 8*). To analyse the suitability of such tasks it is important to remember that LESLLA learners are unlikely familiar with terms found in L2 written texts, or even in their L1 (Faux and Watson, 2018). Therefore, words like dialogue, phrase, conversation, and options are new to LESLLA learners, especially those who speak a language that does not have a written form, which means they speak a language that does not have reference to grammar or rules, and words that describe written texts do not exist in their L1 (Faux and Watson, 2018). Furthermore, the complexity of multiple-choice multimodal is often overlooked by teachers who choose to use such an assessment with LESLLA learners who lack the knowledge of test genre as well as multimodal component, which is required to answer such a question in the right and expected way.

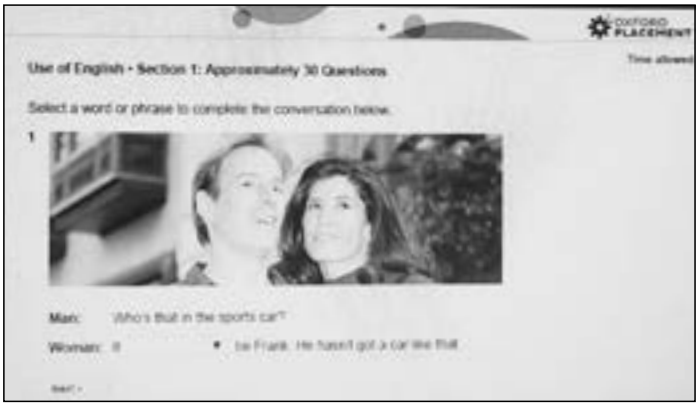


Figure 8. Activity H

Flores (2021c) argues that tests are interpreted in a socially constructed manner. Therefore, the test genre aspects cannot be identified by LESLLA learners, like reading all the misleading components of multiple-choice task, and know how to respond to such as a task and choose the correct answer, especially as semiosis is biased towards literate learners. What's more images may not be interpreted in a transparent way, as assumed by test designers (Flores, 2021b). Here, the chosen image may be misleading or misinterpreted because it presents a man and a woman in front of a building (*Figure 8*), and a woman and a child talking in the kitchen (*Figure 9*). The questions focus on the form of the sentence and on deducing meaning from a short conversation, but the images do not give any clues about that, they only refer to the man and woman/woman and child who are taking part in the conversation.

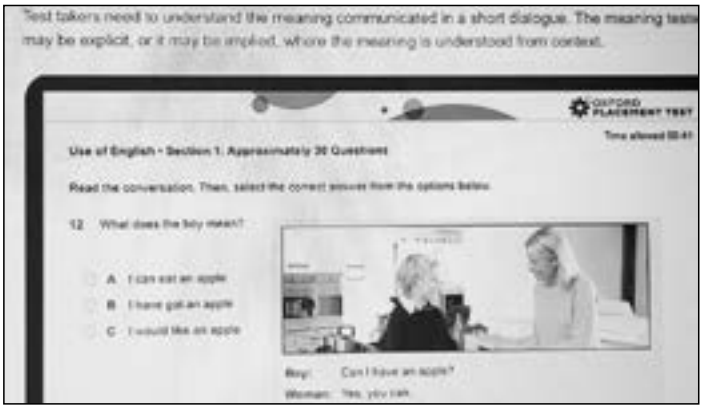


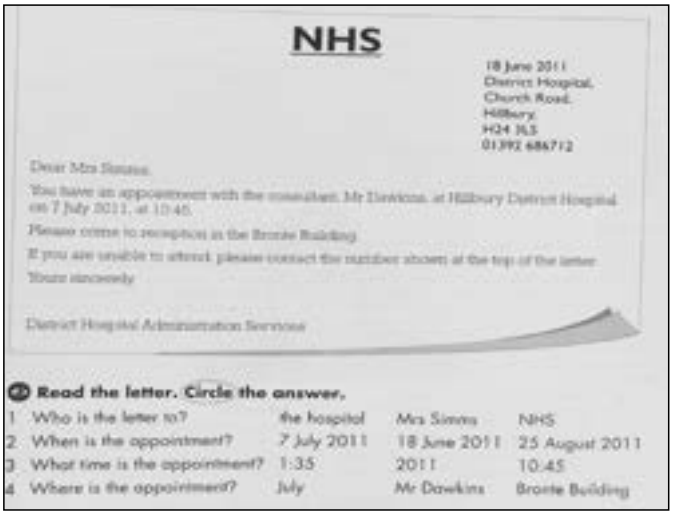
Figure 9. Activity I

Adapted Entry Level 1 (E1) assessment

Similarly, materials in E1 assessments are designed based on the assumption of literacy. This can be clear in an example from Excellence Gateway E1 assessment and ESOL Activities' book (Activity I, *Figure 10)*. The board pins and coloured backgrounds are used with the ads to indicate that the four texts are adverts or notes. This concept might be familiar to those with schooling experience, but it might not be to LESLLA learners. It is unclear how learners should respond to the task. Learners with schooling experience might anticipate that a tick in the small boxes underneath the images is required for the right answer, but learners without schooling experience might not. Moreover, even though most people are born with the ability to see, their understanding of images, or more specifically here of the test design, multimodal and visual components of the test is based on learning and habit. As LESLLA learners are experiencing formal education for the first time, it cannot be assumed that the test instruction, design, and visual multimodal components are clear for them.

Figure 10. Activity I continued

In the other activity (*Figure 11*), a letter about a hospital appointment is used with instructions written in bold with the use of the eye semiotic to instruct test-takers to read and a circle to instruct them to circle the correct answer. The symbols might not be interpreted as instructions by LESLLA learners, although test designers intended to use recognisable symbols, but such semiotics may not be understood by LESLLA learners (Flores, 2021b). Both tasks require test-takers to skim and scan the texts to extract information, which are skills that require time to acquire. As LESLLA learners are new readers and writers, they might be unable to respond to the questions in the expected way, even though they are required to only tick or circle the correct answer, rather than write a full answer.


NHS

18 June 2011
District Hospital,
Church Road,
Hillbury
H24 3L5
01392 686712

Dear Mrs Simms,

You have an appointment with the consultant, Mr Dawkins, at Hillbury District Hospital on 7 July 2011, at 10:45.

Please come to reception in the Bronte Building.

If you are unable to attend, please contact the number shown at the top of the letter.

Yours sincerely

District Hospital Administration Services

2) Read the letter. Circle the answer.

1	Who is the letter to?	the hospital	Mrs Simms	NHS
2	When is the appointment?	7 July 2011	18 June 2011	25 August 2011
3	What time is the appointment?	1:35	2011	10:45
4	Where is the appointment?	July	Mr Dawkins	Bronte Building

Figure 11. Hospital note

Finally, this study supports Flores' (2021b) findings that rubrics should be designed to consider not only the correct and incorrect answers, but should also allow space for different interpretations from learners that could be recognised or valued. Also, ESOL tutors should embed in their courses practices to ensure that LESLLA learners acquire visual, test genre and multimodal literacies to prepare them for assessment where such literacies are required.

Conclusion

This was a small-scale study that focuses on the assessment materials and criteria used in pre-A1 ESOL classrooms and their suitability to low-literate ESOL learners at the pre-A1 level. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to other groups of learners in different contexts. The findings show that the materials used at this level are not suitable for low-literate learners because even though those learners are proficient enough to extract meaning from a text, they are not able to show this in the assessment because the reading assessment is a challenge itself as it is believed the tasks are hindering learners from revealing their knowledge due to the materials' focus on measuring what learners cannot do rather than measuring and capturing the small steps, when compared to literate learners, achieved by them. Thus, this study recommends separating literate from low-literate learners in pre-A1 level, especially in the process of assessment. In addition, a review should be undertaken of the materials used to assess low-literate learners because what is being used may be suitable for the beginner level, but only for those with a literate background. According to

Allemano (2013), low-literate learners cannot transfer what they learn into the examination setting due to the complexity of tasks. Thus, assessments cannot show the real progress that low-literate learners make, especially with the lack of a descriptors/criteria that show the small steps achieved by low-literate learners in the initial, tracking progress and level promotion assessments.

A glimpse of light is the ongoing project funded by the Council of Europe to create descriptors below A1. The Literacy And Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LASLLIAM)[3] reference guide which focuses on 'can-do' statements that can be used as learning goals at the pre-A1 level. It also promotes the use of individual profiles for assessment at all levels for low-literate learners.

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3 Read more at https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/working-groups#{%2222597847%22:[2]}

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Measuring Success in Adult Education: Recognising Diverse Outcomes From a Diverse Sector

SARAH COSS

Abstract

This article explores the experiences of a group of women who having achieved success in education and returned to the adult learning environment again. A creative methodological approach allows the women to describe in their own words experiences of educational success and motivations to return to learning. Discussion points predominantly focus on outcomes that fall outside those typically measured. These include alternative interpretations of success; benefits of diverse learning groups; personal growth and bias, and connections and friendship. Questions of success and outcomes in later life are also explored. Conclusions identify the importance of recognising the diversity of experience in adult education, the varying methods of measuring success and the need to ensure learner stories are heard.

Keywords: Measuring Educational Success; Diverse Learning Environments; Measuring 'Soft Skills'; Educational Outcomes and Ageism; Learner Stories

Introduction

In my work as a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 5 Applied Social Studies tutor, I am tasked with encouraging my learners to employ their sociological imagination (Mills,1959). Often, the role of the social researcher involves the ability to do just this - to see the extraordinary within the ordinary. Through my working relationship with the women who are the focus of this article it became apparent that their experiences within adult education were noteworthy and that others could benefit from listening to these learner voices. The AONTAS Adult Learner Journal theme of 'success' brought these women to mind for the reason that they had all achieved significant success, both educationally and professionally, before they returned to the learning

environment again at a lower level on the NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications) than they had previously experienced. SOLAS, an agency of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, reported that 15,212 (17.9%) of all 2019 Lifelong Learning enrolments had a third level degree (Dulee-Kingsolving and Guerin, 2020). The women at the centre of this article have all studied at third level, including post-graduate study. More significantly, their own descriptions of learning experiences across their lifespan fit closely with what was termed by Cyril O. Houle in 1961 as 'Learning-orientated learners' (cited in Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2011, p.55). These learning-orientated learners 'seek learning for its own sake', have been engrossed in learning 'as long as they can remember', choose 'serious programs on TV and radio', and are 'avid readers'. Learners in this category 'join groups, classes and organisations for educational reasons' (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2011, p.55). While much research focusses on the educationally disadvantaged, this article explores the experiences of a group who are not defined as educationally disadvantaged. The research seeks to qualitatively consider the experiences of these learners to uncover and explore how their experiences of progression and success align with the value placed upon learning using a hierarchical framework such as the NFQ.

