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The Adult Learner

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Editorial Comment

ROSEMARY MORELAND, EDITOR

I am delighted to introduce the 2025 special edition of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner,* which focuses on *Challenging racism and creating a more inclusive society*. When the Editorial Board decided on this theme last year, we were particularly concerned with the rise in racism across Ireland, the UK and Europe. Adult education has a longstanding tradition of working with those who have been marginalised in society and challenging inequalities and oppression, with key thinkers such as Freire (1985) arguing that education is always a political act, which can either oppress or liberate humanity (Freire, 1977). Within this context, many papers included in this edition address how adult education can tackle racism and ethnic discrimination, create culturally diverse learning experiences and promote adult education practice which supports the creation of a more equal and just society. Other papers included in this edition focus on wider challenges to social inclusion with a diverse range of adult learners. We are also delighted to include papers from across Europe, which provide additional insights into similar themes impacting adult education in Sweden and Germany.

The journal comprises three sections: Section One, Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning features six articles which have a specific theoretical focus, whilst Section Two, Case Studies on Improving Practice includes two papers which provide opportunities to learn from practice. Section Three contains a selection of Book and Policy Reviews.

Section One

Färnskog provides an interesting insight into the use of "church learning cafés" (CLCs) in Sweden to provide adult learning opportunities for migrants. Her study, which explores various CLCs through an ethnographic lens, contends that adult education should not be limited to government agendas and that alternative adult learning spaces, which seek to provide wider benefits should be recognised and supported. Buddeberg et al.'s study on adult education in Germany examines the pressure that adult educators are under from

far-right influence. Their paper focuses on micro-aggressions impacting adult learning and they explore strategies which adult educators adopt to counter this influence.

Nwanze-Akobo and O'Neill draw on their own experience, to critically interrogate racism within the higher education context in Ireland. Their paper invites us to critically engage with their experiences, entering into dialogue with ourselves, to critically reflect on our hidden assumptions, unconscious biases and blind spots. In confronting the status quo "one educator and colleague at a time", Nwanze-Akobo and O'Neill's paper challenges each of us to "interrupt racism" wherever and whenever we see it.

Ó Loingsigh and Foster's paper, drawing on a survey of adult educators in Ireland, advocates for equality for adult educators and parity of esteem with their colleagues across the educator sector. They suggest that the inequality faced by adult educators is symptomatic of a broader neoliberal agenda which devalues the work of those engaged in challenging oppression and supporting the most marginalised, as well as the adult learners themselves. McCabe's paper on the digitisation of application to adult learning courses in Ireland highlights how disabling and disempowering this can be, particularly for adult learners with low levels of ICT skills. He challenges the inherent contradiction of the system and recommends several solutions to address these inequalities and enable those most in need of adult education to gain access.

Power et al.'s qualitative 360-degree study of a pilot Level 6 Certificate in Adult Literacy Studies explores how a deeper understanding of adult learners' literacy needs promotes inclusion and accessibility of adult education. A recurring theme of many of the papers included in this edition of the journal, highlights how adult educators often mirror the stigmas associated with adult learners, demonstrating a lack of self-confidence in their own learning capabilities. The paper also highlights the inequities experienced by adult educators who do not have the same opportunities for professional development as their counterparts in other areas of the education sector.

Section Two

The first article in this section by Cash and Doyle is a case study of the first college of the future in Wexford. The paper highlights how this integrated model of learning, housing apprenticeships and further education under the one roof, fosters a learning environment of social inclusion, diversity, promoting greater cultural competence. Our final paper by Connaughton-O'Connor

and Craddock examines three case-studies focusing on how adult education can promote greater engagement with democracy and political processes, particularly in communities where there is traditionally low participation. The case-studies demonstrate the potential of participatory adult education to generate critical thinking and transform the lives of individuals, communities and the wider society.

Section Three

Section Three comprises two book and one policy review. Nuala Glanton reviews Katherine Donnolly's book *Education and Training Boards: Shaping the future, leaving no one behind*, which provides an historical overview as well as a number of case studies demonstrating the diverse range of practice. Glanton however suggests a gap in any specific reference to adult literacy and community education. Trudi Barnett reviews Chardon et al.'s book *Restorative Practices That Heal School Communities* through a lens of inclusion and equity. She highlights how restorative practices combined with Universal Design for Learning principles could promote truly inclusive learning practices. Whilst the book focuses specifically on education in schools, she nevertheless argues that the key messages are applicable and transferable to adult education. Toni Lambe reviews the SOLAS (2024) position paper on *Learner Support in Further Education and Training*. She highlights the inclusion of best practice case studies but questions the lack of diversity in the choice of these and comments on the lack of transparency in choosing case studies. Whilst commending the paper's usefulness for the sector, in terms of outlining a more coordinated and centralised approach to learner support, she critiques the lack of guidelines to measure its effectiveness, and the need for a roadmap to guide ETBs.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members of the Editorial Board, for their time and commitment, throughout the year, to enable the production of this year's journal. I would also like to thank the Editorial Office team at AONTAS, without whose support this would not have been possible.

I hope you will enjoy reading this selection of articles and that this may engender critical reflection on your own area of practice, thus contributing to the transformation to a more socially just and equitable society.

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Contributors

TRACEY ANDERSON is a graduate of the University College Cork, where she completed a master's degree in digital arts and humanities, with a research focus on exploring the intersection of communities of practice and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in fostering equitable learning environments within Further Education and Training (FET). Tracey has extensive experience across public and private sectors, working in the further education sector, in various capacities including teaching, managing programmes, and leading out on various initiatives across FET. Tracey is currently working with Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, with responsibility for the Professional Learning and Development department and Learner support and Digital Learning (TEL).

TRUDI BARNETT is an Education Consultant, and External Authenticator with over 25 years of experience in adult education in Ireland and the UK. Specialising in inclusive learning and assessment design, she is a strong advocate of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Trudi holds postgraduate qualifications in UDL, programme design, and mentoring in professional learning. She is currently completing an M.Ed. and MA in UDL. She facilitates national workshops and recently presented at CAST UDL-Con 2025 in Washington, D.C. Trudi is committed to promoting equity, learner voice, and designing accessible educational experiences that create a sense of belonging and meaningful engagement.

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MICHAEL CASH is Assistant Training Manager with Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, overseeing apprenticeship and training at Wexford College of Further Education, Wexford training centres, and specialist training provision across Waterford and Wexford. With 28 years of experience, he has served as Development Lead at the National Apprenticeship Office, SOLAS Senior Training Advisor, World Skills technical expert, instructor, and programme developer in metal fabrication. Holding a BA (Hons) in Training and Education (NUIG), Certificate in World Class Standards (NUIG) and advanced craft certification, Michael is a strong advocate of apprenticeships, lifelong learning, and the transformative power of further education.

FIONNAIGH CONNAUGHTON-O'CONNOR has worked for over 20 years in Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) as an adult literacy tutor, tutor trainer, and most recently as their voter education co-ordinator. She works for DALC who provide targeted adult and community education to people in the North Inner City. Fionnaigh has previously been involved in projects for National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), such as literacy publications, webinars, and prison education. She continues delivering training in voter education, creating resources along with the DALC team for their website and organising their annual Voter Voices conference.

FERGUS CRADDOCK has worked in adult and community education and social inclusion for over 20 years, formerly as the Education Programmes Coordinator in the Dublin Northwest Partnership to his current role as Inclusion Manager with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). He has a particular interest in the transformative effect participation in adult and community education can have on learners, families, communities and broader society by providing a voice to those who feel powerless, especially in communities which have been left under-resourced and marginalised. Fergus holds a Master of Arts in Adult and Community Education, a Postgraduate Diploma in Criminological Studies, and a Postgraduate Certificate in Innovation in Social Enterprise.

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ANNE FOSTER teaches adults with the City of Dublin ETB across subjects including STEM, climate, and sustainability. She holds postgraduate qualifications in sustainability, development, and education with a focus on diversity and inclusion. With a background in community development and organisational management, she has authored government reports on social development programmes. Over a career spanning more than 35 years, she has designed curricula and courses, initiated adult education programmes, and tutored for the University of Wales and Dublin Institute of Technology (now Technological University Dublin). She is a member of Adult Education Tutors Organisation and serves on the Teachers Union of Ireland's Adult Education Tutor sub-committee.

NUALA GLANTON is an Adult Education Officer with Cork Education and Training Board managing Youthreach, adult literacy, community education, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision in the North Cork area. Nuala has over 25 years of experience as an adult education practitioner and is a member of the Adult Education Officers' Association (AEOA) and the editorial board of *The Adult Learner* Journal. She is also a PhD student at University College Cork's School of Education, completing doctoral research on the values of Further Education and Training in a neoliberal policy paradigm.

ANKE GROTLÜSCHEN is a professor in the Department of Lifelong Learning at the University of Hamburg. She is Director of the Department for Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning, a scientific speaker of the German Literacy Decade (2016-2026), and is responsible for the nation-wide Level-One Surveys (LEO 2010 and 2018). Anke is one of five principal investigators in the co-operative research project "Under Pressure: Literacy

and Discrimination" (2025-2028), together with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. Together with Alisa Belzer (USA) and Keiko Yasukawa (Australia), she published a policy study funded by DVV International, which focused Adult Learning and Education (ALE) policies in eight countries, most of them in the Global South. Her research is both qualitative and quantitative.

TONI LAMBE is an adult education professional with a background in adult literacy. She currently works with Dublin Dunlaoghaire Education and Training Board's Adult Education Service (South East) where she coordinates English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision for Ukrainian adults accommodated in City West Hotel. Toni holds a PhD from the School of Social Policy, Social Work, and Social Justice at University College Dublin. Her research to date has engaged with the role of adult literacy education in promoting social inclusion, collective empowerment, and social change. Toni has a particular interest in the role of the adult literacy tutor in promoting social change.

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ELEANOR NEFF is a lecturer in the Literacy Development Centre (LDC) at South East Technological University. She has worked in adult education for over 24 years, 17 of those focused on adult literacy. Her experience as an Education and Training Board educator includes designing and delivering English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), literacy, and family literacy courses. In 2020, Eleanor worked with the Distance Learning team at the National Adult Literacy Agency before joining the LDC in 2021. She currently serves on the Board of Management of National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), and

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LILIAN NWANZE-AKOBO completed a master's in international and European business law at Trinity College. Following this, she moved to Maynooth University where she completed a Higher Diploma in Further Education (HDFE) and subsequently, her Doctoral studies. Her PhD research inquired into Black migrant women's experiences in Ireland, and she used the insights from the women to propose a culturally responsive anti-racist pedagogy for use in Irish adult education. Her broader research interests include widening participation initiatives in education, anti-racist, critical and culturally relevant pedagogies, and inclusivity in and through adult education. Lilian currently serves as co-Director of both the HDFE and the Turn to Teaching programmes at Maynooth University.

JERRY O'NEILL has worked with adults in further, community and higher education since graduating as a mature student over 20 years ago. He has a particular interest in educator development across the career span that is collaborative, creative, and critically reflective, with a focus on personal and socially transformative ends. Along with a range of widening participation initiatives, projects, and interests, he is currently co-director of the Higher Diploma in Further Education (HDFE) at Maynooth University, Ireland – a Teaching Council-accredited post-graduate teacher educator programme for the field of adult, community and further education.

CLARE POWER has academic expertise in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), curriculum development, adult and further education, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and quality and research. Clare leads a team of academics at the Literacy Development Centre at South East Technological University, which offers awards from Levels 6 to 9, facilitating education within literacy and adult and further education. Clare is a member of the national Project Advisory Group (PAG) for the New European Agenda for Adult Learning (NEAAL) and is also Vice Chair of the Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board Regional Adult Literacy Coalition.

JOAN SLEVIN is a graduate of South East Technological University where she completed a Bachelor of Arts in Adult Education. Having returned to education as an adult learner, Joan brings firsthand insight and empathy to her role by showing that it's never too late to learn. An experienced Adult Literacy Organiser with over 25 years of dedicated work in the field with Longford and Westmeath Education Training Board (LWETB), she has led numerous

initiatives aimed at engaging and empowering learners and providing them with meaningful opportunities to develop their core literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Joan has focused on creating positive pathways for adult learners across diverse communities.

CATRIONA WARREN is a lecturer and Programme Leader in the Literacy Development Centre (LDC). She mostly works in the areas of pedagogy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) pedagogy, blended learning, and technology enhanced learning with Further Education and Training (FET) practitioners on teacher education programmes. She is currently completing a Doctor of Education degree with a focus on professional learning and teacher education. Catriona is interested in ESOL literacy, active learning strategies and learner autonomy.

SECTION ONE

Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning

Church Language Cafés: Creating Spaces for Inclusive Futures

MARTINA NORDQVIST FÄRNSKOG

Abstract

This article explores church language cafés (CLCs) in Sweden and their significance as non-formal language learning venues for migrants. Using an ethnographically inspired case study, this article employs metaphors to bring together place and space, capturing the functions and meanings of CLCs for migrants. Challenging the often-limiting governmental education efforts for migrant inclusion, CLC learning sites are experienced by migrants as Swedish Schools, Citizen Service Centres, Social Clubs, and Sacred Spaces. These findings contribute to the discussion of the significance of civil society's interrelational and heterogeneous spaces for creating more inclusive environments and futures for migrants across Europe.

Keywords: Migration, Language Learning, Civic Society, Church Language Café, Ethnography

Introduction: Exploring Migrant Learning Spaces

The starting point of this work is an understanding of migration as a complex meaning-making journey that intertwines past experiences with new relationships, ideally creating opportunities for active, engaged and self-reliant lives in one's adopted country (Morrice, 2018; De Haas, 2021). Language learning is central to this process, serving as a vital inclusion conduit for migrants to connect with their new environments and communities. In Sweden, as in much of Europe, public discourse has increasingly highlighted the importance of effective language acquisition as a cornerstone of rapid integration and economic participation (Tip et al., 2019; Dahlstedt et al., 2021; Eriksson and Rooth, 2022). The Swedish government further provides comprehensive and well-funded language education for migrants with residence permits; however, the effectiveness of these programmes has come under scrutiny in recent years.

Alongside the comprehensive formal educational structures of adult education in Sweden, community initiatives, though often unrecognised and underfunded, play an increasingly important role in supporting migrants as they navigate their new lives. Though sometimes disputed as civil society actors (O. Larsson, 2021), faith-based organisations (FBOs), such as churches, have proven integral to this support network, offering diverse sites for activities that facilitate the process of establishing a sense of home in Sweden. Part of a larger study describing and understanding both formal and nonformal learning sites from a migrant and societal perspective, this study focuses on church language cafés (CLCs) as a specific case of non-formal education. It aims to demonstrate how community contributions can offer alternative values in education through the exploration of migrant learning spaces. This endeavour is guided by two research questions: (1) "how are inclusive learning spaces created through church language cafés?" and (2) "what meaning do participants ascribe to their experiences in these spaces?"

Setting the Scene

Sweden, historically considered a "soft socio-democratic state", has traditionally offered universal public welfare, including education and care for vulnerable groups such as refugees. As a result, these social needs have traditionally been viewed as a public responsibility rather than an individual or civic one (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

In the aftermath of the great migration event of 2015 when more than a million refugees arrived in Europe, Sweden's previously open stance toward migration has shifted, bringing about government actions, such as restrictions for residence permits, subsidies for re-migration, and new language requirements for citizenship (Swedish Government Office, 2021). Many migrants join the municipality-run Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) national programme, considered essential for social inclusion (Pötzsch and Saksela-Bergholm, 2023). However, the programme faces challenges, including a high dropout rate (46% in 2022), and recurring quality issues such as lack of relevant content and individualised teaching efforts (Rydell, 2020; National Agency of Education, 2022).

Churches and other civil society actors have been quick to create activities such as language cafés, which have become vital meeting spaces for many migrants in Sweden as well as across Europe (Della Porta and Steinhilper, 2021; Nyström et al., 2023; Escobar and Ahl, 2024). Working without any national programmes, language cafés in Sweden vary greatly in set-up with community

and communication in Swedish as their only common denominator. Despite budget cuts and scrutiny, civic education efforts for migrants have consistently continued their support for migrants. Despite battling declining formal membership numbers, many Protestant "free churches" in Sweden have become homes to well-visited CLCs in almost every town. Rooted in the 19th-century Christian revival movement, these churches influenced democracy by breaking away from the then-state-governed Lutheran church and collaborated with labour and sobriety movements for improving living conditions for the population (see Andersson and Laginder, 2013; Rolf, 2022). The Nordic "*folkbildning*" (popular education) concept of "learning for life" and the church's "Reader's tradition" remain central to free church identity, emphasising learning and community involvement.

Previous Research: Migration and Civil Society (Language) Learning

Earlier research on migrant reception and language learning in Sweden highlights the role of civic society, particularly study organisations, in providing stability and fostering new relationships with different communities in society (Fejes et al., 2018; Fejes and Dahlstedt, 2022). These organisations, along with other civic society efforts, have significantly impacted long-term access to social networks (Mesic et al., 2019). Ydremark (2022) also demonstrates how four traditional roles of ethnicity-based civic society organisations are relevant for refugees as well as for labour force migrants: collective problem-solving, social integration, member services, and democracy. To these she also adds the role of civil society as an arena for negotiating and balancing belonging.

In Europe, non-formal second language learning is common and language cafés organised by various societal actors are widespread. However, language café venues in particular are often perceived merely as places for migrants to practise speaking and have historically received limited attention in academic research. Nonetheless, some previous studies have explored linguistic aspects of language café learning, examining features such as bilingual (Haim and Kedar, 2022), multilingual (Jansson, 2021), and translanguaging practices (Polo-Pérez and Holmes, 2023), as well as the significance of transcultural interaction (Riley and Douglas, 2016). These all point to the importance of acknowledging all languages and cultural expressions present in a learning situation. Additionally, multimodality (Kunitz and Majlesi, 2022) i.e. the use of many different forms of expression, and storytelling (Kunitz and Jansson, 2021), have been identified as effective means of establishing communication between volunteers and new migrant Swedish speakers.

The religious aspects of the CLC work have also been recognised by researchers. Targeting church professionals, Jansson (2021) has examined the concept of belonging within CLCs, and reports have highlighted the potential for CLCs to become pathways to church membership (Hemmati, 2021; The Church of Sweden, 2024). Researchers have also studied inter-religious groups supporting migrants through projects like language cafés, enhancing community cohesion, security, and a sense of welcome for minority groups all across Europe (Lyck-Bowen, 2019; Lyck-Bowen and Owen, 2019; Lyck-Bowen, 2020).

In this study, building on previous research, I examine churches as unique civil milieus at the intersection of informal and nonformal adult learning. I explore how inclusive language learning spaces are innovatively created through participant experiences. By adopting a participant perspective, this study aims to deepen understanding of the complexities and opportunities within CLCs as spaces for meaning making.

Theoretical Perspective: Exploring Space-Making Through Metaphors

This work intertwines ethnographic approaches and metaphors with theories of space and place. Churches may be regarded as unexpected venues for language learning underexplored by research. The materiality of CLCs is therefore in itself interesting to explore, as are the people populating them. In this work, ethnographic methods are used to uncover new knowledge about real people with unique names, histories, and local cultures. This requires deep engagement with both people and places, spending significant time in the field, and observing all interactions, including those involving objects, subjects, learners, and volunteers.

In the course of this work, places emerge as more than passive frames; they become milieus interwoven with the learning experience. The concept of space as the meaning-making, expansive counterpart of place therefore becomes relevant. Adapting Massey's (2005) ideas of space as a social dimension, intertwined with time and ever-changing, this study analyses CLC spaces as products of interrelations, and always under construction. Using these sensitising concepts, I examine how migrants give meaning to CLCs and how these places come alive through their presence and activities. This perspective views language cafés not merely as church activities or language practice arenas, but as spaces contributing to our understanding of possible futures.

The dual focus on places and spaces in this work necessitates an analytical tool that unites these concepts. To serve this purpose, metaphors have been

crafted as both research method and representational resource (Black, 2013). Using imaginative language, these metaphors expand ideas beyond material places like churches and connect to human experiences such as learning or socialising. They act as analytical instruments, catalysts, and generative tools for interpretation, providing structures for identifying patterns. Drawing from everyday concepts in familiar domains, such as schools and clubs, they offer a map to the less familiar domain of CLCs (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

In the process of coding the data collected from both observations and informal talk, artifacts and in-depth interviews, metaphors spontaneously seeped into the analytic work early on and became instrumental in my analytical process. Through iterative engagement with observation and interview data, I identified separate functions and relationships within the CLC spaces that corresponded to well-known venues in social life. Taken together, the four different metaphor spaces of Swedish School, Citizen Service Centre, Social Club, and Sacred Space formed a four-dimensional image of what a CLC can be. Agreeing with Massey (2005, p.19), the CLC spaces are not to be regarded as fixed entities but rather as "loose ends" or "missing links", composed of various (his-)stories of migrants, volunteers, staff, and me as a researcher. This work can be seen as a window into the shared lifeworld of all these stories at a certain point in time, sketching that event. The metaphors constructed from this snapshot attempt to stabilise the meaning of particular envelopes of space-time (Massey, 1994). In terms of rhetoric, and following Ricoeur (1974), the metaphors in this work can be identified as local events within the text that contribute to the overall interpretation. Through their "narrative contracts" with readers (Atkinson, 1990), these metaphors convey more than their literal meaning, hopefully contributing to a deeper understanding.

Method: Ethnographic Encounters

This work is part of a larger research project, targeting both formal and non-formal language learning venues for migrants in a particular Swedish, mid-sized town. For the entire project, as well as for this present work, I have adopted a naturalistic, ethnographically inspired approach to capture everyday life and Swedish conversation at CLCs. I conducted over 50 hours of close observations (van Manen, 1990) to build genuine relationships and share in participants' daily lives (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), maintaining "hermeneutic vigilance" by reflecting regularly on my experiences. The material includes many non-structured, meaningful interactions, defined as "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 1988). Using systematic fieldnotes, I collected varied and rich materials, aiming to create a colourful "meadow"

of living beings. Seven in-depth interviews, lasting 45 to 90 minutes, further enriched my understanding of individual experiences at the CLC.

My research process also involved keeping an extended research journal to capture insights (Dahlberg et al., 2008). By combining interviews, observations, and self-reported communications from the CLCs (e.g. advertisements and pamphlets), I captured the purposes and qualities of the CLC venue from different angles. This multifaceted data allowed me to create a triangulated collage of complex images, forming metaphors of how the CLC learning environment is experienced by migrant learners. Gathering data from various sources provided a basis for creating rigour and "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973), contributing to quality in qualitative research and the creation of cohesive, believable new knowledge. Hopefully, this knowledge will prove to be transferable to other fields as well (S. Larsson, 2009; Tracy, 2010).

Places, People and Ethical Considerations

Six different CLCs of different Protestant denominations and geographical locations in the same town were selected for the study. They all had newly arrived migrant visitors from different countries (refugees and others), and seven of them were selected for interviews according to snowball sampling (Moser and Korstjens, 2017). The set-up varied greatly and whereas two churches organised conversation-only language cafés, others often included both introduction, presentation of a topic, group talk/work, and a concluding activity. The last part did in some cases coincide with an element of religious devotion. One of the language cafés was a collaboration between an SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) class and a local church, and students were expected to attend. The different language cafés are introduced in *Table 1*.

CLC and location	Participants	Interview person(s)	Volunteers	Setup
City Church, City centre	20-30	**Yonas** (48), Afghanistan	Large group of mainly senior volunteers and several staff	Thematic presentations, guest speakers, group work. Invitation to church prayer (evenings)
Little City Church, City centre	15-20, mostly students	**Nadia** (44), Ukraine	Mainly younger volunteers, volunteer pastor	Thematic group talk, separate devotion time (evenings)
SFI and Church collab, City centre	25, invited SFI-group with teacher	*Participants not present by choice*	Senior volunteers, usually no staff	Group theme set by leader, no devotion (daytime)
Women's language café (hosted by Little City Church), Community housing centre West	10-15, Women between 25 and 35	**Sara** (27), Syria **Zanaib** (37), Pakistan	Two appointed volunteers, usually one member of staff	Going around the circle thematic talk, no devotion (daytime)
Community Church South, Community housing centre South	15-20, many nationalities	**Ali** (27), Turkey **Sabi** (27), Eritrea	Mixed-age volunteers, one member of staff	Just conversation, devotion in separate room (evenings)
Church on the Hill, Residential area	5-10, mainly Syrian origin, occasional new visitors from different countries	**Nid** (51), Thailand	Large group of older volunteers, several staff	Thematic presentation, thematic group talk, devotion included (evenings)

Table 1. CLCs and participants of the study

The decision was made not to use an interpreter during fieldwork due to my prior experience communicating at a learner level as a second language teacher, and my proficiency in English. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and/or English which brings to the fore the issue of respectful representation of speech. In some instances, "learner's Swedish" has been carefully translated into "learner's English" while also keeping representations of mixed language talk. While this remains a researcher's construction, it may still provide a somewhat more authentic quality to the quotes. All the participants of the study were anonymised and/or have chosen their own pseudonyms. They have given their oral and written (in case of interviews) consent and the work has been ethically vetted according to the guidelines of the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2024) according to 13§ of the Personal Data Act (Ministry of Justice, 1998). An approval was received 230327 (Dnr 2023-00P).

More Than Words: Findings on the CLCs as Spaces of Diversity and Community

Working out the meaning-making of the CLCs by capturing functions and relationships, four main themes have been constructed as metaphors of the different spaces: the Swedish School, the Citizen Service Centre, the Social Club, and the Sacred Space. They are all presented below.

1. The CLC as Swedish School

CLC spaces can function as Swedish Schools. In these venues, language appears not as a problem to be solved but rather as something naturally integrated into life at the café as well as connecting to everyday life. Presented below are examples of the use of CLCs as language practising arenas, where experiences of effortless learning and feelings of acceptance pave the way for possible new futures. In the scene below, groups are sitting at round tables at the language café at the Church on the Hill with migrants and Swedes mixed. The theme of the presentation is cheap and expensive vegetables:

> Helga is standing, quite teacher-like, holding a piece of paper with pictures photocopied from a cookbook, pointing and asking questions to individuals she knows by name. She speaks slowly, using easy Swedish, takes short breaks to makes sure she gets a response from one of the migrants before she continues […] Later in my group a woman shares tips on how to make real Lebanese baba ganoush. (From fieldnotes 230412)

Lacking in any formal guidelines or curricula from regional or national levels, church or otherwise, the CLCs of the study often take on a surprisingly

traditional school-like form. Teaching themes and materials are mainly chosen by volunteers, and the seating arrangements are adjusted for lecture-like talks and group work. In several of the CLC set-ups, there is an initial teaching section where a volunteer or invited guest speaker presents lesson content followed by exercises in groups using hand-out materials. Many volunteers further take on a traditional teacher role, standing, talking and pointing to visual material which can be associated with teaching ideals from the times when senior volunteers were in school themselves. As personal relationships develop, volunteers sometimes even prepare materials for individual learners, making sure they sit down together as soon as they arrive, forming a unique one-to-one teaching and learning relationship.

As expected, the CLC space can be created as a practising arena to support language learning in different ways, both as oral practice and vocabulary learning. Nadia (44, from Ukraine) is an accomplished university English professor working from home at all hours to support her family. She has carefully chosen Little City CLC and, taking time from her busy teaching schedule, she focuses on her own oral language practice. "This is my speaking hour", she says. Nadia reports that her knowledge of English worked well in Swedish everyday life until trying to communicate with the parents of her daughter's friends. Realising the war in Ukraine may continue longer than first expected, she feels she needs to be skilled for a full life in Sweden, imagining a future here for herself and her children.

Ali (27) is younger than Nadia but is also a person who wishes to move further and expand his horizons in life. He has studied in other countries on the way to Sweden after fleeing his birthplace in Turkey, and his goal is to get accepted to a university programme as soon as possible. For this he needs strategies for language learning such as, in this case, the learning of new words. At the formal SFI school, he picks up words and writes them down in his notebook, but states that by using them in practice repeatedly at the language café they stay with him for the rest of his life:

> I translate into Turkish or English, so it stays there […] Always, yes. Sometimes I forget, but I can say almost always, almost everything I remember always.

By consciously engaging in speaking tasks and vocabulary learning, migrant participants use the CLCs in a self-directed manner, which both second-language practice and research have found to be effective (Norlund Shaswar and Wedin, 2020).

The Swedish School at the language cafés also seems to differ from a traditional learning environment in the significance of the interpersonal relationships between volunteers and migrants. Intertwined in the learning experience is a sense of a safe space, contributing to feelings of acceptance and confirmation. This is the atmosphere Sabi (27) from Eritrea has experienced at the Community South Church. She says, "Here I not ashamed." Zanaid (37), a master's student from Pakistan, adds from The Women's Café:

> They are so warm, so warm to new people. Like us who don´t know so much Swedish and who makes mistakes. But they are so welcoming, and they are so big hearted, they don't realise this thing. They even correct our mistakes in a way that we don't take it as badly … Yeah.

This feeling of acceptance is what Yonas (47, from Afghanistan) has encountered as well. A fighter personality himself who has overcome many hardships, he still appreciates the uncomplicated nature of the CLC learning:

> But in *kyrka* [church] it is easy, it's not so fast, it's not so forcing […] But when you are in, studying in for example SFI in each of them you have to *kämpa* [struggle]. You have to force and force. But in the *kyrkan* [church] you will study normal and normal.

As demonstrated in the examples above, the learning experience is intertwined with a sense of a safe space, contributing to feelings of effortless acceptance and confirmation.

As for language learning pointing towards better futures, Nid (51) from Thailand is now hopeful. After years of demanding work in Sweden, she has gone back to the SFI, where she is making consistent progress. "I don't want […] work as cleaning […] No, hard life for me", she says with emphasis. She now complements her formal education by attending various language cafés, focusing on those that provide the most benefits. Her dream is to work with the elderly before retiring back home in Thailand.

The examples above aim to show how the CLC, created as a Swedish School, focuses on everyday language practice but also points forward towards imagined futures where greater language skills open doors to better opportunities in life. Learning at the CLC is further tied to close relationships between volunteers and migrants where language learning presents a natural activity, a space where fear of failure is replaced by trust. There is also a sense of "learning for life" at the CLC; that whatever happens at the language café can make a difference in the lifeworld at large.

Being a newly arrived migrant involves constant learning, including a new language and the challenges of everyday life and societal structures. This also creates a need for space to address various questions and navigate the demands of the new society. The CLC can thus function as a Citizen Service Centre.

2. The CLC as Citizen Service Centre

The CLC can be lived as a Citizen Service Centre—to which someone can bring all kinds of official papers—staffed with volunteer "assistants" ready to guide new citizens into society. Resembling not only a pit-stop for urgent matters for the newly arrived migrant, it also offers an introduction to all things Swedish. Furthermore, forging ties at the CLC can lead to valuable connections for work as well as community involvement, even if these relationships are not without their challenges.

At this point in the interview, Yonas looks me eagerly in the eye when asked about the CLC:

> Yonas: It … important to me. I meet a lot of different people and the staff, they work in the church. They are very nice people. Help with everything. Or for now, when I have some tests, some papers I don't understand…
>
> Martina: …Yes?
>
> Yonas: I bring all the papers.

At the large City CLC where Yonas is a participant, things run smoothly, with volunteers ready at their computers to assist participants with letters from the Migration authorities, phone bills, homework, or other business. This setup is especially valuable for migrants before they gain access to formal language training, when meeting places are limited and connections with native Swedes and institutions are few. Here the CLC can function as a civic society equivalent of the common Municipality Service Centre (*Servicekontor*), where different authorities share offices in many Swedish towns. Being volunteer organisations, CLCs can offer a more personal approach to their services.

As relationships develop, these service efforts become even more valuable. Ali shares how he got his first summer job through a language café contact. Everybody had been telling him how difficult it was to get a first job in Sweden, but he beamingly tells the story of just walking into the manager's office, filling

in some paperwork and then getting the job. "New friends, new paths!" he exclaims.

For new migrants, the world of the CLC can further represent a "pocket version" of Swedish society, where volunteers have more time than teachers or government officials to introduce all things Swedish. Yonas describes his support from volunteers as comprehensive, extending beyond practical administrative issues to introducing a new way of life and culture: "[T]hey just help us with the *svenska* [Swedish], with the *svenska* [Swedish] culture, with Swedish people," he says. Several CLCs in this study provide orientation in what is "typically Swedish." Newly arrived Sara (27) from Syria speaks happily of the baking theme at the Women's café, where different traditional Swedish cakes were introduced on her first visit: "I like baking," she says shyly, her eyes shining as she brings examples of her accomplished edible art to our interview. Another striking example is the Coffee and Fishing expeditions offered by one of the churches. The Swedish *fika* culture was introduced, where sharing coffee and buns or sandwiches as a social event was combined with another popular Swedish outdoor hobby: fishing, complete with professional instructors at a nearby lake. The "outdoorsy" initiative, while perhaps not suitable for all participants, was still an appreciated event repeated several times.

