

The Social Value of Community-Based Adult Education in Limerick City

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Abstract

This article documents the findings of a qualitative study into the social value of community-based adult education in Limerick City. The article demonstrates that participants experience significant improvements in numerous facets of their lives and we argue that it is crucial that we recognise the multiple and inter-connected social impacts that community-based adult education offers to its participants, as well as to the community in which this service is provided.

Key words: (Social Benefits, Community Education, Community Education policy)

Introduction

It has long been established that public education promotes civic solidarity and social cohesion (Heyneman, 2003). However, European and national policy developments in recent years have created an expanded vision of lifelong learning, one that promotes active citizenship as well as employability. *The Lisbon Strategy* (2000) and *Europe 2020* (cited in CEFA, 2014, pp.3, 9) have promoted this policy shift at a European level, following research that demonstrates that participating in education has a positive impact on peoples employability, income levels and occupation (Carnoy, 2000, Blondard et al., 2002 both cited in Schuller, 2004a, p.3). Nationally, the economic collapse of the Irish economy and the chronic unemployment problem has meant that education and training, especially in the community education sector, is increasingly being offered as one of the ways to reduce Ireland's economic deficit. With policy documents such as *Pathways to Work* (and the *Action Plan for Jobs* cited in CEFA 2014, p.13) the once apolitical and informal community education sector is being increas-

ingly co-opted into the state mechanism. Many could contend that this subsuming of community education into state governance predates the current economic climate, a process that began with the increased neoliberalism of the Irish state throughout the Celtic Tiger years (1994–2008). This increased neoliberalism is evidenced in the imposition of a ‘value-for-money’ managerialism into the Irish healthcare system (Skillington, 2009), community development (Lloyd, 2010) and education (Grummel, 2007). The desire to align community education with government priorities and the potentially negative impact on its original ‘aims of enhancing learning, empowerment and contributing to civic society’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.25) has also been acknowledged.

Individual commentators (e.g. Finnegan 2008, Connolly 2007, Brady 2006 all cited in CEFA, 2014, p.6) as well as the Community Education Facilitators’ Association (cited in CEFA, 2014, p.18) have called attention to the increasing political tendency to reduce community education to an economic rather than social value. The possibility that community education in Ireland could be further depoliticised has also come one step closer with the publication of the *Community Education Programme: Operational Guidelines for Providers* (Department of Education and Skills, (DES) 2012 cited in CEFA, 2014, p.18). These guidelines present a contradictory picture of the role and function of community education in Ireland. On the one hand, the guidelines underline the role of community education in combating educational disadvantage. However, in outlining the intention to develop ‘a cohesive integrated service approach’ the guidelines worryingly add that one aspect of this approach will be to ‘avoid duplication’ (DES 2012 cited in CEFA, 2014, p.18) of services. Such a statement resonates strongly with the managerialism of neoliberalism but also jars with the grassroots ethos of community education and its interest with being ‘community-led, reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals and their community’ (CEN, 2000 cited in O’Reilly 2012, p.9). One way which community educators and campaigners have mooted to challenge this reductionist mind set has been to call for more research to be conducted on the multiple impacts of community education (e.g. The Edinburgh Papers, 2008; Mannien 2009, and Voss 2007 cited in Bailey, Breen and Ward, 2010, p.9). It is against this wider context of a call for more primary research on the value of community education that this research is located.

In 2010, 50,000 participants took part in community education (DES 2011, p. 25). Despite this number very little research has been conducted on the educa-

tional experiences of learners in this sector, with the exception of Slevin (2009), Evoy and McDonnell (2011), Bailey, Breen and Ward (2010) and Bailey, Ward and Goodrick (2011). The data from these studies offers an insight into how community education provides adult learners with a positive learning experience from which they acquire a renewed sense of self as well as an improved quality of life. The main findings from a qualitative research study exploring the social outcomes of community education in Limerick in 2011 will add to this growing body of literature.¹

It is important to acknowledge that Limerick City is the second most disadvantaged local authority in Ireland² with high proportions of unemployment and lone parent households (McCafferty and O’Keefe, 2009 cited in City of Limerick VEC, 2011, p.13). Low educational attainment in the city is often referenced. The Fitzgerald Report (2007), for example, reported that there is significant educational disadvantage in specific estates and in Limerick City as a whole (see also City of Limerick VEC, 2011, p.13; Barrett, Walker and O’Leary, 2008, p.3). Third-level attainment figures also highlight geographic disparity in Limerick City (see for example Humphreys, 2010). Yet, Limerick City also has a strong history in the promotion of learning. Since 2011 Limerick has held an annual Lifelong Learning Festival, which promotes learning throughout life for all and strives to build social capital and identity (Kearns, Lane, Neylon and Osborne, 2013). Adult and community education is a pivotal component of this focus on learning and is provided and/or supported in Limerick City by a mix of statutory, community and voluntary organisations. Limerick City Adult Education Service (LCAES) is located within the City of Limerick VEC³ and is tasked with providing learning opportunities to youths and adults returning to education. The LCAES works in collaboration with community-based groups to provide community-based adult education in 59 locations across Limerick City. In 2011, over 3,000 people participated in such courses, through three distinct and integrated programmes; Community Education, Basic Education Solutions (adult literacy) and Upskill Solutions (further education). Such sig-