Back to Education – A Contextual Examination

The women at the centre of this article met while participating on a Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) course at QQI Level 5 on the NFQ. BTEI courses lead to a range of accreditation at levels 1-6 on the NFQ. This particular course, co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Social Fund (ESF) was part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020 (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2020).

The BTEI typically targets individuals and groups that experience particular and acute barriers to participation and are more difficult to engage in the formal learning process. In Ireland, such courses are run by a range of education providers, including the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). In 2012, BTEI Operational Guidelines were issued by the Further Education Development Unit to Vocational Education Committees (VECs) to assist them with managing, administering and delivering programmes using this funding stream (the VEC was re-structured to establish the current ETBs in 2013). At the time of writing, no updated BTEI guidelines were available (although new guidelines may be issued to coincide with ESF Plus 2021-2027 (EU Funds Ireland, 2020).

In the 2012 guidelines it is stated that priority for spaces on BTEI courses should be given to those most educationally disadvantaged. Furthermore, in order to ensure that funding is reaching those with lower educational attainment, 'not more than 30% of provision may be aimed at adults who have already achieved certification at upper second level education' (Further Education Development Unit, 2012, p.6). Eligibility for BTEI courses, including free tuition, includes those with less than upper-second level education but also includes the following categories, summarised below:

Category 2a and 2b - Persons entitled to, or dependants of persons entitled to:

- a medical card
- an unemployment payment
- a means-tested welfare payment
- working family payment (formerly known as family income supplement)
- participate in VTOS or Youthreach

Category 3 – All persons with less than upper second level education who are not eligible under Category 2A e.g. persons not in the labour force, persons in employment

Category 4 – others. For this category, fees are charged for participation on the course.

The overall aim of the BTEI is to 'increase the participation of young people and adults with less than upper second level education in a range of part-time accredited learning opportunities leading to awards on the NFQ' (Further Education Development Unit, 2012, p.3). The primary target group is adults who have not completed upper second level education, particularly the so-called 'hard to reach' that experience strong barriers to participation, access, transfer and progression to other education or employment pathways. In the Irish Further Education and Training (FET) landscape, one of the three strategic priorities from the FET strategy 2020-2024 is 'pathways'. The goal is to offer clear pathways into FET, within FET and from FET enabling 'smart choices at all stages of people's lives and careers' (SOLAS, 2021, p.1). However, there is also an acknowledgment that pathways are not always in one direction,

and learners with a third level qualification can, and do, enter at lower levels on the NFQ (SOLAS, 2021). Although there is a distinct and pressing need to continue to ensure that we meet the needs of the educationally disadvantaged and marginalised in our society, we can simultaneously acknowledge the benefits that participation in learning can bring for all. The women at the centre of this research all met the BTEI eligibility criteria as stated above and accessed the QQI course because (at the time of studying) they were unemployed and receiving a jobseeker payment. They joined a wider group of learners from diverse educational and social backgrounds to participate in an accredited module leading to QQI Level 5 certification. This research sought to understand more about their motivation to return to formal education at this time in their lives and to hear their own accounts of personal success during this learning episode.

The teaching and learning that these women were engaged in included a pedagogy that sought to promote mutual learning, equality and solidarity 'driven by dialogue with and between learners and their teachers' (Duckworth and Smith, 2019, p.28). It involved radical adult education practices which sought to recognise and lean on learner experiences and existing knowledge as a starting point in the curriculum, offering a space for group members to interact, to share and to learn together. There was also a commitment to creating conditions whereby transformative learning could take place, in this instance, learning that can extend beyond the individual into the family and the community and includes a 'personalised critique and understanding of social inequality and the student's positionality with this' (Duckworth and Smith, 2019, p.28).

Discussions about education are dominated by measurement and comparisons of educational outcomes and these measurements seem to direct much of educational policy and practice (Biesta, 2008). One such neoliberal, managerial indicator used to measure and classify education is that of outcomes - a topic widely debated and discussed in adult basic education, further education and higher education (Tett and Hamilton (eds), 2019; Fitzsimons and McGrath, 2019; Fitzsimons, 2017; Finnegan, 2016; Grummell, 2014; Hussey and Smith, 2008; 2002; Biesta, 2008). Often, it is these managerial measurements that determine whether a learning course is successful or not. Chosen units of measurement have been influenced by the inclusion of the Human Capital perspective, in particular how the human capital model has been translated into measurable indicators of learning (Allatt and Tett, 2019). The human

capital model has led to a discourse that views learning in relation to economic potential, in what Allatt and Tett describe as a focus on productivity that comes at the expense of the type of knowledge that leads to the development of an individual's potential and greater well-being (Allatt and Tett, 2019). Some of this discussion can be summed up here using a reflective question posed by Gert Biesta: 'are we measuring what we value, or are we measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure?' (Biesta, 2008, p.35).

There is a position within education which maintains that although learning outcomes can be valuable if properly used, they have been misappropriated and adopted widely at all levels within the education system to facilitate the managerial process (Hussey and Smith, 2002). One research method we can employ to counter this reliance on tightly constrained statistical units of measurement is to seek out the voice of the learner to add nuance and descriptive depth to our definitions of what constitutes measurable outcomes and progress. Collecting learner voices allows us to gain a wider perspective on the many and varied successes of learners. Following a piece of research on learner progression within community-based adult learning, Janis Macintyre stated that learner opinions are often missing from debates and there is a need to explore progression from the points of view of the learners in order to ensure that we take account of their experiences (Macintyre, 2012, pp.187-189). Similarly, in their research with literacy practitioners, Allatt and Tett (2019) uncover stories of practitioners working within and around the measurement criteria to produce alternative data aimed at capturing the type of outcomes they were observing. The practitioners noted the difficulties encountered when using progression, qualification and employment as criteria for success and instead, detailed the use of tools such as learner impact statements to measure 'soft skills'. These are typically skills that are not accredited and are not easy to record, such as increased self-confidence and 'whole-life impacts' (Allatt and Tett, 2019, p.47-48). In a comparable manner, my research offers the women a space to tell us a little more about their educational journey, their experiences together and their outcomes, as told in their own words. In the act of sharing their stories, the women highlight the diversity of experiences within adult and further education and add qualitative depth to discussions relating to learner outcomes and learner success. The AONTAS Community Education 20 Years since Publication of Learning for Life paper states that:

> Quantitative assessments of lifelong learning participation that are based on metrics such as completion of a single minor or major award, mask the

life and learning experiences of the learners [...] Each learner has a unique experience and success means many things to different people (AONTAS, 2020, p.2).

Methodology: Life Histories, Codes and Conversation

This research includes the significant contributions of five women, participating across the globe and two significantly different time zones! While research based on just five cases makes it difficult to achieve qualitative depth, I had prior experience of working with these women in a teaching and learning environment. I was confident in their ability to reflect and consider their experiences and furthermore, to provide stimulating and interesting statements which could inspire future research into this cohort of adult learner. All findings included in this article are generated from an initial creative exercise with a follow-up focus group taking place online, full details of these methods are outlined below. Leaning on the work of Letherby (2003) and Oakley (2000; 1999) and following from previous research methods I have undertaken (Coss, 2017; 2016), I used a series of open-ended activities and 'codes' (Freire, 1993) based on the overarching theme of success to allow participants bring as much of themselves as possible to the research process. During our focus group, I once again put my trust in the mantra 'the group can take care of itself' (Sheehy, 2001, p.33) and trusted that these women would engage in a vibrant and explorative facilitated discussion together. The unstructured nature of my research activities provided qualitative depth by enabling respondents to talk about their experiences within their own frames of reference, drawing upon meanings with which they were familiar and allowing those meanings of events and relationships to be understood on their own terms (May, 2001). The research was co-constructed (Bryman, 2012; May, 2001) and participants were invited to approve and comment on a first draft, including choosing their own pseudonym to use. Furthermore, it was an ethical consideration of mine that prior to participation in this article, all of the women had completed their period of formal learning and were no longer in an assessment relationship with me at the time of research. The responses of the women included in this article are summarised, stylised accounts, unless their words appear verbatim and where this is the case it is noted using double quotation marks or indentation. The women took part in a reflective exercise which I entitled *Draw my Life: Education Edition*. Guidance was given to the group, which included the direction to:

> […] draw, write or record your educational experiences to date, across your life span. Think about any educational experiences that come to mind; any setting; any level; any people... essentially any time that you determine you were engaged in learning something.

Participants were invited to add images/words/colour/symbols that reflected their thoughts and feelings about these educational experiences, and finally, to further reflect on which of these educational experiences they would describe as 'successful', making a note of why they considered them so. Following from this exercise, a series of codes were used within a focus group to stimulate conversation. These codes will be explained in more detail during the discussion of the findings.

Early Experiences of Success

The 'Draw my Life' exercise was enlightening for me from the very beginning of this research process, because the beginning is exactly where these learners started. Although the prompt given did include the phrase 'across the life span', I was struck by how prominent the early educational experiences were, both in the life history work and later in the follow-up focus group. The word love was used many times in relation to schooling, with this love of learning fostered from a young age through socialisation, including the positive expectations of family, institutions and peers. Maggie Feely (2015) shared the stories of adult learners who experienced trauma in their early educational experiences and the subsequent importance of learning care when working with emotionally vulnerable adults. In sharp contrast, it was enlightening for me to listen to each one of these women independently make their declarations of love from such a young age:

> Henrietta - I just loved my primary school. The teachers used the Froebel method and we were engaged in active learning and immersive activities from the very beginning. There were a lot of trips to museums, gardens and exhibitions and everything just seemed to be intuitive and fun.

> Florence – I started primary school at the age of 3! I loved school, I always did, a small country two-room school with lovely teachers...

> Jade – Belonging to a school was very important to me, I was diligent and I had a role organising and helping others – I loved that role...