The service station quality of the CLC is further underlined by the setup which allows participants to come and go as they please. This approach distinguishes the CLCs from most traditional activities of the Swedish free churches, which typically expect significant personal involvement. At the language café, every unique visit almost feels like a treat to volunteers. However, this welcoming atmosphere does not eliminate the hope for the return of "old" learners. At the Church on the Hill language café, name tags are laid out every week in anticipation that the great number of participants who used to attend will one day return. "We hope, we hope!", the deacon comments hopefully. Yet most tags lie untouched every week as the activity ends.

Considering the findings above, there is perhaps a risk that the generous and open-hearted service attitude of volunteers underlines unequal positions and hinders reciprocity. Yonas' recent initiative does however point to the opposite. He has signed his name on the cleaning list of "his" language café. Realising this is not a requirement, he feels proud to give back to the local church:

> Yes, even … the persons in the *kyrkan* [church] they are helping a lot of people, and two time I have told them: Put my name, on Sunday I'm coming to clean here!

The CLC as Citizen Service Centre often becomes the first go-to place for any kind of citizen orientation a migrant may need. These opportunities may also expand towards needs for future endeavours. However, it is not necessarily a place of passive reception, and there are examples of a two-way movement where the dedication of volunteers inspires some participants to give back to the community.

For some, the need for service is, however, over-ridden by the need to take part in the social activities at the church language cafés, making that aspect the most significant of their CLC experience. The space for fellowship, the sharing, and the face-to-face encounters have become something deeply meaningful to them as they attend the CLC activities, creating a Social Club.

3. The CLC as Social Club

The CLC as Social Club provides opportunities to break isolation, forming new unexpected friendships, and raises the question of dependence and independence. The Social Club of the CLC may become a separate unit of its own or point towards fellowship in the greater church community:

> I find a place at a sturdy wooden table with three women from India. One of them is a member of the congregation and a volunteer at the café. We talk for a long time about Sweden, the state of the roads, and a TV-series about India. I try to include the visiting sister in the conversation through the others' interpreting. The invited woman smiles a lot at me, leans towards me, and I feel a sense of closeness. Her volunteer friend says she needs to get out of her house. She might forget her Swedish when she stays home a lot. (From fieldnotes 230418)

Informal meeting places for new acquaintances are rare in Sweden, affecting both migrants and long-term residents. This makes the CLC an exception, being a non-member open activity described on the website by one of the churches as a place of inclusion: "for asylum seekers, new arrivals in Sweden or residents who have lived their entire lives here" (City church, researcher's translation). As loneliness is considered a great social problem in Sweden, one would perhaps expect the CLC to be a space for casual visitors of all nationalities dropping by for fellowship and the typical "*fika* fellowship". However, the Swedes at the language cafés of the study are always staff or organised volunteers, creating a uniquely composed Social Club of its own, nurturing temporal as well as deeper relationships.

When one's lifeworld is temporarily restricted due to migration, it can lead to a sense of alienation. The CLC may be the first opportunity for new migrants to break isolation and find fellowship outside the home and immediate family. For master's student Zanaib from Pakistan, the local language café has become an essential venue, attending to the needs of her sociable personality. She colourfully describes the hardships of living in a temporary residence "in the forest" with literally no one to talk to. Before finding the women's language café she says she sometimes, a little desperately, approached strangers in her next neighbourhood, just to get a connection and a little language practice. Now the CLC has further populated her everyday life, making it more recognisable and meaningful, resembling her pre-migration experience.

Even more so than Zanaib, young single student Ali speaks of the CLC not only as an opportunity but rather as a necessity, a breaking away from loneliness. "What else could I do?", he asks, suddenly very serious, describing his single life in a rural residential area outside the immediate city. Ali comes across as a slightly shy young man, but his eyes light up when he speaks of a new best friend from the language café. Ali starts naming the different spaces they now share: other language cafés, the gym, restaurants. For every site he adds, "Also together!" It is evident they have become important people in each other's lives.

For several participants of the language cafés the experience of social interaction is paramount, forming new routines and structures in their lives. These new friendships also help to expand the lifeworld horizons of the participants. Yonas from Afghanistan bears witness to the unexpected joy of forming a new international and inter-generational circle of friends from the CLC to share moments with, like a dinner and a movie:

> I have … I meet sometimes erm … son of my friend and friends out on the town …We can meet one another. It is very good. They are from Iraq, from Ethiopia, from Arabic.

Close bonds also form between participants and volunteers, especially participants who visit often. Yonas has bonded with a senior woman and former missionary, who has been supporting his family and written down his captivating life story. She is very eager to share his story with others and seeks me out as a researcher. After the encounter, Yonas says pointedly:

> "I'm not here every time […] Maybe every other week", he says. I get the feeling he wants to make sure I understand that despite his close connections to the volunteer he does not belong to this place. He is his own man. (From fieldnotes 230504)

Recognising the risk of dependence in relationships, Yonas wants to indicate his stance, making sure I realise he is not always to be found in one place. This demonstrates how the CLC as a Social Club is populated with interdependent yet independent participants, who take part in the social activities according to their own wants and needs on a voluntary and force-free basis. The CLC isn't a formal membership club: rather it's a launching pad for new ventures and for friendships that can extend far beyond the church walls.

There is also opportunity for deeper fellowships within the church community. At Little City Church, other church activities are openly "promoted" at the language café for those wanting to move closer into the fellowship. Invitations to more "neutral" international parties and board game nights are paired with approving talk of prayer nights and worship services displaying a more "missionary agenda". In contrast, the activities at the other CLCs of the study seem rather cut off from other church functions, and it is not always made clear how to proceed if one is interested in participating in other church projects. This further underlines the CLC as an independent and separate community.

The CLC created as a Social Club is a venue that fosters relationships on various levels. It helps newly arrived migrants break isolation and offers opportunities to form new groups for the future, bridging generations and ethnicities. Experiences of forming strong bonds with potential lifelong friends among visitors and volunteers further underscore the CLC as a place of belonging yet conditioned by migrants' own choices.

This space of relational possibilities may also take on existential dimensions as the CLC can also be created as a Sacred Space, a room for something larger than life, that goes beyond the here and now.

4. The CLC as Sacred Space

Language cafés in churches have the potential to minister to the existential dimension of participants' lifeworlds, often recognised as a matter of human dignity. Migrant participants can experience the CLC as a potentially Sacred Space, ranging from non-interest to newfound curiosity about spiritual matters and even full church involvement:

> With no further introduction little notes are handed out as we are finishing. I recognise the two common Swedish worship songs: "You surround me" and "God loves you". The church worker stands up to read an Easter poem, we sing the songs accompanied by a piano in

> the corner, and the activity is suddenly over. Everybody leaves quite quickly. I'm surprised at this uncommented and seamless transition from language café activity to a time of religious devotion. (From fieldnotes 230412)

The existential needs of participants can be addressed in different ways at the CLCs. In most cases there is an option to take part of a devotion at the end of the language café activity, and participants do seem to make deliberate choices whether to attend or not. However, in one case there is a "mandatory" devotion part at the end of a CLC activity with religious song lyrics provided (*Image 1*). This means participants take part in a religious act without really having the opportunity to opt out, which may be seen as problematic.

"God loves you God loves you Whoever you are Wherever you live God loves you"	Gud älskar dig Gud älskar dig Vem du än är Var du än bor Gud älskar dig!

Image 1. Lyrics to worship song

All but one of the language cafés of the study are situated in an actual church building. Participating in activities in these places would mean, in a sense, literally an act of "going to church". Religion is, however, not always visible at the language cafés of the study. For example, the language café activities are situated in the church community hall rather than in the more symbol-laden church interior, and only in one case is there an invitation to a time of devotion in such a room. In the longstanding collaboration between SFI and one of the local CLCs of the study, the visit to the neighbourhood church is integrated into regular oral practice sessions and is unquestioned by all participants.

As Sweden is considered a secularised country, the significance of the language café organisers could perhaps make a difference to participants. But Muslim participant Zanaib had to be asked twice before she realised this could be seen as a controversial issue. Rather, the openness for all, and the no limits because of creed or ethnicity, has made an impression on Yonas, who is from a traditionally Muslim community in Afghanistan. To him it seems a matter of human dignity, of important and perhaps existential values that he appreciates. He says:

> Because it's for *alla personer* [all people]! They are not asking any document […] Just you can go, and you can attend, forever you want. You can study there. And they will not ask you, "Who are you?"

Connecting the CLCs to a sense of human worth does not automatically lead to acceptance of all aspects of the activities. Nadia from Ukraine is displaying reservations when it comes to the organised expression of faith the church has to offer. She does not attend the concluding "reading comprehension" session at the end of the activity since they comprise of bible readings and sermon-like talks. Appreciative of the invitations to international parties, she draws a line against actual religious activities: "Because my mother was a religious fanatic, so we are really, really scared of like being religious, like at all I should say", she says emphatically.

Seemingly moving in a different direction from Nadia, Ali is making his way towards a greater involvement in the church activities. He has begun weekly "bible talks" with the pastor of the church. Not coming from a Christian background, these meetings seem to bring him joy and existential meaning as well as challenges, both from a faith and a language point of view. He describes laughingly the feeling of coming home from a meeting of Bible talk: "My head, it's on fire!"

In some CLCs, devotion time is separated from the rest of the activity, which provides an optional opportunity for deeper involvement in religious activities. At Community Church South, this time is coupled with the congregation's weekly prayer time. Sabi from Eritrea, who sometimes takes part in this prayer time, shares in this experience:

> Yes, we pray to God. If we for example … if we have something we pray together, for example if there is the war in the world, or if there is … if I have a problem. One day we, they pray for me, my brother he goes to military. There was war in my country. Now, he is good situation.

For Sabi, a sense of higher purpose permeates her life narrative, tracing back to her bible school experience in Eritrea where she met Swedish Christians. She also admires the CLC volunteers who, despite having "important jobs," still manage to help others learn. She connects them to her SFI teachers, who helped her accelerate her learning, saying "they have a grace," implying a special gift for teaching. Already employed working with the elderly, Sabi is now retraining to become a childcare worker just to have free time on weekends for church activities.

Thus, the creation of the CLC as a Sacred Space depends on individual experiences, but also on the different set-up of the activities. All the CLCs could, however, provide space for the sacred dimensions of the lifeworld of participants through relationships and the communication of human dignity and worth. To some participants this seems to have little significance, while others take this as an incentive to search for deeper meaning pointing towards a future of further involvement within the church community.

Summing up the results of this study, CLCs can be made into qualitatively different spaces that do not exclude one another but are yet separate in functions as well as relationships. The explorations of the CLCs as Swedish School, Citizen Service Centre, Social Club and Sacred Space present rich, diverse and meaningful venues administering to many needs of migrants, both in the immediate sense but also in creating pathways into imagined futures. Looking at the four metaphors together, an image of a space emerges where interrelated learning as well as community in an accepting atmosphere have great significance for learning. This goes beyond the Swedish language towards extended learning experiences connected to the entirety of life, in the present as well as in times to come. These two aspects do not appear to be separated but rather are woven together in a real-life experiential way creating a diverse meeting place. The significance of these findings will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion: What Does the CLC as Swedish School, Citizen Service Centre, Social Club, and Sacred Space Represent?

All over Europe, the migrant process of meaning-making of everyday life patterns in a new environment is time-consuming and arduous, requiring a deep investment over time. Only a small part of this experience is of course reflected in the CLC space. Nevertheless, this discussion will explore two intertwined perspectives of this process as revealed in the metaphors of the Swedish School, the Citizen Service Centre, the Social Club, and the Sacred Space, namely: the importance of interrelations for learning for life and the possibilities of creating a heterogeneous space.

Knowing that difference in settings "however informal, do[es] not necessarily lead to different practices" (Tett, 2006, p.124), the churches of the study and their language café activities do provide many different functions for learning. These complex environments are not merely language practice sites or social meeting places: they serve as spaces where migrant participants can bring their multifaceted identities, living and shaping the milieus according to

their present selves and future aspirations. Woven together, the learning of the School Space, the support of the Citizen Service Centre, the interaction of the Social Club and the existential living of the Sacred Space underline the importance of interrelations that make space for learners as whole human beings. Concrete, everyday life learning is vital for survival as a newcomer in a foreign society: the breaking of isolation, a few key words in the local language, an orientation of the institutions of society, and a space offering human dignity and worth. But the mutual creation of CLCs between volunteers and migrants may also contribute to future aspirations. As recognised in previous research, the expansion of life and opportunities for migrant participants extends into future spaces (Fejes and Dahlstedt, 2022). This contributes to connections with the labour market, further education, the formation of new lifelong relationships, and the creation of spaces for existential meaning, all of which are vital for a sense of belonging and well-being. CLCs can therefore be understood as spaces for new learning relationships that move both vertically and horizontally.

As formal church membership numbers are dropping all over Europe, the societal significance of church history may receive less attention. Swedish free church identity has historically emphasised a strong social dimension, where "fellowship built the rooms." The openness towards the surrounding world made church spaces a "mission in themselves" (Fahlgren, 2008, pp.61-62), a concept recently revived through language cafés and other activities for migrants. The creation of the CLC's' multi-faceted spaces reflect the *Folkbildning* (popular education) ideas of learning for life, viewing knowledge as broader than just qualifications for societal contribution (see Gustavsson, 1995). This idea resonates with the free church experience of the Reader's movement. Concerned with democratic and equal access to knowledge, early Readers met in homes and small chapels to read various literature, not just the Bible. Through round- table conversations, they deliberated on matters of the heart, soul, and societal engagement on equal terms. In this "Readers' spirit," respectful interactions between learners and volunteers at the CLCs contribute to the reduction of typical hierarchies of teaching-learning situations (van Manen, 2016). Additionally, communication of worth through relationships can foster trust and confidence between educators and learners, creating a positive learning atmosphere (Bollnow, 2016).

Against a backdrop of a streamlined "effective" formal language education effort for "integration purposes", the CLCs further contribute to the creation of a heterogeneous space in society. In a time when migration is constantly politically problematised, and migrants face less supportive societal attitudes,

these spaces can work as boundary-breaking forces where difference not only is considered an asset but rather propose a new heterogenous normal. The CLC portrays a spatial example of the truly European experience of "throwntogetherness" coined by Massey (2005, p.149) as different languages, races and religions come together in this particular urban space. And as loneliness among senior citizens increases because of social exclusion (Dahlberg et al., 2022) and many retirees feel their contributions are no longer needed, the CLC offers a space where different ages and nationalities can meet, supporting each other in learning and fellowship.

The findings of this work can therefore challenge "difference" and homogeneity by recognising diversity in itself as a way of understanding space, allowing for the simultaneous coexistence of different stories and life paths co-creating the space. This work has demonstrated possibilities for CLC participants to live these spaces as more equal heterogenous subjects, underlined by the heterogeneity of the set-up of the different cafés. Although often excluded from the process of planning the learning content, participants can still impact the creation of the space through sharing their experiences informally as well as part of the didactic activity. This may be the reason why the CLC activities appear as inclusive places, according to visitors, even if other church activities perhaps are not.

Challenges remain, such as traditional structures that seem "ingrained in the walls", featuring old ideals of learning and well-meaning but non-reciprocal "help-happy" attitudes from church members. These may hinder migrant participants from contributing more to the co-creation of the space. Additionally, it is important to monitor the well-intentioned encouragement towards "Swedishness" to ensure it does not steer towards attitudes of expected homogeneity.

By recognising the CLCs as interrelated and heterogeneous spaces, these practices may challenge current essentialist views of migrants and migrant language learning places. Participating in the ongoing construction of society, they potentially provide spaces for alternative roles, challenging the established identities presented to migrants in Sweden and across Europe today.

Conclusion: CLCs as Agents for Inclusive Futures

The dynamic relationship between societal homogeneity and the proposed heterogeneity of civil society meeting places raises issues of power and agency. How can these heterogeneous spaces and their populations expand and speak for themselves in church as well as society? It is perhaps for the church to

investigate how this presence can permeate the entire church space and the consequences of power and impact on church life. In striving for relevance in Sweden—as well as in Europe—today, the church needs to welcome new visitors into its fellowship. This is a calling for the church and a meaningful activity for volunteers. However, the reciprocal nature of this relationship may need to be more fully acknowledged at both local and national levels.

On a societal level, the significant number of visitors to CLCs and other civil society activities for migrants highlights their importance, despite the Swedish comprehensive and accessible formal and state-funded adult education system. However, their limited support and recognition calls for further investigation. The Swedish state's response to these civil society efforts is mixed, with unevenly distributed financial support often tied to time-limited projects. Conversely, grants for some forms of adult education, such as study organisations, have been severely cut in recent years (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2025). These educational efforts, embedded in local communities, foster meaningful interactions between citizens and their surroundings. Despite their creativity and independence, these venues are influenced by educational policies, limiting their ability to drive societal change. Nevertheless, the tradition of church volunteerism shows great stability over time, making churches a reliable option for long-term societal efforts worth supporting.

Looking forward, this work reveals a tension between institutionalised learning venues and civil society efforts for migrant learning and support. At the CLCs, new migrants seem to experience authentic, meaningful life and learning close to their subjective experiences, which they can carry into other areas of their lives. This raises questions about the current formal basic language learning for migrants in Sweden. Constant reforms and poor measurable results suggest a gap between what is considered meaningful migrant learning and what is not, calling for more research to find keys to migrant learning beyond mere language exercises.

This article may serve as a reminder of the significance of civil society efforts and calls for their recognition. CLCs are organised in response to a perceived social need and are part of the church's mission: loving, caring, and sharing the good news of the Christian faith. Empowered by joining forces, churches and various civic society actors can make a greater impact on Swedish society by showcasing the vital importance of reciprocal, heterogeneous relationships that unite both old and new citizens from around the world into an inclusive future.

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Dialogue or Firewall? How the Providers of Adult Education in Germany React to the Influence of the Extreme Right

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Abstract

Adult education and learning in Germany are under pressure from attempts by right-wing extremist actors to increase their influence on structures, target groups, and programmes. This paper presents qualitative data from a survey of actors in different adult education and learning areas. They report on various incidents of right-wing influence. These attempts at influence vary in terms of the actors involved, the setting, and the intensity. The reports also show that the institutions involved, and their representatives, react in different ways. These reactions and countermeasures range from attempts to counter influence through dialogue (talking to the right) to clear disciplinary boundaries (firewalls). In this article we present results relating to the micro level of adult education (courses, seminars, lectures).

Keywords: Right-Wing Populism, Adult Learning and Education, Discrimination, Overton Window

Introduction

In countries worldwide, right-wing populism has established itself at parliamentary level and in governments. In 2017, Waller et al. stated that "educational institutions […] are challenged by the anti-pluralist, anti-expert and anti-elitist stance of populist movements, in particular those on the right" (Waller et al., 2017, p.384). From the perspective of adult education, this growing pressure is highly problematic. The topic of refugees and migration is taking up an enormous amount of space in public debates.

In Germany, the discourse shifted significantly to the right in the run-up to the

federal elections in February 2025. The pressure is primarily associated with the political party "*Alternative für Deutschland*" (Alternative for Germany [AfD]), which is represented in the federal parliament (*Deutscher Bundestag*) and in almost all parliaments of the federal states (*Länder*). Initially founded as a party that questioned the use of the Euro, the AfD has developed politically in the direction of right-wing populism. At the beginning of May 2025, the German Domestic Intelligence Services classified the entire party as a confirmed right-wing extremist organisation due to the extremist character of the party as a whole, which disregards human dignity.

Theories on racism (El-Mafaalani, 2021), as well as adult education research (Heinemann, 2014; Grotlüschen et al., 2021) agree that the German integration system fails to include (recent) immigrants into full acceptance and participation in Germany. Therefore, the educational system is exposed to attempts by right-wing actors to exert influence (Hanschmann, 2024). Regarding adult education, the system of integration courses for migrants is increasingly the target of right-wing hostility. Integration courses were made compulsory in 2005 for recent migrants and those persons who want to apply for German citizenship. They include language courses (600 hours) and course content on culture, history and politics in Germany (additional 100 hours). The courses are aimed at the rapid integration of immigrants into society and the labour market and are funded by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Hanke, 2025).

The project on which this article is based is dedicated to analysing strategies for curbing right-wing influence at three levels of adult education (micro, meso, and macro level). The collection of case descriptions is organised by these levels (Lima and Guimaraes, 2011; Boeren, 2019). According to Hippel et al. (2022, p.24), the didactic levels of action at the macro level deal with institutional and economic conditions, political decisions, and curriculum concepts in adult education. The meso level focuses on programme planning and teaching concepts relating to the structuring and provision of educational measures. The micro level deals with the concrete implementation and evaluation of individual educational programmes and teaching-learning interactions.

This contribution presents results based on reports from the micro level of the adult education system in Germany. It concludes by systematising various countermeasures that have proven effective as a response to influences of varying intensity. On the micro level, reports point to racism within integration courses, attempts to discredit certain topics, and, more generally, to introduce the views of the extreme right into the course.

Literature Review: Adult Education in Times of Global Right-Wing Populism

Growing political power of extreme right-wing parties leads to shifts in discourse in public debates towards a "normalization of the radical right" (Valentim, 2024). In German discourse, there is talk of a shift in the boundaries of what can be said when dealing with extreme right-wing positions. These limits of what can be said are contested and are moving towards more extreme positions. Right-wing statements that were once considered unacceptable (misanthropic, authoritarian) are increasingly normalised although these are not generally new positions in the discourse (Biskamp, 2021, p.39). This phenomenon is described as "moving the Overton window" which is a political science concept representing "the range of ideas the public is willing to consider and accept. In short it dictates what is politically acceptable and therefore possible at a given moment" (The Lancet Planetary Health, 2021, p.1619).

Right-wing populism goes hand in hand with xenophobia and misanthropy (Nuissl and Popović, 2020) and leads to the dismantling of democracy (Hanschmann, 2024). Specific characteristics of right-wing populism are the aggressive protection of the "we" with the help of the repression and devaluation of the "others" (Panreck, 2020, p.79). Discriminatory and derogatory language using so-called "Fighting Terms" (Gießelmann et al., 2019) is an important part of populist strategies. Fighting terms are provocative words intended to aggravate opponents in political or social disputes and win over the audience in favour of one's own point of view.

Scholars agree that right-wing populism is on the rise globally (Kumral, 2023). This is true in Europe, where the Eurobarometer on discrimination (European Commission, 2023) found that large sections of the populations in Europe are ready to discriminate against vulnerable groups, including immigrants, Roma, people with disabilities and older people. Germany is no exception: the *Mitte-Studien* (surveys on the political centre) (Zick et al., 2023) show that group-based misanthropy has been on the rise for years and is accompanied by growing right-wing populism. Adult education has contributed to curricula, courses, and publications to fight right-wing influences. However, the rise of populist parties leads to the question of what else can be done, and what exactly these parties are aiming for when it comes to (adult) education.

Berg et al. (2023, p.1314) have analysed fourteen European right-wing populist parties and found that their education policies consistently point to "nativism",

"authoritarianism" and "populism" as party ideologies. The authors of the analysis derive expected educational policies of these right-wing populist parties. We can therefore expect the exclusion of all sections of the population constructed as "non-native", considerable influence on educational curricula with a preference for practical (non-academic) activities, a reactionary interpretation of history, and a socially differentiating education policy (Berg et al., 2023). Right-wing populist parties advocate social differentiation instead of social inclusion. These positions appear to be a highly selective educational ideology (Nikolai, 2024) and a monolingual (Gogolin, 2008) idealised notion of a uniform dominant language.

Educational research has criticised the fact that neoliberal exaggerations of the performance narrative act—as an instrument of societal selection and exclusion by discriminating against people with unfavourable class backgrounds (Seeck, 2022, p.41), with disabilities or impairments, or at an older age (Kulmus et al., 2025)—as having limited performance and being insufficiently "useful" (Akbaba and Heinemann, 2023, p.368). In addition, xenophobic discrimination can be found worldwide in the approaches of right-wing populist parties (Kumral, 2023, p.755).

There is discussion about how right-wing populist parties try to gain influence over the education system because here they can exert considerable influence below the statutory regulatory level through administrative regulations (Hanschmann, 2024). In summary, populism is putting substantial pressure on diversity in education, a situation which Hussain and Yunus (2021, p.253) describe as "education as (contested) ground for populist programmes".

To date, the discussion of right-wing populism and education has mainly focused on civic education or politics and history lessons in schools (Nuissl and Popović, 2020, p.346; Estellés et al., 2023). In recent years, more examples of right-wing influences have been reported that cross the boundaries of these areas. An international study that covered eight countries shows how vulnerable adult education is under populist governments. During the Bolsonaro regime in Brazil and under the Modi regime in India, adult education and learning, as well as literacy provision, was cut back substantially (Grotlüschen et al., 2023, pp.39-42; Grotlüschen et al., 2025).

Against this background, collected from research on a global populist and right-wing movement, we argue that populist activities start to threaten adult education as a whole. Findings are scarce and mostly cover civic education, while we do not know what else is going on in the field. This is the starting

point for this exploratory study and leads to the research questions: What kind of right-wing influences do local and community education centres report? What counter-strategies do educational practitioners apply?

Methodology

The current research employs a citizen science approach through a participatory research project (Unger, 2014) which was funded by the University of Hamburg and took place between October 2024 and March 2025. Citizen science aims to involve citizens in the design of social research and includes the engagement of persons outside the scientific community in the research process, e.g. in the research design, data collection, and analysis or dissemination (Albert et al. 2021, p.120). The interview protocol and sampling strategy were developed collaboratively with representatives of community education centres and with students of an adult education seminar. The collected data was subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This concept fosters community involvement and enhances the relevance and applicability of the findings to real-world contexts (Albert et al., 2021, p.122).

The 29 students of a seminar on the history of adult education are nearing the end of their bachelor's degree and are therefore familiar with relevant topics and questions in the field of adult education. In the seminar the differentiation of the system of adult education at micro, meso and micro levels was introduced. The students were intensively involved in the discussions during the development of the questionnaire. This also focussed on the wording when developing the questions. After processing the text responses, the students analysed the case descriptions in three working groups, differentiating whether the statements could be assigned to the micro, meso or macro level. At the end of the empirical phase, the working groups presented their results to a public online meeting.

External Partners

Representatives of the German Adult Education Association (*Deutscher Volkshochschulverband* [DVV]) and the associations of adult education centres in two federal states (Hamburg and Thuringia) were recruited as practice partners. Their involvement served several purposes. Their expertise was needed to sharpen the questions and clarify the terms used in the exploratory online survey. They participated in several online meetings with the project team, which consisted of the head and post-doc staff members of the department for adult education and lifelong learning of the University of Hamburg. At a digital seminar the project team and adult education students discussed and

collectively defined the survey concepts and issues. On a practical level, the practice partners supported the dissemination of the online survey. At the end of the project, the practice partners were involved in the interpretation of the results. They had the opportunity to familiarise themselves in detail with the text material and the case descriptions and to provide feedback on the interpretation. In a public online presentation session, they commented on the results and added to them from their respective practical perspectives. Finally, they took the results back to their organisations to implement practice transfer.

Qualitative Online Survey

In the autumn of 2024, we developed a qualitative online survey. It asks for the description of instances of right-wing pressure as well as counter-strategies. The survey was conducted in German. All survey questions and all responses reported in this article were translated into English.

The University of Hamburg does not require an explicit ethics statement for projects such as the one described here. The catalogue of questions on which the assessment of ethical safety is based does not contain any aspects that would have been identified as problematic in our project, meaning that we expected approval. In principle, however, specific concerns of the participants were taken into account when designing the survey. For example, certain terms were not used in the survey and were replaced by terms that were considered unproblematic, e.g. we use the term "extreme right" instead of "right-wing populism" in the survey. No questions were asked that referred to right-wing influences in the organisation itself or to right-wing attitudes of superiors. Data on the federal states in which the respondents work was not collected; instead, the region was asked for optional information.

It was not the intention to depict the nature and intensity of the influence of right-wing actors on adult education in a representative way. The survey instrument and the type of sampling are therefore not suitable for determining representative results. Rather, the objective was to visualise the range of influence in terms of actors, types of incidents, and counter-strategies. It consisted almost exclusively of open questions, thereby essentially generating qualitative material. The survey gathered narratives from the respondents. While these are not exactly the same as qualitative material gained from personal interviews, nonetheless, the material is extensive and, in our view, represents a qualitative corpus since the respondents were able to bring their own experiences to their narratives.

The survey consisted of several sets of questions, each relating to the micro, meso, or macro levels of the continuing education system. The wording of the questions was the subject of intensive and sometimes controversial discussions with the practice partners. It became clear that the practice partners had reservations about certain terms that were considered too confrontational.

The questions were derived from the literature review and cover the whole institution instead of only focusing on the external right-wing pressure against civic education. It was already known before the start of the project that there was right-wing influence. However, few concrete details were known about the types of influence and their intensity. Furthermore, we could not assume that specific incidents were known in all organisations or among all people who took part in the survey. We therefore asked a narrative-generating initial question on whether examples of influence from right-wing populist positions were known. The succeeding questions asked what kind of influence was exerted, by whom, directed to whom, what counter-measures were taken, and whether these measures were successful or whether further counter-measures and support were needed.

The target group for the survey was defined as those working in adult education. Because we wanted to get as many different reports as possible, no pre-selection was made, e.g. by type of educational institution, region, or function in the institution. Instead, the link to participate in the survey was distributed through various email lists. These were mailing lists of the project organisers and e-mail contacts of the practice partners. The DVV informed the regional associations, which in turn informed regional and local institutions. In addition, federal and state associations of other institutions were contacted, including confessional adult education (i.e. further training activities provided by church organisations) and trade union education organisations.

Answering in every case was optional. To minimise refusals, we pointed out in the introductory text to the survey that it was not compulsory to answer questions. At the beginning of the survey, we made explicit reference to the voluntary nature of participation, and the privacy policy of the University of Hamburg was made available. No personal data such as age, gender or migration status was collected. The survey was not intended to be representative, but exploratory in nature. The survey started on 14 November 2024. By mid-February 2025, the access link had been clicked on 1,425 times. Of these people, 505 completed the survey either in part or in full. Case descriptions could be drawn from all responses given, even if not all questions were answered. For example, some respondents only reported about cases from the micro level

and not from the meso and macro levels. For the question to be discussed here, which relates to the micro level, a total of 35 case descriptions were extracted from the material. Passages cited in the results section are indicated by letter abbreviations.

An underlying assumption had been that there should be a particularly high number of reports from eastern Germany, as the AfD party has large parliamentary groups in the eastern German federal states and is also represented in numerous committees at the local and regional level. However, it emerged that the number of reports from eastern Germany (i.e. reports by participants who explicitly stated that they work in Eastern Germany) is proportionally low. Oral discussions with partners led to the conclusion that adult education representatives in Eastern Germany were very fearful of participating due to the possible recognisability of case reports.

Analysis

The case descriptions were exported to SPSS format and sorted by micro, meso, and macro levels. The statements were then output on a case-by-case basis and transferred to Excel tables, and finally were transferred to text documents that contain all cases of right-wing pressure on all three levels. Data were then anonymised by one of the post-doc project members, and are accessible *via* the project website.

The adult education students examined the statements on the micro, meso, and macro levels in working groups and discussed their results in three consecutive seminar sessions, while the scientific project team analysed all three levels. In preparation for the final public online session, in which the findings were presented to the public, the project team and student groups decided which case descriptions should be presented.

To validate our findings, we reflected on the results in two meetings with the project partners. In this way, we were able to create strategies against right-wing influence--based on the empirical material—and we summarised these into strategy types. We used the permanent comparison approach in constructing these strategy types. Statements in which counter-measures against right-wing influences became visible were qualified as strategies. We then typified each strategy by comparing it with others in the case reports. If there were clear differences, a new category of counter strategies was formed. At the end of this process, the types proved to be clearly distinguishable.

Findings

In a larger proportion of the reports the respondents stated that so far, they did not experience right-wing influence on their daily work. In fact, right-wing influence is not an everyday occurrence everywhere.

The survey distribution across the federal and state level of adult education centres resulted in a large proportion of the reports on right-wing influence coming from members of adult education centres. However, there are also statements from institutions of continuing vocational training, trade-union-oriented adult education and denominational adult education. Denominational adult education is characterised by the fact that it is organisationally linked to a church, its content is oriented towards religiosity, and it is socially oriented towards a certain clientele. In Germany, the educational institutions of the Catholic and Protestant churches are the largest providers of denominational adult education (Nuissl, 2023, p.248). Reports come from persons working in management and administrative positions as well as from teaching staff. Regionally, the reports come from all parts of Germany. Reports from East Germany are less often than expected, but they frequently contain descriptions of incidents of intense influence and usually had to be dealt with by disciplinary responses, including the deployment of the police, rather than by dialogue-oriented responses.