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2 The first being Donegal (Donegal Community Education Forum, 2008)

3 At the time of research the public service education organisation was known as the City of Limerick VEC. In 2013 this entity was reconfigured and is now known as the LCETB (Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board).

nificant enrolment figures indicate that the provision of community-based education offers a significant platform for the aforementioned lifelong learning to the inhabitants of Limerick City. In this respect, Limerick City provides a useful example of how community education can be ‘creative, participative and needs-based’ (CEN, 2000 cited in O’Reilly 2012, p.9).

Methodology

In 2011, a qualitative study of the social value of community education in Limerick City was undertaken.⁴ This qualitative research focus is in keeping with the participant centred philosophy of community education (Connolly, 2004, p.11). Purposive sampling was used to provide conceptual richness (Lindlof, 1995) and a series of twenty-five focus groups was convened in community locations. The composition of focus groups was diverse: including adult learners (past and present, male and female, participating in both accredited and unaccredited courses), family members of learners, community-based adult education tutors, Home School Community Liaison Coordinators, representatives of funders of adult education in Limerick City and support staff for community-based settings. All of the focus groups were approximately one hour in duration and endeavoured to elicit the participants’ views on their experiences of community education, the benefits identified as a result of such participation and the challenges facing the on-going provision of community education.

Ten in-depth interviews (averaging approximately 45 minutes each) were also conducted with current and past adult learners, in order to examine and expand on issues emerging from the focus groups. As a result of the sampling strategy a total of 145 individuals participated in the research. Analysis was therefore based on data reduction and interpretation.

As a consequence of this process of data analysis, four overarching key themes were identified. These themes, though overlapping and reinforcing, were:

- Impact on Individuals
- Impact on Families
- Impact on Communities
- Impact on Wider society.

4 See Power et al. (2011) for the final report from this study.

Impact on individuals

Human capital ‘refers to the knowledge and skills possessed by individuals, which enables them to function effectively in economic and social life’ (Schuller, 2004b, p.14). Attending community education classes can result in improved economic outcomes, which subsequently allows learners to secure better paid employment (McNair, 2002, p.235). Further personal dividends can include decision making skills, problem solving skills, leadership skills and improved communication skills (McNair, 2002, pp.240–241). In this research, the cumulative reported benefits of participation in community education at an individual level highlighted issues around self-image, social contact and involvement, and orientation towards learning.

Poor educational attainment and a lack of interest in schooling were the most tangible effects of the learners’ learning experiences prior to participation in adult education classes, and a common view was that such courses constitute a ‘second chance’ at learning. In addition, a previous failure to understand the lifelong impact of education was identified by a majority of learners in almost half of the focus groups conducted:

Well for me like it wasn’t important at the time you know because you were so young you didn’t understand what education was, but as soon as you start going looking for work you realise then how important it is (Participant, Adult Learner Northside Group).

This (new) recognition of the importance of lifelong learning was attributed to the learners’ participation in adult education courses.

In the context of personal development, previous negative experiences of formal education were generally overridden by the sense of empowerment that arose from participation in adult education. The research process itself provided anecdotal evidence of this, as did the reported accounts of improved communication (e.g. resolution of a long-standing issue with a child’s teacher) and self-confidence (e.g. giving a PowerPoint presentation to 140 people). Many learners expressed pride and a sense of belonging as a consequence of their participation. As one participant noted ‘... you’re bringing life experiences and everybody is bringing life experiences and it’s very enrichin’ (Participant, Adult Learner Northside Group).

The data suggests that community education is having a significant impact on

the progression of adult learners in the city. While there is a definite point of difference between accredited and non-accredited learners, with the former group referring to up-skilling and job attainment and the latter concentrating more on looking for new classes to replace those that were due to end (in order to 'keep busy'), both groups of learners were united in their aspiration to continue their education and the process of self-improvement. In this respect, community based education has enhanced the human capital of the participants. This supports Narushima's (2008) research which found that attending lifelong learning classes for the elderly allowed them to continue pursuing various educational interests. As a result participating in community education can help promote lifelong learning (Feinstein and Hammond, 2004, pp.201–202).