> Sonja – Fádo fádo! A small two-room national school in the country. Look! I even drew a picture of it, the Master's room and the junior room! I really liked school, I loved learning...
>
> Rachel – I *loved* school, especially primary school. I loved everything about it: the teachers, my classmates and learning. I was lucky it was easy for me.

While it is well documented that our early experiences can shape our later ones, particularly when we apply a psychodynamic lens (Tennant, 2006), it was insightful nonetheless to hear these women talk about their very early experiences when such open-ended prompts were given. Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, the group also named success in their early schooling with all of the women identifying that this was a setting they felt comfortable and capable in, with comments including terms such as: 'top of the class'; excelling; having fun; and having confidence. Skills named included: having a good memory; early and competent reading skills; coping skills; and strong social skills leading to feeling part of a tribe. Collecting the educational histories from adults who have had positive early experiences allows us better understand how these events shape the adult learner and subsequently informs our practice. However, like many adult learners, for most of the women the continued journey through education was not without difficulty despite their positive early-years experiences. At this point in the article I will take the opportunity to give some context from the women's lives to allow us understand more about the journey through adult education for each of them.

Directly after school, in the 1970/80s, Florence worked for years in a civil service job that she hated:

> From day one I hated it. It was so boring…it was incredible! I spent my lunchtime going to the agencies to see what else was available but there was just nothing, it was shocking. I mean, it was just emigration or get a job somewhere and just hang on to it.

Florence described feeling trapped - long hours working shifts meant she couldn't pursue a night course. Eventually, she took the decision to take a career break to attend a PLC course, then extended this career break for another two more years to complete her undergraduate studies. This was an overwhelmingly positive experience for Florence, and although she returned to her job due to financial necessity, she did enter education again at a later stage to achieve her

Masters in Journalism and subsequently gained what she described as a dream job working as an advocate and activist with a human rights organisation, which included work in New York and work with the UN. Following a company restructure that involved a permanent move of the offices to New York, Florence was made redundant in 2019.

Jade went from formal schooling into nursing (pre-degree nursing), and she progressed in this field. She recounted a time at a senior-level meeting when she suggested ideas which went unheard only to witness the same ideas raised at the following meeting by a doctor, however on this occasion those same ideas were met with enthusiasm. On leaving this meeting, Jade spoke to another colleague to help her process what had occurred, and alongside Jade's understanding of the gendered dimension to this encounter, she recalled her colleague informing her 'you don't have a ticket to the party, he is a doctor and you are a nurse'. This, among other motivators, was the reason Jade returned to formal learning to complete a Master's degree. Jade then moved away from nursing into personal coaching and on entering the BTEI classroom in 2019 was out of work and on jobseeker's benefit, describing herself as 'recently retired' (a descriptor we will return to later).

Sonja's early love of school was somewhat shattered by a difficult transition to secondary school, including a personal tragedy with the illness and death of her mother. During these difficult years she persisted and after completing a 'good Leaving Cert' she followed her (self-employed) father's advice and gained 'a pensionable job in banking'. Sonja was engaged in education throughout her time in banking and although progressing well in her career over the years, she decided to pursue a degree in UCD – an undertaking that involved huge personal sacrifice with classes for five nights of the week. Throughout her studies, Sonja continued to work in the bank, but was made redundant in 2018.

Henrietta also entered the workforce after completing her secondary education, being 'of an age that allowed her have a great career without having gone to university'. Henrietta did return to learning as a mature student, nurturing her passion for psychology to pursue a degree in UCD. Although 'life got in the way' Henrietta went on to 'plough her way accidentally up the career ladder' to a very high level completing professional courses along the way and working in a high-status role including living and working in different countries around the globe.

Rachel is the youngest of our group of women, with almost two decades in the difference. She described a more traditional route into higher education. Rachel spoke insightfully about the culture in the school she attended in the midlands in Ireland where the expectation was that you went to college, which she did, choosing to live in Dublin to fully immerse herself in the experience. After her degree, Rachel also entered banking in the area of human resources, and in relation to education and training described how 'in banking, you always had to do something'. Yet, in parallel to the stories above, Rachel was made redundant in 2019 which led her to access a BTEI course near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The information above tells us a little about the women's individual life histories, but what brought them all together in a relatively small Adult Education Service in South Dublin?

Motivation and Persistence

During this period of unemployment Florence, Sonja, Henrietta and Jade - four women in their early 60s who never met before - each saw a flyer for a QQI Level 5 Psychology class in their local Intreo or Citizen's Information Office. Rachel would join the group later, finding the course on the fetchcourses.ie website (Further Education and Training Course Hub). When discussing motivation to return to learning there were a range of reasons given. These reasons were predominantly linked to what educational functionalism might typically view as latent (unintended, unrecognised and unforeseen) rather than manifest (intended, recognised and expected) functions of education. Jade stated:

> I wanted to make friends. I also was feeling lost, because I went from a very stressful, very busy job to a very quiet period. I was struggling. What do I do with myself? What do I do with my time? What is my purpose in life now? I suppose, like a lot of people, I was my job for a long, long time, so I was reflecting 'Has Jade got any worth? Outside of my work, is Jade as a person worth something?' I was struggling with all of that, so the course came at just the right time.

Separately, Florence described herself as being in a similar place of reflection and contemplation in her life, and Sonja also mirrored these feelings, adding another factor that would make the learning experiences of these women all the more poignant – the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions and lockdowns in Ireland were a feature of their

learning episode together, and one which was explored and reflected on throughout the research conversation. On this topic, Sonja stated:

> I saw the leaflet in Intreo. We were made redundant in work and I had been working in various temporary jobs but that had all finished and this was a time when there was nothing happening. So, I started the course and when COVID came it was a saviour – it took on a greater significance, it gave me a focus and a purpose. I got hooked on Psychology and I continued all the way (to achieve a Major Award in QQI Level 5 Applied Social Studies).

When listening to these women discuss their experience of occupying liminal spaces (Turner, 1974) – those periods between what was and what comes next - I was interested to learn more about why they chose adult education, and more particularly, why they chose a relatively pressured accredited course complete with the associated assessments, paperwork and deadlines. What emerged from their discussions was that while certification was not necessarily the goal, and most certainly wasn't their first priority, there was a pull towards formal, structured education and a recognition that this was a space and an activity where they would be comfortable. Neo-liberal and managerial measurements can exclude an analysis of the many and varied motivations for returning to education. Henrietta expressed some of the reasons for her choice to return to education at this stage in the following way:

> The adult classes have been a joy as they have come at a time when I needed something to keep my brain alive, I needed to meet new people. I needed something that built on my experiences but did not make me feel uncomfortable. I don't play sport well, I don't mix with large groups of strangers well, my health will not allow me join a tennis or golf club and I think I'm still too young for Bridge. But I love learning. It's always a good day when I learn something new. And I learned a lot and enjoyed it all.

While some of the women initially expressed that the accreditation was not important to them, further discussion among the group highlighted the associated benefits that accreditation can bring to the (perceived) status of a course. The following exchange shows how the group shifted in their thinking from initial comments that certification did not matter or was not a factor in their choice, to a recognition of the value of accreditation:

Jade: To me, certification did matter, not because of the qualification but because I didn't have any experience of the organisation or the courses. I knew that it was in some way accredited, I knew that there had to be a certain standard, I knew that there had to be somebody delivering it that knew what they were talking about. To me, it validated the organisation and the course.

Florence: That is important. I never thought of it that way.

Rachel: Maybe at the back of our consciousness we knew that because it was QQI it would meet a certain standard, so even though the cert. itself wasn't important we knew ourselves that it had to be a certain level.

Sonja: But it was lovely to get the cert. in the post – it's an achievement! I got a buzz out of that.

Learning Outcomes: Participation in a Diverse Learning Group

As part of my research process I sought to understand more about the nature of outcomes for these women, more particularly the aspects of their learning experience that they would identify as an outcome. I knew from my role as a BTEI coordinator entering data and 'pulling reports' that there were particular outcomes captured and recorded. Within the Irish setting, recent government funding schemes overwhelmingly focus on progression within learning and learner destinations into employment or further learning (Guerin and Hegarty, 2020; Dulee-Kinsolving and Guerin, 2020; 2019), with the UK producing regular statistics that also include 'Earnings' in their measure of outcomes in Further Education (Department of Business, 2014). The topic of learner outcomes was introduced by way of codes during the focus group with images depicting each of these 'destinations':

- The NFQ ten-level framework infographic and a QQI certificate to represent Learner Progression and Accreditation
- An instantly recognisable image of a workplace to represent Employment, and
- A pile of Euro notes to represent Earnings.

A further image was used (with prior consent) which included a reflective statement written by one of the group members:

> It is difficult to explain but to listen and learn…was mind blowing. It gave me an insight into the mind and the workings of mind, which enlightened me in aspects of my own life and those close to me. To say that it was lifesaving is an understatement…Our group got on really well and I made some lifelong friends which are now, so important to me. Without them, I do not know how I would have survived.

These codes were left on view for a while to allow time to individually and personally reflect and react to each. When I felt enough time had passed for them to be processed, I asked the women to share their thoughts on their outcomes over the period of study within their BTEI course. The reactions and responses of the women were diverse, and there was more emphasis placed on gaining employment than I had expected, particularly given that some of the women had previously described themselves as retired (this will be discussed later). What was very clear though, was that there were a wide range of outcomes identified that did not fit into any of the aforementioned statistical categories and these were the outcomes that the women led with when they discussed this topic.