Right-Wing Influence on the Micro Level: The Case Descriptions

In this section, we present a selection of the reported cases and analyse their characteristics in terms of the type of influence exerted and the actors involved (Research questions: What kind of right-wing influences do local and community education centres report?) and the forms of response (Research question: What counter-strategies do educational practitioners and democratic policymakers apply?). Letters in brackets indicate the relevant interview. The reported incidents range from rather casual provocative comments to massive disruptions that led to events being cancelled.

Some examples suggest that there is a clear political agenda behind the statements. In one case, a confessed "*Reichsbürger*" (d) was reported. *Reichsbürger* is a term for people who deny the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany as a legitimate and sovereign state and fundamentally reject its representatives and the entire German legal system. In other cases, the respondents referred to a "well-known representative of right-wing positions and conspiracy myths" (ee) or sympathisers of the AfD (t, ff). The descriptions originate from various areas of adult education and relate to lectures and public

discussions, non-formal settings like political and general adult education courses, or formal education formats such as catching up on school-leaving qualifications or retraining. In most case descriptions, the influence on the events was exerted by participants in these events. However, in other situations the teaching staff influenced the events with right-wing and discriminatory statements.

Reactions to the reported incidents included a discursive approach by seeking dialogue with the people involved (talking to the right) and disciplinary measures such as issuing bans from the premises and calling in security services or the police (firewall against the right). Disruptions by individuals and groups representing extreme right-wing positions were reported in the context of individual public events, which suggests a high level of public attention. These include lectures and discussion events in the run-up to the federal elections in Germany in February 2025. There are also numerous examples of right-wing influence in courses and seminars. A report from confessional adult education illustrates the urgency of the issue:

> Colleagues from eastern Germany report that they usually have to reckon with problems at all events that deal with democracy-promoting topics, integration, democracy, gender equality, anti-racism, anti-fascism, etc., and that, for example, an additional security service has to be booked, or arrangements made with the police. (bb)

Influence is expressed, among other things, in the criticism of topics due to their alleged lack of balance, whereby an alleged requirement for neutrality in the education system is postulated. Examples in the material include criticism of an information event on the neo-religious Anastasia movement, which pursues ethnic settlement projects linked to organic farming (f), an event on a local right-wing book publisher (j), and one person complaining that a public lecture that reported on right-wing extremist incidents did not report on left-wing extremist incidents in the same breath (v).

Right-Wing Influences Exerted by Participants

A person from an organisation of confessional adult education (dd) reported:

> Disturbances caused by shouting at lecture events—especially if they are thematically appropriate: e.g. on topics of migration and causes of flight, socio-political topics, events on democracy promotion and social issues, events in the context of racism and antisemitism.

According to this description dealing with such incidents requires "good moderation and qualified speakers", but also disciplinary reactions ("house rules") if necessary.

A representative of an adult education centre in southern Germany (i) highlights the importance of the ability to deal with right-wing influence. When a right-wing group attempted to disrupt a lecture, the moderator's "knowledge was sound enough to set the record straight [...] They repeatedly brought the subsequent discussion back to the topic established at the beginning." The person reporting points out that it is a good idea to start with cooperation partners when dealing with "topics that are likely to attract right-wing extremist participants, so that a clear stance does not have to be formulated by the moderator alone." This aspect of being able to act collectively, i.e. not having to deal with confrontations alone, emerges from another report, which deals with "topic hopping, aggressive speaking, interrupting and loudly arguing, seizing words or even shouting in during speeches or lectures" (t). As a guide for future situations, "an emergency strategy was developed within the team and red lines were discussed together, where we intervene in concrete terms."

An employee of an adult education centre in West Germany reports of "toxic masculine talking points":

> Discriminatory misogynistic and queer-hostile positions are defended as being sayable within the framework of an assumed freedom of opinion. Any form of progressive or emancipative ideas, on the other hand, are generally dismissed as left-wing. The contradictory nature of both positions is denied. (gg)

Similar in content is a description in which the legitimacy of the topic of diversity in the context of family was denied. It was reported that a lecture on "family structures today" (e.g. living as a blended family) (ee) was disrupted:

> A well-known representative of right-wing positions and conspiracy myths spoke up in the discussion section after a lecture, with right-wing positions, including the statement that alternative forms of partnership destroy society and violate God's will.

The situation was defused by the fact that the speaker took a counter position, the moderator communicated clear rules for appropriate requests to speak, and the wider audience was included.

The counter-measures taken are not always successful. A public lecture about disinformation could not be continued at all:

> At an event on disinformation, fake news and conspiracy ideologies, it was not really possible to address the topic objectively and inform interested people who want to know how they can behave in certain situations […] because the group also included people who held similar views as […] right-wing populists. The people from the right-wing milieu have taken up a lot of attention. The lecturer unfortunately seemed overstrained, even though he came from a project that explicitly deals with these issues. The participants who wanted information were annoyed and frustrated. We have probably lost them for the future. […] We had actually organised the event together with a counselling centre against right-wing extremism, but the lecturer was still overwhelmed. (u)

The threat to exclude the disruptive person from the event proved to be effective in other situations (g), but the person also describes that often "participants from the right-wing spectrum try to disrupt the course by constantly speaking out and expressing their views or to convince those present of their ideas."

A representative of an adult education centre in eastern Germany (p) reports of a person disturbing a public discussion related to the federal elections and who also filmed with their mobile phone: "The loud disturbance could be stopped by calls to order, but the filming continued." The person would like to see a preventative ban on filming at such events.

Even if attempts to exert right-wing influence at political education events are to be expected to a particularly high degree, such attempts are not limited to political adult education but also occur in diverse apparently "unpolitical" contexts like gardening (o), handicrafts (b, d) or cultural education and language courses (c). In addition, language and integration courses for migrants are targets of right-wing pressure.

In a painting course, one participant brought along an AfD poster as a portfolio for her drawings (b). The course leader openly discussed and criticised this during the course. The course leader also consulted with the centre management.

While this example could still be contained through dialogue, in another incident a solution by dialogue was not successful. In a course on bookbinding

(d), one participant positioned herself with a closed ideological right-wing worldview:

> One course participant repeatedly "outed" herself as a so-called "Reichsbürger", i.e. she rejected the German constitutional state in general and attracted unpleasant attention through penetrating attempts to convince other course participants […] The participant tried to convince others of her mission of Reichsbürgertum […] After the situation did not improve despite repeated warnings and other course participants were again harassed by the extreme, anti-democratic statements, I imposed a house ban on the participant in my function as director.

The educational formats in which right-wing and discriminatory positions exert influence at the micro level also include formal education events such as reskilling programmes and catch-up school qualifications. The latter make it possible to subsequently acquire the next higher school-leaving qualification after leaving the formal school system (second-chance education). Racist positioning by participants was reported in several interviews (l, m, q). In the cases described, it was possible to calm the situation through dialogue.

There is currently a heated debate in Germany about immigration issues. Therefore, one assumption underlying the study was that situations are being reported in which right-wing influence specifically relates to issues of immigration and immigrants are being verbally attacked. Various descriptions of this kind can be found in the material. For example, teachers and employees of educational institutions report statements by participants that there were too many immigrants in Germany (a), prejudices against immigrants (c) and "statements in a seminar that devalue certain groups of people (migrants, especially refugees) and discredit democratic rules" (r). There are reports about statements that attack the system of integration courses as such: "With this audience, you have to think about whether you still go to the adult education centre" (aa).

However, this influence is not only exerted by participants, but also by people outside of educational events, i.e. in public:

> There were racist stickers at the entrance to the building where an integration course is taking place and lots of gawping passers-by who entered the course room to have a look or to complain about participants allegedly leaving rubbish lying around. (i)

Right-Wing Influences by Teaching Staff

Although right-wing influence is often exerted by course participants or guests at public events it also comes from teachers. On one occasion an instructor on a course for the long-term unemployed was derogatory towards people with a migration background and shouted right-wing slogans (ii). He was confronted by a member of management about his statements but proved to be unreasonable. The respondent to the questionnaire would consider a company warning notice appropriate for future situations.

Another respondent reported about a course in the creative field at an adult education centre in western Germany (m). The teacher of this class explicitly acknowledged his membership of the AfD and openly expressed his positions. Some of the participants "reacted shocked". This had an impact on the atmosphere of the course, and several participants did not register for similar courses again. The programme planning team decided not to offer the course another time. The course instructor no longer works for the adult education centre although he was not actively excluded by the institution.

Very specific personal devaluation of immigrants who were present in the situation concerned adults who had immigrated from Syria in the course of the refugee movements. In both cases, the discrimination came from the course management. In a course on horticulture (o), a person from Syria was deliberately excluded from some activities by the course leader. The situation was clarified through discussions, at least to the extent that the participant in question was no longer excluded from further meetings. Another example of right-wing positioning on the part of the course leader took place in an integration course for immigrants at an adult education centre in southern Germany:

> An integration course instructor […] handed out a fork to all the students at a joint celebration of their integration course except for one student from Syria, who was not given a fork. When a fellow pupil pointed out to the teacher that the Syrian student had not yet been given a fork, the teacher simply said: "He doesn't need one, they eat with their fingers anyway." (s)

The situation occurred years ago and the teacher in question no longer works for the institution. According to the report the management had no information about the incident but would have been able to "react adequately".

The first research question is: "what kind of right-wing influences do local and community education centres report?" As the overall qualitative material shows, right-wing influence can take the form of minor disruptions and provocations, which can certainly be interpreted as a shift in the Overton window. However, massive influence was also reported, which can sometimes lead to the failure of entire events. Adult education initiatives that are particularly affected include those that address issues of flight and migration or provide courses in German and integration for migrants. The legitimacy of this type of adult education is repeatedly called into question. The argument put forward by representatives of the AfD, for example, is that courses with low success rates are funded by taxpayers' money (Bühl, 2022).

Reactions and Countermeasures

In the incidents described above, the persons involved in the institutions (management, administrative staff, teachers) reacted in different ways. The forms of reaction range from dialogue-based approaches to disciplinary measures. The success of the measures also varied depending on the type and intensity of the incident.

We refer to the dialogue-based approaches as "talking to the right" (in German: *mit Rechten reden*) and subsume the disciplinary measures under the term "firewall against the right" (in German: *Brandmauern gegen Rechts*).

Strategy Type: Talking to the Right

Entering into dialogue with right-wing actors proves to be a viable solution as long as the actors are not operating within a closed right-wing ideological world view and with a clear political agenda. The practical examples show that it needs to be considered whether a factual argument is possible in a given situation. If this is the case, a critical dialogue can be sustained and extremist statements can be rejected if they represent a violation of the liberal democratic basic order (in German: *freiheitlich demokratische Grundordnung*).

In the case descriptions presented, the dialogue-oriented strategy was successful when it came to rejecting disruptions caused by heckling during public presentations (i, dd). In these cases, however, the reporting persons pointed out that success also depends on speakers and moderators acting in a well-informed and qualified manner. They also recommend involving co-operation partners and including the rest of the audience in the response so that they are not at the mercy of the situation as isolated individuals.

In a situation in which a person disturbed a discussion about diversity in families (ee) the dialogue strategy also proved to be successful, "the speaker has taken a counter position in terms of content. The moderator clearly communicated rules for appropriate requests to speak." The definition of communicative rules served as introduction of a code of conduct. Here again the audience was involved. There are also recommendations on how to be better prepared in comparable future situations. It was recommended that an emergency strategy should be developed in advance that defines the "red lines" beyond which interference will no longer be tolerated (t).

However, the dialogue strategy repeatedly reached its limits. In the material, this is explained by the fact that the people involved are not able to solve the situation (u), e.g. because they are exposed to the situation alone.

In the case of racist remarks made by a teacher in a measure for the long-term unemployed (ii), the head of department did seek dialogue, but apparently without any lasting change in behaviour ("not successful, resistant to counselling"), so that the reporting person considers a clear separation from the teacher to be necessary for future situations of this kind.

In situations where right-wing influence was exerted in courses to catch up on school-leaving qualifications (q) or in retraining programmes (l, n), the dialogue strategy proved only partially successful. The respective situations could initially be calmed, but the sustainability of the reaction in terms of a fundamental change is in doubt: "For the moment, the participants were given food for thought. However, there was no long-term success or change in thinking" (q).

Strategy Type: Firewall Against the Right

In various cases, it was not possible to react to the disturbance by dialogue. Disciplinary action was taken after the failed attempt at dialogue. Managers made use of their domestic authority and excluded the disruptive persons from any further courses or events, or imposed a house ban. In other cases, contracts with lecturers were not extended. We propose the term "firewall against the right" for this type of reaction.

The firewall against the right applies to cases in which people with a clear right-wing political orientation and agenda disrupted events. These people include the confessed "*Reichsbürger*" (d), who was ultimately banned from the centre by the management due to her continued dissemination of right-wing

positions and attempts to "proselytise" other course participants.

In the event of targeted disruption of lectures by participants from the right-wing spectrum, dialogue was not sought and exclusion from the event was announced instead:

> The participants in question were called to order and exclusion from the lecture was announced. […] As well-known participants had registered, we had a member of staff on site who would have taken action in an emergency. The director was also in the building to be able to attend. For particularly sensitive events, we inform the police in advance. (g)

There are descriptions in which cooperation with course leaders was not continued. This applies to one course leader in the creative sector who openly admitted to being a member of the AfD. The course format was not continued and the course leader was not employed again (m). In the case of the course leader who was racist and insulting towards a participant from Syria ("they eat with their fingers anyway") (s), the reporting person also assumes that an appropriate disciplinary response would be taken in such a case in the future.

The first passage that we quoted in this contribution shows that the involvement of security services and the police is seen as a form of necessary clear response but also as a preventive measure:

> Colleagues from eastern Germany report that they usually have to reckon with problems at all their events that deal with democracy-promoting topics […], and that, for example, an additional security service has to be booked or arrangements made with the police. (bb)

To answer the research question about counter-strategies ("what counter-strategies do educational practitioners use?"), the strategies described need to be considered in their entirety. It becomes clear that the reaction to right-wing influence initially includes an attempt at dialogue, but that in various cases such a strategy fails, and a clear demarcation is made from the people who exert pressure on events, course leaders, and participants with right-wing populist and extreme right-wing positions. The two terms "talking to the right" and "firewalls against the right" represent the two ends of the spectrum based on the material.

As a rule, the measures described do not stand alone but are embedded in other strategic considerations that relate to preventing possible future incidents.

These include the recruitment and selection of qualified and experienced speakers and moderators (i, dd), but also—as the same examples show—a clear reference to house rules as a code of conduct. Clear rules for conversation (ee) should be understood as part of a code of conduct, as should a general ban on filming at events (p).

It is described as fundamentally important that adult education institutions agree on rules and red lines within the team (t), so that where any doubt arises, those in charge know they are acting in consensus with the institution.

Discussion of Findings

The first research question asked for a collection of case descriptions, and the first attempt of structuring the influences used the micro, meso, and macro level approach. We focus here on the micro level and find a variety of incidents.

The second research question asked for counter-strategies. We find the strategy type of "talking to the right" effective as long as there is a basis for understanding each other. Otherwise, the strategy type of "firewall against the right" is applied. The latter is more effective when community education centres and training providers are well prepared in advance.

The case descriptions show a slight tendency for the option of entering into dialogue to be more successful if participants in the events contribute to that dialogue. If, on the other hand, it comes from course leaders only, this option is quickly exhausted, and the management may then enact disciplinary measures in the sense of the "firewall against the right".

There are also clear indications in the case descriptions that actors on the extreme right are attempting to shift the boundaries of what can be said (Biskamp, 2021, p.39), using the Overton Window (Valentim, 2024) to contribute to a normalisation of the radical right. In the material, this becomes visible in the form of blatant discrimination against vulnerable groups, especially migrant groups, something that is also seen as a trend in other European countries (European Commission, 2023).

We confirm that political education is particularly affected by right-wing influence, but that influence is no longer limited to just this area. We established at the outset that debates about the relationship between education and right-wing populism relate primarily to civic education or politics and history lessons in schools (Nuissl and Popovic, 2020), but the findings discussed here show that right-wing influence is neither limited to school education nor to

certain educational topics. Both adult education and supposedly non-political topics are affected: for example influence is also exerted in craft or gardening courses that are regarded as non-political. Neither certain organisations nor certain topics are safe from attempts to exert right-wing political influence in adult education. The particularly high political representation of the AfD in parliaments and municipal bodies in the eastern German states could lead to the conclusion that this is essentially an eastern German phenomenon. However, the data we collected shows that basically all regions are affected.

Adult education and learning are not free from right-wing attitudes, there are teachers and trainers as well as participants who tend to prefer the AfD and their allies. So far, we have not found broader "witch hunts" (Hussain and Yunus, 2021) against the teaching or management staff of community education centres, but cases on the meso and macro levels show that this may happen soon.

The examples presented essentially relate to the micro level of course events. However, they should not be seen in isolation from the influence exerted at the political level. The issue here is the delegitimisation of general and, in particular, political adult education and this involves the risk of substantial funding cuts, as can be observed in countries with populist governments (Grotlüschen et al., 2023; Grotlüschen et al., 2025).

Limitations of the Qualitative Case Descriptions

Although there has been knowledge of this type of influence from media reports, politically active networks or personal accounts, no systematic investigation has been carried out to date. The reported cases show examples of incidents and counter-strategies but they are not representative in any way, as this is a qualitative citizen science project. We assume substantial fear against reporting the incidents and in personal discussions we learned that the situation has worsened since the investigation began in autumn 2024. This information came from side discussions in a conference with community education centres from eastern federal states, and at a small workshop in one of the eastern federal states. Reports on this tend to be more general and relate to the overall picture but illustrate fewer specific incidents.

The material discussed here represents only a section of what is happening in the field of adult education. Other areas of education, such as school education, extracurricular education for children and young people, or in-company training should therefore be researched in a similar way to expand the picture outlined here.

Implications: Strategies and Knowledge About Right-wing Propaganda

Both strategies, talking to the right as well as firewalls against the right, have their effects on the micro-level of adult education and learning. When staff have sound knowledge about effective strategies, they succeed against the right.

One aspect, where staff need knowledge about their rights and right-wing influences, stands out. Several case descriptions confirm that right-wing influence often refers to an alleged neutrality requirement: this is a substantial part of right-wing propaganda (Wischmann, 2023), intended to discredit or cancel democratic topics or people. A fairness and balance requirement exists in Germany for certain state bodies like public mass media, but not for teachers or educational institutions. Teachers are not subject to any neutrality requirement, but to the constitution. From the perspective of both legal studies (Eckertz, 2019, p.262) and educational science (Wischmann, 2023, p.33), the concept of neutrality is rather characterised as a "fighting concept" of the right. This means that right-wing actors claim that all employees in the education system are obliged to be politically neutral, and that a violation of this obligation constitutes an illegitimate discrimination against right-wing positions. In Germany the so-called "liberal democratic basic order" provides the yardstick for determining which positions may be taken publicly and which may not. The liberal democratic basic order is based on the principle of human dignity laid down in the German constitution. The guarantee of human dignity includes the preservation of personal individuality, identity, and integrity, as well as basic legal equality. Concepts aimed at racial discrimination are not compatible with this. This is the point at which members of adult education institutions formulate a need for action in the analysed case descriptions.

Civil servants are not only allowed to stand up for the preservation of the liberal democratic basic order, in fact they are obliged to commit their behaviour to it and stand up for its preservation. As the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs of the federal state of Lower Saxony puts it: "it is the duty of civil servants to contradict anti-constitutional statements [...] and [they] must not refrain from doing so due to a misunderstanding of neutrality" (Hamburg, 2024). When it comes to establishing counter-strategies and protective measures against the influence of right-wing actors on the education system, this knowledge is central to countering accusations of alleged partiality, as is also evident in our research material.

The phenomenon described in the research literature—that attitudes of group-focussed misanthropy in societies (Zick et al., 2023), xenophobic discrimination (Kumral, 2023), and exclusion of all sections of the population

constructed as "non-native" (Berg et al., 2023), are being pushed forward by right-wing actors—is also clearly visible in our qualitative data. In cases where right-wing actors target migration and migrants, especially refugees, we are not only dealing with attacks on specific topics, organisations, and their representatives, but also with attacks on a group that is considered particularly vulnerable. Right-wing actors bring about a normalisation of positions of the radical right (Valentim, 2024).

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Multi-Racial Co-Facilitation as Anti-Racist Pedagogy

LILIAN NWANZE-AKOBO AND JERRY O'NEILL

Abstract

Drawing on critical pedagogy, Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory, and associated modes of inquiry, we (Lilian and Jerry) engaged in a series of reflective dialogic encounters over the last couple of years to consider issues of race and racism in our working lives as directors of an initial teacher education programme for adult, community, and further education. Using our experiences as a site of research, and centralising the ways our starkly different identities shape our perspectives, we started to see, in our reflective inquiry, four occupational spaces where we propose critical multi-racial co-facilitation as one mode of anti-racist practice in adult education. Those four spaces are: Student Recruitment; Teaching; Institutional, Professional, and Social; and Interpersonal spaces.

Keywords: Racism, Anti-Racist Practice, Co-Facilitation, Critical Reflection, Teacher Diversity

Introduction

In this article, we reflect on our racial identities and our experiences as a pair of educators and co-directors of an initial teacher educator programme for further and adult education in Ireland. Drawing on values, concepts and practices associated with critically reflective pedagogy (Brookfield, 2017; hooks, 1994), Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), Black Feminist Thought (Hill-Collins, 2000), and critical duoethnography (Mulvihill and Swaminathan, 2022), we propose that critical multi-racial co-facilitation, where practicable, can be one way in which we can interrupt racism in, and across, educational spaces. In this reflective, dialogic, and collaboratively-written paper, we attempt to both illuminate and model how such a practice, limited as it is by our own biases and perspectives, has, and is, evolving for us in our work in teaching, professional, and social spaces across adult, further, and higher education. As might be expected in a collaborative and dialogic

paper, the authorial voice of this paper shifts between the third person, first person singular, and first person plural.

Who are we?

Lilian is a Black migrant educator from Nigeria who has lived in Ireland for over a decade. As far as we are aware, Lilian is the only Black director of an initial teacher education programme in Ireland and is also currently the only Black academic in her department in Maynooth University. Lilian co-directs this programme, the Higher Diploma in Further Education, with Jerry. Jerry is a white Irish educator who has worked in adult, further, and higher education for over twenty years.

The Higher Diploma in Further Education is a one-year, post-graduate, initial teacher education programme, accredited by the Teaching Council that is aimed at educators who work in, or seek to work in, the diverse field of adult, community, and further education. Jerry has been working on the programme in various capacities for over ten years and, in more recent years, has been one of the co-directors. Lilian, who has also worked on the programme over the last five years, commenced her role as co-director in October 2023. Co-leadership of programmes is common in our department and, whenever possible, there has been a practice to have a gender balance in this model.

In its values and practice, the programme is grounded in a commitment to critically reflective pedagogy. In our work we draw on writers and thinkers such as Freire, hooks, and Brookfield to create spaces for our students to engage in both individual and socially transformative potential for growth and change as emerging adult educators.

As part of that approach, we place a strong emphasis on students developing their capacity to critically reflect, in a number of ways, on their learning and on their practice. We stress the importance, in these reflective acts, to move beyond the rich, albeit always constrained, terrain of individual reflection and to engage in dialogue with each other, with scholarship, and with the wider world beyond the classroom so that they may gain multiple perspectives and insights on their practice and assumptions. This multi-dimensional reflective work, which Brookfield frames as four lenses, can create rich, and sometimes disorientating, spaces of growth and development (Brookfield, 2017).

Another significant part of our approach is our commitment to modelling the kind of practice that we hope to see our students cultivating in their developing

pedagogy. And so, in line with this impulse to practice what we preach, we present in this article, some of our own ongoing critical dialogic reflections from the last couple of years that we have been co-leading this programme.

A Disorientating Start

Very shortly after Lilian commenced her role as co-director, the Dublin riots of November 2023 occurred. Indeed, they fell right in the middle of a series of sessions focused on anti-racist practice for adult educators that Lilian was facilitating with the group. This kind of pedagogic work has become depressingly commonplace for Lilian who—drawing on her own experience as a migrant, educator, student, and researcher in the area (Nwanze, 2024a)—is often called upon, both within the university and in the community, to facilitate various versions of these anti-racism workshops. A day or so after the riots, Lilian was due to give the second of these workshops on the programme that she had recently started to co-direct.

Jerry We will get into this further into the paper, but for me, this moment back in November 2023 signalled the start of our more explicit, or intentional, dialogic and reflective inquiries into ways that we felt we were individually and as a pair responding to issues of race in our work. Although this was a well-worn path for you, Lilian, in your navigation through all aspects of your life in Ireland, it was, for me, something new. It wasn't that I had never thought about issues of racism before. In fact, I'm pretty sure that up to then, I would have thought about, and positioned, myself as being enlightened and committed to issues of social justice. But rather, what I probably need to admit is that my privilege as a middle-aged, white, middle-class man meant that when I reflected on racism at all it was always at a certain distance from the everyday of my life. Although other white colleagues have certainly gone deeper and more actively in their critical reflections (Fitzsimons, 2019), I think that I remained at a place where I would get suitably outraged but always with the luxury of being able to put such outrage on a shelf and get on with my life uninhibited by systemic or personal discrimination or threat.

Lilian I think our work together started by you first, listening and then, noticing … and I would trace it back to before the November 2023 incident. In a different academic year, I remember that I was called in to do one of the anti-racism workshops on the same programme.

> In my second class, an incident occurred where I had to end the class early because I felt unsafe. I remember saying it to you. But at that time, there was no critical conversation afterwards – I know there was a formal complaint made to you (maybe we will get to how complaints are dealt with later) but I don't think we had any deep conversations about it. However, what I think that incident did was that it made you pause to notice some of what I had spoken about. Again, I may be wrong ... and if I remember correctly, after I named my nervousness about going into the space after the riots in November 2023, you volunteered to come into the space with me to co-facilitate it. We altered my original plan, you came in and to me your presence shifted things – I noticed there was a lot less resistance, but it was also a lighter session for me. I named what I had noticed, and I think, after that, it just became our custom to de-brief after sessions and to start thinking deeply about the things we were experiencing and noticing.

An Emerging Method

These initial de-briefing conversations grew over time as we got to know and trust each other more. Our conversations took many forms: in person between classes; over lunch; on walks around the campus; and, asynchronously, through email exchanges. We would, for example, wonder if the other noticed a certain moment of microaggression in a meeting, class, or other social space. In fact, to be more exact, it would usually be Lilian who would ask Jerry if he noticed something. Often he didn't, but sometimes he did. These noticed or unnoticed moments became the *foci* for, sometimes difficult, conversations as we worked through what we felt might or might not have been happening in a space.

Gradually we came to realise that the reflective and dialogic work that we were doing over time was significant – or rather it was for us at least – and could be framed as both a pedagogic and engaged research practice. The critically reflective work that we were doing was very much in line with the impulse in adult education practice to engage in dialogue with self and others in ways to interrogate our assumptions and our practice (Brookfield, 2017; Formenti and West, 2018; Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994; Horton and Freire, 1990; Mezirow, 1998). As well as grounding our ongoing dialogues in a critically reflective practice, we saw these conversations, - whether they were in person, through electronic communication, or on foot - as spaces of inquiry that collapsed the distinction between critical pedagogy and engaged research. In so doing, we drew on our own and others' work that explores overlaps between critical practice, duo/

autoethnographies, walking inquiries, and narrative research (McCormack et al., 2020; Fitzsimons and Nwanze, 2022; Mulvihill and Swaminathan, 2022; Nwanze, 2024a; Nwanze, 2024b; J. O'Neill, 2024a; J. O'Neill, 2024b; M. O'Neill and Roberts, 2020). Of course, we must acknowledge that such a method does not make any claims to be immune from our own biases and, indeed, any insights or knowledge that emerges from our critical dialogues will be bounded within the limits of our personal and cultural perspectives and frames.

Four Spaces

With due sensitivity to the limitations of our own perspectives, what emerged from our initial dialogic and reflective inquiries was, nonetheless, something we felt, worthy of more sustained contemplation. In that slow, reflective process we began noticing how issues of race and racism were playing out across four overlapping spaces in our work as directors of the Higher Diploma in Further Education programme. The first space relates to recruitment of students on to the programme and, in particular, our first encounters with prospective students in the mandatory interviews that we conduct for all candidates. The second space relates to our teaching work. A third space was within institutional and professional spaces associated with our work. And finally, a fourth space, which really cuts through and across the others, was how race and racism manifested in our evolving relationship as co-directors.

For each of these spaces, we have presented below some edited extracts from our asynchronous email exchanges which, in themselves, were spaces where we had been processing previous moments, incidents, and conversations.

Before we invite you into those spaces, we would like to attempt a working definition of racism. We agree with Harrell's (2000) definition of racism as being:

> A system of dominance, power and privilege based on racial group designations rooted in the historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant group members as inferior, deviant or undesirable; and occurring in circumstances where members of the dominant group create or accept their societal privilege by maintaining structures, ideologies, values, and behavior that have the intent or effect of leaving nondominant-group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status and/or equal access to societal resources. (Harrell, 2000, p.43)

To our minds, racism manifests itself in different ways in different spaces and will continue until it is actively and intentionally interrupted (Brookfield and Hess, 2021). In this paper we also speak a good bit about microaggressions which Sue (2010) defines as "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalised group membership" (Sue, 2010, p.3).

Student Recruitment Spaces

Jerry We often talk about the importance of the relational dimensions of our pedagogy and how those relational connections start to form in the first encounters with prospective students in the interviews we conduct for the course … that first mutual sizing-up of each other that is going on both ways … we interview everyone that is eligible to apply for the programme … and the interview itself is quite a relaxed conversational format where we probe about motivation, experiences, future plans … we leave lots of space for their questions too … we have reflected a lot on the interviews we have done and what we noticed … sometimes one of us and sometimes both … I remember one round of interviews, when a number of people coming for interview would direct a lot of their answers, and gaze, towards me … we commented on this between interviews and experimented with moving things around … switching chairs in case the one I was in seemed more dominantly placed in the room or, at one stage, I think I lowered the height of my chair below yours to make a difference … I think in the moment of the interviews I often (but maybe not as much as I should) tried to draw you in somehow by words or body language … I'm not sure if any of that made a difference … but it did reinforce with me how much, for some people we were interviewing, they saw me solely as the programme director or rather the one with the power in the room … but then there were things that I didn't see … so for me, the recruitment process, was, and will continue to be part of my own anti-racist learning which I reckon is definitely going to be a lifelong process ... I think it was probably the start of the students learning as well … we often talk about how most students who have grown up in Ireland will not have had a Black teacher … these interviews with us will often be their first encounter with a Black educator.

Lilian Thanks, Jerry. Our interview spaces have really been interesting. I remember one of the interviews we conducted online with a Black candidate. We introduced ourselves and he began his conversation saying, "hello Doctor Jerry and Miss Lilian". You then corrected him and said, "Dr. Lilian". He grunted a response and continued what he was saying. A few minutes later, he said it again, "so, Dr. Jerry and Miss Lilian", to which you responded, "She is Dr. Lilian herself" and we all laughed. Before the interview was over, and our interviews last for less than 30 minutes, he had called you "Doctor" and me, "Miss" about three times. There have been various other incidents also with Black people who refused to engage with me during some of our interviews but engaged rather charmingly with you instead.

I am reflecting on these incidents because sometimes these racial and gender microaggressions can come from people of the same race. Being a member of a non-dominant racial group does not exempt you from the internalisation of the dominant narratives in society.

bell hooks (1989) writes about the need for us to recognise how even Black people and people from minoritised origins have been "socialised to embody the values and attitudes of white supremacy" (p.194). There is also, of course, the issue of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins, 2006) – where I experience life differently from you, not only because I am Black but also because I am a woman.

I think for me, the big thing about working closely with you is that you are beginning to see the sheer amount of seemingly little aggressions and put downs that I have to navigate daily! These things are usually unseen, disbelieved and consequently not addressed (Essed, 1991).

I must say, however, that where I actively participated in the recruitment of students, my interactions in the classroom after they have enrolled and registered for the programme are a lot less challenging than in classes where I had no input in recruitment. I think that, reflecting on the difference in the way I am perceived and treated, the recruitment process seemed to mitigate some of my Blackness and gave me a level of power. By this I mean, the students

automatically knew that I was not an appendage or a diversity hire. They realised quite quickly that I was an actual lecturer. My experience was very different when I taught students where I had no involvement in their recruitment. I can't make any certain causal conclusions, but this has been my experience.

Another concern of mine in relation to recruitment is that adult and further education in Ireland is very white on the teaching level. Something I noticed was that in the year we began to do this work together, there was a sudden surge in international/migrant applications. Now, this did not always translate to a surge in the recruitment of that cohort for many reasons, but I thought it was interesting – were people suddenly seeing the sector as accessible because of the foreign name? I got over five messages saying, "Dear Dr. Lilian, I was delighted to see your name listed as Director of the Higher Diploma in Further Education ...". I know it is clichéd but representation does matter for various reasons and can combat some of the exclusionary effects of racism.

Teaching Spaces

Lilian I remember, Jerry, the very first time that I asked you to facilitate a session with me. I think it was the day after the November 2023 riots in Dublin. I was timetabled to facilitate three anti-racism sessions for a cohort of initial teacher education students. I had done the first session and my experience in that session was in keeping with what I would usually experience in predominantly white spaces when I facilitated anti-racism workshops – mostly discomfort, some defensiveness, but some deep thinking and shifts in other people. Some of the interventions in my initial class felt like direct attacks on my person but I was used to these kinds of things. And then the riots happened. I suddenly felt very unsafe not just about being in the classroom. But I felt unsafe just being a Black woman in Ireland. A part of me just wanted to hide and stay home. I brought it up with you and asked that we co-facilitate the session. We re-worked the plan and you came into the class with me. I was honest and open with the students. I spoke to them about why you were in the space – I needed a white face to make me feel a bit safer and we were able to go ahead, to unpack the riots and the sentiments that accompanied it but also to do some of the anti-racism work that I had planned to do. For me, for the first time in a

long while, co-facilitation removed a bit of the emotional burden I felt every time I went into a space to do anti-racism work. The onus was no longer on just the Black face to do the *dirty work*, there was buy-in from whiteness. The de-brief after the session was also very useful and powerful because we were able to share our different perspectives on comments or incidents that occurred in the class.

Since then, we have begun co-facilitating as a practice on our initial teacher education programme and the benefits of this mode of teaching are unquantifiable to my mind. I think Brookfield sums it up quite nicely when he explains that an educator teaching on their own is limited by the "boundaries of her own personality, learning preferences, racial group membership, and experience" (Brookfield, 2015, p.102). When you and I, Jerry, facilitate our classes, "the possibilities for connecting to a wider range of students expand exponentially" (Brookfield, 2015, p.102).

I also remember an incident that happened after one of our co-facilitated sessions, and actually this has happened more than once in the last year, where a minoritised student will walk up to me after the session and say, "Thank you! Thank you! This is the first time that I am being taught by someone who gets me". Although this happens often when I teach on my own, the potential that multi-racial co-facilitation has in creating another space for transformative adult education is largely overlooked.

Jerry Thanks a million for sharing this, Lilian, … I remember that session after the Dublin riots well … didn't we go back and forth a bit about whether I should come in or not? Or maybe the back and forth was in my head. I remember how shaken you were by the riots and how I, trying to do the right thing, wasn't really sure what the right thing was … would my presence in that session undermine you as it had been timetabled just for you … or would my presence make a more significant point to the students about how the impact of the riots and racism was playing out in their own learning space in the university? We've talked a bit over the couple of years that we have worked together about how I can tend to paralyse myself in wondering what the right thing is to do or say … and you cut through that usually by saying something like "get over yourself, Jerry … it's not about you!" … and then we usually laugh (usually) … but the point I'm making, I think, is that often that, as well as

carrying the emotional burden of the tensions and resistance you feel from students and participants, you also seem alert to not making me or your colleagues feel too bad about our own privilege … it's mad even to see me write that down … but I think that this is also part of the racialised dynamic of our work.

And the other thing that I was thinking about reading your reflections on the Dublin riots session was, up until then and, to be honest a lot of the time after then in other spaces, how much you are called on exclusively to take on the responsibility and, very often, absorb the emotional kick-back of anti-racist pedagogy … I see a kind of pattern where you are working in a space or speaking at an event – and very often you spark someone to realise that they need anti-racism work with their students and or colleagues … that moment, which is a very commendable one, where someone will think to themselves "I need to get Lilian in to speak to my [students/staff]". Meanwhile the likes of me can feel that as a programme or a department that we are doing important anti-racist work … when in fact, it's you who is doing it … so yeh, I think that there is an ethical obligation for white colleagues to make ourselves available to work with you in those spaces if you think it will work … and we are starting to do that.

Also another thing, relating to teaching spaces that I think that has changed since that session, is that there are fewer of the stand-alone anti-racist sessions on our own timetable and they are more integrated as part of the critical reflective work across our modules and our co-facilitation work.

Lilian I love that you have highlighted not just the *doing* of the anti-racism work, but also *how* we do it. I don't think it was pre-meditated or even intended but rather than stand-alone sessions where we interrogated how racism surfaces in the classrooms, all our co-facilitated sessions contain an organic reflection on racial dynamics and power whether we are teaching group work or other topics.

Openness (and by openness I mean a willingness to share our journey and our failings unashamedly with the students) and humility are two big factors in co-facilitating with an anti-racism lens. There are times when I draw your attention to how you have taken over a conversation or how something you have said shows

that you are blind to your privilege. And you have occasionally highlighted my own internalisation of the things that I critique. Many times we do this "calling out" (Brookfield, 2015, p.145) in the open, within the hearing of the students so that they see one way of modelling their practice – they are usually grateful for it by the way, but we may get to that in another thread.

Institutional, Professional, and Social spaces

Jerry So another big part of what we talk about is the things that happen in the everyday spaces of our work outside teaching … from formal spaces like meetings and conferences to more social encounters such as staff rooms or social occasions with colleagues. Again, to state the obvious, whatever about the student spaces, the staff spaces we navigate together are predominately white. So, for example, on most days if you come into the staff canteen at all, you will most likely be the only Black colleague there. Also, even walking around the campus and building is something we have reflected upon. I know that some staff have had issues with noise coming from classrooms that are being used by Black students for peer learning or extra-curricular activities … we have talked about our different relationships with our ID badges (J. O'Neill, 2024c). I am casual about wearing mine and when I do it's often not very visible but I think that you are more conscious of having your staff card with you and it being visible as you move through the campus … as a middle-aged white man with a beard and who often wears cardigans I am also a visual cliché of an academic and look like I am in place … but again you have another layer of emotional work to attend to in making yourself look like you belong and the ID badge is part of that … also I think that I happily go up to staff social spaces on my own but in the first year anyway I think that your preference was to come with me or someone else into these spaces … I don't think that these are spaces you go to a lot on your own.

One other aspect of the social dimension is the out-of-office and informal spaces … so in Ireland, a staff get-together can often start (and end) in a pub … I used to think that your cautiousness of going to a pub (not that it happens often) for the odd staff occasion (someone leaving, Christmas party, etc.) was because you didn't drink and were not interested in the pub culture aspect of Irish

culture. But more recently I have come to appreciate that your trepidation about pubs is the potential to be in a public space where alcohol loosens people's inhibitions and how alert you are to the possibility, based on past experiences, of some stranger in that space feeling emboldened with drink-fuelled confidence to unleash their inner racist voice … so I think we need to be thinking of how we organise social events.

There are also the ways both internally and externally that we keep needing to re-assert that we are both the directors of the programme … so even after telling colleagues (in person or in email) that we are co-directors, there are times that emails, for example, which should come to both of us come to me … maybe this will shift over time? … We do push back on this politely usually by reminding a colleague that you are also a director of the course … one thing that I am increasingly aware of, when we are at internal and external meetings about our work as directors, is that I need to be more conscious or more considered in allowing spaces for us to speak as a collective … I think at times when talking about our work I slip into the "I" voice too much. Of course, my gender privilege and my white privilege support each other in this type of positioning.

Lilian You are spot on! The university (but also adult and community education generally) is a very white space and my interactions in the organisational and professional spaces are very… interesting. I feel as though I am both hypervisible yet invisible. There have been instances where we have been at meetings in our capacity as directors of the programme and I have been the only Black person at those meetings. Often, I would make passionate contributions about matters like the colour-blind stance taken during a particular section of a meeting or how inadequate attention was being paid to the impact of racial dynamics in a matter. Minutes of the meeting would then be circulated and my name would have been omitted – What are the odds? The only Black person in the space is the one who was omitted – that feeling of being very visible yet invisible is a tricky one … I remember on one of such "omission" days, we also had to push back on about two or so emails where I was not copied and you were addressed as the sole director. These things seem minor, but they have a cumulative effect! I know colleagues who go through this and have no one to speak about it to, so, I am grateful that you even notice some of these things and occasionally take up the fight alongside me.

I also recall going in to supervise students on placement and being very badly mistreated and aggressively spoken to because staff (in the other institutions) thought I was a student. On one occasion, I had expressly mentioned that I wasn't a student – I still received an embarrassing lecture about how students must not use the room I was in. In the head of this member of staff, Black = student. Sure, what else could I be? But, Jerry, so what if I was a student? Is that what students of colour go through in that institution? Being spoken to so condescendingly? That incident raised a lot of questions for me.

Again, for many of these incidents, you and, in some cases others, from the department were a support. I know I have reported a few of the incidents internally in our own space and I have occasionally been invited to de-brief formally. Sometimes, the reporting lines work well, at other times, they don't ... I am however grateful for colleagues who I can speak to about these things but maybe there should be more thought put into the reporting lines in institutions. What actions are taken after such issues are reported?

Interpersonal Space

Lilian First, Jerry, I want to thank you for your continued commitment to creating an environment of respect, openness and kindness. I think that the secret to the strength of the work that we do can largely be traced to our interactions and conversations in this space where we are able to slow down, recall, and replay in our minds and our conversations the varied encounters we experience in all the other spaces where we work together. I have said before, in one of my many speaking engagements, that this space we have created, where I can come back, de-brief, and have critical conversations with you is one of the most powerful antidotes to the intense diminishing effect that racism has on me.

Sometimes however, in our interactions, it is something that you have done, thought or said that is tabled for conversation. Most times, you did these things without any intention to harm or hurt and I would only bring it up for you to interrogate. I have seen the difficulty it causes for you when you realise that you had acted out of a position of privilege or internalised white supremacy. Because you and I have become very good friends, I then feel uncomfortable about your discomfort and have often times come

back to apologise to you for causing you that discomfort. Every time I have done that, I become angry because it is almost like a loop – I am microaggressed (or I point out a reaction from a place of privilege), you realise it (and because you are so committed to unlearning these internalised things, you immediately become uncomfortable and troubled), I notice your discomfort and become uncomfortable or worried that our working relationship would be hampered so I come back and apologise then go back angry with myself for apologising for something that hurt me. I think of this as the racism loop. You are quick to remind me that you are human and you have to process things – which has helped me in my anti-racism trainings and workshops to become more gentle when I am presenting challenging concepts … but even as I write this I wonder, is this not another privilege? I now have to think about being gentle when showing people that they are harming me?

It isn't all you on the receiving end. We have had conversations about my own internalised white-supremacist thinking. The beauty of what happens through our critical conversations is that we have become hyper-aware of how racism can colour our thoughts, policies, and processes and we now police ourselves often asking one another – is that privilege speaking or is there some form of superiority here? When Stephen Brookfield came over to our university recently and I sat in conversation with him, one of the questions that was asked was "what makes you trust your white colleagues?" (or something like that). I thought it was a good question and I thought of you when I crafted my answer – the humility to own up to things and to accept that we both see things differently as a result of our race (and gender) but also your track record of kindness, respect, and making an effort to really undo things and change things. I know people who teach and profess anti-racist pedagogy but who in real life would do nothing to change things – I do not trust people who just speak anti-racism, I trust people who roll up their sleeves and do the difficult uncomfortable work of pushing back on this destructive, diminishing, hurtful pandemic called racism.

Jerry Thanks for that, Lilian … just to pick up on that last line … it's great that you think that I am doing more than speaking about anti-racism but I am never sure if I am doing anything at all … but it's good to know that you think I am … but then, even as I write, I can hear you say again "get over yourself – this is not about you, Jerry!"

… Anyway, I think you're right that we have managed to create a space where we can step out of the frantic pace of work to have conversations about things we are encountering and noticing.

A couple of things you have said to me have really stayed with me … one thing was that I need to get used to acknowledging that sometimes the things I say or do are racist … I think that hit me at first but over time, and particularly as we have discussed the systemic, ideological, and historic prevalence of racism, that process of acknowledgement has become much easier for me to admit – and, in fact, important to admit in certain spaces.

But the other thing you have said which feels more subtle but I think is so important, is when you talk about the work of anti-racism really starting with just being open to noticing things. I know that sometimes I have noticed things and, probably more often, I haven't. But I suppose what we need is to create space to slow down in our work and life to create the conditions for the possibility of such critical noticing being able to emerge in the first place. Of course, even slowing down to reflect in the hyper-productive work environments that have become so normal to us all seems like a radical act in itself … this important need for slow spaces in our work as educators is something that I have been reading, writing, talking (but not always practicing) for years … (J. O'Neill and Cullinane, 2017; M. O'Neill et al., 2014).

And absolutely, I certainly recognise the racism loop in our relationship that you talk about … and maybe it's a spiral (you know I like spirals!) – I think that the difference between a loop and a spiral is that the former brings us back to the same place, while the latter brings us somewhere different (although not necessarily better!). So, for me, the racism spiral doesn't seem to bring us back to the same place but just deeper down into something else … But we usually recover from the emotional charge of slipping into our loops/spirals and I put that down to the strong friendship we have developed over the last couple of years … And yet, it does make me wonder what we can say to other colleagues in the field … it's not as simple as getting a Black woman and white man to work together and assuming that all will be well … so much comes down to just acknowledging the importance of the relational core at the heart of the co-facilitation that we do together … of course if the

> workplace in education is almost exclusively white then there will be little opportunity for multi-racial professional relationships to develop in the first place … so even though we are focusing on the relational and personal in this thread, the priority still points to a systemic one to address the lack of diversity in teaching across all educational spaces in Ireland.

Conclusion

What began, possibly, as a request from one colleague to another to co-facilitate a workshop on anti-racism has, through an entangled and ongoing weave of critically reflective conversations, led us to uncover the potential that critical co-facilitation can have in interrupting racism in adult education. We acknowledge that racism manifests differently in different spaces and will continue until it is actively and intentionally interrupted at the interpersonal and systemic level. This paper is part of our contribution to anti-racist practice and pedagogy. Our commitment to this model of multi-racial co-facilitation presents its own peculiar challenges and limitations: it takes us more time to plan sessions; our conversations and reflections are often emotive and difficult; and the labour is generally not rewarded, recognised, or measured by, the academy. What's more, sometimes being in spaces together actually reinforces the very ideas that we seek to interrupt. However, in spite of these challenges, we have been fortunate to watch how this relatively simple shift towards a more purposeful critically reflective co-leadership relationship has interrupted the manifestations of racism in various spaces where we work and learn.

Universities and other adult education centres, even though multi-racial in the student base, are predominantly white in terms of staff. This perpetuation of whiteness mediates a picture in society and in our associated systems of thought that proclaims that the academy is white. Lilian's presence with Jerry therefore, facilitating as a peer not as an assistant, taking charge of the space in the same way that Jerry would, interrupts this fixed picture of the academy as white. Our multi-racial co-facilitation therefore contributes to the mediation of the meaning/picture/ideas that Ireland has about teachers. For every space that we co-facilitate, we create that picture of the possibility of a non-white educator.

When we speak of co-facilitation here, we hope that it clear at this stage that we are talking about our work in teaching spaces but also extend that to refer to the work we do together across all the institutional, professional and social spaces of our work as educators. The more that is seen, the less abnormal it

would be for those in positions of authority to imagine a minoritised person being competent to attain to the position of educator and/or leader. So, what we are suggesting then is that our model of multi-racial facilitation can interrupt racism by bringing a "body out of place" (Tuttle, 2022) into "place" and beginning the journey of normalising that sight. This does not, of course, mean that bringing a minoritised person into a space automatically works wonders – and we speak about this in the article. There is a critical dimension to the work that must be done at systemic levels to engender real change. And yet it is still worth mentioning that representation in itself plays a huge role in mediating societal ideas and, consequently, in interrupting racism.

Because of our constant critical reflection where we use race as a lens (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), rather than isolate our anti-racism interventions in the initial teacher education programme we co-direct, our entire practice is hinged on an ethos of anti-racism, so much so that, whether we are teaching, interviewing potential students, or attending meetings with colleagues, we are constantly modelling reflection using the lens of race. This aspect of our practice also counters expectations that limit anti-racism work within the curriculum to certain days or classes. With our students, we model and we speak openly and freely about implications of what we learn from a racial point of view. Many times, this may not even be carefully rehearsed. Our attempts at authentic and organic ways of being in classroom spaces allow us initiate conversations and highlight blind-spots one or both of us may have concerning the topic being taught. In this way we see that we are operating, in our anti-racist work, on a similar dimension that Freire refers to when he speaks of the humanising drive of the "ontological vocation" of education (Freire, 1993, p.55): rather than presenting a "tool-box" for anti-racist practice, we model, and invite, our students into the often slow-moving but more critically reflective way of being as an adult educator.

As mentioned above, microaggressions are a big part of how racialised and minoritised educators and students navigate their educational and occupational worlds. In addition to the systemic manifestations of racism, Lilian deals with an overwhelming amount of micro- (and sometimes macro-?) aggressions. These acts are sometimes so subtle that Lilian often feels embarrassed to speak about what she has experienced. The sheer frequency of these occurrences, however, adds an extra layer of psychological stress to what would be a normal day for someone who is not racialised. With our model of critical co-leadership, there has been some sort of an emotional buffer for me (Lilian). Just having someone else who notices some of the subtle aggressive occurrences has a way of reducing their impact. What has proved very beneficial is you, Jerry, a white

man, calling these things out politely to people, e.g. by asking them to copy me in emails or just reminding them that I am a co-director of the programme (often repeatedly).

As with most initiatives that attempt to interrupt racism in education, we don't claim to have an antidote that will rid the entire system of racism in one year. We are daily reminded of how much more ground we need to cover. Again, we must stress that we have a strong sense that this work we are doing together is slow and always emerging. What we haven't focused on in this paper is the shadow that neoliberal approaches to employment cast over such work. There is another dimension of power differentials between Jerry and Lilian in terms of their positions within the university: Jerry has a permanent position and Lilian works on a series of fixed-term contracts. There is, then, as with all precarious workers, that additional emotional burden for Lilian as she must continue to work through slow and developmental work such as this with the persistent reminder that her position could disappear very quickly.

In spite of these challenges, we are hopeful that our practice of critically reflective co-facilitation and leadership has the potential to change the face of initial teacher education, one educator and colleague at a time. It is an almost imperceptibly slow process where racialised micro-aggressions are met with micro counter-responses across the four spaces we have discussed in this paper. Our open reflections model to our students the need to use lenses that make visible the worldview of the minoritised, and they often give feedback about the novelty of our methods and how that too is transforming their practice.

Of course, it is also important to stress that such an approach is difficult to sustain without professional and institutional commitment which recognises the value of co-teaching and co-leadership in moving towards genuinely inclusive and diverse educational and organisational cultures. Similar opportunities for the kind of multi-racial co-facilitative practices which we have touched on here will never have space to emerge and flourish unless there are purposeful and meaningful systemic interventions to address the profound lack of diversity, when it comes to colour, within, and across, adult, further, and higher education educator spaces.

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Working through Neoliberalism: Precarity and the Adult Learners' Classroom

TOMÁS Ó LOINGSIGH AND ANNE FOSTER

Abstract

This article is intended as a form of "Workers' Inquiry" by adult education tutors into the working conditions and structures of their own employment. As well as referencing academic and industry literature, it builds on research carried out by workers in adult education themselves into the practices of their own workplaces. It was written during the rollout of a new contract for adult education workers across the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in the state. Adult education workers have long been a very precarious workforce, facing regular and long periods of forced unemployment, unequal pay for equal work, and unclear and unfair pension arrangements.

Keywords: Adult Education Tutors, Neoliberalism, Precarity, Austerity, Workplace

Introduction

> A workers' inquiry serves a critically dual role: for workers to inform themselves about their own class power in a particular struggle, and to provide a model for workers to emulate in their own struggles elsewhere. (Ovetz, 2020, p.8)

The following analysis can be defined as a "Workers' Inquiry" or "co-research" —a form of research carried out by workers themselves into their own workplaces and work practices. Its aim is both to cast light on the conditions of work, and through both the research process itself and the dissemination of its findings, to be of immediate practical use to workers in the processes of organising themselves to confront unjust treatment and to gain greater control over their working lives (Notes from Below, 2018; Roggero, 2014).

In the spirit of such an inquiry, the authors of this piece are adult education tutors employed by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in the

Adult Education Sector in the Republic of Ireland. As well as academic and industry sources, much of the data used was collected by workers themselves from their colleagues, particularly in the form of a survey designed by adult education workers and disseminated among adult education workers across Ireland—research which, it bears noting, is conspicuous in its absence from the agendas of either employers or unions representing these workers, and which therefore gives an otherwise missing perspective on an understudied aspect of the Irish education sector. Likewise, the conversations with workers quoted here were conducted by other workers in their field—their colleagues. Much of the authors' expertise and familiarity with the area of concern in this piece come from their own experience and involvement in the campaign for better working conditions in their sector over the past number of years. In the tradition of Workers' Inquiry, this research and the findings here outlined are partisan—they are intended to inform and assist the ongoing struggle of adult education workers for secure, stable, sustainable, and "good" (Thomas et al., 2019, p.1) working and teaching conditions.

Throughout this piece, the term "worker" will be used interchangeably with other, synonymous terms, such as "teacher", "tutor", "educator", "practitioner" or "professional". This is not to diminish the professional skills and practice of those who work in the sector, but to emphasise their positionality in the adult education sector—as people who rely on their work as adult education workers for their livelihoods (both during and after their working lives). This choice of wording recognises the discomfort many workers in the field have with the formal job titles "tutor" and "educator", which some feel obscure their real role as teachers. The choice of terminology further recognises that the adult education sector employs many people whose teaching stems from years of experience, both in the education sector and in the areas that they teach, and not on formal accreditation—itself a rare holdout in the neoliberal emphasis on "credentialism" over and above lived experience and real-life interaction in all areas of life, and in the field of education in particular (Bloomfield, 2009; White et al., 2010; Allais, 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017). The terminology of choice is also intended to push back against "the re-invention of professionals […] as units of resource whose performance and productivity must constantly be audited so that it can be enhanced" (Shore and Wright, 1999, p.559). In contrast (and with humility), following McGlynn (2012, p.212), we wish to emphasise the position of workers in community and adult education as "organic intellectuals" in the Gramscian tradition:

> Tracing this role across historical periods and varying contexts in this research suggests some common features of engagement and motivation for the workers who took up these roles, variously described as organic

> intellectuals, radicals and border crossers, outreach instructors and boundary workers. (McGlynn, 2012, p.212)

This perspective on education and learning contrasts with a more dominant focus on "'education from above' where the authority structures of educational expertise and professionalism determine the type of learning that occurs" (Grummell, 2007, p.193). This wording, however, is not intended to imply that adult educators, who spend the majority of their working lives in classrooms teaching learners, are not teachers, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

This piece intends to examine the impact of creeping neoliberalisation on the working (and post-working) lives of those who work in the sector, and how this in turn impacts adult education in general, and adult learners in particular. Globally, adult learning is recognised as playing a vital role in the functioning of democratic societies:

> If adults of widely differing class and ethnic groups are actively exploring ideas, beliefs and practices, then we are likely to have a society in which creativity, diversity and the continuous re-creation of social structures are the accepted norms. (Brookfield, 1986, p.1; see also: Brookfield and Holst, 2011)

Adult and community education is broadly recognised as the sector within the broader education system that serves the most marginalised people in society (Department of Education and Science, 2000; McGlynn, 2014; Cobain et al., 2020; AONTAS, 2024). It is, however, also the education sector that is itself most "subordinated" (Connolly, 2007; McGlynn, 2012, p.10), "invisible", "low-status" (Murtagh, 2015), and vulnerable to being ignored in public discourse (and indeed by teaching unions), or even cut by policies of austerity and neoliberalism (Fitzsimons, 2017; Boeren and James, 2019).

Neoliberalism in Education

In this context, adult education workers—who teach learners who may have been failed by the traditional, formal education system (Finnegan, 2008), or people who have experienced severe forms of trauma in their lives—must bring additional levels of understanding and awareness to their teaching practice (Johnson, 2018). In the Irish context, where a growing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) sector within adult education aims to provide English language education to adults who have fled conflict zones and other threats, the joint navigation of trauma by student and teacher is a core part of classroom activity (Ní Ghráinne, 2024).

In spite of these stated ideals, however, the advance of neoliberal modes of organisation through all areas of society (Harvey, 2007), colonising and "marketising" all areas of social life including the education sector, also impacts adult education, its learners, workers, and other stakeholders (Brookfield, 2005; Finnegan, 2008). Globally, neoliberal reforms have taken hold of state educational agendas, often focused on the triad of "the market, managerialism, and performativity" (Ball, 2003, p.215), and the penetration of market logic into all areas of the education system (Ball, 2007). In similar terms:

> The contemporary common sense of the restructured neoliberal global economy is that any society that wants to remain competitive needs to implement educational reforms emphasizing the development of a flexible, entrepreneurial teaching workforce (i.e., broadly educated, specifically trained and without tenure) and a teacher-proof, standards-based and market-oriented curriculum. (Fischman, 2009, p.4)

In the US, the rise of charter schools has been interpreted by many as an attempt to privatise childhood education by the backdoor (Gross, 2014; Sondel and Boselovic, 2014). In this context, observers such as Jane McAlevey (2016) have identified industrial action by teachers' unions in the USA over the past two decades as attempts to defend an embattled education sector from underfunding, austerity, and privatisation.

Neoliberalism in the Irish Educational Context

Ireland is no exception. Since the Whitaker/Lemass revolution of the late 1950s, and increasing through the Celtic Tiger period and the period of austerity that followed the 2008 crash, as charted by McCabe (2011), the Irish economy has been significantly opened up to foreign capital. The education sector in Ireland too, has been a zone of experimentation for neoliberal policies (Lynch et al., 2012). Changes in nomenclature in government departments relating to education—from the Department of Education and Science to the Department of Education and Skills in 2010 (followed in 2020 by the splitting off of the newly-created Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science [DFHERIS], with responsibility for overseeing further and adult education)—and increasing emphasis on teacher performativity and productivity measured against various benchmarks reflect the ongoing neoliberalisation of the primary, post-primary, further, and higher education sectors, albeit with serious resistance from teaching unions (Ball, 2016). Adult education workers have traditionally been a marginal voice within teaching unions, limiting the room for concerted pushback to neoliberalisation within

the sector (O'Neill and Fitzsimons, 2020). The community sector has also been deeply affected by cutbacks and reliance on state support, which have "turned community-led projects into market driven service providers" in the words of community arts worker Moray Bresnihan (2024, no pagination; see also: Bisset, 2015).

Adult and community learning has similarly borne the brunt of neoliberal policy while, like the community sector more broadly, it has often been tasked with picking up the slack from a state that has absolved itself of its responsibility to deal with social problems, not least the failures of, and gaps in, traditional compulsory education (Connolly, 2007; Fitzsimons, 2017). "An Bord Snip Nua", a name coined by the media in reference to the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes tasked by finance minister Brian Lenihan in 2008 with proposing drastic cuts during the period of austerity, identified adult education in particular as one of the many community initiatives that ought to be cut in line with neoliberal performativity agendas:

> Projects funded include *adult education courses*, support for local enterprise initiatives and information provision for target groups. There is little evidence of positive outcomes for these initiatives. (emphasis ours, cited in Bisset, 2015, p.187)

This accords with broader trends in which "lifelong learning is conceptualised largely in terms of maintaining a flexible and competitive economy in the modern 'knowledge society'" (Finnegan, 2008, p.66) and with a reduced emphasis on its traditional focus on social justice and active citizenship, while "educational institutions are expected, especially in Further Education and Training (FET) and HE, to justify what they do in marketised terms" (Finnegan, 2016, p.48). As Grummell and Murray (2016, p.110) have noted, this has placed adult education in a difficult position, "targeted with educating many of those disenfranchised within Irish society but using the modes of governance and education which alienated many learners in the first place." They also emphasise how a new focus on outcomes has changed the very nature of FET:

> The scope of Further Education is constrained by discourses of new managerialism which demonstrate a predominance of operational definitions that focus on outcomes rather than processes; training rather than learning; management rather than leadership and clients rather than learning and learners. (Grummell and Murray, 2016, p.110)

Grummell and Murray (2016) also chart the shift during the period of austerity (a shift that remains in place) from ETBs to the newly-created SOLAS, the state body responsible for Ireland's FET sector since 2013, taking "overall strategic responsibility" for educational aims, with a focus on employability metrics (DES, 2012, p.3), a shift that aligns with Tight's (1998, p.262) diagnosis of adult education "as a part and extension of work". Meanwhile, neoliberal ideology tends to emphasise adult learning as very much an individual and individualising process that further hegemonises the 'cult of the individual' in modern-day society (Hargreaves, 1980; Grummell, 2007), and one that exists in a dominant consumerist paradigm:

> The neoliberal framing of education as a consumer choice has profound consequences for voluntary and informal learning … Learning and leisure activities move from their traditional role as a contributing force to personal and community life to a commercial element of consumer lifestyle or an additional aspect of people's work life. (Grummell, 2007, pp.195-197)

Precarity in Education

However, while much attention has been paid to the impacts of neoliberalism and austerity on education in general and, to a lesser extent, on adult learning, significantly less focus has been given to how such policies impact those who work in the sector, and the knock-on consequences for their learners. The advent of neoliberalism has been marked by the rise of a new form of workforce, dubbed the "precariat", defined by Thomas et al. (2019, p.5) as:

> people in work who nevertheless endure insecurity with regard to their employment status, their job security, their work security, their income, their skill reproduction and workplace representation.

Indeed, one of the defining aspects of neoliberalism is as an "economic regime […] in which careers are increasingly being replaced by jobs, many of which are temporary and part-time" (Smart, 2005, p.74). This new class of temporary workers is alleged to have replaced the traditional working class which, at one time (and in a limited geographical zone mostly restricted to the Global North) had secure, permanent employment and access to housing and post-working life security (Bobek et al., 2018; Means, 2022). It bears acknowledging that this state of affairs, to the limited extent to which it was generalised, and not restricted to a particular gendered, ethnic class segment, was itself not a natural condition of capitalist modernity, but of the victory

over successive generations by organised labour. In the new "gig economy", however, flexibility is prized by employers (and some workers) above stability, and precarious employment, centred on short-term, part-time contracts, has become increasingly normalised. While commonplace images associate this gig economy with fast-food work and delivery services, the fact is that precarity has increasingly penetrated white-collar and pink-collar (feminised careers such as nursing and teaching) professions (for a broader discussion on the emergence of precarious work, see Bobek et al., 2018).

With almost a third of higher education staff on temporary, precarious contracts (IFUT, 2023, p.11), precarity in academia has become a topic of discussion in a sector which was once a bastion of secure, tenured employment. In the broader education sector, precarity is also no exception – one of the authors of this piece, for instance, has worked ten different jobs in ten years, all but one of them in the education sector, and that one job outside the education sector was the sole one where he was offered a permanent full-time position. A study by teachers' union Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) in 2017 found that two-thirds of recently qualified post-primary teachers were precariously employed (ASTI, 2017, no pagination). Elsewhere in Europe, German research has indicated that up to 70% of workers in the adult education sector there may be precariously employed, with consequent impacts on educators' ability to plan their careers and build professionalism (Werner and Martin, 2023, p.477). The development of neoliberal and precarious forms of work can take multiple forms, including but not limited to "zero-hours contracts, casualization, temporary contracts, platform work, increasing use of part-time workers and self-employment", but contracts (and their absence or instability) are central to this process (Thomas et al., 2019, p.2).

Precarity in Adult Education

Similar research by unions into conditions in the adult education sector in Ireland has been conspicuous both in its absence, and in its redundancy—all teaching workers in the Adult Education Services of Ireland's ETBs are employed on part-time teaching contracts. To the extent that any such data has been collected by the Irish labour movement, it has been done by adult education tutors conducting an informal survey among their colleagues across the country, the results of which showed that 40% of current tutors do not have a Contract of Indefinite Duration and are employed temporarily from year to year, and that 39% of tutors are in the first five years of their employment, indicative of a very high turnover (Foster, 2025, pp.3-4).

This research was carried out by tutors themselves and can be seen as an example of research in the tradition of "Workers' Inquiry" discussed in the introduction to this article. The research was conducted to gain greater understanding of working conditions (often extremely divergent based on location) and of inequalities across the sector, with the express intention of using this data to clarify and advance demands for an end to precarity in the sector. Due to the informal nature of the survey, these results are themselves likely heavily skewed towards tutors who have been working in the sector for longer and have developed connections with their colleagues, therefore the number of newer employees in the sector is likely higher. Nevertheless, the fact that in total 283 tutors responded to the survey—approximately 10% of tutors employed in the state according to government figures of 2,800 (Oireachtas, 2024, no pagination) reflects a significant sample size.