Hussey and Smith examine how learning outcomes can be divided into different categories, with their final category, 'Membership inclusion, self-worth' being a category they name as 'very useful' (Hussey and Smith, 2008, p.108). This category reflects the learner's affinity towards participation and worthwhile contribution to the group where the learning takes place. The first of the outcomes discussed related to the benefits gained from membership and participation within a diverse group of adult learners, benefits which included personal growth and learning. In particular, the women discussed with fondness some of the young (early to mid-20s) members of their class commenting on their 'intelligence', their balanced and relaxed attitude to study, their 'different way of learning' and the fun and energy they brought to the classroom. Florence described this dynamic as 'amazing' and Jade stated that 'one of the benefits I got was meeting those people and really loving meeting them'. There were other similar remarks about the unique outcomes achieved from having a diverse adult learning environment, with Henrietta stating the 'mix was wonderful', adding that 'we heard experiences we'd never have come across normally and we learned so much from, and about, each other'. Sonja reflected on the typical life experience of 'living in our own little bubbles that we are born into, where our work and our education dictate where we go and the people we mix with'. She added that this learning group represented a 'whole different world, and it

is so healthy and good for us'. Diversity within any educational setting should be enabled wherever possible, and funding and recruitment mechanisms are key in this regard. The benefits provided by peer-to-peer activities, particularly when we include a diverse range of experiences and knowledge, provides a depth of learning that simply could never be provided by the teacher-student relationship alone. Jade in particular was quite reflective on this topic, and this outcome had featured previously in her individual reflective 'life history' work. In the focus group she grappled with how to express her thoughts and feelings on this, eventually stating:

> I don't know how to put this…but how and ever, I'll just say it…It was the first time in my life that I came into direct contact with young people from a lower-socioeconomic group that wouldn't have had the advantages that I had. And also other cultures, people from other cultures. I found that so enlightening and so interesting, and I would hope that they found it the same in reverse, I don't know if they did, but we were so different that actually even if I learned absolutely nothing about Psychology, I loved coming into class.

Learning Outcomes: Capturing Imagination and Uncovering Bias

In keeping with the journal theme, I sought to explore with these women what they deemed to be success. My motivations here were to uncover and explore how their experiences of 'progression' and 'success' align with the value placed upon learning using hierarchical frameworks such as the NFQ. Some of the women's opinions regarding certification have been detailed above, but there were further discussions relating to success. This topic was introduced as part of the life history work and repeated in the focus group with a relevant visual image and a referenced extract from the AONTAS quote above stating 'success means many things to different people'. Early in the discussion Jade stated that success is when something 'captures your imagination', adding that she 'didn't stop when the classes stopped and continued to read all sorts of things'. The women then launched straight into naming smaller, individual personal learning that took place while completing particular activities or tasks, using examples that perhaps would not typically be considered in the overall picture of success. Rachel started with her QQI Level 5 Social Studies research project describing it as different to her previous experiences of learning during her degree where tasks felt more like a 'tick-box exercise'. In comparison, Rachel valued this learning activity as 'a real achievement' because the topic was personal, the overall research task was daunting, and on completion she 'felt really proud of

it'. Other notable successes named included journal tasks involving personal reflective work, in particular from a QQI Level 5 Intercultural Studies module. Sonja continued the act of critical reflection within the focus group noting the success she gained when she reflected on and acknowledged personal bias and experienced consequent personal growth:

> You were looking at your own life journey and…it's about bias I suppose, because we all do have bias and this was the first time I really acknowledged that I do have bias. From examining our own exposure to other cultures along the way I reflected that I was very sheltered growing up and it was so good to go back and look at that and see how things have evolved and how we have evolved…there was a personal growth in it.

Florence also named the success connected to personal growth and how participation on the course led to her taking a 'much deeper look' at herself, declaring that she 'learned an awful lot about herself, without knowing it initially'. For Henrietta, success outside of certification was also named, leading her to conclude that rather than it being all about the award, it was much more about learning and meeting like-minds. Rachel sagely proposed that perhaps because they already hold recognised qualifications that the other outcomes become more important. She expanded on this by describing how instead of the course acting as 'a stepping stone to get a good job' it was more about expanding personal knowledge and having your personal awareness of self and others 'challenged to some degree'. The group seemed to agree with this proposition. Radical adult education practices that embody critical reflection on individually held attitudes, personal beliefs and wider social norms should be a central core of the adult learning experience. This research provides concrete examples of transformative learning, as identified by the women themselves, evidenced through this challenging of personal awareness of self and others. As the conversation on the topic of success began to wane, Jade brought the discussion full-circle by concluding:

> I would think of much more basic stuff: turning up on the day, just getting there. For me, a big thing was mental health […] If you are attending and you're mingling with others you are supporting your own mental health, and probably the mental health of others.

Outcomes: Connections, Friendship and Personal Growth

Following from the above quote, what came through strongly and emotively during the research were the benefits regarding connections, friendship and personal growth. When COVID-19 hit, these connections took on an even greater significance. As stated earlier, a reflective comment from one of the women was used as a code to stimulate further discussion in the area of connection and friendship. A major outcome that was uncovered during the research was the particular value of the course to those who felt they were in a stage of transition. Early in the focus group when discussing motivation for joining the course, Florence revealed to us all some of her thoughts and feelings during this time:

> At that stage in my life I was retired. Well, I don't know if I was retired or if I was just out of work, I don't know what I was! But I found myself unexpectedly living alone and I wasn't in a great place in my life so it was an absolute lifesaver.

These benefits from participation on the course were echoed by other women in the focus group, particularly the four women who were of an older age and were experiencing a period of liminal reflection and contemplation. Henrietta responded to the statement with the following piece:

> I'd have to echo what Florence said that I found the course lifesaving, and I suspect many others did too. Many of the class were at another crossroads in their lives either voluntarily or otherwise and I think it was so very important for them to realise that they were (are) not alone [...] It was very bonding, the group dynamic was special and wonderfully nurtured.

Like many education centres, when our physical doors closed in March 2020 there was a pause and a re-group while we established our new ways of working with our learners. As an adult education service, we quickly surveyed all of our learners inquiring who was willing and/or able to continue remotely. Approximately one third of our learners remained engaged with us; one-third stated that they now had care responsibilities that precluded their participation in learning, and the remaining learners (those who would fit into the category of educationally vulnerable) never responded to our various attempts at communication. Perhaps due in part to the prior educational successes of the members of this research group, they all indicated an interest in continuing to study remotely and all returned to an online classroom once this facility was

offered. Jade described the course, during COVID-19 times in particular, as 'an absolute godsend' adding:

> It gave me an anchor in the week, it gave connections, it gave purpose, it gave an interest, there were so many things I learned along the way about myself, about others, about the topics.

While discussing the various benefits and outcomes of participation on the course, Sonja named an added dimension for those who were living alone during the COVID-19 lockdowns:

> Yes, it was an anchor and a focus and we were part of something outside of ourselves. And after the class Florence was my anchor. We discovered we lived very close to each other and we started to meet for a cup of coffee on the wall down the road and that was hugely important because I live on my own and Florence lives on her own.

Florence added, 'It was hugely important. I met Jade for coffee and Henrietta for coffee…we drank a lot of coffee!' The friendships remained firm ones, with the women talking about their activities since COVID-19 restrictions eased including coffee meet-ups, dinners out, and even holidays together.

Outcomes and Ageism

As mentioned previously, employment featured more highly in the discussion regarding outcomes than I had predicted, which I reflect now most likely highlights an inherent personal prejudice that led me to conclude that due to their age profile many of these women would not be seeking employment following this course. On the contrary, the 'destination' of employment was a destination that many of the women were actively seeking, although they outlined barriers faced in this regard. Henrietta welcomed the inclusion of employment as a measurement, however she expanded this to add that 'employment on its own' did not sound like a destination, instead preferring 'progression within employment and personal progression within oneself' adding that she always needed 'a purpose and a reason'. Rachel, who is in her early 40s, has gained employment and is no longer studying (a fact that led to Sonja expressing how they really missed her when she left). Duckworth and Smith (2019) describe a type of outcome called 'critical social literacy' – the ability to navigate the complexities of different social groups and settings. Through their research they provide us with an example of critical social literacy which includes the

ability to read social relations in the workplace and wider society (Duckworth and Smith, 2019, p.35). For Rachel, her higher education was still the most important qualification when seeking and gaining employment in her field, although she did acknowledge that she was more aware of job vacancies seeking person specifications that included 'a social studies element'. Rachel stated that due to her new learning, particularly in relation to equality and diversity, she definitely felt more confident in her ability to demonstrate this knowledge at interview level and also use it in any subsequent work. The remaining four women are, as yet, not engaged in paid employment, although they discussed a desire to do so, particularly to gain part-time work or work supporting others in their community. Florence is currently exploring the prospects and training requirements involved in gaining work as a Special Needs Assistant in a school setting. She participated in the conversation on employment explaining 'I would love to use my Level 5 for work of some kind, but age is a problem' to which she laughed, adding that there was nothing much she could do about that! Jade came in on this point, with a more direct observation:

> I found, and I think Florence will agree with this, that your chances of getting a job after the age of 60 are nearly zilch. We live in an ageist society. We have all had experience of applying for jobs and I know we didn't get the jobs because of our age and nothing will convince me otherwise, even though we were very well qualified.

There was also a revisiting of their own role within the classroom with Jade recalling a time where they were involved in a paired, peer-to-peer activity supporting other learners with referencing and writing skills. Jade declared 'We can be used! We have experience!' adding that it would be great to be able to link with younger people to support them, either inside or outside the classroom setting. Two of the women disclosed that they had applied for volunteer roles within the literacy services, but at the time of interview neither had heard back from the organisation, which led to the following exchange:

> Florence: They never got back to me.
>
> Sonja: Nor me!
>
> Florence: I don't get that…we're not dead!

However, what was quite startling for me to witness during the final conversations were statements that might indicate the presence of internalised ageism. Despite all of the many and varied outcomes the women described - outcomes that benefitted themselves individually but also their learning group, their wider community and arguably society as a whole - there was a strong feeling of anxiety expressed that they were 'taking a place' from others. Sonja stated, on behalf of the others, 'we were always conscious of taking up a space for a younger person' with Florence adding 'We've had our shot, we've been lucky. If I thought I was taking a place from someone else I would happily say no'. The women recalled recommending the course to their peers and said 'they didn't apply because they felt they didn't want to take up space that could be used by a younger person'. Jade circled back to the statistical measurement of outcomes and added her concluding thoughts in relation to age, a comment to which others whole-heartedly agreed:

> In the older age group, it has to be something outside of money, work status or even getting a job. It has to be about what you are getting outside of that. I took a long-time campaigning in health to remove outcomes and replace it by benefits. Benefits are much wider and deeper than outcomes will ever be, certainly in the older age group. So, when they are looking at outcomes for learning in our age group, I think they're looking in the wrong place.