Studies from within an academic context support this picture. A survey conducted into career outcomes of 110 graduates of Maynooth University's Teaching Council-accredited Higher Diploma in Further Education found that of the 48% of graduates working in the sector, only 10% of these were in full-time employment, and, significantly, 28% of respondents were not working in a role relating to education at all (O'Neill and Fitzsimons, 2020). Qualitative responses suggested that lack of job security, low pay and limited work hours were all major concerns for recent entrants to the sector.

Until now, workers in adult education, despite working for the ETBs, have been employed on part-time teaching contracts, with no incremental pay scale, and with forced unemployment during school closure periods at summer, Christmas, and mid-term breaks, during which many tutors are forced onto social welfare (Foster, 2025) or, in the case of some ESOL tutors, into temporary employment in private English language schools. Of those who responded to a survey carried out among tutors, 89% were not paid during school closure periods when surveyed in 2024 (Foster, 2025, p.10), and a significant proportion had difficulties accessing social welfare in their interactions with the Department of Social Welfare (Foster, 2025, p.17).

The Adult Education Teachers' Organisation (AETO), founded in 2022, has argued that adult education workers who have been hired to do the same work as teachers in other sectors of the education system—teaching learners in classrooms—ought to have the same pay and conditions (AETO, 2024). The poor employment conditions for teachers in adult education can only be interpreted as part of a systematic undervaluing by the state of the sector, its staff, and its learners. Within the sector itself, major differences exist between

the employment practices of the 16 different ETBs across the state, despite all being state employers nominally committed to fair employment, and all overseen by the same state body—SOLAS—responsible for Ireland's Further Education and Training Sector. For instance, until 2024 the pay increases due to public servants, under the Building Momentum pay agreements between the government and the unions, were applied to adult education tutors' wages in some counties and not in others. This led to major discrepancies between the hourly rates paid to adult education tutors doing the same work in different parts of the country. In 2023, according to data collected by tutors from their colleagues working in the respective ETBs through the AETO WhatsApp group, tutors in Donegal hired after 2011 received an hourly rate of €34, while their counterparts in Kildare, Wicklow and Dublin City were on €42 (AETO, 2023).

Likewise, some ETBs pay a fixed rate to adult education teachers for conducting and grading assessments towards QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) awards, whereas others do not. The survey conducted among tutors in 2024 indicates that 53% of workers in the sector do not receive payment for QQI assessments and 47% receive payment for some or all QQI levels or have in the past (Foster, 2025, p.7). One respondent who worked for two different ETBs indicated that they were "[p]aid in CMETB [Cavan Monaghan Education and Training Board], not in LMETB [Louth Meath Education and Training Board]" for assessment, further highlighting discrepancies from ETB to ETB (Foster, 2025, p.8).This is despite circular letters from the relevant departments instructing ETBs on standardised fees to be paid to assessors dating back to at least 2011 (Department of Education, 2011), and which were updated in 2016 following negotiations with unions (Teachers' Union of Ireland, 2018a). With nearly half of tutors receiving no payment at all for assessment, however, many of their employers appear to be entirely ignoring these obligations.

One of the biggest issues for adult education teachers, beyond discrepancies countrywide as to remuneration, have been their livelihoods after their working lives. Up to now, teaching staff in the sector have been employed on term-time contracts of up to 22 hours a week. However, despite 22 hours being considered full-time, as it is for teachers in the post-primary sector, pensions for adult education teachers have been calculated against a whole-time expectation of 35 hours a week.

The result is that when they retire, even tutors who worked all the available hours they were entitled to work, will receive pension entitlements much lower than they might have expected from their working life (Teachers' Union

of Ireland, 2024).Combined with lengthy periods of forced unemployment during school closure periods, adult education workers are finding their pensions significantly reduced when compared to those of other education workers or public servants. Indeed, 10% of tutors surveyed in 2024 had been told that at least some of their hours are "non-pensionable"—most often because those hours take place in the evening, as many adult and community education classes do, or because they were special purpose ESOL classes for Syrian or Ukrainian refugees (Foster, 2025, p.13). In this way adult education workers are negatively affected simply by the time of day they are scheduled to teach, and the cohorts they teach. In the case of at least 9% of tutors, these hours had been allocated on the same contract as their normal hours without clarification of separate terms and conditions (Foster, 2025, p.14).

A New Contract—Ongoing Precarity

This is the context in which, in 2025, a new contract for adult education teachers is being rolled out in fits and starts. Thanks to ongoing pressure from unions and from the AETO, including protests during midterm breaks at the Dáil and the Department of Education (O'Kelly, 2024), adult education tutors have succeeded in forcing the Department to offer a new contract. Until now, in fact, most tutors across the country had never received a formal signed contract beyond an allocation letter informing them of their hours for the term. AETO-led protests at government buildings centred on the call for secure, year-round contracts and an end to reliance on social welfare during school closure periods, and a 2020 Labour Court hearing of a case brought by unions TUI and SIPTU on behalf of adult education tutors to demand the regularisation of tutor contracts and a salary scale, found in favour of these demands and called on the government to draw up a proposal for the contract (Labour Court, 2020). In 2023, responding to Dáil questions on the issue, Tánaiste Micheál Martin acknowledged this ruling and claimed progress was being made towards a contract (Oireachtas, 2023).

However, this contract, as it has been delivered in 2025, falls significantly short of the demands of many workers in the sector, which include an end to forced unemployment during school closure periods, recognition of qualifications, and parity with other teaching staff across the education sector. The relatively small proportion of adult education teachers in the country in comparison to other education workers has however, made them a relatively small, and to a degree marginalised, voice within the unions (O'Neill and Fitzsimons, 2020).

Only 23% of tutors surveyed have been offered a new contract that runs for 45 to 52 weeks of the year (Foster, 2025, p.4). Under the conditions of these

new contracts, as per the interpretation proposed by various ETBs, even adult education teachers who work every week of the year during which their centres and workplaces are open will not necessarily be entitled to an annual increment on the pay scale each calendar year, nor will their work be deemed a full year's pensionable service. The period of forced unemployment during school closure periods in the summer and at other holiday periods will not be counted towards their annual working time. This is in direct contrast to the employment conditions of other education workers at primary and post-primary levels, who receive payment during school closure periods and a pay increment each calendar year, regardless of school holidays.

Divergences in interpretations by ETBs of what has been framed as a nationally agreed contract further indicate that regional variations in employment practices around the country may well persist under the new contract. Indeed some tutors, who have been paid under lower, so-called "self-financing" rates ("so-called" because, although the ETBs describe them as "self-financing", many of the courses in question are not in fact self-financed through learner contributions or fees, but, like most other classes taught by adult education workers, are paid for from SOLAS funds [DFHERIS, 2024]), have found that they are being put onto the new pay scale at a lower point than their colleagues on other, higher rates, further ossifying unequal pay for equal work under the new contract. In other words, far from "regularising" employment conditions across various ETBs in the state, as the proposal document issued by the government in March 2024 suggests in its title (see also: Bohan, 2024), the new contract appears to have locked existing disparities and inequalities in place. Adult education tutors deliver their classes to the same standard for all student cohorts regardless of the source of funding. Many literacy and basic skills modules were also classified as "self-financing" when employers covered the cost for learners, even where learners were literacy students and received the same teaching as others in the Adult Literacy Service. As pointed out by Foster, an adult education teacher herself, in her analysis (2025, p.12) of a survey of adult education tutors, "tutors were disadvantaged as staff by delivering these courses." A Department of Education information note from April 2024 indicates that these "self-financing" hours will remain non-pensionable even after the rollout of the new contract, continuing to disadvantage educators who teach these courses long after their working lives have ended (Bohan, 2024, p.4).

Another major area of contention around the implementation of the new contract is the concept of "associated work". As with all education workers, the time spent in front of a classroom is only part of an adult education teacher's work: lesson preparation, material design, communication with learners, and

correcting work are also part of the job. The new contract recognises this and acknowledges that the pay for each contact hour also includes payment for 45 minutes of (until now invisibilised) associated work. However, the broad definition of associated work, and the interpretation of it under new Adult Educator job listings being posted by ETBs, have raised concerns that an increasing administrative burden will be shifted from administrative staff onto adult education tutors, without any corresponding increase in remuneration. Job descriptions posted for vacancies as Adult Educators, such as that posted by Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB) in July 2024, show a massively expanded list of duties and responsibilities, encompassing administrative duties such as timetabling and course promotion, outreach to external stakeholders, and other tasks typically associated with administration or management employees—all for what will be *de facto* a reduced income (new entrants will begin on point 1 of the new pay-scale, a significant reduction on the current salary of existing adult education tutors) (KWETB, 2024).

The question of associated hours has also exposed certain unusual employment practices by the ETBs. Many adult education workers are employed as "Course Coordinators" or "ESOL Coordinators" with administrative responsibilities relating to learner recruitment, resource design and so on, but are employed on "tutor" contracts. Under the new contract these workers are finding that their workload and scheduled hours of work have increased by 75%—*without any corresponding increase in salary*—to make up the full hours which in the case of classroom tutors are understood as contact hours plus associated hours carried out in their own time. For example, a worker in a Coordinator role who was working 20 hours a week now must do 35 hours to claim *the exact same salary*. Although staff have been working with these titles and responsibilities for years, HR departments claim that such roles do not exist and that they are "tutors" who under the new contract must now do almost double the work for the same salary, with no protest whatsoever from the unions.

All of this has contributed to a general sense that the teaching work of adult education staff is being obscured and sidelined, with the resulting effect of denying them access to the same employment conditions as other education workers in other sectors of the education system. The 2020 Labour Court recommendation found that those employed as "Adult Education Tutors" were not entitled to the same pay and conditions as those employed on "Teacher" contracts (Labour Court, 2020). However, this semantic distinction has served to underplay the fact that those employed as adult education tutors spend the majority of their working time in classrooms delivering classes to groups of learners—that is, teaching. The distinction also ignores the following: many

of the adult education tutors are qualified teachers with Teaching Council registration; they deliver and assess courses at various levels on the QQI National Framework of Qualifications (the same framework against which the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificates are set); and job descriptions and interview processes for their roles list teaching experience as a primary requirement. Attempts to redefine the roles of adult education teachers as "non-teaching staff" demean and devalue their work and are transparently wrong. The very fact that the new contract offered to adult educators calculates their income based on their contact hours in the classroom, while simultaneously avoiding the word "teacher", is representative of a form of "double-think" that has undervalued tutors, their learners, and the sector in general. This wording does harm to the very "plain English" advocated throughout the sector to facilitate learners' understanding of complex issues—various obscurantist euphemisms for the pedagogical work of adult education, such as "tutors" and "educators", have been chosen, whereas the word "teacher"—simpler, more broadly understandable and descriptive to learners and community members alike—has been eschewed (NALA, 2008; 2024. This semantic shift is not isolated to Ireland. In Australia, "a new role was carved out for VET [Vocational Educational and Training] teachers as they were repurposed, firstly as 'facilitators' of learning and later as 'VET Practitioners'", with a corresponding impact on the nature of their work and even "their standing as teachers" (Schmidt, 2020, p.280).

Of nearly 300 adult education workers surveyed in 2024, all but one respondent rejected their identification as "non-teaching staff" and the biggest proportion self-identified as "teachers" (Foster, 2025, p.3). This discussion takes place against the background that, despite the state declaring tutors to be "non-teaching staff", all workers employed as adult education tutors on the Back To Education Initiative for adult learners were offered automatic conversion to teacher status in 2016 without any change in their working role (Teachers' Union of Ireland, 2018b), and that tutors who transfer to the prison education system are likewise automatically converted to teacher status. If those who deliver classes in the adult education sector are indeed "non-teaching staff", it begs the question: who, if anyone, is doing the teaching in the sector at all? This further calls into question the ethics of the Department and ETBs in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion as it has an impact on the level of respect and recognition of the status of learners, registered as students, on adult education courses.

Impact on Tutors

All of this adds up to a picture of ongoing and institutionalised precarity for workers in adult education. Indeed, 39% of respondent tutors had had their hours reduced in the past academic year when surveyed in 2024 (Foster, 2025, p.17). The current employment status of adult education tutors, and the proposed new contract, both maintain a *status quo* that devalues adult education, its learners, and its workers, and is based on a neoliberal perspective on the value of education that maps onto increasing precarity across all employment sectors, but which positions adult education teachers as the precariat *par excellence* of the Irish education system. Many teachers in the sector echo this sentiment in their discussion of the precarity of working in the sector:

> The biggest challenge by far in the last 22 years [of working life] has been the uncertainty and lack of communication [...] Never having a wage during centre closure periods has meant that despite having a Level 9 qualification and almost 25 years experience my annual salary equates to the minimum wage when jobseekers is taken into account. (Adult education tutor, anonymous)

The structure of VECs (Vocational Education Committees) which preceded the ETBs in the local management of further and vocational education included local politicians nominated to the committee, some of whom considered membership of the committee as a stepping stone to further political advancement. According to research from the 1980s "[c]ommittee members who are aspirant politicians or aides to senior politicians may also see some role for the VEC in their own career developments: a 'honeypot'" (O'Reilly, 1989, p.167, cited in McGlynn, 2012, p.201). To the degree to which the clientelist structure of the VECs has carried over into their new form as ETBs, on which local politicians still sit, this may further contribute to the difficulty of attaining transparent and equitable application of the proposed contract across the country, where local political groupings and individuals may view the bodies as their own personal fiefdoms, hindering uniformity of interpretation and application of the contract.

The "nature of the employment contract" is "the core measure of precarity" (Healy and Ó Riain, 2021, p.325). Ireland came in third place in a study of seven EU countries in terms of levels of precarity in 2018 (Pembroke, 2018), and the new contract for adult education practitioners can be understood in this context. By institutionalising existing inequalities across the country in

the form of the new contract—one which, although a significant number of adult education teachers with Contracts of Indefinite Duration have elected not to accept it, tutors new to the sector or joining in the future will not have any choice but to work under—the precarity discussed throughout this article has been further entrenched in the adult education sector in Ireland. A report by the Think-tank for Action on Social Change (TASC) (Pembroke, 2018) recommends clear "honest" contracts as an antidote to precarity. However, the broad and ambivalent interpretations across ETBs of the meaning and requirements of the so-called "associated work" in the contract have created anxiety for workers and raised the possibility of different expectations from location to location under the same contract. That almost 40% of tutors surveyed had had their working hours reduced in 2024 points to a pattern of involuntary part-time work, itself a form of precarious employment (Pembroke, 2018). The fact that the majority of adult education workers remain forced into unemployment, and into reliance on social welfare or alternative work, for several months of the year under the new contract lends itself to an interpretation of government and ETB attitudes to adult education workers as a form of "seasonal" labour (Pembroke, 2018), only to be paid at certain times of the year and at other times dispensed with, with employment contracts and conditions to match.

Precarity institutionalised in contractual arrangements in adult education is no exception, however, but maps onto a landscape of precarity across education, and in higher and further education in particular—in 2022 a third of staff in Irish higher educational institutions were employed on a non-permanent basis (O'Connor, 2023, p.4), under what has been described as a "plethora" of contractual arrangements (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015, p.49), a situation that has only become more entrenched since the financial crisis of 2008 (Mercille and Murphy, 2017).

All of this ties in with a broader process of change across Western economies since the 1980s in the structure and wording of employment contracts in all sectors, towards limiting the responsibilities of employers to provide stability, security and high-quality employment to their workers (Collins, 2024). Ireland is no exception in this regard. Precarious employment among younger workers was significantly higher in the final years of the last decade than in the past (Nugent et al., 2019). Contrary to arguments that this form of work serves as a stepping-stone to secure work, those in precarious employment typically find it more difficult to transition to stable, secure employment. The transition rate for precarious Irish workers to more secure work is among the lowest in Europe (Nugent et al., 2019). It should also be noted that the precarity

discussed throughout this article is not an abstract theoretical concept, but one with concrete knock-on implications on the lives of workers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, precariously employed workers are more likely to experience deprivation, and often face barriers attaining stability in other areas of their lives, for example in housing through difficulties accessing mortgages and rental contracts (Nugent et al., 2019), possibly further contributing to turnover in the sector and instability in learning experiences for learners as a result.

Impact on Learners

Without secure and stable employment that offers parity with other workers in education, skilled and experienced workers will continue to leave the sector. The impacts this has and will continue to have on learners are immense—for example, a study by AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation has noted the "invaluable" role that tutors play in supporting learners to complete their courses despite mental health issues (Meyler et al., 2023, p.10). Globally, there is widespread acknowledgement that precarity among education professionals has a direct bearing on student academic success. In Canada for example:

> higher ratios of precarious teaching staff are associated with lower graduation rates, lower persistence, and lower levels of student retention. In adult language education, most teachers are precariously employed. So, it is not surprising that dropout rates among LINC [Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada] students were reported to be over 22%. Although the official report attributed the high student dropout rates to various personal reasons, these dropout rates may be caused directly or indirectly by the teachers' working conditions. (Elshafei, 2022, p.18)

Elsewhere, Xu (2019, p.372) notes the "consistent negative impacts" of part-time educational staffing in academic contexts "on follow-on course enrolment and completion rates across all categories." The study also calls attention to the limited opportunities for professional development and participation in communities of practice for education workers in precarious employment (see also: McCulloch and Leonard, 2023; Joubert and Clarence, 2024). Elsewhere, Education Support, a British charity focused on educator mental health and wellbeing, has noted that "teacher well-being and student well-being are inextricably linked" (Education Support, 2024, i). In Australia, Schmidt (2020, p.286) has noted the need for greater "professional autonomy and respect as educators" to be given to teachers in Vocational Education and Training in

order to ensure the autonomy and efficacy of the sector as whole. In an Irish context, as Fitzsimons et al. (2022, p.638) have noted, the task of building a high-standard further and adult education system is an empty "political promise", "without an unambiguous commitment to the development of a sustainable HE [Higher Education] and FE [Further Education] workforce", supported by secure and sustainable employment conditions.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism has permeated education systems worldwide, and adult and community education in Ireland is no exception. The new contract offered to adult education workers in the Republic of Ireland has been promoted as resolving long-standing issues of precarity in the sector and regularising disparities between employment practices in different ETBs, but in fact appears to further solidify and enshrine precarious, unstable, and exploitative working conditions for educators in adult education, in line with the structural dynamics of neoliberalism and austerity.

Drawing on the Freirean provocation to educators to ask ourselves, "in favour of whom and of what do we use our technical competence" (Freire, 1987, p.212), we might ask: in favour of whom and what are these changes being imposed on the adult education sector and its workforce, and the corresponding question—against whom and what is it being implemented. This article has argued that this "regularisation of casualisation", for want of a better term, is taking place as a function of the ongoing and deepening process of neoliberalisation of the Irish economy and education system, a process mirrored globally. These shifts are taking place in the interests of an increasingly hegemonic and wealthy class of the rich and powerful (Smart, 2005; Arestis et al., 2010) and decreasing investment in the marginalised and oppressed, a shrugging off of collective responsibility towards those disadvantaged by current social structures. This disinvestment is replicated at many levels of the economy, from housing to healthcare (Flynn, 2014; Hearne, 2020). The disinvestment from adult education, a site of education traditionally aimed at the most marginalised and often containing the most "radical" of teaching practices—themselves potentially a source and site of resistance to neoliberalism (Fitzsimons, 2017, pp.59-60)—can equally be considered part of this broader disinvestment. In its place, a narrowing of focus "from citizenship and community to skills and performativity" (Glanton, 2023, p.788) and the institutionalisation of mass casualisation in the sector reflect the disempowerment and defanging of a once vital part of the Irish educational landscape.

The state's imposition of this contract on workers in the sector can therefore be interpreted as a lack of regard and support for the sector and its often-marginalised learners. Above all, this disinvestment from, and casualisation of, adult education is directed against educational practitioners and their learners, and the forgotten and sidelined communities to which they belong. The divisions that the implementation of the new contract has driven between long-standing tutors (who have chosen not to accept the new contract), educators in years one to three of their careers (who have had no choice but to sign), and new entrants to the system (who are entering the pay scale at point zero, far below the wages of their colleagues who were hired even one year before), is typical of neoliberal divide-and-rule strategies towards workplace management (Telford and Briggs, 2022). As educational practitioners working in adult education, working with learners who have faced trauma, war, exclusion, incarceration and addiction—often people who have been failed by the mainstream compulsory education system—we work in a vitally important but invisibilised sector of the education system. Like the workers in the sector, adult education itself is in a precarious position. Without a commitment to, and investment in, secure and sustainable working conditions, the possibility of long-term careers in the sector becomes less and less tenable. Nonetheless, through our unions and through the AETO, adult education workers continue to fight for parity with other educational professionals, for equal pay for equal work, for an end to forced unemployment, and for sustainable teaching and learning conditions for themselves and their learners.

In this context, the future of adult and community education in Ireland is inseparably linked to the struggle by workers in the sector for fair and just employment conditions. Until this has been achieved, adult education is implicitly held by the Irish state to be of secondary importance to its educational goals, with its learners perceived to be second-class learners.

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Navigating Digital Barriers: Implications for Inclusion into Lifelong Learning

KEVIN MCCABE

Abstract

This article addresses the issue of adults applying online for adult education courses via Proxy Internet Usage (PIU). The requirement for applicants to apply for courses via digital platforms may increase in the future, as may the likelihood of adults with limited digital skills relying on PIU to navigate online application processes that provide access to lifelong learning. The reliance on others to apply online for adult education courses is a complex phenomenon that requires critical examination of: 1) educational policy; 2) technology usage; and 3) the concept of interpersonal dependence. Therefore, the purpose of this article is threefold. Firstly, it will critically analyse Irish educational policies that lead to the creation of digital course application platforms. Secondly, it will examine the impact of e-government services on adults. Finally, it will explore support-seeking behaviours among internet non-users when attempting to access the internet.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, Adult Education, Online Applications for Courses, Proxy Internet Use (PIU)

Introduction

I work as an Information Officer (IO) for an Adult Education Service (AES) in North County Dublin that provides courses for adults. These courses include professionally accredited courses, English language courses, literacy courses, and community education courses. This diverse offering reflects the variety of learner needs and goals that AESs address (Grover and Miller, 2016). In the Republic of Ireland, applicants are directed to an online platform called Further Education and Training Course Hub (FETCH) if they wish to apply for courses with an AES or with other institutions that provide courses for adults, such as training centres and institutes of further education. FETCH hosts information about courses for adults, as well as the facility to create accounts and apply for courses, and aims to make courses more accessible for all adults in Ireland (Mitchell, 2016).

This digitisation of the course application process epitomises the enormous change twenty-first century societies have experienced due to technological developments. Analogue systems that were once prominent in society are being rapidly replaced with digital technologies (Pihlainen et al., 2021). Without the ability to use the internet and digital devices, certain individuals risk possible social exclusion, which makes digital skills essential for full participation in modern society (Enright, 2023). Some adults, therefore, require support with, or require an alternative to (Anrijs et al., 2023), the online application process.

This is evidenced in my professional practice as some applicants contact the AES requesting support with applying online or enquiring if there are alternative non-digital means of applying for a course. As an IO for the AES, I regularly support applicants from all cultural backgrounds with such requests. Therefore, I have a professional interest in understanding which aspect(s) of the application process cause adults to seek support, and what the consequences of such support are. This would offer insights into whether there are elements of FETCH that make courses accessible to all adults and if there are others which hinder this goal. This is pertinent as one of the stated priorities of Irish education policy is making lifelong learning inclusive to all adults (Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science [DFHERIS], 2020).

Digital skills are becoming essential in order to more fully participate in societal institutions (Enright, 2023) such as AESs. As the requirement for applicants to apply for courses online *via* FETCH may likely increase, understanding the needs of the most digitally vulnerable will shed light on the effectiveness of this mechanism, as well as on improved ways in which to foster more inclusive forms of digital application. Adults seeking support with applying online for courses is a complex phenomenon that necessitates critical examination of educational policy, technology use, and interpersonal needs. Therefore, the aim of this paper is threefold. Firstly, to critically analyse the policies of Irish adult education that lead to the establishment of processes such as FETCH; secondly, to examine some key effects that e-government services can have on adults who are expected to use them; and thirdly, to explore the phenomenon of adults seeking support when accessing the internet.

This paper draws on the findings of a small literature review that I carried out using a critical analysis of Irish educational governmental policy, informed expert opinions in the field, and qualitative and quantitative studies relevant to the topic. Papers and studies from the Irish context, as well as papers and studies from other westernised countries experiencing similar issues within adult

education, were selected. Furthermore, papers and studies published between 2010 to 2024 were prioritised, as FETCH was launched during this period, with an exception made for seminal works and other studies deemed relevant to this inquiry. A thematic analysis of the relevant literature was employed, from which three themes emerged: adult education as a contested concept; the rise of e-government; and adults seeking digital support. Therefore, this paper is divided into the above themes, with relevant sub-themes in each section, and with a conclusion section provided at the end.

Adult Education

Defining Adult Education

Adult education is distinct from other forms of post-secondary school education in that its primary focus is adult learners. The focal point of adult education is the way in which adults learn, and how such learnings are applied in their lives and the wider societies they belong to (Hill et al., 2023). This concentration on what the individual wants to learn, and how, gives rise to a multitude of learner needs and goals that AESs must support.

Pedagogy refers to how children learn while andragogy is concerned with adult learning (Knowles, 1984). However, andragogy can be an ambiguous term which generates multiple interpretations of the concept (Loeng, 2018). This discourse around how adult learning occurs is reflective of the varying educational needs and ambitions that characterise adult learners. The student body of AESs can be made up of: 1) adults learning fundamental literacy skills essential for everyday life; 2) adults attending courses for leisure; and 3) adults acquiring skills to improve their career opportunities (Grover and Miller, 2016). Although individual learner needs and ambitions are central to this type of post-compulsory education, re-immersion into structured learning is also an aspect of the adult education enterprise. Adult education can also be understood as adults undertaking systematic learning after having concluded compulsory education or training (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2000). As such, adult learners are a heterogeneous group rather than a homogeneous student body with uniform learning requirements and goals.

The variety of course provision mirrors the three purposes of adult education, in no particular order: 1) qualification, and the pressure of the transmission of knowledge and skills to learners; 2) socialisation, such as the (re)presentation of cultures, customs and practices; and 3) subjectification, pertaining to the ability of education to restrict or enhance individuals' capacities and capabilities

(Biesta, 2020). Adults who are drawn to AESs to acquire skills that will improve their chances of gaining or retaining employment are thus primarily motivated by qualification. Moreover, adults who enrol for courses to immerse themselves in new ideas and practices for personal satisfaction and growth are primarily motivated by socialisation. Finally, adults who attend literacy classes to improve their reading, writing, numeracy or everyday computer capabilities are often driven by subjectification. This illustrates the highly varied and complex mixture of needs, ambitions and purposes for engaging in education among adult learners who attend courses with AESs.

Benefits of Adult Education

Regardless of which aspect of education draws people to adult education, adult learners can experience similar individual and societal benefits from AES courses and supports. Attending adult education classes leads to improved self-efficacy, higher levels of social capital, and health-promoting behaviours among learners (Pearce, 2016). Furthermore, participation in adult education generates feelings of social inclusion and membership which are oftentimes experienced to a greater extent by adults with limited formal education (de Greef et al., 2014). From an employability perspective, this phenomenon of adults establishing social connections and creating life improvements can be transferred from the classroom to the labour market. The probability of vulnerable adults entering the workforce, for example, increases after the completion of an adult education training programme (de Greef et al., 2012).

Relationship Between Learner and Institution

The centrality of learner needs within adult education defines the relationship between students and AESs. The nature of adult education positions the learner, rather than the educational provider, at the heart of the learning process. This requires educational institutions to develop inclusive practices that promote learner engagement (DES, 2000). The practices and policies that AESs adhere to must, therefore, be flexible in response to learner needs. Adult education institutions have a mandate to establish policies, strategies, and practices that are suitable for the students who attend classes with them, which in turn facilitates successful adult learning (Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). However, staffing, clerical, and policy-compliance issues can hamper education providers' objectives of broadening participation in lifelong learning (Clain, 2016). While philosophical conceptions of adult education view education providers as ideal and able responders to adult learner needs, in practice AESs must do so within the constraints of available resources and governmental policies they must adhere to.

Government departments that fund courses can influence which programmes are made available. Government expectations impact the amount and variety of adult literacy programmes that organisations offer (Pickard, 2019). Notably, governments within the European Union view lifelong learning as a means of addressing labour market needs. This challenges the assumption that the needs and goals of learners inform the content and purpose of adult education programmes. European Union member states have, for the most part, embraced adult education policies espoused by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), thus transforming the intent of adult education from supporting adults to achieve individual ambitions to creating subjects who can contribute to the growth of market economies (Larson and Cort, 2022). In contrast to the person-centred definition of adult education highlighted earlier in this article, the OECD conceptualises post-compulsory education primarily in the context of the labour market and, relationally, society. Thus, it is argued, adults require continuous training opportunities in order to adapt to the changing demands of their current jobs, to be ready for new career pathways, and to adopt new modes of operating in work and participating in society that will exist in the future (OECD, 2023). Engagement with lifelong learning, it is further argued, leads to higher wages, increased productivity for businesses, and improved social trust (OECD, 2023).

These contrasting perspectives of education throughout adulthood call into question the primary function and purpose of lifelong learning. According to Rasmussen and Lolle (2021), the OECD's influence on education has pushed learning for personal development and enjoyment to the periphery, and has made readying citizens for the labour market the central focus of education. As a result, the OECD's perception of adults in education is arguably skewed heavily towards the qualification domain of purpose (Biesta, 2020) and, in particular, the acquisition of skills and knowledge that stimulate economic growth, while having little in common with the socialisation and subjectification domains of purpose (Biesta, 2020). This emphasis on addressing labour market needs underscores the influence of neoliberalism, as a philosophy and practice, in education. Neoliberal practices, which are predicated on the concepts of economic performance, efficiency, and competition, have firmly taken root in education and have created a culture of "training" adults for industries at the expense of "educating" adults as individuals (Schmoelz, 2023). Therefore, neoliberal policies result in the educational needs of the individual being superseded by the supply of skills that grow the economy and help it adapt to emerging global trends.

Notably, evidence of both the person-centred and market-focused philosophical conceptions of lifelong learning can be found in Irish educational policies. The DFHERIS *Statement of Strategy 2023-25* (2023) articulates its commitment to supporting individuals in the attainment of personal educational goals, while also describing adult learners as human capital. This depiction of the adult learner as individual and human capital suggests the lifelong learning landscape in Ireland is occupied by two vastly contrasting comprehensions of what "adult education" is. Moreover, the DFHERIS declaration to partner with organisations such as the OECD to develop educational provision (DFHERIS, 2023) highlights the neoliberal and market-driven influences in Irish educational policy.

Yet, despite this influence, the experiential, authentic benefits of adults returning to education should not be calculated in solely economic terms. It is important that the department measures the benefit education has on adult learners in relation to the economy, while also gauging broader benefits that education can create for the individual, such as improved self-confidence, empowerment, self-efficacy, and social integration (DFHERIS, 2020). The presence of two radically different philosophies within Irish educational policy indicates that all adult learner needs will need to be better understood, welcomed, and catered for. Access, inclusion, and removing barriers to education and employment will be central to everything that the department does (DFHERIS, 2023).

The influence of neoliberalism on adult education needs to be better understood too. For example, O'Brien (2017) and Glanton (2023) claim that policymakers are all too ready to reframe "active inclusion" as meaning inclusion in the labour market. Despite governmental proclamations to include all adults in lifelong learning, neoliberal educational policies risk excluding learners, especially vulnerable ones. Equity through the neoliberal lens has been reconstructed in economic, efficiency, and performance-measurement terms, while it does not address the factors that cause inequality, thus further alienating vulnerable and marginalised learners (Mikelatou and Arvanitis, 2021). Consequently, educational institutions risk generating barriers to access rather than easing access and accessibility to education. Institutional barriers are obstacles that often result from policy mandates or operational procedures that are not informed by the needs of adult learners (Sualehi, 2023). Furthermore, this migration from a person-centred philosophical conception of adult education has altered how lifelong learners and institutions are perceived. Adult students in Ireland—particularly students who engage in vocational or skills-based training—are now increasingly viewed as customers, and there is a growing demand for educational institutions to communicate their activities in commercial terms (Finnegan, 2016).

FETCH

It is from within this educational landscape that FETCH has emerged. A month after its launch in August 2016, the website was heralded by the then secretary general of Education and Training Boards Ireland as a momentous improvement in how the variety of courses available to adult learners is now communicated (McGuire, 2016). In keeping with this assessment, FETCH hosts information about all the different types of adult education courses, including:

- Adult literacy
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- Apprenticeships
- Accredited courses leading to various professions
- Traineeships
- Bespoke courses for employers who wish to up-skill their workforce
- Options for employed adults with limited previous education
- Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) choices
- Community education for adults who wish to attend non-accredited courses for leisure or lower level QQI (accredited) programmes.