Conclusion

Our system of 'progression' through the NFQ and the overemphasis on managerial measurements of success overshadows the multiple possibilities for what constitutes success in learning. Using collaborative research and unique learner voices this article provided an interesting and emotive account of what motivated these adults to return again to accredited learning, uncovering motivations that sat alongside employment opportunities and a typical understanding of progression. While a small sample size precludes generalisations or any attempt towards a grand theory, collecting the educational life histories from 'successful' adult learners gives us insight into how important formative educational experiences are, which may in turn assist in our practice with those who are educationally vulnerable. Adult learning practices that promote critical reflection of our social norms in relation to equality and expectation allow our learners opportunities to reflect and transform. The diversity of adult learning groups in FET should be promoted and protected by utilising funding mechanisms that provide suitable educational spaces for the most vulnerable while also recognising the learning benefits enabled by

diversity of experience. Diverse learning groups become the site for a range of educational experiences that extend beyond the learner-teacher relationship.

The examples of success named by these women include significant and socially beneficial skills such as identification of personal bias, an understanding and awareness of self and others, and a protection of mental health. Outcomes described as 'lifesaving' and 'anchoring' are evidently of incredible personal importance to the learner yet they are not the type of benefits that are officially measured as outcomes. Furthermore, individual and personal success in the arenas of self-awareness, self-confidence, relationship and connection permeate to wider social circles leading to an increase in positive outcomes for others. In tandem with previous research I have conducted (Coss, 2017), it seems evident that if we don't take steps to name these experiences as successful learning episodes, then we can't recognise and measure them. In the current FET context, as has been shown above, significant learning outcomes that are not systematically recognised are at risk of being devalued, marginalised or trivialised.

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Towards Critical, Engaged, Antiracist Learning Environments

CAMILLA FITZSIMONS AND LILIAN NWANZE

Abstract

Racism is not an anomaly, rather it is an ordinary feature of our world and is a symptom of white supremacy. This article draws from critical race theory and critical pedagogy to make sense of this assertion and to contemplate possible responses. Using an autoethnographic research paradigm, we draw from our own contrasting experiences and perceptions; for Lilian as a black naturalised Irish educator and for Camilla as a white, indigenous Irish educator, to offer reflections, analyses and concrete examples that might help other adult educators to respond to a topic that many people tend to avoid.

Keywords: White Supremacy, Structural Racism, Adult Education, Critical Race Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Autoethnography

Introduction

In 2009, Barack Obama became the first African American to be elected US President. Both of us remember how the images of his inauguration that were beamed across the world included a tearful Jessie Jackson — a former Democratic presidential nominee who is also African American. The mood was electric as people dared to believe that our world was perhaps moving in a better, less racially-divided direction. Eleven years later, a very different image of race relations dominated our screens when, in 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer was captured on video and shared virally. Countless panels and programmes were organised to debate the demands of the US Black Lives Matter Movement, which originated in the middle of Obama's presidency when three women, Alicia Garza, Parrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, responded to police inaction following the death of teenager Trayvon Martin in 2013.

Floyd's death seven years later galvanised the movement and many Irish people got involved. For days, the hashtag #blacklivesmatter trended domestically and over 5,000 people protested outside the US embassy, chanting 'Black Lives Matter' and 'defund the police'. The crowd also drew connections with discriminations in Ireland by demanding an end to our much-criticised Direct Provision (Pollock, 2020), a for-profit system of accommodation supports for people seeking international protection from persecution who often live for many years in sub-standard conditions.

Exactly seven months after the death of George Floyd, George Nkencho, a 21-year-old Black man from North Dublin was shot dead by Irish Police (the Gardaí) in the front garden of his home in Dublin 15. Nkencho had a documented history of mental illness and had been involved in an earlier incident where he wielded a knife at staff in a local convenience store. Gardaí pursued him as he made his way home. He rang his own doorbell and his sister answered but was soon ordered to close it again. Despite her pleas that he was no threat to the family, Nkencho was shot in the back (Gallagher, 2021). Nkencho's family have repeatedly raised concerns about the progress of the Gardaí's internal investigation into his death (which at the time of writing is yet to conclude) and have called for an independent inquiry. In a country that had a few months before his death been so outraged by the death of George Floyd, the silence surrounding Nkencho's death was deafening. In fact, some of the loudest voices heard were those modelled on US Blue-lives Matter rhetoric, a discourse that seeks to equate the dangers of police work with the deaths of people of colour whilst in police custody. Quinn (2020) argues this rhetoric does little to protect anyone's life, rather it perpetuates police violence by fostering an environment of fear, hatred, and racism.

This is also not the only situation where we believe a person's ethnicity cannot be ignored. Ireland is one of a number of European countries where statistics reveal that women of colour fare worse within maternity services. Rather shockingly, Ireland's Confidential Maternity Death Enquiry has recorded 'a five-fold difference in maternal mortality rates amongst women from Black Ethnic backgrounds and an almost two-fold difference amongst women from Asian Ethnic backgrounds compared with white women' (CDE Ireland, 2019, p.9). In the last nine years alone, inquests into the deaths of six women who were all migrants have all returned a verdict of medical

misadventure[4]. No surprise perhaps that Ronit Lentin (2013) has described ethnic-minority migrants who enter into Ireland's maternity services as 'm/others', subjugated within a system that privileges white bodies.

Our decision to forefront this contribution with stories that can seem quite separate to adult education is because we believe there are connections between these situations, and the less catastrophic, but much more pervasive everyday impacts of structural racism on the lives of people of colour. This contribution explores what adult educators might (or might not) do in response. We draw from a conceptual framework that is underpinned by Critical Race Theory which we interpret as a set of ideas that views racialisation as a social construct that disregards socio-historical contexts (Lentin, 2004), and that minimises white supremacy, something bell hooks (2013, p.153) describes as 'the bottom line of race and racism'. We also apply a critical pedagogic lens, an approach to education that Henry Giroux (2021) argues is needed more than ever if we are to combat injustices in a world that is increasingly shaped by perpetual crisis. He writes:

> Inequality under neoliberal capitalism is a cancer that functions as a form of violence that attacks the social fabric, the welfare state, and the body politic [...] It relentlessly subjects workers, the disabled, the homeless, the poor, children, people of color, and frontline hospital and emergency workers and others considered at risk to lives of anxiety, misery and in some cases death. (Giroux, 2021, p.179).

This critique of capitalism is, and always has been, a central feature of critical pedagogy, a set of ideas that often focuses on the work of Paulo Freire who asserts that education is never neutral and that much traditional education domesticates rather than liberates because, to quote Freire directly, it becomes 'easy spaces for selling knowledge which corresponds to capitalist ideology' (Freire and Shor, 1987, p.8). Instead, critical pedagogy invites us to think critically about our lives using problem-posing, dialogic methods.

4 These women were Bimbo Onanuga, whose inquest was in 2013, Savita Halappanavar, whose inquest was also in 2013, Dhara Kivlehan (2014), Nora Hyland (2014), Malak Thawley (2017) and Nayyab Tariq (2021). In the week we were finalising this paper, a young woman who was resident in a Direct Provision Centre in Co. Kerry dies in hospital whilst in labour. The cause of death is not yet known. We send our sincere condolences to the friends and families of these women.

Not everyone writing about race agrees that critical pedagogy can play a part. The activist and academic Kehinde Andrews, who principally locates critical pedagogy within universities, argues against viewing it as a panacea. He writes:

> By presenting itself as some kind of solution to an issue it can never solve, critical pedagogy is in fact a regeneration of the problem that is 'particularly perverse' because of its good intent while actually contradicting the core theoretical foundations of CRT. (Andrews, 2018, p.242)

There is much to agree with in Andrew's assertion in that it rightly identifies universities as often in the business of separating 'thought' from 'action' (Andrews, 2018, p.243). However much adult education has resisted this separation, and the history of Irish adult education is rooted in 'community education,' an endeavour that has praxis, a radical union of reflection and action, at its core. Notwithstanding the neoliberalisation of many adult education structures in the last few decades (Fitzsimons, 2017a), much critical pedagogy works best when it is in collaboration with communities and social movements. Many university-based critical educators maintain close relationships with these civic society spaces.

Our research methodology is autoethnographic, which Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p.1) describe as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.' Autoethnography allows the stories that shape our lives lead us towards the power dynamics that shape that world, an approach McCormack, O'Neill, Ryan, and Walsh, (2020, p.74) describe as 'wholly congruent with adult education.' They are not the only fans of drawing from our own lives as a source of knowledge. The educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1992, p. xii) believes our lives are the 'narratives of liberation' continuing 'what stories we choose to tell, and the way we decide to tell them form the provisional basis of what critical pedagogy of the future might mean.' We model autoethnography by infusing vignettes from our lives throughout this contribution. Our perspectives are very different. Lilian is a black naturalized Irish woman who migrated to Ireland as an adult. Camilla is white-Irish and was born in Ireland, as were her ancestors. Although she has worked overseas in the past, including time spent working in the Middle East, that was many years ago now and she has spent most of her life in Dublin.

We have collaborated on publications before including an indepth investigation into structural racism within maternity care (Fitzsimons et al., 2021) and an autoethnographic contribution on experiences within Higher Education (Fitzsimons and Nwanze, 2021). We've also previously reflected on our racialised identities, alone (Fitzsimons, 2019) and in conversation with others (Akinborowa, Fitzsimons, and Obasi, 2020; Nwanze and Pshyk, 2021). As well as leaning on these previous contributions, we will especially rely on contributions from bell hooks, a prolific philosopher and writer across critical pedagogy, feminism and race-related discourse since the 1980s. bell hooks sadly passed away in December 2021. Her tremendous influence on our practice will remain indelible. We also draw from some practical methods proposed by Stephen Brookfield who has written extensively about reflective practice in adult education and who, in more recent years, has more deliberately turned his attention to addressing race within adult education. This article thus converges three strands of enquiry: 1) the theories of critical race theory and critical pedagogy; 2) our own autoethnographic dimensions and; 3) some literature from others to offer concrete suggestions on what adult educators might, and might not do, if they are to better respond to a global phenomenon they are often reluctant to tackle head on.

Is racism really an issue in Ireland?

Lilian: I had come to pick my baby up from the child minder…She graciously offered to walk me back to the car. I had parked my car a few houses down the road as her drive way was really narrow and she lived at a bend on the street where it was not safe to park. 'So, what programme are you studying for in Maynooth?' she asked.
'My Doctorate,' I replied.
'Wow! A doctorate? That's some hard work. How long does it take and what are you researching?'
'It should take me about four years and I am researching the effects of racism on black women in Ireland.'
'Sounds interesting… but in Ireland?' she quipped, looking surprised. 'Is it that bad in Ireland?' I smiled and nodded.