The breadth of information available on FETCH suggests the website is informed by a learner-centred philosophy in line with the definition offered by Hill et al. (2023), as adults are provided with the full scope of available courses, thus allowing them to decide which option(s) best suits their individual learning needs and ambitions. Moreover, the variety of course information published on the website encompasses the aforementioned three domains of purpose (Biesta, 2020). However, accessing this diversity of course provision is done through a uniform online application form. For instance, adults applying for a professionally accredited coding course or a beginner's computer course must use the same online application form. Without differentiation or a design that facilitates a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) access, in effect this channel fails to resemble the learner-informed policy making advocated by Ross-Gordon et al. (2017). Instead, it is more emblematic of a decision driven by efficiency, a key principle of neoliberalism (Mikelatou and Arvanitis, 2021; Schmoelz, 2023). As such, "the user experience" of searching for courses on FETCH is guided by some person-centred conception of lifelong learning. However, the means of applying for courses via FETCH is more closely

aligned with neoliberal principles. Consequently, online access to adult education is dominated by a market-centred, neoliberal philosophy of lifelong learning.

The rise of e-government

Through my literature search, the results pertaining to scholarly treatises on online application systems for education courses were limited. I extended the search to e-government services as this is a better understood phenomenon from which relevant knowledge can be applied to the topic of this article. E-government is a means of accessing public services online. Online public services, also known as e-government, provide benefits that include increased transparency, improved efficiency and savings for businesses and governments, and improved sense of citizenship in political life (European Commission, 2024). FETCH meets the e-government criteria as it is a digital means of accessing publicly funded adult education courses that are within the remit of DFHERIS.

Trust

Despite the proposed benefits of e-government services, fears about one's security can make people reluctant to use online public services. Citizens do not fully trust e-government websites due to concerns about the protection of their data when using such services (Tokovska et al., 2023). Uploading and sharing data with e-government services causes concern among citizens. However, a different concern is to the fore when citizens use e-government sites solely for informational purposes. Trust in government, more so than trust in technology, determines whether or not adult citizens trust the information found on e-government sites (Thompson et al., 2009). Tokovska et al. (2023) describe three levels of interaction that e-government websites facilitate: 1) informational, obtaining information published by governmental departments; 2) interactional, making enquiries or filing complaints; and 3) transactional, completing a complex interaction online.

Furthermore, previous educational attainment and prior experience of using online public services have been found to be indicators of trust in e-government platforms. Almost half of the respondents who have never used e-government services stated they have low levels of trust in such services, while over sixty percent of respondents who have achieved high levels of education have strong feelings of trust in online public services (Mesa, 2023). These findings are shown in *Table 1*.

	%	Use of PA platforms		Education Level			Total
		Laggers	Beneficiaries	Low	Medium	High	
Trust in public administration (PA)*	Low (val. 1-5)	53.6	42.9	48.7	45.7	36.6	45.4
	High (val. 6-10)	46.4	57.1	51.3	54.3	63.4	54.6
Change in trust in PA after the pandemic*	Increased	7.4	12.8	10.0	10.1	17.9	11.4
	Unchanged	60.2	55.6	55.6	57.8	57.3	56.8
	Decreased	32.4	31.6	34.4	32.1	24.8	31.8
Is aware of the PA reforms contained in the Piano Nazionale di Rinascita e Resilienza (PNRR) plan*	Yes	16.5	30.8	20.5	27.9	44.2	27.5
	No	54.9	48.0	52.2	50.8	40.1	49.5
	Don't know	28.6	21.2	27.3	21.3	15.7	23.0
Degree of confidence in implement reform*	Low (val. 1-5)	56.5	45.8	53.9	46.4	37.8	48.3
	High (val. 6-10)	43.5	54.2	46.1	53.6	62.2	51.7
Digitization of PA*	Will improve the functioning of PA	59.1	70.6	61.1	71.4	77.8	67.9
	Will create more difficulties	40.9	29.4	38.9	28.6	22.2	32.1
Reasons why digitization may create difficulties**	The lack of attention to users	24.0	23.9	23.4	25.6	22.5	23.9
	Users' poor digital skills	54.8	54.9	57.2	53.0	49.2	54.9
	The risk of privacy violation	15.3	15.3	14.1	15.3	20.0	15.3
	Other reasons	5.9	5.9	5.3	6.1	8.3	5.9

*N = 3,002; **N = 965

Table 1. Digital divide, e-government, and trust in public service: the key role of education (Mesa, 2023, p.6)

While these findings are situated in the Italian context, they hold relevance for FETCH as the website hosts information about an array of courses, including courses designed for adults with limited previous education, for example, early school leavers. If high educational accomplishment is a factor among adults in Ireland for trusting the portal that provides access to educational opportunities, then a possible "Matthew effect" could exist. The Matthew effect pertains to incidences where those who are in advantaged positions benefit more from a system than those in less advantaged positions, which when applied to adult education results in greater participation among adults who have successfully participated in education before and less participation among adults who have not (Van Nieuwenhove and de Wever, 2021.) As such, trust in e-government services could be a barrier for adults with limited previous education and experience in relation to acting on the information that is available on FETCH. This, in turn, could perpetuate a Matthew effect.

Design

The public's perception of the usefulness of e-government websites is an important factor that government departments should consider when designing online public services. When designing e-government services, rather than self-evaluate the quality and value that an online service generates for a population, public administrators should incorporate the needs, values, and views of the citizens who will use such websites (Savoldelli et al., 2014). The experiences of users of such online services—as well as staff members who support adults in navigating e-government platforms—can highlight how online public services can be improved upon.

Employees from a UK council service who help citizens use e-government services, for example, noted that poor design, particularly around language and page layout, exacerbates frustration with using digital services which stems from a lack of consultation by web developers to better understand the needs of end users (Harvey et al., 2021). However, e-government services can be shaped around the needs of citizens who they are intended for *via* consultation with them (Tokovska et al., 2023). Given the multiplicity of adult learner needs that FETCH courses seek to address, such consultation with the citizens who use the website may require multiple iterations. Proactively consulting with adults who use FETCH would inform how the informational and transactional aspects of the website can be improved upon. Also, strategies that address digital exclusion must be informed by the socio-economic contexts and needs of current internet non-users (Helsper and Reisdorf, 2016).

Impact on Wellbeing

Adults who are not able to access e-government services can experience feelings of disempowerment. Older adults, in particular, are aware of the benefits that digital technologies bring, but feel disempowered if they are unable to join in the digital world due to their lack of skills (Hill et al., 2015). Moreover, older people who see value in the internet and attempt to use it may feel disempowered and excluded as they can struggle to use the internet to its full potential and benefit (Seifert et al., 2018). Therefore, attempts by older adults to use websites such as FETCH can evoke feelings of exclusion and disempowerment. Furthermore, complexity of use and concerns about privacy are two aspects of internet usage that cause stress in older adults (Nimrod, 2017). This is particularly pertinent for FETCH. Applying for courses moves users from the informational to the transactional aspects of the website. This requires multiple digital skills, as well as uploading personal information as a mandatory component of the online application process. As such, online public services like FETCH can potentially negatively impact the psychological wellbeing of older adults who visit the site at various levels of participation.

Adults Seeking Digital Support

Adults requiring support with digital technologies is a prevalent phenomenon in Irish society. Almost 50% of respondents in a survey for the *Adult Literacy for Life* Strategy (DFHERIS, 2021) revealed that they know of a relative, friend or colleague who requires assistance with digital technologies, whereas just over a quarter (or 25%) of respondents know of a relative, friend or colleague who needs support with reading, writing or numeracy (see *Figure 1)*. Therefore, dependence on others for digital media support in Ireland is more pronounced than requests for other forms of literacy support. This prominence reflects how digital support seeking among adults crosses socio-economic boundaries.

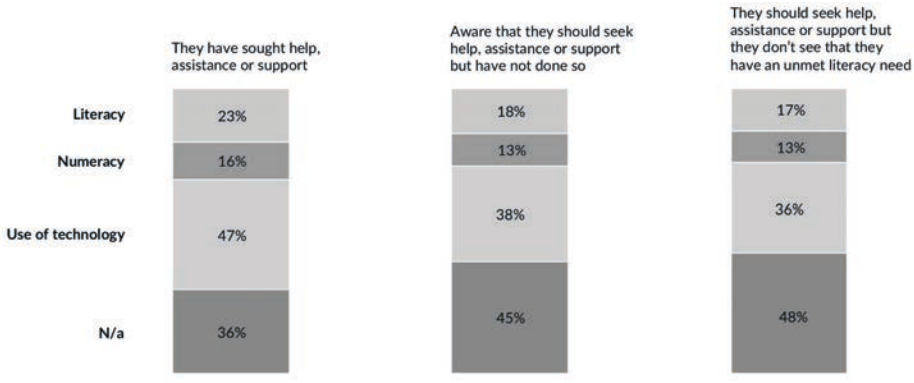

Figure 1. Knowledge of Friends, Family and Colleagues who Struggle with Literacy; from Adult Literacy for Life: a 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy *(DFHERIS, 2021, p.29)*

Describing digital exclusion in purely socio-economic terms omits important complexities of the phenomenon, and initiatives to create digital inclusion must focus on citizens from all socio- economic backgrounds (Anrijs et al., 2023). Moreover, Enright (2023) suggests that the term "digital natives" describes younger generations who have acquired digital skills due to the omnipresence of digital technologies in their childhoods, while the term "digital immigrants" describes older generations who did not grow up with computers but now live in digitised societies. Although this generational distinction can be useful in understanding the challenges older adults encounter when using digital technologies, it does not encapsulate the IT experiences of all older adults. Adults typically aged sixty-five or older who learned digital skills in earlier adulthood, and who continue to use the internet as part of their daily lives, are known as internet super-users (Tyler et al., 2018).

Aside from internet super-users, Asmar et al. (2020) contend that digital support seeking behaviours demonstrated by adults can be organised into six categories, namely: Support Deprived (SD); Community Supported (CS); Supported Through Substitution (STS); Network Supported; Vicarious Learner; and Self Supported. This categorisation of support-seeking behaviours indicates that digital needs and capabilities among adults are varied rather than uniform. Furthermore, the experiences of the population that this article is focused on can be better understood by exploring Asmar et al.'s (2020) first three categorisations. Therefore, the SD, CS, and STS categories will now be examined in closer detail.

Support Deprived (SD)

On the extreme end of the spectrum proposed by Asmar et al. (2020), are SD adults who require support with fundamental digital tasks, such as sending emails, but don't have access to a social network that can support them with their IT needs. Furthermore, SD adults typically have limited previous education and face economically disadvantageous circumstances which reduce their ability to purchase a digital device. The inability to access online services or own digital devices further exacerbates this population's sense of social and digital exclusion (Asmar et al., 2020). In the Irish context, there are government pledges to support adults living in these precarious situations, but there is little description of what unique supports are suitable for their digital needs. The learning requirements of the most vulnerable and marginalised adults in society should be recognised and nurtured (DFHERIS, 2020).

Community Supported (CS)

Another vulnerable group at risk of social marginalisation are older adults who rely on familial ties for digital access. The CS category is populated by adults, usually aged 51 to 70, who attend computer courses in order to become digitally independent, or less dependent on their children, and who seek to proactively protect themselves from potential social and digital exclusion (Asmar et al., 2020). However, acquisition and improvement of digital literacy skills can only occur once the correct learning environment is established. The combination of patient and supportive tutors, comfortable and unthreatening learning spaces, and inculcating a sense of community with fellow adults who experience similar IT vulnerabilities, greatly improves the likelihood of learners achieving success on digital literacy programmes (Pendell et al., 2013). Notably, CS adults are characterised by a contradiction in circumstance. That is, they depend on family ties to complete online application forms to attend digital literacy classes, but attending such classes equips them with the skills to complete online forms independently.

Supported Through Substitution (STS)

The theme of dependence on close social networks for digital access re-emerges in a category that Asmar et al. (2020) label Supported Through Substitution or STS. This particular population is typically aged 41 to 70 and uses digital technologies, *via* people in their immediate social circle, for one of two reasons: 1) they possess low Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills; or 2) they have low motivation to use the internet (Asmar et al., 2020). This

application of a relative's or friend's digital skills in order to use the internet is also known as Proxy Internet Use (PIU). PIU is the act of internet non-users asking internet users to perform online tasks on their behalf so as to avoid total digital exclusion (Grošelj et al., 2022). While STS and PIU are highly similar, a subtle but important distinction between the two phenomena categories exists. Internet users provide stress and anxiety management, digital device expertise, and guidance on how to complete online tasks to internet non-users (Asmar et al., 2020).

Adults with low ICT skills and who depend on STS often do so due to psychological reasons. This population's motivation to engage in proxy support stems from a fear of digital technologies which is typically rooted in a previous negative experience of digital media usage (Asmar et al., 2020, p.144). However, fear of digital technologies and awareness of skills deficiencies do not deter adults from engaging with the internet entirely: rather, it steers them towards proxy use. Adults who consider their lack of skills to be a barrier to independent internet usage seek out internet users as a means of engaging online access (Grošelj et al., 2019).

Conversely, adults who belong in the STS category and meet the low motivation criteria cite temporal and stage of life reasons, rather than phobias, for non-independent internet usage. Adults who lack motivation to use the internet are usually aged 51 or older, educated, have access to digital devices, are embedded within rich social networks, view their spouses as suitable internet support, and cite retirement or lack of time as reasons for disengaging with the internet (Asmar et al., 2020). This spousal element of familial PIU is becoming an increasingly important aspect of the phenomenon. While intergenerational support remains a defining characteristic of PIU, intra-generational PIU within households is emerging as a significant source of internet access (Grošelj et al., 2022). As such, adults who depend on STS due to phobias or low motivation are likely to enlist the internet skills of a family member when applying online for courses.

Digital Care

Adults also approach public institutions such as libraries when attempting to access the internet. The type of digital support that libraries provide is known as "Digital Care" (DC). DC is technological support that falls outside the professional remit of librarians, but which they nonetheless extend to customers when requested (Lehtinen et al., 2023). Librarians are viewed by adults as sources of digital media support. However, the complex nature

of aiding adults with digital media requests requires librarians to manage varying scenarios which can be classified into four categories: 1) emotionally and ethically non-problematic DC; 2) emotionally non-binding but ethically problematic DC; 3) emotionally binding but ethically non-problematic DC; and 4) emotionally and ethically problematic DC (Lehtinen et al., 2023). These classifications of DC offer further insights into the needs of adults with limited digital skills and shed light on the experiences of DC givers who support said adults.

DC aid that aligns with the first category is instructional in nature and is centred on questions about device usage, either provided by libraries or privately owned, and navigating the internet (Lehtinen et al., 2023). This type of care requires librarians to administer the digital device and online navigation support previously articulated by Asmar et al. (2020).

Notably, DC that sits within the second category does not place librarians under emotional duress but can cause them to limit the amount of support they offer due to ethical considerations, for example requests to log into online bank accounts on behalf of customers, due to fear of legal repercussions (Lehtinen et al., 2023). Consequently, the element of familial familiarity present in STS and PIU, but absent in DC, can restrict the amount of support that is available for adults with low IT skills through public institutions.

In the third category, requests for help are used by customers to gain approval from librarians who they deem more digitally competent than themselves, while often commenting on how limited their own digital media capabilities are (Lehtinen et al., 2023). Pertinently, this insight illustrates the power imbalances that exist within DC, and perhaps also STS and PIU. Furthermore, this form of interaction places librarians in the role of emotional support giver akin to the stress and anxiety manager role that internet users assume (Asmar et al., 2020). While these situations elicit empathy from librarians, they also noted customers experience stress while using devices during interactions, causing them to manage their own emotions and the feelings of the adults they are trying to support (Lehtinen et al., 2023).

The final category is characterised by potentially problematic appeals for digital support, for example support with paying a bill online, that can become emotionally charged if such requested support is not forthcoming (Lehtinen et al., 2023). Library members can approach librarians for support with specific online tasks that are important to them, which is in keeping with the definition of STS in Asmar et al. (2020). However, appeals for help of this nature raise

GDPR concerns in the minds of librarians, leading to them denying support and managing the emotions of customers as well as their own, or crossing ethical lines to help customers out of sympathy (Lehtinen et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Adult education in Ireland is influenced by person-centred (DES, 2000; Hill et al., 2023) and market-focused (Finnegan, 2016; Glanton, 2023) philosophies of lifelong learning. While some courses on FETCH aim to meet the unique needs of individual learners, other courses on the platform help adult learners adapt to the needs of the labour market. This contrast illustrates the presence of two differing educational philosophies, which in turn can create an incoherent description of adult learners as they seek out online access to adult education courses. This incoherence becomes apparent when adults use FETCH to find courses that may meet their individual educational needs, but still require a uniform application process to enrol onto a course, regardless of their prior experiences or the level of course they are applying for.

Furthermore, lack of trust in online public services (Mesa, 2023; Tokovska et al., 2023) can make some adults reluctant to use e-government websites. Moreover, using the internet can evoke feelings of disempowerment (Hill et al., 2015), exclusion (Seifert et al., 2018), and stress (Nimrod, 2017) in adults who wish to gain the full benefit of online services but lack the necessary skills to do so. Yet, online public services can be designed around the needs of internet users with limited digital skills (Salvodelli et al., 2014; Helsper and Reisdorf, 2016). These design considerations are important and can help FETCH achieve its mission of making lifelong learning accessible to all adults (Mitchell, 2016) and make lifelong learning inclusive of all in Ireland (DFHERIS, 2023).

In addition, internet non-users eliciting the help of internet users to complete online tasks is a complex phenomenon that takes several forms (Grošelj et al., 2019; Asmar et al., 2020; Lehtinen et al., 2023). Internet non-users can be socially marginalised, motivated to become digitally independent, unmotivated to use the internet, or phobic of digital devices (Asmar et al., 2020). Moreover, familial PIU can be both intra and inter-generational (Grošelj et al., 2019) and internet non-users seeking DC from public institutions can sometimes cause ethical dilemmas that employees must manage (Lehtinen et al., 2023). Any attempts to understand why internet non-users seek proxy access to websites such as FETCH must take into account the complexities and nuances that characterise this population and phenomenon.

Finally, Ireland is a country that values education throughout adulthood, evidenced by the existence of the DFHERIS, the strategies it publishes, and the range of courses available to meet the needs of adults. Yet, no consistent philosophical conception of adult education guides the policies from which AESs act. Rather, adult learners are seen as both individuals with unique needs and, from a neoliberal perspective, as human capital resources (DFHERIS, 2023). These conflicting conceptions illustrate how adult education in Ireland is informed by person-centred (Hill et al., 2023) and market-centred (Finnegan, 2016; Glanton, 2023) comprehensions of lifelong learning. Consequently, while the uniqueness of each adult learner is affirmed, they are still required to adapt to a one-size-fits-all online application form to fully partake in adult education. This contradiction highlights the philosophical tensions that exist in adult education policy development. In my experience, the promise of having one's educational needs met attracts potential adult students. However, the online application process can be an institutional barrier (Sualehi, 2023), especially for adult learners with lower ICT skills, as it is not informed by their needs and capabilities.

In line with the DFHERIS goal of making lifelong learning inclusive (DFHERIS, 2023), and the mission of FETCH to make adult education more accessible (Mitchell, 2016), it is recommended that digital support-dependent adults be closely listened to and consulted with in order to better understand, and act upon, their experiences. This would provide insights into how the online application process could be modified to achieve the above aims in a manner that is appropriate for adult education (Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). Furthermore, each AES within Ireland may have unique insights into how the user experience of FETCH could become more accessible and inclusive. Including AESs in this collaborative process would, in key respects, allow them to fulfil their duty of responding to learner needs at the local level (DES, 2000).

In a more practical sense, and to allay concerns about sharing personal details with e-government services (Nimrod, 2017; Mesa, 2023; Tokovska et al., 2023), I recommend that each data entry required for FETCH be accompanied with supporting information. This may be in the form of a short sentence, with an option to be played in audio to assist adults with literacy challenges, that explains in plain English why that specific piece of information is required for course applications. This would be good practice, as one of the principles of GDPR is stating clearly the purpose for collecting each piece of information (European Commission, 2018). This transparency around data requirement may alleviate some issues of trust (Mesa, 2023). Finally,

I recommend IOs from AESs hold information sessions in libraries. This would facilitate meeting adults who may visit libraries for DC (Lehtinen et al., 2023) when applying for courses. The IOs would be in a position to provide information, and support with applications in person, thus removing many barriers that FETCH may present.

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Exploring a Collaboration in Tertiary Education to Empower Adult Educators and Make Education Accessible

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Abstract

This review is conducted on research carried out within the tertiary educational space, between higher education (HE) and Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. The review focuses on the research conducted on the provision of a 30-credit National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 6 programme entitled Certificate in Adult Literacy Studies (CALS). It explores the multiple focus groups that sought to capture the experiences of all stakeholders. The findings present a unique view of the experiences of management, lecturers, and students in the blended delivery of this programme. The focus of this article includes the impact of this type of academic delivery on the students, lecturers, and other respective organisational stakeholders from both the HE and the FE perspective, to ensure accessible, inclusive, and transformative education for all.

Keywords: Tertiary Education, Accessible Education, Empowerment

Introduction

This research was prompted by two recent policy documents which impact provision in both further education (FE) and higher education (HE) in Ireland, thereby supporting positive transformations in the educational experience. While both FE and HE contribute to the full range of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 1 to 10, both sectors have been, traditionally, separate in their approach, albeit overlapping at times within the Irish education system (Iannelli et al., 2016).

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, (DFHERIS) recently published their *Policy Platform: Progressing A*

Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge (2022). One aim of this research is to identify and articulate a model of good practice for tertiary education.

Additionally, the *Adult Literacy for Life (ALL)* Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021) introduced a ten-year plan to improve literacy, numeracy, and digital skills for adults in Ireland, emphasising accessible, inclusive learning and coordinated support for those with unmet literacy needs and at risk of social exclusion. A cornerstone of the strategy is the continuous professional development of adult educators (Government of Ireland, 2021). The Literacy Development Centre (LDC), situated within South East Technological University of Ireland (SETU) is a national HE Centre, offering specialised programmes for practitioners and educational managers in adult literacy and the broader Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Through collaboration with various stakeholders, the LDC has been instrumental in supporting the strategy's objectives, particularly within the Professional Learning and Development (PL&D) of staff within FET. This is in line with the requirements of *The FET Professional Learning & Development: Statement of Strategy 2020-2024* (SOLAS, 2020) which emphasises that the quality of the FET sector relies on the excellence of its workforce, necessitating ongoing professional learning and development. The strategy aims to create a culture of learning, facilitate access to professional development, and build the confidence and competence of FET practitioners.

This review focuses on one stakeholder collaboration that occurred in 2022 between Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB) and the LDC. LWETB organised for a cohort of LWETB FET practitioners to enrol on the NFQ Level 6 Certificate in Adult Literacy Studies (CALS) delivered by the LDC as a pilot. For some participants, this marked a return to HE after a long absence, or even their first engagement with HE. This caused concerns for some, including situational and dispositional barriers: situational relate to a person's life situation; dispositional relate to self-belief and personal motivation (Flynn et al., 2011). In this case, situational barriers included managing the demands of their teaching roles and personal commitments alongside part-time studies, while dispositional barriers included fears around the learning experience and formal assessments. Despite these challenges, the LDC's philosophy of adult education, underpinned by the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), 2012), supported students to successfully complete the certificate. This approach uses a learner-centred, wealth model approach perspective.

The CALS aims to introduce community education (CE), adult education (AE), and FET tutors, with or without a background in adult literacy, to the theory and practice of adult literacy, in order to support adult learners with unmet literacy needs. The programme enables participants to recognise and understand the literacy needs of adult learners accessing support services through ETBs and other providers. It consists of the following three NFQ Level 6, 10-credit modules:

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Adult and Further Education: This module aims to establish an understanding and awareness of equality and diversity in theory and practice. A key aim is to enable students to critically reflect on and challenge perceptions, attitudes and practices that promote prejudice and discrimination. Practical strategies and approaches to teaching in AE and FE taking into account issues of social change, diversity, and inclusion.
- Integrating Literacy in Adult and Further Education: This module aims to enable students to relate literacy issues to teaching in a variety of contexts to support teachers of other subjects to facilitate students who present with literacy difficulties.
- Literacy and Society: This module aims to introduce students to the current social, cultural, and economic issues informing policy and practice in the field of adult literacy.

This review paper examines the impact of the pilot delivery approach for this programme. It uses a 360-degree perspective on the experiences of all stakeholders involved, specifically the students, the lecturers, and the staff who logistically managed the programme from both HE and FET. The research focused on the benefits, challenges, and lessons learned from the participants/stakeholders involved in this programme. In doing so, the insights garnered from the different perspectives can inform future practices and policies within both the HE and FET sectors, ultimately enhancing the educational landscape for adult students in Ireland.

Methodology

We decided that a focus group would be an effective tool to explore experiences from diverse perspectives within each stakeholder context, thereby providing opportunities for insights that one-on-one interviews might not facilitate (Denscombe, 2008). Furthermore, insights are developed in a collaborative manner as participants react and respond to each other's contributions (Bryman, 2016). This approach aligns with our beliefs that knowledge is

subjective and socially constructed, which follows an interpretivist paradigm (Kuhn, 1970).

We conducted three separate focus groups:

- Student perspective
- Lecturer perspective
- Organisational perspective (programme administration and programme lead perspective)

As the research team across two organisations engaged in critical dialogue about the focus of the research, we wanted to learn what worked and did not work and what lessons were learned that could inform future programme delivery in line with the unified tertiary education policy (Government of Ireland, 2022) mentioned above. Following the 360-perspective, and to ensure continuity and consistency, we felt it was important to have similar prompts for each focus group discussion. These were:

- Benefits and challenges conducting this learning experience for all stakeholders.
- Benefits and challenges in both the face-to-face and online learning experience for lecturers and students.
- Organisational implications, if any, of delivering the programme for both stakeholders.
- Lessons learned, if any.

Additional discussion points emerged for the student focus group that were not used in the other focus groups. The students were self-reporting on these aspects and they did not come up in the discussions with other focus groups:

- Reasons, if applicable, for advancement to the Major Award of the Higher Certificate in Literacy Development for students.
- Explore aspects that may have been transformative, both for you as a student and you as a practitioner.

In hindsight, the advancement to the major award was probably outside the scope of this study because it is a potential study in itself. Furthermore, the transformative potential was probably going to emerge as an aspect of the discussion around the benefits, but we did want to explicitly capture the

transformative shifts in meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1994). However, we should have also considered this within the other focus groups as some of the research team have also expressed a change in their perspectives.

Each of the focus groups were recorded, using recording capabilities built into Microsoft Teams. The resultant transcripts were then coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, and as patterns emerged, themes were labelled. For inter-rater reliability (Gisev et al., 2013), researchers from each organisation cross-referenced the themes.

Research Participants

The graduates of the pilot programme were invited to participate in the research where 10 of the 13 graduates volunteered to participate within the focus group for the student perspective. These student participants are all FET practitioners with diverse educational backgrounds who have successfully completed the CALS pilot programme and work in a variety of contexts within FET. The lecturers and administration teams also volunteered to participate. Following the Freirean approach advocated by the NALA (2012) adult literacy guidelines, relationships are based on equal status and mutual trust between those in dialogue, which reduces hierarchy and power. To mitigate against the potential for power dynamics, there was careful consideration given to who would facilitate each focus group so the researcher who had the least previous contact with the respective focus group would be the facilitator. This also potentially reduced researcher bias due to prior relationships. Specifically, the student focus group was conducted by the researcher who was not a colleague within LWETB or the lecturer on this programme. The lecturer focus group was conducted by a member of the LWETB research team and not one of the colleagues from the LDC. Finally, the programme management focus group was conducted by a lecturer within the LDC.

Student Voice

The student voice is often lost. While the data collected and examined came from the various stakeholder groups, *Table 1* captures a sample of comments from the student focus group as direct quotes so as not to lose the student voice within the discussion.

	Comments from Student Focus Group
Benefits conducting this learning experience	"You know, I thought the organisation like the ETB were great. I thought the way they cleared our days was great." "I was being paid to do this most amazing course where I was learning so much from both the lectures and my peers, and I remember that." "LWETB bent over backwards, they wanted you to do it and they wanted you to complete the programme and receive my certificate!" "We're talking about the relevance to our everyday work, and for me hearing everybody else how they're working within the ETB." "That was your day for your college, and you could actually relax, and you could soak in everything that was being said to you, and you weren't stressing about or I'm in class later on or anything like that." "I think the practice has definitely improved and so the students have benefited. And in that sense, I think the organisation has benefited for sure." "I do think you've come out of this believing in yourself more and understanding the way everything works more and that your learners have 100 percent benefited more, which in turn helps the organisation for people to be coming in ongoing all the time." "You know like it's we're colleagues now and rather than just people who also work in the same organisation and that has changed so it's created a kind of a fraternity." "I was picking up a lot of stuff from my colleagues and going 'oh yeah right that could work from a different angle', but I think it has given me a lot more confidence in my practice and in what I'm doing and it's also kind of made me look outside for other ideas."

Challenges conducting this learning experience	"Probably the challenge, to be honest, I'd say it's what many people would say is just time, you know, carving out that time. Everybody is working and busy." "I still felt that first day that I wasn't meant to be there. I felt I was like an imposter going in. I really felt that for a long time because I really didn't enjoy my college experience 30 years ago."
Lessons learned, if any	"For me, I would have the confidence to study again and I believe SETU did a great job on how they taught us, how it was all set up." For context for the final quote, students expressed they felt the learning supports were under-utilised due to lack of awareness or their own reluctance to seek help. They suggested perhaps at learner induction to the programme that more focus could be put in this area to encourage learners to use the supports available to them from SETU. "And I don't think that service was used enough or realised, so advertise that a bit more from our point of view, which is great."

Table 1. Student quotes within the focus group on the benefits, challenges, and lessons learned within their participation in the CALS programme

Findings

The lecturer and organisation focus groups reiterated what emerged from the student group. However, the findings were considered richer from the student group which led this discussion to be more heavily weighted around the student voice. As the themes were comparable across the focus groups, they will be grouped together for consistency.

Each focus group included a discussion in terms of experience for the students. This section includes the benefits of piloting this programme under the themes of empowerment, collaboration, and support.

Empowering Students: Building Confidence and Overcoming Barriers

For some, participating in the CALS programme marked a return to education after a long absence, while for others it was their first experience of HE. In

addition, it was also the first positive education experience. This diversity existed despite all the participants working within an adult educator role themselves. Linking to the dispositional barriers (Flynn et al., 2011) previously mentioned, students expressed their fears about returning to formal education due to previous bad experiences in their own education journey. As one learner pointed out:

> I still felt that first day that I wasn't meant to be there. I felt I was like an imposter going in. I really felt that for a long time because I really didn't enjoy my college experience 30 years ago.

Initial feelings of not belonging were overcome by the LDC's ethos of learner-centredness and commitment to providing a supportive framework to overcome these barriers. This framework included the pre-programme induction which explained the adult education principles that informed the teaching and learning approaches, and the value placed on the students' knowledge and experiences in line with the wealth model (NALA, 2012). It also facilitated a community of practice to encourage independent peer support. One-to-one and group check-ins were offered between sessions as additional learner supports. It was evident from each of the focus groups that the programme had boosted students' confidence and self-esteem, helping them overcome some of these previous negative experiences, such as not being included, valued, or heard in education settings.

Another factor that supported the empowerment was the "on-site champion". This was a term coined during the focus group stage of the study. In this case, it was the LWETB person on the ground driving the project and ultimately ensuring it proceeded. Firstly, the champion worked with management at LWETB to ensure the students were funded to attend the programme. Secondly, the champion worked closely with all stakeholders within LWETB to ensure the students were timetabled to be available for programme delivery. Thirdly, the champion acted as the spokesperson for the students when working with the team at the LDC, addressing queries and scheduling challenges. Further, from the lecturer and organisational perspective, they were also a point of contact for the team at the LDC assisting with programme delivery logistics.

In addition, the lecturers noted how—as the programme progressed—the students demonstrated personal growth, increased confidence, and enhanced critical thinking, transforming them as educators. This was evidenced through an increase in assessment achievement and student application of theory to practice through shared reflective journals.

The *FET Professional Learning & Development: Statement of Strategy 2020-2024* (SOLAS, 2020) emphasises that the quality of the FET sector relies on the excellence of its workforce, necessitating ongoing professional learning and development. As well as aligning to this priority, the programme has given students the confidence, and indeed the desire, to take up further professional learning opportunities as they arise. One student expressed how they will be more likely to engage with professional learning opportunities they might have steered away from in the past. In addition, the students identified a few "eureka" moments. One of particular note was around the validation they themselves felt as educators when they realised that their own practice was already underpinned by theories of adult learning. They knew they "hit the target" but were now confident their teaching practices were well supported by theory.

Undoubtedly the most significant growth was in their own practice. All claimed their own learners were benefiting from their experiences on the programme as they identified an improvement in their own educational practices, linking with Pillar 3 of the *ALL* Strategy which aims to support skilled practitioners for enhanced provision for adult learners in FET (Government of Ireland, 2021). This was highlighted by a participant who said "I think [my] practice has definitely improved and so the students have benefited. And in that sense, I think the organisation has benefited for sure." The organisational focus group reiterated the significant gains made which included further professional learning and career advancements. Some staff progressed on to the major award of the Higher Certificate in Literacy Development with the LDC, while some students, as staff, have been promoted to management roles in their organisation(s).

Balancing Flexibility and Connection: The Success of Blended Learning

The blend of asynchronous and synchronous online sessions, supplemented by occasional in-person meetings, was found to be ideal for programme delivery. This included practical, directly applicable content, making learning meaningful and engaging for students. For each 10-credit module within the CALS programme, there were four days' delivery in total. Three days included online synchronous and asynchronous activities, and one day was face-to-face delivery. This face-to-face session was the third day of the module and was onsite within a location provided by LWETB which added convenience for students by removing a trip to SETU College Street Campus in Waterford. The combination of online and face-to-face sessions balanced convenience and connection. Face-to-face days helped build rapport, while online learning allowed flexibility. Students expressed that they liked the way module theory

was kept online, whilst the in-person days had a mix of practical and networking opportunities. One student claimed that the fact the first day of the programme was online made it much easier for them to engage in the process. By day three, relationships had been established and the students were comfortable with the dialogical nature of engagement. As one student observed:

> I don't know if it would have worked if we just met online for the first time and the next time was face to face because like that first day, jeepers creepers, like most of us were mutes.

This retrospectively demonstrated that having the third day as the in-person day on each module was correct.

Despite students saying initially they would have preferred a second in-person day, they conceded that one face-to-face day was sufficient, and a second would have caused them significant challenges to be able to attend in person. There is huge value for the students with the online elements, with flexibility being highlighted as a major advantage which is expected of modern professional development (SOLAS, 2020). This format was also welcomed by the lecturers who expressed that the programme design supported the building of relationships which enhanced the learning process:

> It wasn't going into and having to deal with the new people. You were in your home. You had that comfort that worked so well and the relationships could be built up online. And then when you met the person it was really special. Rather than that first day, wondering where am I going to park my car? Where am I going to sit? You know that you see adult learners bringing that stress into a group. And then that just wasn't there when we did meet in person.

Fostering Collaboration: The Role of Communities of Practice

We know from the findings of Grummell and Murray (2015) that working conditions can be an important consideration in both the professional learning requirements and the motivation of practitioners to engage in such learning. Despite working for the same organisation, the students on the programme were spread across different geographical locations so many did not know each other before commencing the programme. The organisational and programmatic gains of having all students from one organisation fostered a community of practice, enhancing inter-collegial relationships and organisational integration for LWETB. Students enjoyed the opportunities to learn both with and from their peers. One participant said, "you know like it's

we're colleagues now and rather than just people who also work in the same organisation and that has changed so it's created a kind of a fraternity." More open discussion and valuable learning experiences emerged.

From the discussion about the programme, they felt they got a glimpse into a colleague's classroom and some mentioned gaining insight from this. It was particularly important for the new members of staff completing the programme. These findings correspond with Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who highlight that professional learning approaches promoting communities of practice and diverse delivery modes improve professional practice and student outcomes. Both their study and the participants of this focus group remarked on the transformation of learning and teaching practices by creating this space of shared practice:

> I was picking up a lot of stuff from my colleagues and going, "oh yeah right that could work from a different angle", but I think it has given me a lot more confidence in my practice and in what I'm doing and it's also kind of made me look outside for other ideas.

Institutional Support for Success

Collegial relationships between the LWETB and the LDC academic and administration teams promoted trust and respect and ensured challenges were overcome together. This demonstrates the commitment to staff professional development (Grummel and Murray, 2015) and develops the HE and FE links promoted by the unified tertiary education policy (DFHERIS, 2022). This ensured the programme's success, with logistical, financial, and academic support. LWETB's commitment to staff development, including timetabling adjustments and resource provision, was crucial in enabling participation. SETU also had capacity considerations for staffing the pilot delivery. LWETB staff were released from teaching responsibilities for the days of study. Facilitating this demanded considerable goodwill, resourcing, and financial supports. However, it ensured students were available to learn, rather than distracted by external pressures. One student captured this:

> That was your day for your college, and you could actually relax, and you could soak in everything that was being said to you, and you weren't stressing about or I'm in class later on or anything like that.

Workload was a key topic that came up and the struggle that the adult student has trying to balance education, work, and personal life. Students commended LWETB for their work with its programme coordinators to ensure that staff

were not timetabled on the days the classes were being held. Without this, many students said they would not have been in a position to complete the programme as they would not feel comfortable if they were required to turn down timetabled classes. Further supported by the on-site champion, the on-site day was well-organised, with a room ready for teaching and learning, hospitality and lunch for the whole cohort, making lecturers and students feel valued and appreciated. These features that supported the successful implementation of the programme go towards developing a culture of professional learning (King, 2019).

Challenges

As mentioned, PL&D provides valuable benefits for students to enhance their expertise. Nonetheless, despite this motivation to develop their skills, adults, even those who are education practitioners themselves, often face challenges that can hinder their progress (Bellare et al., 2023). Understanding these is essential to creating learning experiences that genuinely support their needs. Although the benefits of the programme often seemed to outweigh any difficulties for those involved, it is important to discuss the challenges raised among the focus groups to assess their impact. While many of these challenges were mitigated through the collaborative approach adopted by all stakeholders throughout the programme, recurring themes emerged across the three focus groups: time constraints and scheduling; assessment and dispositional barriers; and technical challenges.

Facilitating Engagement and Delivery

In positioning adult education and vocational training within the Irish educational context, McGuinness et al. (2014) and Grummell and Murray (2015) remind us of its perceived inequality in that FET in Ireland is generally described in terms of what it is not, i.e. primary, post-primary or HE. While it is generally considered second chance education, as in Europe, the primary purpose is to meet the demands of the labour market followed with a focus on reducing social exclusion (Government of Ireland, 2000; Kis, 2010; McGuinness et al., 2014; Shannon, 2019). This lack of a defined space means some practitioners within the FET sector arrive at it from a place of prior experience and /or qualification with a dual or confused identity. The student focus group expressed their confidence to further engage in PL&D now, whereas previously, although they would have liked to engage in professional development themselves, they could not see an opportunity to do so while still conducting their role as practitioners. Those who have a strong and established professional identity are better able to maintain agency, which supports their

decision-making regarding professional development (Suarez and McGrath, 2022). Others remarked they did not consider themselves worthy of such an opportunity until it was presented by LWETB.

Additionally, balancing professional and personal responsibilities alongside academic studies is a significant challenge for adult students. Bellare et al. (2023), building on Gopalan et al. (2019), emphasise that adults often prioritise their professional roles, leading to conflicts between work and study commitments. Rigid programme structures can further exacerbate these challenges, creating additional barriers to participation (Boeren et al., 2023) and compounding pre-existing situational barriers (Cross, 1981). However, research suggests that flexible educational programmes can significantly alleviate these pressures (Saar et al., 2014). Time management emerged as a common challenge across all focus groups, with participants having to balance study requirements, scheduling, workload, and travel commitments. To mitigate this challenge for student participants, LWETB coordinated scheduling to ensure participants could attend CALS sessions without conflicting professional obligations, allowing them to focus on their studies. However, given that students were engaged in multiple programmes and worked across different centres, achieving this required considerable effort, dedication, and managerial support on the part of LWETB. A focus group participant acknowledged this saying from their perspective, "I suppose getting the coordinators to agree and change timetables for an entire year was a big ask."

However, this significant effort by LWETB ensured that even when the CALS programme was not being delivered on this scheduled day, the learning space was still retained. This provided students with valuable time for learning reflection, assessment preparation, and peer collaboration within their newly formed community of practice. These findings of being accommodated by their organisation remind us that involving staff in decisions regarding necessary continuous professional development is fundamental to engagement (Kennedy, 2014; The Teaching Council, 2016).

The LDC faced similar challenges in resourcing blended and outreach delivery, with a focus group participant highlighting the challenge of time and staff resourcing from this perspective:

> It flipped the coin on it, so we have to make the commitment at start. So that kind of fed into the challenges on the timetabling side and staff capacity.

Delivering the programme also created time challenges for lecturing staff, particularly the demands of traveling to an LWETB site for a full day. Beyond the travel commitment, teaching in an unfamiliar venue required additional time for preparation and adaptability. However, this was mitigated by the strong support at the teaching venue. As one lecturer noted:

> What I liked was by the time I did travel, I knew the group well and again there was such support at the Centre. I wasn't worrying about how am I going to get my computer going? Can I print something? All that was taken care of for me.

It is evident that time constraints were a challenge for all involved in the programme. However, collaborative scheduling, strong support at organisational levels, and commitment from everyone involved helped to manage this challenge. Perhaps most importantly, providing a well-planned but flexible learning schedule allowed the programme participants to engage in their studies while balancing their work responsibilities.

Assessment and Dispositional Barriers

For many adult learners, assessments can be a significant source of stress, especially for those returning to formal education after a long absence (Cross, 1981). Assessments are often perceived as judgment rather than a tool for learning and self-improvement (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education [NFETL], 2016). These dispositional barriers, combined with competing commitments, can lead to student disengagement and, in some cases, non-completion (Flynn et al., 2011). To address these challenges and to help reduce student anxiety, the programme adopted an inclusive, flexible assessment approach, incorporating formative feedback, draft submissions, and negotiated deadlines. Research indicates that assessment flexibility can improve student retention, as rigid timelines often force learners to focus on meeting deadlines rather than engaging with the subject matter (Burke et al., 2019). By incorporating the opportunities for formative feedback, students could critically evaluate their work before submission, enhancing both confidence and learning outcomes (NFETL, 2016). O'Neill (2017) describes this as making students "partners in assessment" which is a process that fosters self-regulation and autonomy, particularly for those overcoming dispositional barriers in higher education (Neff, 2023). Additionally, concerns about the difficulty of the learning or assessments are consistent with research showing that assessments can often be viewed as a source of stress or judgment rather than a tool for learning

(NFETL, 2016). Universal Design for Learning principles were applied to assessments, making the programme accessible and adaptable.

In the student focus group, some participants spoke of this challenge as they struggled with self-doubt about returning to education, often due to negative past experiences. For others, academic writing and assessment were daunting because they had been away from it for a long time or never engaged in this kind of work before. One student commented that "I think some people were a little bit, you know, wary about some of the writing and all of that, being away from doing that for so long or not ever having done it." These insights highlight the uncertainty many adult learners, even those who are educators themselves, can experience when returning to education.

The lecturing team were very aware of the need to accommodate a wide range of educational backgrounds and professional experience, which involved careful planning and often personalised support. One of the lecturers reflected on the importance of recognising and supporting student diversity:

> We had diverse learners in the group, and we have to be mindful of that. But again, I think the group worked so well together, and I think they supported each other.

This also highlights how the fostering of peer support and wider organisational support enabled students with different levels of experience to learn from one another.

Beyond individual challenges, there was a collective sense of pressure to succeed among all stakeholders involved in the programme. As a participant in the organisational focus group described:

> Some of the unseen, the hidden pressures, were on the lecturers—that this would not fail. You know, it was a case of, "This cannot fail." Even though the word pilot was being used, it was a pilot that had to be successful. Now it was, and everybody put everything into it that they had, but there were some stresses there at times—"Oh my God, what if it doesn't work?"

This pressure was not just about the current group of learners. This pressure extended to future opportunities. A focus group participant from SETU highlighted the weight of this responsibility:

> The impact really hit me. The fact that they would never, ever be able to do this on a full working schedule. And I started to think, how can we make this work in the future? Because if it failed, it wouldn't just be an issue for this group—it would mean shutting the door on others who might need this opportunity.

The profound emotional investment in the programme's success was evident among all involved. A participant, who had long advocated for this initiative, described the experience:

> I was waiting 10 years for this to happen, and then it happened, and everyone rolled in behind it. It was better than I even could have imagined it would be.

This shared sense of responsibility, the "emotional weight" of ensuring the programme's success, was a challenge in its own way creating high stakes for successful outcomes. However, the collaborative "rolling in behind" from stakeholders across the programme ensured that both students and lecturers were supported to overcome the dispositional challenges that can often come with adult learning and professional development in an academic setting.

Technical Challenges

As has been mentioned, the programme used a blended delivery model to provide flexibility with in-person and online teaching sessions. Kara et al. (2019) highlight the benefits of online environments in enabling adult learners to take control of their educational journeys, express their ideas, and balance learning with personal and professional commitments. However, this approach also presented some technical challenges. Problems such as malfunctioning microphones and poor internet connectivity occasionally disrupted participation for some students. However, these difficulties were largely overcome through peer support. As one participant noted:

> Yes, there were hiccups. Microphones wouldn't work, or earphones wouldn't work, whatever it was. But at some stage, I think mostly we got around it. A little bit of help from each other was there as well for how to do things.

From a lecturing perspective, the structured nature of the blended session, at times, reduced opportunities for spontaneous teaching moments, necessitating a more deliberate approach to maintaining student engagement. One lecturer reflected on this challenge:

> But yes, so I think that the only disadvantage I would say about the online is I think, and it's a teaching thing, I'm a very spontaneous teacher and I like to respond to what's happening in the room. It's much more difficult to do that online because you lose people.

Coordination between HE and FE brought further logistical challenges due to the different online learning systems used by each. While SETU operated through Moodle, LWETB primarily used Microsoft Teams, requiring additional effort to bridge these platforms. Ensuring accessibility and technical support for online components was difficult at the outset, especially for student participants unfamiliar with the tools used. As Hill and Peterson-Ahmad (2024) point out, adult students can face challenges with digital literacy and may lack confidence in navigating online learning platforms. A participant from the organisational focus group highlighted the importance of considering student diversity in digital skills:

> Even some of the tech basics, because I suppose you say like, well, some of them will have various levels of experience with some of the different tech platforms, and some will be flying at it while others may not.

This emphasises the need for adequate onboarding and digital support to accommodate students, with a coordinator observing, "It's the onboarding to Moodle and things like that probably from the learners' perspective, you know, and accessibility."

While these challenges required both students and lecturers to adapt, support from all stakeholders helped to ease many of the difficulties. The experience showed the need for strong technical support, clear onboarding, and flexible teaching methods to keep students engaged in a blended learning setting.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Future Programmes

There is no doubt this collaboration has strengthened partnerships between HE and FE institutions (DFHERIS, 2022). Whilst LWETB has been sending staff on an individual basis to programmes delivered in the LDC in SETU, this project has made significant progress in developing long-term links between the organisations, and another project is currently underway. The bespoke nature of this programme delivery and the alignment of LWETB staff timetabling to attend is costly to LWETB and an increased budget would have been beneficial. However, it is important to recognise that funding for PL&D under the current funding model is subject to budgetary constraints

(Cavan Monaghan Education and Training Board [CMETB], 2019) and was discussed during the focus groups. The success of the programme and subsequent impact on students within LWETB, with upskilled staff and shared community of practice, is testament to the investment. The lessons learned here are transferable to other collaborations that focus on inclusion and require flexibility. They could be adapted for a range of contexts such as FET, PL&D, or HE contexts.

On-site Champion

The success of the programme hinged on open, collaborative partnership between stakeholders, emphasising the importance of trust and communication between the organisations. The key lesson was the lead time that is required for planning and logistics from all perspectives. Students need time to become familiar with HE technicalities such as the programme expectations. The programme required flexibility in overcoming obstacles, such as rescheduling or addressing student needs. This proved essential to maintaining momentum and success. Further, without an on-site champion, this project might have been less successful.

Learning Supports

Some students said that they personally availed of some additional student support from SETU. Participants had been offered a study skills module and an induction to the programme, but this was not mandatory. The introduction of a tech-check session would also have been beneficial and could better prepare participants. The induction for this cohort was well facilitated but could have been extended to include information about learner support, as well as an introduction to Moodle. We suggest this should be included in future inductions.

Blended Approach

With the ongoing progression of a *Unified Tertiary Education Consultation* (DFHERIS, 2022) it was acknowledged that off-the-shelf HE provisions do not always meet local needs: this was expressed by the programme administration and programme lead perspective focus group. The objective of the CALS training programme was to upskill their staff in the realm of adult literacy in line with the *FET Professional Learning & Development Strategy 2020-2024* (SOLAS, 2020). While the LDC offers these programmes as part of their suite of programme offerings from NFQ Level 6 to 9, the bespoke location and blend

of delivery met the needs of the LWETB staff. This blend of days one, two and four online and day three face-to-face was acknowledged by all three focus groups as being the preferred balance of delivery. Traditionally in the LDC, the first day of many blended programmes is when the face-to-face session happens; however, for this pilot, day three was face-to-face. Initial reservations about the opportunities to build rapport and community were dismissed as day three meant relationships amongst students and between lecturers and students were well developed. The timing of the in-person date helped with the motivation of all involved. This removed dispositional barriers for day one and the face-to-face day.

The value of initial online interaction, e.g. starting with online induction and subsequent online sessions, allowed students to build comfort and trust before meeting in person, enhancing their overall experience.

Supportive Environment

The supportive environment drove the success of the programme. Strong institutional backing, administrative support, and collegial collaboration were critical in overcoming challenges. Effective coordination was essential to the success of the programme. This would not have been possible without regular communication and shared planning among lecturers, which ensured consistency and scaffolded learning progression. Lecturers saw how much students appreciated the organisational investment in their learning, including time allocation and recognition of the programme's value. Financial and logistical support underscored the management's commitment to staff development.

Conclusion

While other teaching professionals within the Irish educational domain, from primary to HE, undertake professional development as part of their role, the unanimous expression of gratitude by the student focus group to being given such an educational opportunity fully supported by their employer spoke to the challenges these practitioners experience around their professional development. LWETB are to be commended for the value they place in their practitioners as shown by their facilitation of a well-organised, large-scale educational professional development experience for their staff. Their commitment to professional development has already paid dividends, as the students within LWETB are benefiting from enhanced practice as a result of the programme. While professional development occurs within the FET Sector,

the impact of the benefits of this current model of professional development by organising a body of training and facilitating staff participation, such as the training conducted within this study, has seen far-reaching benefits to the practitioners, their students, the organisation, and the profession.

Additionally, through focus group feedback, this research demonstrated the overwhelming benefits of delivering this pilot programme in such a collaborative way. The key to its success lay within relationships: the relationship each student had with themselves as a student; with their peers on the programme; with the lecturers; with their own organisation; and with SETU. Also, the relationship at organisational level within the programme administration and programme lead perspective in facilitating the delivery of this programme. The success of this programme was the "can do" attitude from everyone, from the students to the lecturers to the organisation. This is something that can be successfully repeated with such an attitude and can be considered as a model for similar programmes.

Within this current study, it was expressed within the programme administration and programme lead perspective focus group that with the success of the CALS programme, the plan was to reschedule another such programme for a different group. It was expressed within the same focus group that due to the success of the current programme in terms of engagement, retention, progression, and professional advancement opportunities from its current graduates, the uptake by staff wishing to avail of professional development opportunities to a subsequent programme would be much greater thus fostering an organisational culture of PL&D (SOLAS, 2020).

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SECTION TWO

Case Studies on Improving Practice

Shining a Light on the First College of the Future in Wexford

MICHAEL CASH, SUZANNE DOYLE, AND LINDSAY MALONE

Abstract

This practice-based paper provides a case study of a College of the Future in Wexford. The SOLAS (2020) Future FET: Transforming Learning Strategy created a vision of a College of the Future which is an integrated model where apprenticeship and further education are provided together under one roof. In 2023, Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB) opened the first College of the Future. The Wexford College of Further Education and Training (FET) brings the SOLAS vision to reality. Focused on the three strategic priorities of the Future FET: Transforming Learning Strategy, this paper illustrates how the college fosters inclusion, promotes pathways and provides consistent supports for learners. This paper showcases the first College of the Future in Wexford in order to illustrate how the college is a learning environment that contributes to greater cultural competence, cultural diversity, social inclusion and empowerment of learners.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Further Education and Training, College of the Future

Introduction

In this paper, we shine a light on the first College of the Future in Ireland, the Wexford College of Further Education and Training (FET). We begin by framing the case study within its political context. From there, we explore what makes the college unique before we address how it meets the three strategic priorities of the SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning* Strategy by fostering inclusion, promoting pathways and providing consistent supports for learners. Finally, we examine how the college plays an important role in developing greater cultural competence and cultural diversity for learners.

The Political Context of FET

In 2013, SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were established, and the concept of an integrated FET approach was first introduced. Since then, FET has been in a development and establishment phase, with some key milestones set out in *Figure 1*.

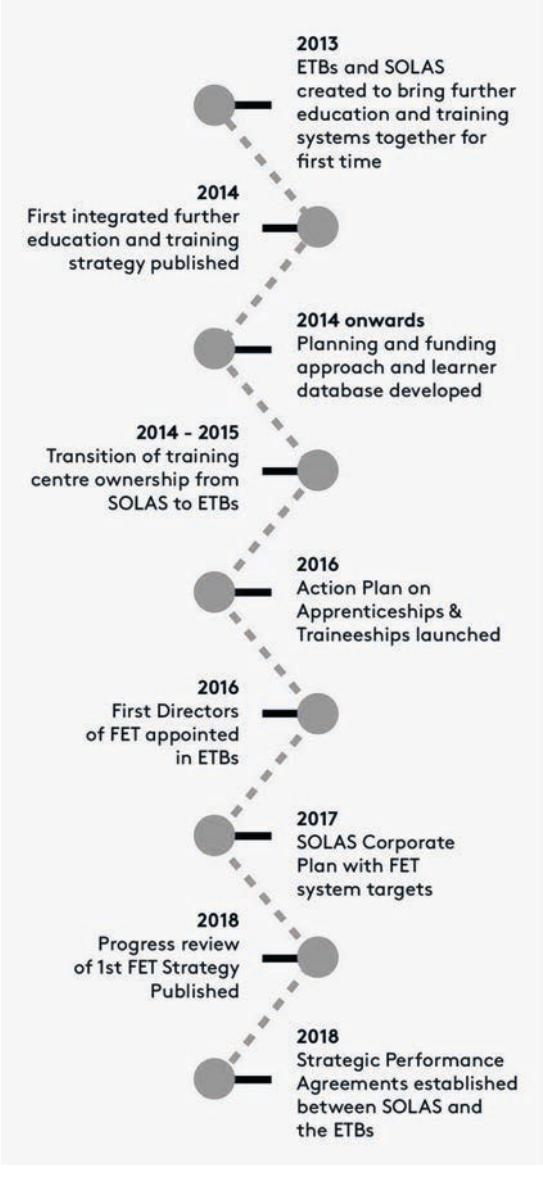

Figure 1. Key milestones in FET development (SOLAS, 2020, p.16)

While challenges remain—particularly around organisation structures and capabilities—real reform, integration, innovation and performance improvement is now continuing apace across the FET system. With FET becoming louder and prouder and with more people of all ages becoming aware of the opportunities to learn, develop and progress at local level, FET is certainly building momentum. This is evidenced through the 400,000 places that were taken up in 2024. Since 2019 there has been an 11.8% increase in school leavers opting for Post Leaving Cert (PLC) courses, apprenticeships, and new tertiary degree programmes in FET rather than go straight to university. According to SOLAS (2025), the steady increase in FET participation experienced over the last five years shows that FET is now considered a valuable option, not only for individuals, but for communities, enterprise, and Irish society, helping to drive economic development and foster social cohesion. There is an inherent opportunity now to grow the FET contribution to a more collaborative and cohesive tertiary education system for Ireland. To support this unified tertiary approach, the SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning* Strategy set out to simplify the FET structure, improve access to it, support learners more consistently, and build its provision around a distinct, diverse and vibrant community-based FET College of the Future.

Background

FET is at the heart of local communities providing accessible, flexible learning opportunities for everyone. FET is growing, transforming, and delivering for individuals, for society, and for enterprise. In 2023, one out of every ten people in Ireland engaged with FET and it continues to grow and evolve, resulting in 400,000 places overall (SOLAS, 2025) Through government investment, there is a drive to develop new flagship College of the Future campuses across the country as well as to improve existing learning spaces. College of the Future is an ethos, a way of delivering FET into the future and of evolving FET facilities and provision into a distinct, integrated FET college offering. It is a major programme of capital investment that modernises and upgrades colleges of FET to provide transformational learner experiences. Historically, further education was provided in local further education centres, and training (apprenticeships) was provided through training centres. The focus of the College of the Future model is to create sustainable campuses that deliver modern skills development opportunities and learning spaces, and that serve communities and learners alike (SOLAS, 2025). The FET College of the Future unit at SOLAS worked in collaboration with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to realise the shared, ambitious vision

for the future of FET, through the management of capital investment aligned with the SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning* Strategy. At the heart of the College of the Future model is the bringing of further education and training together under one roof. This innovative approach means that for the first time in Ireland, apprenticeships and further education will coexist under one roof. In October 2023, then Minister of State at the DFHERIS, Simon Harris, officially opened the Wexford College of FET as illustrated in *Image 1*, bringing the concept of a College of the Future to reality.

Image 1. Minister officially cuts the ribbon in Wexford College of FET

This paper explores strategies for fostering inclusivity and diversity awareness within an educational setting in FET. Though inclusivity and diversity awareness are not explicitly referenced in the SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning* Strategy, the concepts are implied through the focus on inclusion in the strategy. Cultural competence is the capacity to understand cultural differences, big and small, which can affect learners and teachers in the classroom. For this reason, cultural competence in education is key to fostering an inclusive learning environment. Cultural competence is regarded as an ongoing process of learning, understanding, and respecting cultural differences. Cultural competence in education is helpful to both students and educators. The benefits of culturally competent teaching for students includes enhanced mutual respect, good communication and a more supportive learning environment. Teaching cultural competence can help make institutions and classrooms more welcoming and accessible to all types of students. This is especially beneficial to marginalised groups of people who may not always feel welcome in institutions that were historically discriminatory. FET is proven to have a positive impact on social mobility, so cultural competence in

educational systems can potentially improve social mobility for marginalised groups (Falcon, 2024).

SOLAS (2025) affirms that the role of the College of the Future is to promote inclusion by providing access to flexible FET for everyone, at all ages, and all levels, in the heart of communities. It also aims to promote pathways ensuring that they are a place to start, begin again, or continue lifelong learning journeys: taking learners as far as they want to go. The College of the Future is also a place for skills development whether a learner is looking to upskill, learn something new, or get career-ready. The College of the Future will provide: bite-sized to full-time courses, apprenticeships, literacy, post leaving certificate options, upskilling and reskilling, community education and everything in between. These will be delivered with state-of-the-art facilities, digital learning, one-to-one support, as well as face-to-face, hybrid, and online options. The College of the Future model is underpinned by the strategic priorities as set out in the FET strategy which are to promote inclusion, create pathways for learners in, out and back to FET, and provide consistent learner supports (*Figure 2*) (SOLAS, 2020).

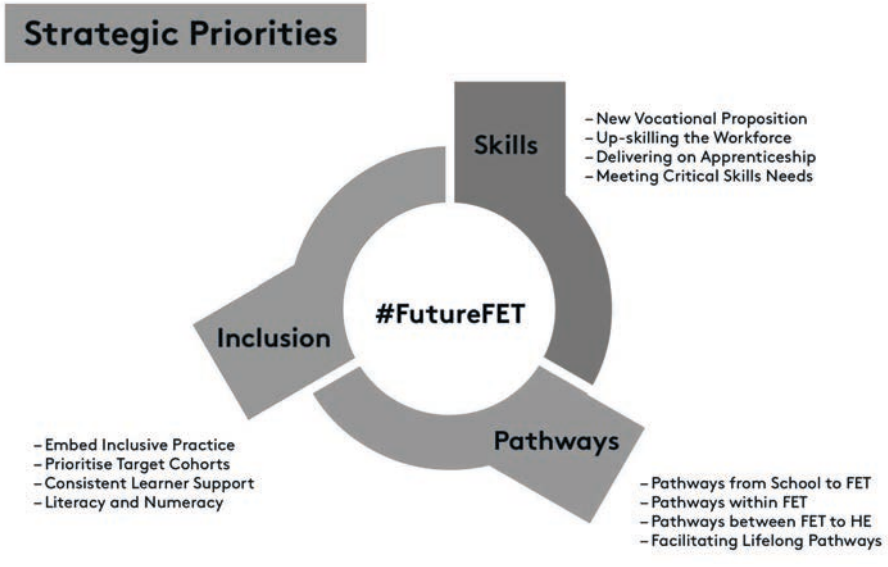

Figure 2. Future FET strategic framework (SOLAS, 2020, p.37)

Facilities and Programmes

Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB) proudly launched the new Wexford College of FET in 2023 in line with the SOLAS strategy for the development of FET Colleges of the Future. This state-of-the-art facility houses the integration of FET provision for the first time in Ireland in a new and custom-designed 52,000 sq. ft facility. The campus offers a broad range of fully funded full- and part-time programmes. The programmes span a number of discipline areas including apprenticeships in Metal Fabrication, Plumbing and Electrical, in addition to Sports and Recreation, Business, Literacy and Language, Art and Craft, Healthcare, Administration, and IT. The college consists of six workshops (see *Image 2*), 17 classrooms, five IT rooms (see *Image 3*), two art rooms, sports and conditioning room (see *Image 4*), healthcare room, sensory room, learner support rooms, staff hub, study room, conference room, meeting rooms, multiple offices, reception, and a large canteen all under the one roof.

Image 2. One of the apprenticeship workshops in the college

Image 3. One of the computer labs in the college

Image 4. The sport and recreation room in the college

In particular, the shared canteen sets the tone for the inclusive approach that exists throughout the college. Over 50 staff and 500 learners from all the different programmes share the same open space which encourages acceptance, a sense of belonging, social interactions and shared learnings across the programmes. A healthcare learner recently affirmed this when she said that "it is a welcoming, safe and friendly space where students and staff can interact in the shared canteen, making everyone at ease and allowing lifelong friendships to be created". The learner's words highlight the positive impacts on our learners outside of the classroom and workshop settings.

Promoting Inclusion by Engaging a Diversity of Learners

What truly sets the Wexford College of FET apart is the positive and inclusive culture fostered within the college. This unique college fosters integration among learners of all backgrounds, exemplified by the presence of a 17-year-old apprentice completing their phase two apprenticeship training alongside a 91-year-old part-time IT student. Learners with disabilities and community groups also benefit from the shared, supportive facilities showcasing the college's commitment to inclusivity. An electrical apprentice recently said "there's a lot of different walks of life in here between young people, old people and people with disabilities. It's great to see all these learners coming together under one roof." The learner's words highlight the concept that underpins the work within the campus which is that no one size fits all when providing learning opportunities for lifelong learners. The campus has welcomed more than 500 learners who include those from new communities, those with additional learning needs, learners who wish to reskill and upskill, and those from harder-to-reach communities, as well as retired, first generation learners and returning-to-education learners. New and emerging communities are those that have recently arrived in Ireland and are increasing in number. They could be humanitarian entrants, asylum seekers or skilled migrants (Multicultural Affairs Queensland, 2025). In the Wexford College of FET, every learner is a welcome learner. A standout moment in the college occurred in May 2024 when a group of adult learners with disabilities completed their two-year course and on their final day, all the apprentices and other further education learners lined the corridors and applauded them as they left the building. This gesture by the learners highlights the respect and inclusivity that is embedded within this College of the Future, in Wexford.

WWETB developed its first Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy in 2025 and an action from the WWETB Strategy Statement 2023-2027 is to develop an EDI charter by the end of 2025. Though the charter is not developed

yet, there is a commitment to embedding EDI in the college through the publication of the EDI calendar (WWETB, 2021). The EDI team developed and published a 2024 interactive diversity calendar for use by all staff and learners in the college as a further step to raise awareness of EDI: the calendar educates employees about the diversity of their colleagues, which can lead to greater understanding, empathy, and collaboration. Forkmanek (2021) affirms the relevance and importance of such calendars by asserting that they keep diversity in a state of constant renewal.

Providing Consistent Learner Supports

Aligned to the FET strategy, the Wexford College of FET focuses on providing consistent learner supports across the college. The focus of the college is to create an environment where learners can gain a holistic experience that enriches their learning experience both inside and outside the classroom and workshop environments. Each learner has access to one-to-one onsite independent guidance supports from a Guidance Counsellor which provides vital assistance to learners in determining their learning pathways. The dedicated sensory space featuring a custom-designed sensory pod (see *Image 5*), provides a calming environment for learners seeking sensory regulation.