When I talk about the focus of my research, I've lost count of the amount of times white people in Ireland have responded with surprise asking, 'is racism really an issue in Ireland? Is it not something that happens more in America or in other parts of Europe?' There is an almost palpable element of shock or disbelief when I say that racism is rife in Irish society.

Consistently, research has uncovered what O'Halloran (2019) describes as 'worrying patterns of racism' across Ireland. As far back as 2009, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) stated it was 'gravely concerned' at the findings of one EU report which 'shows Ireland among the worst of all the EU countries when it comes to victims of racial discrimination and abuse' (IHERC, 2009, [no pagination]). High levels of both Islamophobia (Carr, 2017) and Afrophobia (Michael, 2015) have been uncovered with both populations experiencing high levels of hateful discrimination on a regular basis. The situation is also stark for Mincéir (Irish Travellers), who have endured a prolonged history of prejudice and discrimination. One report by the IHREC, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre and the Department of Equality found that Irish Travellers experience some of the worst discrimination in Europe, with more than two-thirds reporting overt experiences of racism as a regular feature of their lives (EUAFRA, 2020). Given the fact that most Mincéir are racialised as white, their experience reveals the malleability of white supremacy as it adapts to meet the needs of the dominant group (hooks, 2013, p.5), in this case Ireland's mostly white settled population. Moreover, McGinnity, Creightan and Fannye (2020) found that over one quarter (27%) of educated people in Ireland hold concealed racist views which are enacted when making important decisions such as when they are voting in elections or hiring people for jobs.

In seeking to understand these levels of racism, discussions are often framed through an individualist lens and with an emphasis on moral values. Or to put it another way, a person is either 'racist' or 'not-racist'. The difference between the two is easily recognisable. A person who is racist should be held accountable, reasoned with, educated and supported to re-evaluate their behaviours. Whilst interpersonal acts of racism are completely unacceptable, they go hand in glove with a much more pervasive, covert system of structural racism which permeates every aspect of society. As Reni-Eddo Lodge (2017, p.640) puts it 'structural is often the only way to capture what goes unnoticed – the silently raised eyebrows, the implicit biases, snap judgements made on perceptions of competency.' Critical Race Theory (CRT) makes sense of structural racism. Drawing heavily from critical legal studies, it originated as an ideology in the US in the 1970s when a group of Black lawyers became concerned that gains from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement were being eroded (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). They sought to design a tool to examine the relationship between race, law and power. At the heart of CRT are several taken-for-granted propositions. The first of these is that racism is not aberrant or unusual rather it is a normal and everyday experience for people of colour. Because it is so

intricately intertwined in the systems and institutions of society, racism is often difficult to articulate or clearly identify and it is frequently not deliberate. As Kehinde Andrews (2018, pp.240-1) argues 'even with good intent from teachers and policy makers, racism is reproduced because it is a necessary feature of the nature of the system.' A second proposition of CRT is that racism only exists because of a corresponding 'system of white- over-colour ascendancy,' or white supremacy that 'serves important purposes, for the dominant group' (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p.8). bell hooks (2013, p.3) describes white supremacy as 'the glue that keeps white folks connected irrespective of many other differences,' continuing;

> Politically, White supremacist thinking was created to serve this purpose. Imprinted on the consciousness of every white child at birth, reinforced by the culture, white supremacist thinking tends to function unconsciously. This is the primary reason why it is so difficult to challenge and change.

It is not only black and brown writers who recognise white supremacy in this way. Steven Brookfield (2018, p.3), who is racialised as white, describes white supremacy's operationalisation eloquently when he posits how it 'places whiteness as the preferred norm in society, white people as the natural authorities in any situation, and white knowledge (and white forms of knowledge production) as the most valid of humankind.' White supremacy runs so deep, people of colour equally internalise its tenets (hooks, 2013; Eddo-Lodge, 2017). In sharing the impact of everyday situations as imprinting the neutrality of whiteness, Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017, p.85) shares:

> When I was four, I asked my mum when I would turn white, because all the good people on TV were white, and all the villains were black and brown. I considered myself to be a good person, so I thought I would turn white eventually. My mum still remembers the crestfallen look on my face when she told me the bad news.

Lilian: I've shared in other spaces about how when I was out in a shopping centre somewhere in Dublin, I saw a group of four or five young Black men walking in my direction. I immediately clutched my bag tighter. I had completed the act before I realized that I had just exhibited racist and invariably white supremacist tendencies, I had been socialised into seeing Black men as dangerous, aggressive, and prone to crime.

We are not suggesting that there is a common, homogenised experience of being non-white, rather we support the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2016) which conceives of each of us as affected by a series of interlocking, fundamental and consolative structures mainly social class, gender identity, dis/ability, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation which overlap to create very different experiences for people. Arguably, the most dominant point of difference, and also connection, is social class. As hooks (2013, p.2) observes, 'it is much more likely that a white person will bond with a black person when the two share a common class lifestyle. It is less likely that a materially prosperous person will develop a bond with someone who is poor and indigent.'

As well as the assertion that racism is pervasive and normal, and the belief that white supremacy is its root cause, a third tenet of CRT is to reject the myth of reverse racism, or the suggestion that people of colour can be conversely racist against white people. Certainly, there can be inaccurate assumptions about white people such as that they can't rap, are terrible dancers or are inferior athletes. But these assertions are more light-hearted and are suspended from the systemic relations of Eurocentric power where the world is largely viewed through a European or Western Perspective. As Eddo-Lodge (2017, p.89) points out, 'there simply aren't enough black people in positions of power to enact racism against white people on the kind of scale it currently operates at against black people.' Rejecting the myth of reverse racism also includes interrogating neutral perceptions of cultural difference. Typically, and not incorrectly, culture is understood as the conscious and unconscious enactment of certain customs and rituals. But less emphasised, is how the 'cultural fields' within which these differences are exercised repeatedly privilege existing social hierarchies (Fitzsimons, 2017b).

A final concept of CRT we rely on is that racism is not just deeply embedded within our psyche but is a fundamental feature of capitalism, a system hooks repeatedly describes as an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Capitalism was built on colonialism, and it was white supremacy that enabled the dispossession of millions of indigenous people for economic gain. Although less stark than the slavery models of the past, expropriation remains a core feature of our contemporary social world. As Arruzza, Tithi and Fraser (2019, p.43) argue:

> In every phase [of capitalism] up to and including the present, the expropriation of racialized people has enabled capital to increase its profits by confiscating natural resources and human capacities for whose

> replenishment and reproduction it does not pay. For systemic reasons, capitalism has always created classes of racialized human beings, whose persons and work are devalued and subject to expropriation.

It was Obama's principal commitment to neoliberalism, an economic world order that prioritises profit over people and that places its trust in the so-called 'free-market', that makes him as culpable as his predecessors in undermining a range of democratic institutions including civic models of education (Giroux, 2021, p.76). In fact, the structural position of African Americans declined during Obama's presidency as they were disproportionately impacted by rising poverty, homelessness, and unemployment (Andrews, 2018, p.11).

There is a growing body of evidence on the structural experiences of non-white Irish populations. Black-Irish people are less likely to be employed, less likely to hold a management role and five times more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace (Pillinger, 2006; McGinnity et al., 2018). Even when organisations describe themselves as 'equal-opportunity,' the dominant discourse is one of meritocracy where a person's qualifications (and not their whiteness) is viewed as the principal mechanism through which their career moves forward (Joseph, 2020, p.9). To give an example of how this works in practice, meritocracy blames a racialised person for their inability to get a job whilst ignoring the structures that work against them at every level. There are other examples too. Non-white populations in Ireland are more at risk of having their children taken into care (Gilligan, 2019) and young black males are at greater risk of physical assault that their white counterparts (O'Curry and Michael, 2014). Amidst Ireland's well-documented housing crisis research by Grotti et al. (2018, p.ix) found:

> African migrants are also over-represented among the homeless. Concerning housing discrimination, while Asians and non-Irish White people are no more likely to report discrimination than White Irish nationals, we find that Black people and people of other ethnic groups are more likely to report discrimination.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants were more likely to be frontline workers, less likely to be able to work from home and, along with ethnic minorities including Irish Travellers, were over-represented in infection rates (Shannen et al., 2020).

Educational outcomes are also often worse for people who are racialised. A recent UK report by Universities UK and the National Union of Students (2019) found inequalities in Higher Education (HE) that mirror wider social inequalities where a student's race and ethnicity can significantly impact their performance. White students are more likely to go to college, less likely to drop out, and more likely to get first-class honours when compared to Black students, Asian students and students from mixed ethnicities. There is limited but growing research into the educational experiences of ethnic minorities in Ireland. One comprehensive study by Darby (2020) found universities are dominated by Eurocentric curricula and predominantly staffed by white people, both of which help to ensure the continuity of white privilege where the expectation of ethnic minorities is to quietly assimilate despite enduring a range of microaggressions on a regular basis. Where refugees or asylum seekers go to college, research by Meaney and Nwanze (2021) found that many educators have little understanding of the living conditions of these students, such as sometimes needing permission to leave Direct Provision centres, the absence of study spaces and the challenges when asked to pay international fees in contravention to their legal residency status. The researchers found some educators had no clue who 'refugees' were or what rights this categorisation gave them. There are complexities too and it is important not to essentialise. For example, Chinese populations tend to perform well in European universities (Archer and Francis, 2007). However, students often struggle to adapt from China's collectivist culture to Ireland's more individualistic society, a struggle that can be compounded by language barriers, homesickness, and a lack of friends (Sun and Nolan, 2021).

Outside of university settings, there is a higher-than-average uptake of migrants in Further Education, many of whom are non-white. Ebun Joseph (2020, p.85) alerts us to potential problems with this when describing this practice as an exercise in 'down-skilling' rather than 'up-skilling' so people are better able to access low-paid jobs they are often overqualified for.

What might adult educators do?

Given the tremendous significance of structural racism and the powerlessness people often feel in addressing this situation, it is perhaps understandable that many adult educators are reluctant to address the topic of race in any meaningful way. Stephen Brookfield (2018, pp.5-6) ranks the reasons educators avoid addressing race as a fear they might say the wrong thing, concern about opening uncomfortable discussions, a sense that race just isn't relevant to what

they are teaching, a worry that if they do broach the subject their actions might go badly wrong, and (for white educators) a reluctance to confront their own racialised privilege.