Image 5. WWETB's custom sensory pod in the college

WWETB recognises that learners have different needs, and the college is fully dedicated to creating a conducive environment for all learners from both an academic and personal well-being perspective. All learners have access to a range of learner support services including: disability supports; course-related reading, spelling, and English language; maths and IT; laptop and device loans; assignment planning and study skills; assistive technology; one-to-one and group sessions with a learning support tutor; and wellbeing, counselling, and mental health supports. In recognition of the importance of these supports, a further education learner recently commented that "the college offered invaluable emotional support at a difficult time in my life in addition to academic and psychological support". The learner support service for FET launched in September 2024 and provides learners with centralised literacy, academic support and English language supports. Approximately 1,548 learners received learner support in 2024. Spectrum Life Mental Health Support was made available for all FET Learners from January 2024.

Creating Pathways for Learners

The Wexford College of FET is further aligned to the FET strategy by ensuring that learners have opportunities to explore pathways in, out and back to FET. These pathways are promoted in a number of ways. Firstly, having a dedicated guidance counsellor onsite enables all learners to access information about how to progress their educational journey. Learners can also explore other programmes in the college through open days, networking with other learners, and by having an opportunity to sample other programmes in the college. WWETB hosted a symposium in 2023 which was centred around the theme of connecting through learning. With over 140 delegates (see *Image 6*), the Symposium was an excellent opportunity to showcase the college to potential learners and also showcase the research that colleagues have engaged in across the tertiary sector.

Image 6. The WWETB Connecting Through Learning… Learning Through Connecting *symposium in the college*

The Importance of Greater Cultural Competence and Cultural Diversity

Cultural competence in education has emerged as a critical area of focus in contemporary educational discourse, aiming to create inclusive learning environments that celebrate diversity and promote equitable opportunities for all students (Eden et al., 2024). The foundation of cultural competence lies in recognising and respecting the cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities of learners, educators, and communities. WWETB was the first ETB in the country to receive bronze accreditation from the Irish Centre for Diversity in recognition of its commitment to fostering equality, diversity and inclusion (Irish Centre for Diversity, 2025). The Irish Centre for Diversity is an Irish organisation that works in partnership with organisations across Ireland to help them embed EDI in all that they do. Their goal is to positively influence beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and conduct towards issues surrounding EDI. They provide EDI training, EDI accreditation, and consultancy supports which assist organisations to transform the workplace culture to one which is equitable and inclusive (Irish Centre for Diversity, 2025).

The college focuses on EDI by celebrating diversity using its diversity calendar and planning events that promote more awareness of different cultures.

Through culturally responsive teaching practices, educators can leverage students' diverse backgrounds to enhance learning experiences (Eisenbruch, 2004). This involves incorporating culturally relevant content, perspectives, and instructional approaches that resonate with students' lived experiences. Furthermore, building cultural competence requires ongoing professional development for educators. Training programmes and workshops can enhance educators' understanding of cultural diversity, unconscious biases, and strategies for creating inclusive classrooms.

In keeping with the organisation's commitment to EDI and creating greater cultural competence, the WWETB senior management team completed an inclusive leadership programme in 2023. The inclusive leadership training had a positive impact on organisational culture and employee engagement in the development of a more shared understanding of EDI and cultural competence. However, challenges such as resistance to change, lack of tailored content, and difficulties in measuring long-term impact can hinder success. Through its EDI working group, WWETB will keep the process under active review. Additionally, fostering partnerships with community organisations and engaging families from diverse backgrounds can enrich the learning environment and strengthen cultural connections.

The college is committed to fostering linkages with the local community as evidenced through its community days. According to Eden et al. (2024), fostering partnerships with community organisations and engaging local people from diverse backgrounds can enrich the learning environment and strengthen cultural connections. The college also supports local communities through its fundraising initiatives including: waste cable donations for Wexford Marine Watch; multiple coffee/cake mornings in aid of the Irish Heart Foundation, Wexford Women's Refuge, and the Hope Centre; Jersey Day in aid of GOAL; and food/toy donations in aid of St. Vincent de Paul (see *Image 7*). Landorf et al. (2023) conclude that institutional commitment to cultural competence is crucial for developing cultural competence and educational policies, and curricula should reflect a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Image 7. Christmas jumper day held in the college to raise funds for charity

Conclusion

FET is truly unique because it is for everyone and every community in Ireland (SOLAS, 2025). This is what makes the SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning* Strategy so important. It was an ambitious strategy based around the three core pillars of building skills, fostering inclusion, and facilitating pathways. It called out that the key to delivering these core pillars was the evolution of FET facilities and FET provision into a distinct, integrated College of the Future that can serve as a beacon of community-based learning excellence, which in turn can start to change the hearts and minds of Irish society with regard to school leaving and lifelong education options. Wexford College of FET is the first of its kind to bring that vision to reality. It is a shining example of how to ensure that learners can engage in lifelong learning in a local state-of-the-art facility where the focus is on ensuring they can develop their skills, feel a sense of inclusion and belonging, and identify supported ways to progress through lifelong learning in the pursuit of their own goals and dreams. The college exemplifies WWETB's commitment to supporting people across all of our communities to stay local and go far.

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Voter and Civic Engagement: Capacity Building, Awareness, and Solidarity within Communities

FIONNAIGH CONNAUGHTON-O'CONNOR AND FERGUS CRADDOCK

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore how adult and community education can grapple with themes of democracy, voting, and civic engagement—with particular emphasis on learners and communities with low engagement in the political system—to empower and affect change on both an individual and collective basis through a critical pedagogical approach. Drawing on the Freirean principles of conscientisation, praxis, and collective action, and illustrated through three project case studies in the Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) Active Citizenship Voter Education programme, this study demonstrates how participatory methods in adult education can empower learners to engage meaningfully in democratic processes. Through this transformative process, it is hoped that a more just and equal society can be achieved by inclusion and empowerment of oppressed individuals, groups, and communities, thus equipping individuals with the skills needed to understand the Irish political system critically, assess information, and confidently participate in civic life.

Keywords: Active Citizenship, Voter Education, Community Education, Empowerment

Transformative Community Education

Transformative community education has a strong tradition in Ireland which has resulted in a rich tapestry, informed by and reflecting local communities, which is emblematic of the participative and democratic nature of its approach. While the term community education may provide a simplistic view of education, solely defined as a model delivered in a community-based setting, transformative community education is more radical in its approach whether on a personal, community, or societal level.

While the background to this approach can be seen as sharing common elements in Freirean pedagogy and liberation theology teachings (Freire, 1970), the central concerns are also identifiable in community development movements, which (have):

> Been created in that most dynamic of processes, that of generating knowledge by action and reflection which advocate for the social concern and political liberation of oppressed peoples through the combination of political activism to enact social change in the modern day. (Connolly, 2003, p.10)

Community Engagement and Praxis

The value of collective learning as a means to enhance community cohesion, participation, and action characterises the ambition and approach of community education which identifies praxis (i.e. putting theoretical knowledge into practice) being achieved through social justice ideals of critical thinking, active citizenship, and social inclusion (Freire, 1970, p.51). This is of particular importance for those who are vulnerable in society, socially excluded by virtue of gender, race, class or the many forms of discrimination that exist in modern Irish society. Through this process, learners are invited to engage and share their personal experiences and strengths towards the development of collective consciousness and action which creates social capital and solidarity. This has its most powerful manifestation within marginalised communities through the conscientisation as to how power works, but crucially, according to Freire:

> What action to take with no dichotomy implied in this praxis which could be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action. Action and reflection occur simultaneously. (Freire, 1970, p.128)

Role of Adult and Community Education

Adult and community education is ideally positioned to invite learners to develop tools to question society, identify issues, reflect on values, and share experience and perspectives. This can, in turn, encourage sensemaking from life experiences that serve to understand and critique larger social structures and our place in the world beyond literacy and labour market activation interventions. This article spotlights the process and impact of the Active

Citizenship Voter Education Programme delivered by Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) that aims to educate, engage, and empower individuals and communities across different settings.

DALC Active Citizenship Voter Education Programme

Since its establishment in the 1990s, DALC has been at the forefront of running literacy classes in the City of Dublin as a community-based adult education organisation. It was formerly the Dublin Literacy Scheme established by the Dublin Institute of Adult Education in 1974 and was incorporated as DALC in 1997. Rooted in the north inner city of Dublin, the centre has long been committed to addressing educational disadvantage and promoting social inclusion through its core values of equality, empowerment, community engagement, and lifelong learning. DALC offers literacy, numeracy, digital skills, and community and civic education programmes. It has a well-established history of engaging marginalised adults in transformative learning opportunities, with a specific emphasis on democratic participation and active citizenship and is committed to a student-centred learning process that involves an integrated approach to literacy.

DALC is based in a beautiful Georgian building and has a rich history. In 1909, a man called Walter Cole purchased the house at 3 Mountjoy Square, becoming its last and most notable private owner who was involved in politics. During the War of Independence, his home hosted three secret Dáil meetings following its suppression in 1919 and welcomed figures like Michael Collins and Kitty Kiernan (Walker, 2021). It thus seems preordained coincidence that DALC would come to deliver voter education work in this setting.

DALC, funded by City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB), took over the delivery of the Active Citizenship Voter Education from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) in March 2023. DALC continues the important work in civic education for democracy and social justice started by Sr Bernadette McMahon, director of the Vincentian Partnership and a member of the Daughters of Charity, and her colleagues (Vincentian Partnership for Justice, 1997, pp.310-312). This, however, is very much in line with the work DALC has always carried out. Adult literacy and wider adult and community education play a crucial role in fostering active citizenship by equipping individuals with the skills needed to navigate complex political systems, critically assess information, and confidently participate in civic life (Harris, 2010, pp. 227-243).

Course Structure and Methodology

The DALC programme has its origins in a social justice lobby group based in Washington, D.C., called NETWORK (Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, 2023). Their aim was to educate and organise people to confidently and actively participate in the political process affecting their lives. With the permission of NETWORK, the VPSJ adapted the programme for use in Ireland, and has been running it for almost three decades. It is the experience of the VPSJ that this programme has provided a valuable resource for community leaders and for all who are committed to addressing the situation in disadvantaged areas where a relatively small number of people vote in elections. As a consequence, their views are not taken into consideration by many of the political parties as they formulate and implement their policies.

The course is based on sound principles of social justice and is underpinned by these values. It is non-party-political: it shows people the importance of voting and how to vote, but crucially not who to vote for. It helps participants clarify their issue(s) of importance and to identify their values. It makes people think about who and how people hold power and, more importantly, brings the participants through the process of registering to vote. Moreover, the course is about making the system of voting and democracy more inclusive.

The course is made up of four units. Unit 1 explores with participants the reasons to vote and demonstrates how to register and how to vote. Unit 2 considers ways of taking an informed stance on important issues facing people today. Unit 3 outlines a process for evaluating election manifestos in the light of a more just society and presents an approach to choosing candidates on an informed basis. Unit 4 focuses on the functions of local government. As part of the wider project in continuing this work, DALC devise resources targeted at adult literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students to support the course and voter engagement in general (DALC, 2025a). These resources include content on EU elections, referendums, participation, and engagement in society and around elections.

Programme Implementation and Case Studies

In 2024, DALC trained around 180 tutors across 14 "Train the Tutor" sessions, working in various adult education and community settings. Additionally, DALC delivered the course directly to 36 adult learners across three groups, which is the focus of our case studies. AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, secured funding to support the training and delivery

of the course across their CEN Community Education Network (CEN) groups. Educators in the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were trained across all ETB areas, leading to regional sessions in Limerick, Cork, and Dublin, focusing on voting and democracy-related issues. ETBs are statutory authorities in Ireland responsible for delivering publicly funded education and training, including secondary schools, further education, apprenticeships, and community-based learning services. In addition, training was provided to various community groups through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), library services, and other local agencies. All those trained rolled out the programme within their own settings.

The pedagogical approach is rooted in Freirean methodology (Freire, 1970, p.31) and models participatory methods by actively engaging participants in the learning: collaborating within each task to enhance meaning, and coming together in dialogue to discuss, reflect, and make meaning of our world. Freire presented the idea of problem-posing education as opposed to what he called the "banking model" of education. Central to the Active Citizenship Voter Education programme is the process of dialogue, discussion, holding different views, and being given the opportunity to think and learn together. For example, one of the exercises entitled the Election Issues Road Map encouraged students to think about the causes, effects and solutions of a particular societal issue posed by the group, such as lack of housing or hospital waiting lists. Therefore, participants were encouraged to critically examine their social reality and recognise their agency in effecting change. One participant said, "It was a brain grinder, remarkably challenging of my thoughts on voting and politics and society as a whole" (Connaughton-O'Connor and Hawkins, 2024, p.13).

The focus on Freire's concepts of dialogue, praxis, and collective action provided a coherent framework for the course. By situating learning within participants' lived experiences, the programme facilitated the shift from critical reflection to transformative action. The course takes people where they are at. The facilitators deliberately positioned themselves as co-learners.

The participatory approach is a core method in the delivery of the Active Citizenship Voter Education Programme. For instance, during the "Create a Bumper Sticker" activity of the programme, participants came up with messages on why people should vote. They used slogans and visuals to express civic messages in their own words. Similarly, one exercise titled "The Way Things Are vs. The Way We Want Things to Be" encouraged participants to "name the world" by contrasting present realities against their vision of a just society, thereby reinforcing Freire's principle that imagining alternatives is the first

step toward "transformation", (Freire, 1970, p.61). Both activities empowered learners to engage creatively and critically, shifting from passive observers to active participants. These, along with other participatory strategies—such as the "Wall of Issues" and "Government Cheques"—will be further explored within each case study to illustrate how Freirean pedagogy was embedded throughout the programme.

DALC delivered the same programme in many different settings and here we will focus on three projects and link each one with a separate spotlighted theme, namely inclusion, integration, and empowerment.

1. Hill Street Family Resource Centre Dublin 1 - Integration

In 2024, DALC commenced weekly workshops in advance of the local elections scheduled in June 2024. The groups comprised 12 participants from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Participants were from wide-ranging countries of origin including Somalia, Brazil, Poland, Italy, China, Ukraine, and the Congo. The group was a mix of Irish-born and new communities: recent migrants settled in Ireland within the previous two years as well as migrants who had gained citizenship and had settled in Ireland many years previously. Importantly, what they all had in common was that no one in the group had previously voted in any elections in Ireland. As residents, they all had voting rights in local elections in June 2024. Furthermore, if they held citizenship, they were eligible to vote in a General Election later that year (November 2024).

Many insights from this group emerged during the "Gallery Walk" element of the course. This involved reading stories of how people in different parts of the world had fought for the right to vote. The group connected this to the fact that, in some parts of the world, voting is not a right but a privilege. They became eager to use their voting rights in local elections to engage with local councillors and services on issues such as school placements, playground facilities, and access to permanent, more suitable housing. Additionally, as their own feelings and identity about being new to Ireland came out strongly during the course, they discussed the importance of voting to counter candidates with anti-migrant views. They strongly believed in electing representatives who embraced inclusivity, supported multiculturalism, and recognised their part of Dublin as a diverse and thriving community.

Another exercise used in the workshop, called the "Wall of Issues", invited participants to identify and visually represent issues affecting their lives using

news clippings and images. For many, the issues were centred on integration opportunity, option for work, childcare, and housing. This method mirrors Freire's use of "codifications" — representations of real-world problems that serve as entry points for critical discussion, (Freire, 1970, pp.96-98). Participants moved beyond passive learning to co-create a visual representation of their collective reality which they then analysed and discussed. This dialogical method helped build critical consciousness by encouraging learners to reflect on systemic problems and see their own experiences as valid knowledge.

2. DALC, Dublin 1 - Social Inclusion

From September to December 2023, we delivered a course at the DALC for a group of 10 local adults who had been attending literacy, numeracy, and basic digital skills classes. The course was well-received for its interactive and participatory approach to learning. However, for many participants, topics like politics and voting stirred feelings of anger, cynicism, and apathy. They felt disconnected from the political process, believing that all politicians were the same and that their struggles with poverty, inequality, and intergenerational marginalisation in North Inner City were not represented.

Despite this, they were highly engaged when discussing issues that directly impacted them, such as the rising cost of living, inadequate hospital services, and a lack of activities for teenagers. The conversations were at times emotional and challenging, particularly when exploring differing perspectives on issues like the housing crisis and the causes of low levels of community participation. Offering solutions proved difficult, but the space for open dialogue and collective reflection was invaluable.

The course gave participants the tools to better articulate their views when potential election candidates came to their doors, empowering them to engage with the political process in a meaningful way.

One example of a participatory exercise was entitled "Government Cheques for a Day". This activity gave participants symbolic control over public funds, asking them to allocate money to address key social issues. Learners had to reflect critically on societal priorities (from the Wall of Issues we created as part of Unit 2 of the course) and make decisions that simulate real-world governance. For this group it was housing supply, mental health services, and facilities for teenagers in the local area. This not only encouraged active participation but fostered an understanding of the political and economic structures that shape their lives, nurturing a sense of responsibility and collective power.

3. National Learning Network, Arklow, Co. Wicklow - Empowerment

Another example of the participatory approach was a course delivered in 2022 to a group of adults with specific learning difficulties, many of whom were returning to education to pursue career opportunities, further their studies, or enhance their social development and confidence.

The course was delivered through weekly sessions over several weeks. The participants, all in their early twenties, had never voted before. Many of them had previously been relatively passive in their learning, but through the course's discussions and activities, they began to find their voices and build confidence. They engaged in important conversations about topics such as disability payments, disability rights, the lack of suitable pavements in the town for wheelchair users, and other issues that were personally relevant to the group.

During an activity called "Campaign Promises", participants role-played as political candidates, crafting promises based on their own values and the community's needs. For them, it was a regular bus route from the town as many in the group had mobility issues and had to rely on a taxi to participate. This exercise breaks the traditional "banking model" of education (where information is deposited by the teacher), replacing it with an experiential and dialogic approach.

The impact of the course was significant, helping foster greater confidence within the group and empowering members to articulate their views more effectively. While some participants did not vote in the elections, the course laid the foundation for future civic engagement. To take just two examples: on her own initiative, one participant contacted her local candidate about the condition of the pavements; while another, a young woman, decided to write a letter to her local town councillor about the issue.

Programme Testimonies

The testimonies from participants highlight the transformative impact of the voter education course on individuals, communities, and their critical thinking skills, aligning strongly with Freire's theory of education. Freire emphasized dialogue, critical reflection, and active participation in the learning process (Freire, 1970, p.31), all of which are evident in the responses of the participants.

One participant shared, "Better than I expected. Loved the interaction and the hands-on approach," reflecting the importance of engaging, participatory learning that Freire advocated. The interactive nature of the course encouraged

participants to engage actively with the material, fostering a deeper understanding of the political process.

A particularly striking comment, "The importance of having one's voice heard. Don't leave it up to everyone else," underscores the power of the course in awakening participants' sense of agency and ownership over their civic responsibilities. Another participant emphasised, "That I have a voice which is much more significant than I previously expected." This realisation speaks to the empowerment that comes with understanding one's own role in the civic landscape. It reflects Freire's notion of conscientisation, the process by which individuals become aware of their ability to challenge the status quo and take action for change. Participants were not only informed but also motivated to engage more critically with the political process:

> I am more interested in the political process than I thought I was! As a citizen, I am delighted that I was able to share my knowledge with others less knowledgeable than me such as our migrant learners with low-level English. (Programme participant)

A tutor who participated on the course highlighted, "This was one of the most valuable pieces of work we have done in a long time as it opened doors to conversations about so much more than voting." This remark points to the course's broader impact, opening up critical conversations on civic participation beyond just voting. By expanding the scope of the dialogue, the course cultivated a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of civic engagement and social issues, embodying Freire's belief that education should empower individuals to challenge and transform their societies through divergent social design (Freire, 1970, p.24). The impact on learners was equally evident, with students reporting that they "looked forward to the session every week" and loved the interactive nature of the workshops. This enthusiastic response suggests that the course created a learning environment that fostered curiosity and engagement.

In conclusion, these testimonies demonstrate the positive, far-reaching impact of the Voter Education Programme on individuals and their communities. By fostering critical thinking, reflection, and active participation, the course embodied the principles of Freire's pedagogy, empowering participants to not only understand their roles in the political process but also to become advocates for change in their communities. Participants were able to engage with diverse perspectives, thereby expanding their political understanding, fostering empathy, reducing apathy, and ultimately encouraging more informed decision-making.

Conclusion and Future Recommendations

In conclusion, to continue advancing voter and civic engagement efforts, several key recommendations should be prioritised. First, ongoing training at all levels—including upcoming sessions at DALC, through the ETB and Community Development network—will be crucial in building capacity and fostering deeper involvement. Additionally, it is important to offer continued support to those already engaged in this work, through community-of-practice meetings, resource-sharing, and responsive connections (*via* email or Zoom sessions) to capture national collaboration. Our established Voter Voices Conference (DALC, 2024; 2025b) could continue to serve as an ideal forum to unite practitioners and students, various organisations and perspectives, further strengthening the movement. Identifying "voter champions" within communities can also enhance local leadership and engagement, while lobbying for additional spaces and funding will ensure sustained momentum in these efforts. Moreover, using a more participative approach in educational and community spaces is essential, as it starts with the individual, groups and communities coming together in dialogue.

Finally, the establishment of the Electoral Commission, as provided through the *Electoral Reform Act 2022*, has a core emphasis on providing information on voting procedures, registration requirements, and the importance of participating in democratic elections (Government of Ireland, 2022). This objective is to be achieved through outreach campaigns, educational programmes, and partnerships with civil society, with a particular emphasis on increasing public awareness, especially among first-time voters, marginalised communities, and youth. The DALC Voter Education Programme offers a ready-made mechanism through which this can be achieved and must be considered as a model which could be replicated nationally with specific resourcing to be made available reflecting the programme's emphasis on social inclusion through education towards affecting change both locally and nationally to empower communities.

Together, these initiatives will help foster a more inclusive and active civic landscape, and will offer the opportunity to think about the kind of world we want, particularly with the rise of centralised and authoritarian governments. It starts with people in a room together: listening to different views; sharing conversations; sharing power in equal voices; and holding a space for varied perspectives and a broad spectrum of ideas, underpinned by values of social justice and inclusion. To paraphrase Freire, to "read the world" but to ensure that we are all ready to listen and be heard (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.35).

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SECTION THREE

Book and Policy Reviews

Book Review: *Education and Training Boards: Shaping the Future, Leaving No One Behind*

KATHERINE DONNELLY (ED) 2025
EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARDS IRELAND (ETBI)
ISBN: 9781068410208
REVIEWED BY NUALA GLANTON

This book captures the impressively diverse range of education and training provided by Education and Training Boards (ETBs). It brings together case studies and academic and personal reflections showcasing the progress made since the formation of ETBs, particularly in the formation of Community National Schools. Edited by journalist Katherine Donnelly, the book provides a valuable snapshot of the perspectives on ETBs, 12 years after their formation.

There are intriguing insights into the formation of the ETBs by John Walshe and George O'Callaghan. Walshe describes the formation of the ETBs as the end of the "turf wars" between training and further education and portrays the changes as being driven by "politics, personalities, opportunities" (p.52). He discusses the consideration of privatising training and introducing a voucher scheme, reflecting the neoliberal thinking of the time, until a "third way" of placing training centres under "revamped VECs" was agreed (p.53). O'Callaghan also highlights the role of politics in how 33 VECs were amalgamated into 16 ETBs and where headquarters would be located. Significantly, he explains how VECs were not allocated any additional funding to support the process of amalgamations and the integration of training services within a short timeframe. This was unsurprising, given the economic circumstances, as Paddy Lavelle, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) General Secretary, reminds us that we were "under the 'troika' cloud" and that the prevailing directive was to "do more with less" (p.3).

The lack of funding to support the formation of the ETBs may have been short-sighted, especially in FET, where two very different cultures were merging after a "turf war". There was no opportunity to reflect on the core values or purpose of the new sector, which possibly led to a potential persistence of a "this is the way we have always done things around here" attitude (p.9). Unlike the

school sector of the ETB, little work has been done, so far, on defining the values and purpose of the FET sector. Professor Anne Looney describes the *ETBI's Patron's Framework on Ethos* (ETBI, 2022) as outlining "what schools ARE, rather than what they are NOT", with "five core values of excellence in education, care, equality, community and respect" (p.21). Looney suggests that other school networks should "set about the hard task of articulating their ethos with similar honesty, purpose and conviction" (p.21). The same could also be said for the FET sector, which was traditionally defined by what it is not, rather than what it is.

The FET section of the book emphasises innovation, including 3D-printed houses, new training centres, apprenticeships, tertiary degrees, Skills to Advance micro-qualifications, and centres of excellence. Colm McEvoy sheds light on the concept of the College of the Future as integrated colleges of excellence that will "rise as beacons of learning and skills development in 12 locations around the country" (p.70). The focus for FET is on sustainability, digital transitions, and aligning training with emerging trends and technologies.

There are some interesting case studies, illustrating the variety of ETB provision, including a Roma Youth Service in Roscommon, prison education at Shelton Abbey, teaching English to adults with literacy difficulties or visual impairments. The FET sector is generally described very positively, with Touria Jouilla-McKee noting that FET is no longer viewed as the Cinderella of the education system as it was historically, but has now "entered a new Goldilocks era, where pathways for many learners are 'just right'" (p.54). One notable exception to the acclaim for ETBs is the contribution by Justin Rami and Jane O'Kelly, which highlights the precariousness of contracts and lower pay rates for some FET staff.

A major gap in the book, considering the scale of provision, is the absence of contributions specifically related to adult literacy or community education. There is no input focused on either of these significant sectors. If the next FET strategy is to fulfil its "unique social and economic mandate", as Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS, states, it must be supported by "a set of principles that service this, including being a major driver of social cohesion and equality and ensuring that all skills are valued equally both in terms of personal and professional development". Recognising the importance and value of adult literacy and community education in fostering social cohesion and equity in Ireland could be a good starting point.

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Book Review: *Restorative Practices That Heal School Communities*

MIRKO CHARDIN, PAMELA CHU-SHERIFF, AND EDGAR VASQUEZ (2025)
CAST
ISBN: 9781943085125
REVIEWED BY TRUDI BARNETT

The book's authors, Chardin et al. (2025), offer a timely exploration of how education needs to shift from punitive approaches to relational ones, focusing on healing, trust, and a sense of belonging. This review considers the book's content through the lens of inclusion, equity, and lifelong learning. In the context of increasing far-right discourse, the role of adult education in creating inclusive communities becomes even more urgent. How might restorative practices challenge racism and expand our collective understanding of inclusion?

The authors discuss how restorative practices are not a simple programme of interventions but a cultural shift. One that is rooted in values of respect, dialogue, and responsibility, to repair harm, strengthen relationships, and co-create a sense of community and belonging. For adult learners, especially those from marginalised and/or racialised communities, isn't belonging and trust necessary for learning engagement? Doesn't this reflect the emerging discourse within Irish adult education, where inclusion can be reduced to questions of access and compliance, rather than understood as the deeper relational work of connection, belonging, and learner agency?

Restorative practices present a framework for adult learning that not only challenges racism but also supports learners to be co-creators of the educational environment. This involves moving from transactional teaching to a culture where every learner feels seen, heard, and valued. The alignment between the book and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework is striking. UDL's Engagement Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024) emphasise the importance of emotional safety, cultural responsiveness, and cultivating empathy. Restorative practices operationalise these principles by focusing on relationships and ensuring learners' identities and lived experiences are welcomed and affirmed.

For instance, the authors emphasise the need for emotionally safe learning environments where difficult (and brave) conversations can occur without fear of retribution. Within adult education, this translates into pedagogical practices that provide learners with multiple means of participation, voice, and reflection, echoing both UDL's commitment to structured flexibility and restorative practice's call for relational trust.

In the Irish Further Education and Training (FET) sector, inclusion is often discussed in terms of access routes, reasonable accommodations, and/or compliance with equality legislation. While important, doesn't such framing risk narrowing the concept of inclusion to a checklist rather than an ethos? Shouldn't we view inclusion as a matter of belonging and community?

Embedding restorative practices into FET policy and quality assurance frameworks will mean moving beyond measuring learning outcomes to actually valuing the climate of learning environments and learner experiences. This requires integrating principles of dialogue, trust, and learner agency into programme design, validation, assessment processes, and professional development. Couldn't the *Draft Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for Providers* (QQI, 2021) be extended to emphasise inclusion by design and multimodal evidence of engagement? Similarly, initiatives such as The Altitude Charter (ALTITUDE Project, 2024) could be leveraged to embed a restorative ethos as a system-wide standard. One particular strength of *Restorative Practices That Heal School Communities* is its grounding in lived experience. The authors use narratives from educators and students to illustrate how restorative approaches transform learning. For adult learning, these examples offer transferable insights, although adaptation is necessary. The school-centric approach may underplay the complexities of adult education, including part-time participation and diverse motivations.

Nonetheless, the book provides a compelling call to action: educators need to move beyond transactional pedagogy toward a restorative culture where inclusion begins with a consciousness of barriers and evolves through a sense of agency and belonging. Chardin et al. (2025) remind us that inclusion is not simply the doorway into education but a sustained relational practice. For the Irish FET sector, the challenge lies in embedding this ethos into policy, quality frameworks and practice. When restorative practices truly intersect with UDL, we are presented with a blueprint for education that creates a genuinely inclusive experience.

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Policy Review: *Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience – Position Paper*

SOLAS 2024
REVIEWED BY TONI LAMBE

This Position Paper, produced in July 2024, is the result of a collaboration between SOLAS, the state agency responsible for funding Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland, and the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the national representative body for 16 local statutory FET providers. Published by the ETBI/SOLAS Learner Support Programme Board, the paper includes six case studies from four Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and one case study from SOLAS. Additionally, it comes with a framework guide for further reference.

The SOLAS FET Strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-2024* (hereafter referred to as the FET Strategy), emphasises the importance of consistent learner support as a key priority for fostering inclusion within FET (SOLAS, 2020). This Position Paper aims to fulfil that commitment. It outlines the authors' proposed approach to promoting and enhancing consistency in the learner experience across the FET sector.

The Position Paper is fifty-three pages long and is organised into four main sections. The first three sections address various aspects of learner support, while the final section focuses on funding. The opening section situates learner support within the context of the SOLAS FET Strategy and includes a conceptual diagram (p.9) that highlights six key areas for coordinating supports within each ETB to enhance the learner experience.

The second section draws upon both theory and practice from the FET sector to propose a shared understanding and broad conceptualisation of "Learner Support". This includes direct, indirect, universal, and targeted support. In this section, the authors present a diagram (p.14) that categorises learner supports by type, source, and degree of integration.

The wide range of available supports underlines a crucial element of the authors proposed approach: the establishment of a "Central Coordinating Resource Developed at ETB Level". This resource would serve as a central reference point for information about learner supports and promote the development of best practices regarding learner support within each ETB.

The third section of the paper is the most comprehensive, elaborating on the proposed approach. It includes a conceptual diagram called the Learner Support Pyramid, which categorises different levels of support: support for all learners, support for some, and more individualised support for a few. Additionally, it illustrates a continuum of support that distinguishes between academic and study-related assistance and personal, social, and well-being support.

In this section, the authors effectively use case studies to highlight best practices in providing support across various levels and throughout the continuum of supports. However, they do not specify the criteria for selecting these case studies, which is disappointing, especially given that only four out of the 16 ETBs were included. Furthermore, there is an overrepresentation of apprenticeships, with two out of the six case studies focusing on this area. A broader range of case studies would have provided readers with a more comprehensive understanding of effective learner support practices in other areas of FET.

The final section of the paper discusses funding and clarifies that no additional resources will be provided to support implementation. It states that since 2022, 1.6% of core funding has been specifically allocated for consistent learner support. Additionally, a table on page 35 outlines potential allocations from other FET funding streams aimed at supporting learners. This section also includes information about alternative funding avenues, their access criteria, and details regarding supports available in the broader environment, which many readers will find valuable.

Overall, the Position Paper is a valuable resource for the sector, serving as a "stepping stone" (p.3) toward creating a more inclusive learner experience in FET. Its proposed approach broadly conceptualises support in a manner that aligns with the learner-centered, holistic philosophy prevalent in the sector. The suggestion to establish a "Central Coordinating Resource" within each ETB is well justified and provides practical implementation guidelines without being overly prescriptive. However, it is disappointing that the paper lacks guidelines for measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of this resource

at ETB level. Additionally, the inclusion of a roadmap or key performance indicators would have strengthened the paper and offered ETBs clearer guidance. This is particularly relevant, as these elements are also missing from the accompanying framework guide (Brennan and O'Grady, 2024, p.231).

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Notes

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

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

The Adult Learner can also be viewed on the AONTAS website, where further details on how individuals can make contributions are made available each year.

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