In the absence of addressing race, many occupy a colour-blind perspective meaning they simply do nothing. This is despite the way, that unless interrupted, dominant cultural norms, including perceptions of superiority that exist in society at large, also shape what happens inside an adult learning group (Fitzsimons, 2017b, p.265). These same individuals might be critical of neoliberalism and are sometimes able to describe how its structures perpetuate racial inequality at a macro-level, but they fall short in turning the mirror on themselves to recognise their own actions as part of the institutional structures they objectively criticise. In these situations, white people are mostly well-meaning and often claim to be led by a commitment to equality. People might say things like 'I don't see race' or, 'I treat all my students the same' or 'I see everyone as human'. However, this inaction doesn't eliminate racial dimensions of power rather this meritocratic perspective simply deepens racial inequality (Hearne, 2009). In another publication, Lilian discusses being on the receiving end of colour-blindness when studying in an Irish higher education institution:

> Teachers were fantastic. They knew their onions. Course content was good enough. But I was invisible. No one spoke to me. I spoke to no one. Honestly, I was afraid to speak to anyone [...] I was always the last to be chosen by my peers to belong in a group. And even when I was, I was never chosen to speak. I never shared anything in the classroom even when I knew that I had things to say that could buttress what the teacher was explaining. I just came to class and went home. I was invisible. If the teachers noticed my presence in the class, it didn't show. They went on engaging with other students and said not a word to me. (Fitzsimons and Nwanze, 2021, p.12)

Camilla: A few years ago, I was in a classroom that, on the surface, embodied everything that is good about a dialogic, collegial adult education approach. I was a student. We were sitting in a circle, and 'students' were interspersed with 'educators'. It was an established group with a fluid membership meaning people entered and left depending on how their research was progressing. On this day, and out of the blue, the lead educator suggested that instead of dividing up the time equally for each student, we would try a new way where people could spontaneously contribute as they wanted. 'Not everyone will get to speak,' they prefaced, 'but we'll

all get to speak in the long run.' One by one, students enthusiastically spoke about their challenges as researchers and unpicked the intricacies of Irish systems and structures. Others (mostly 'educators') responded. About fifteen minutes from the end of a three-hour class, I suddenly realised that the only people who hadn't contributed were the three people of colour. As they were also migrants, it seemed likely they didn't have the same fluency in understanding what was discussed to that point so might have been feeling a little distant from proceedings. In a panic to make amends, I clumsily put one of them on the spot making everyone feel uncomfortable. My co-facilitators noticed none of this, in fact, their evaluation, shared some time later, was that the class had gone great. My analysis was different. Not only had some voices been excluded, but the knowledge uncovered was partial and West-centric.

As well as a form of silencing, the colour-blindness evident in this vignette is a mode of avoidance (Flowers, 2010). But what are we do to? Stephen Brookfield (2018) suggests three methods for 'teaching race' regardless of the topic. The first is a process of scaffolding where students should be eased into talking about race in a way that is invitational and respectful of the interpellated nature of our backgrounds. Educators can start with their own experiences of race. For white educators (like Camilla) this often means naming their own realisation about the privileges they hold and being upfront about how this benefits them.

Camilla: I can't write a line like that without naming that I have known for some time that my academic collaborations with you Lilian, and with other people of colour, often benefit me more than you. I worry that I lean on your 'blackness' in a way that makes me more credible as I progress within the hierarchies of academia. I try hard not to pull the ladder up behind me, and I face a different set of sexist prejudices, but I inevitably fail to make much of a difference in tackling structural dimensions of racism. The privilege I hold, as part of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy (hooks, 2013), is strong. Even in writing this article I worry I am 'using you' to advance my argument.

Lilian's response: I agree that our collaborations may be of more benefit to you than they may be to me. This is unfortunately the structure of the white supremacist world that we live in. The question I would however be inclined to ask is, what is the alternative? When I contemplate what the alternative could be – your silence and reluctance to name this inequity that is racism – then I not only wholly welcome these collaborations that appear to benefit you more than me, I also appreciate them. I appreciate your consciousness and the naming of 'your privilege'. It took

centuries for the damaging structure of racism to take root and to deeply etch its tentacles in the psyches of people the world over. It will be naïve of me (or anyone else) to think that dismantling it will be easy. It won't be. But as the saying goes, 'little drops of water make an ocean'. Your interventions may be little, but you have made them. Imagine a world where every white person actually does something (no matter how little) to dismantle racism…

To my mind Camilla, anti-racism work is not only moral but is deeply spiritual. You are doing your part. This is a good thing.

The second method Brookfield encourages is one of modelling where the educator normalises the topic. In another article Camilla wrote about deliberately carving out space to share her own sense of whiteness in a group and, more specifically, a moment of realisation when she re-evaluated many of her own past encounters through the lens of privilege (Fitzsimons, 2019). She has also acknowledged times when she still leans on this privilege when it advances certain situations (Fitzsimons, 2019). Conversely the black adult educator George Yancy (2018, p.20), tells us about the extent to which his students 'see a black man first' before anything else and explains:

> The question of race, for me, is not simply about philosophical abstraction or the mastery of a set of key philosophical concepts. Rather, race involves and raises importantly lived, personal experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and even trauma.

Brookfield's third strategy is community building, encouraging educators to carefully and deliberately create conditions for peer learning in a safe and supportive environment. What could have happened for example if the facilitator leading the adult education classroom described in Camilla's vignette had interrupted the 'Irish' students chatting freely about cultural particularities and had deliberately invited the migrants in the room to share alternative perspectives so we might compare Irish common sense with alternative outlooks? Importantly, building community is more than just a repertoire of facilitative tactics, it means creating learning environments that are built on deep trust and collaboration. This only happens if time is set aside to excavate our experiences (as we have done here) an approach that hooks (2010, p.56) describes as 'one of those powerful ways to educate [and] to create community in a classroom.' This means rejecting a banking approach to education where the educator's principal function is to transfer certain fixed

ideas into the minds of the passive learner in a way that re-enforces, rather than disrupts, the status quo (Freire, 1972). Instead, we must 'transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly line of learning' (hooks, 1994, p.13) and embody what hooks describes as a progressive, holistic engaged pedagogy that challenges the status quo.

What adult educators must avoid

In a rush to advance reforms, mistakes have been made and many schools and colleges have adopted the vernacular of anti-racism. In seeking to practice diversity, people of colour, and also disabled people, are often asked to join committees and working groups. More and more minority groups are listed as 'allies' to predominantly white organisations whose mission statements have been re-crafted to 'acknowledge' and even claim to understand intersectionality first-hand. This all-important image change is topped off with websites, leaflets and posters that reflect a range of abilities and ethnicities. In no time at all, an intersectional, self-aware group is outwardly presented to the world. The reality of these freshly 'woke' environments is that the experiences for people who are structurally oppressed is often worse. They are always in demand for photo-shoots and representation on committees, often without pay. When they do get a seat at the table and are expected to speak respectfully and on behalf of the homogenised group they are supposedly representing, they are not listened to, or have their comments passed over. In her book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminism, Thinking Black,* hooks (2015, p.292) shares her experiences within universities, where colleagues wanted a Black person in their department, 'so long as that person thinks and acts like them, shares their values and beliefs, is in no way different.' She explains:

> [This] compelled me to use the term 'white supremacy' to identify the ideology that most determines how white people in this society (irrespective of their political leanings to the right or left) perceive and relate to Black people and other people of color.

Sometimes people are even asked to retrospectively legitimize work that has already been done.

Lilian: I was asked to do this once. Someone asked me if I would be interested (on an unpaid basis I might add!) with some research that had been done on ethnic minorities in a particular institution. The overall aim was to develop teaching tools to support educators in creating 'diverse environments'.

Camilla: As I remember it, I tipped you off that the work was already complete so you would be forewarned when the inevitable phone-call arrived. I suspected the research team had panicked when they looked around the table at each other and saw nothing but white faces in the room. I'm glad that I work to a 'nothing about us without us' mantra.

As well as virtue signalling, we also think that white people should resist an aforementioned trend in describing themselves as 'ally'. Again, this is often well-meaning and can be driven by a sense of unity over division. But it can often be little more than an act of self-aggrandizing with little or no thought given to the harms that are continually inflicted on some population groups. As Brookfield (2018, p.38) puts it 'you don't become an ally by saying that is what you are rather you become an ally by consistently showing support for minority groups in your actions and by taking sides against oppressive forces.'

Conclusion

This article proposes a pedagogy that is shaped by several factors. Its starting point is to accept that white supremacy is the precursor to racism and that its endurance is rooted in capitalist structures that depend on inequality for its own survival. One way to challenge these structures is to become more aware of the relationship between our own social position and structural white supremacy, whatever our racialised identity. From this, we are better able to create conditions that actively promote respect for difference and where each person's lived experience can be validated and interpreted as knowledge creation. None of this is easy and the task ahead can be daunting. But unless we teach against colour-blindness, our every-day practices will alienate many of our students. Invariably we'll get it wrong. In fact, Brookfield (2018, p.15) argues 'the fundamental reality and experience of teaching race is feeling as if you're not getting it right.' But if we can accept that things won't always go the way we planned, we can learn from our mistakes. None of this can happen unless we turn our gaze away from assumptions that racism is solely interpersonal and instead view it as a social construct that permeates the capillaries of society. Only then can we embody education as a practice of freedom and perhaps contribute to creating a better world.

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SECTION TWO

Book and Policy Reviews

Article Review: *Combating Ageism through Adult Education and Learning*

ANTÓNIO FRAGOSO AND JOSÉLIA FONSECA (2022)
SOCIAL SCIENCES 11(3): 110
DOI: 10.3390/SOCSCI11030110

This ambitious article takes us back over 50 years to the origins of the word ageism. Quoting Robert Butler in 1969 – 'we may soon have to consider very seriously a form of bigotry we now tend to overlook: age discrimination or ageism, prejudice by one age group toward other age groups' – it identifies two stated aims: to discuss ageism along with its origins and consequences and to discuss ways to combat ageism.

The authors provide a concise, comprehensive and engaging introduction to ageism taking us on a journey with many of the principal thinkers and theorists who have furthered our understanding of ageism over the last half century. In one nimble paragraph they describe the prevalence and reasons for ageism and in another, the three primary dimensions in which it is manifested – prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination. They also consider the relationships between these micro, meso and macro dimensions and describe how they impact on social relations. Finally, they describe and pay attention to internalised ageism which could be of particular import for the field of adult education and learning where older learners are often active participants in their own learning, where this learning takes place in groups with peers and can therefore be a powerful forum for politicisation and redress.

Their discussion about the consequences of ageism begins slightly less impressively. By way of introduction they reference the changing demographic and its 'transversal consequences' for society. They go on to discuss these consequences in the context of the 'Old Age Dependency Ratio' and the prospect of 'intergenerational conflict' without deconstructing or challenging either of these concepts. This is a particular lack because the article goes on

to specifically consider ageism in the workplace where both concepts could be used to facilitate prejudice and discrimination.

In consideration of the workplace however the authors skilfully weave together a robust body of evidence across the three dimensions of ageism. They have cast a wide net and their discussion is well-informed and engaging. They illustrate how ageism is manifested using examples at all levels – from jokes at the micro level to mandatory retirement at the macro level. Looking beyond the obvious they highlight the links between dimensions that can legitimise discrimination, the impact of workplace ageism on home life and how internalised ageism can affect worker's decisions. In considering the consequences of workplace ageism they highlight the damage it does not only to individuals but also to society and the economy.

With the scene thus deftly set the authors turn their attention to combating ageism, considering first the area of law and policy, particularly in Europe. Focussing on retirement policies and finding them 'truly complex', a short discussion is inconclusive and, again, unchallenging about the neoliberal ideologies informing extended working life agendas, negating unpaid work and denying gender gaps. Furthermore, to be offered a glimpse at how policy could mitigate the ageist work practices so well described earlier is frustrating and one wonders if the article might have been stronger had it just focused on adult education and learning as a tool to combat ageism.

The final section looks at how an adult education perspective on workplace learning could help to combat ageism. Finding that lifelong learning is 'widely adopted at the workplace in the format of formal training' the authors conclude that workplace education is not actually very effective at combatting ageism because it is 'limited to the knowledge and competencies directly applied to older workers' jobs and functions.'

Turning to civil society, the authors describe many of the opportunities available to older learners outside of the workplace. Highlighting Paolo Freire's notion of education as a political act they describe how adult and intergenerational education can make a significant contribution to combating ageism. Pointing to a focus on 'critical reflexivity, narratives and experience' often within the context of 'promoting social change and transformation', they describe how beliefs and values can be challenged and changed by engagement in adult education.

This is a timely and thought-provoking article but it might have been useful to clarify that it is ultimately the responsibility of the State and employers to ensure that ageism does not lead to discrimination in the workplace. As we negotiate the nuances, purposes and funding streams for further education, lifelong learning and labour activation programmes it is important that the market does not leave adult education to totally fulfil the duty of combating ageism just because it can.

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Age & Opportunity

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Book Review: *Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Education in Contemporary Context. From Italy to the World*

JONES IRWIN AND LETTERIO TODARO (2022)
PETER LANG, GENEVA/OXFORD
DOI: 10.3726/B19069

A new book which connects themes of Adult Education in the contemporary world to wider questions of educational theory and practice was originally inspired by the university seminar titled 'Paulo Freire: una pedagogia per l'emancipazione e per la speranza' ['Paulo Freire: a pedagogy for empowerment and hope'] held by the Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Catania, Italy, on 16 January 2018.

This collective text has been an opportunity for various scholars to reflect and debate upon the figure, the teachings, and the works of Paulo Freire, with a focus upon the elements that, in today's political, social and educational climate, are perceived not only as pressing, but above all as necessary. In this sense, various approaches focusing upon the history of education and pedagogy, the philosophy of education, inter-cultural pedagogy, and adult education are all able to establish a dialogue, and together come up with an interpretative framework that sees Freire as a 'classic' in the field of education. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the current political crisis in Europe are seen as factors which increasingly draw attention to the marginalised and most vulnerable people in our education systems. Adult Education is considered a special case in this respect. Asking the question directly, we can wonder how Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Education might be employed to 'measure success in Adult, Community and Further Education'?

Although the text speaks throughout to this problem, one particular chapter which focuses on the dialogue between Frei Betto and Freire is of specific note in this context. Elena Marescotti's essay *'This School Called Life': The Adult Education of Paulo Freire Amid Risk and Extraordinary Effort* (2022) addresses this question in important ways for us. This text focuses on a discussion of a text

that has not yet been translated into English, the book-interview entitled This School Called Life, released in Italy in 1986, one year after its original Brazilian edition. This book contains the actual transcript of a nearly six-hour interview held on a Sunday in October of 1984 in São Paulo Brazil, at the home of the journalist to whom Paulo Freire and Frei Betto had turned to help them write a book on popular education by recounting their experiences and recollections of particular events (Betto, 1986).

Betto and Freire identify three paradigmatic aspects of Adult Education which give it a particular indispensability when it comes to educational fulfilment and success. In the first instance, there is an intrinsic connection in Adult Education between 'education and life'. In other words, this kind of education connects in an especial way to who people are, their background and their life experiences (Marescotti, 2022, p.95). The second key aspect of Adult Education which optimises success is an acceptance of uncertainty and the dialogical encounter as essential to pedagogy (Betto, 1986, pp.75-76). This kind of education is a dialogue and a journey, in the sense of a pathway, a process that always takes place through mutual encouragement and confrontation. In this, Betto and Freire claim that Adult Education at its best is more inherently democratic than other forms of education.

The third and final pillar of Adult Education as a form of successful pedagogy for both Betto and Freire is the concept of this kind of education as a form of 'autobiography'. As Marescotti notes, 'events, situations, relationships, and contexts only take on meaning for the subject if the subject makes an effort to do so by reading and re-reading his/her own life story' (Marescotti, 2022, p.101).

Thus, in this very specific vision of Adult Education, as grounded in Freire's dialogical encounter with Betto, we have also a foregrounding of a future vision of Adult Education today. Fundamentally, this is a vision of education which embraces an existential connection, a sense of unavoidable uncertainty and risk and finally, where the autobiography of the student (and indeed reciprocally of the teacher [Kohan 2021]) come to the centre of the stage.

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Book Review: *Key Milestones in the evolution of skills policy in Ireland*

RORY O'SULLIVAN AND JUSTIN RAMI (2022)
IN B. WALSH (ED.) EDUCATION POLICY IN IRELAND SINCE 1922.
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-91775-3_9

Thrills and Skills

Chapter 9 of the book *Education Policy in Ireland Since 1922* is a comprehensive overview of skills policy in Ireland from the formation of the Irish State with a primary focus on 1973 to 2020. It is an absorbing insight into the policy and sociological context of Ireland as it struggled to free itself from the influence of the UK and establish an education and training system. The chapter contextualises the evolution of skills policy through a presentation of 'Skills Formation Systems' in industrialised countries. These SFS are 'the interface between the education system and the labour market'. The authors state that these systems don't develop in isolation but are part of the overall education and training structures and provision in a country. They state that vocational education and training (VET) systems 'in many countries prior to industrialisation were very similar' but industrialisation took different forms in different countries that 'produced different institutional configurations' (p.250). A whistle-stop tour of categories of economic activity and a continuum of 'Varieties of Capitalism' (p.251) for advanced industrial economies contribute to the complexity of comparing SFS in countries. Aspects of these systems are explored in relation to Ireland and the development of our VET system. The section on the impact of the Great Famine and the formation of the Irish Free State reveal the political, sociological and colonial influence of Britain in Ireland. The discussion of the expansion of political thinking from 'Independence to EEC Membership' succinctly and clearly illustrates the context and reasons for key decisions made by the Irish government to address poor growth through the 50s and a shift from the 'protectionist economic policies of the early years of the new State'. What follows is a history of the growth of industrial training in the 1920s through to the establishment of the Vocational Education Committees in 1930 and the origins of sectoral training in agriculture, tourism, fisheries and forestry. This is

when the separation of vocational/technical education and vocational/technical training began with a separate government department taking responsibility for each area – Department of Education and the Department of Industry and Commerce. The two areas were brought together for the first time in 2010 with the renamed Department of Education and Skills (p.260).

The role of the Catholic Church in the control of vocational education throughout the 1930s and 1940s up to 1957 resulted in a lack of certification and qualifications for vocational and technical education and a lack of recognition or status for the Group Certificate (1947) in terms of entry into university. The authors demonstrate that 'the State and the Catholic Church colluded to prevent students attending vocational schools from sitting the examinations which give access to university' (p.262).

The chapter sheds light on the fledgling Republic's efforts to create a skills system that would respond to the idiosyncratic nature of Ireland's economy long controlled by Britain and inhibited in its industrial growth by our nearest neighbour. After the birth of the State the protectionism of policies and approaches that deferred to the Catholic Church restricted the opportunities for growth, recognition and status of the VET system and the learners successfully engaging with it. The apprenticeship system had been established through the 1931 Apprenticeship Act but the VECs had difficulty in planning for the provision of the education element of apprenticeship and were 'to a large extent, working in the dark' (p.263). The final sections of the chapter recount how the modern FET sector emerged from 1973 and Ireland's entry into the EEC through to the first FET strategy from SOLAS in 2014. It is an illuminating journey through the four phases of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the economic and sociological impacts of oil crises, recessions and emigration on policy in Ireland. The identification of neo-liberal ideologies and approaches filtering into politics, funding and policy maker discourse at a national and European level is enlightening and contextualises the challenging economic landscape today.

The elaboration of the genesis and establishment of successive national qualifications systems reflects the need for mutual recognition and comparability of vocational training qualifications between EU member states to allow for free movement of workers that emerged in the 1980s. The establishment of the Education and Training Boards and SOLAS and QQI addressed the need for Ireland to address a 'persistent capacity deficit' and

'commit the necessary investments both financial and structural' for a world class FET system (p.287). The chapter is detailed and fascinating in its factual depiction of the development of VET Ireland over the last century. It is a highly informative insight into the current context of skills policy in FET discerned from the sociological and political discussions and decisions made by the State in its first hundred years.

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Notes

Notes

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. Visit www.aontas.com for more information.

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