The social benefits of community education for individuals range from acting as an outlet for socialising to actively working towards social inclusion. Participation in classes equated to a sense of freedom for the majority of learners, while the social component appears to enable learners to draw on support from each other. Based on feedback from learners, peer support is subdivided into two sections – things in common with fellow learners and active peer support. Both aspects of this peer support are interconnected and overlap.

Increased identity capital emerged strongly during the fieldwork. For some, it was explained simply as 'having a voice' while others described how they now perceive and present themselves differently. One of the learners explained that she began the classes by introducing herself as a housewife but now refers to herself as a childcare worker. Other female learners referred to the self-satisfaction in realising that they have an identity beyond their parenting role. This is in keeping with Inglis and Bassett's (1988 cited in Drudy and Lynch 1993, p.270) findings that women engage in adult education in order to develop an identity for themselves outside of the domestic role and setting.

A significant finding from the study is that the classroom setting was noted by approximately half of the learners as a venue where personal issues such as loneliness, the impact of suicide and addiction issues etc., can be discussed with other learners (who have become friends), and in this context the learners appear to be offering tangible supports to one another. In this respect, community education had a preventive function; preventing aspects of 'personal and social dislocation' (Feinstein and Sabates, 2008, p.57).

Finally, our data suggests that what begins as a decision to seek out new ave-

nues of socialization, or as a break from the daily routine, ultimately results in the recognition of the impact of lifelong learning, which generally leads participants to enroll in further classes. Their respective educational journeys present community based learners as individuals who have developed a sense of resilience, responding to personal challenges. Through their interactions with fellow learners and tutors they have become empowered through their class interactions to pursue further learning.

Impact on families

The case study in Limerick clearly indicates that the social benefits of participation in community education extend beyond the individual learner to their families. These benefits include; positive influences on children's education; the transmission of a new view of education in the context of a lifelong process; improved family communication and affirmative changes in family dynamics.

The relationship between participation in community education and secondary benefits for learners' children is very apparent in the data. In terms of social benefits, that relationship extends beyond mere parent-child interactions. From examples provided by learners, community education has contributed to effective communication with school teachers and principals, and formal learning being supported in the home environment. Parents report being more confident in their dealings with their children, e.g. helping with their homework. This changing role in family dynamics and personal relationships is particularly pronounced among literacy learners where people adopt new roles thanks to their literacy training. In this respect, community education would appear to be playing a part in not only normalising learning in the family, but also helping to break the cycle of poverty or generational disadvantage experienced by some families. As such, one learner summarised community education as "empowering parents to empower their children".

The data suggests that the adult learners that participated in the research are now cognisant of the need to demonstrate to children and grandchildren that learning is not something that should 'stop at the school gates'. This recognition was raised regularly during interviews with learners. Parents described drawing on their own biographies to act as an incentive for their children to do well at school: '... you would talk to kids more to make sure they went to school cause they would turn out like myself and you don't want that' (Participant, Adult Learner Northside – Literacy Group). There were repeated references made to the role model aspect of engagement in adult education classes. There were

three main components to such a role; that children would see the importance of staying in school now so that they would not have to depend on such classes in later life; that seeing their parents interested in education would influence their own interest; and that learning would be seen as important beyond the boundaries of formal education. Such benefits may have had humble beginnings, but they have gained momentum in the journey towards the most pivotal social benefit, that of breaking the cycle of social marginalisation:

It broke a cycle in my family, you know the cycle of the mother does not work, does not educate herself, you get to a certain level in education and then you go get a job. Like myself I was working at 15, my mother was working at 13 so I was just repeating the cycle and then I was able to break it and education gave me the ability to break that, to realise that there is more (Participant, Past Learners Focus Group).

Improved familial communication was evidenced through a variety of examples. One woman, for example, sat the Leaving Certificate at the same time as her grandson and described how their communication had ‘never been better’, as it gave them something in common as well as providing an opportunity for mutual support and understanding. Learners referred to the fact that adult education provided a communication outlet with their grandchildren that they did not have with their own children. Others described how they have a better understanding of the stress and pressure that their children are under as a result of study and exams (since beginning to do homework themselves) and they ‘aren’t as hard on them’ as a result.

Finally, participation in community adult education is creating new forms of support for learners from spouses and family members, leading to a more equal distribution of domestic chores and responsibilities. In particular for some women, commencing classes was their first time being away from home for decades, thus changing family dynamics. The practical skills attained through classes also affected this dynamic – one man, for example, told how literacy classes meant that he could attend appointments (e.g. with doctors or at the social welfare office) without his wife accompanying him for the first time since they had married. This, in effect, gave him a new sense of independence in addition to freeing up his wife’s time. This shift in dynamic, however, is not always positive. One participant cited the sense of redundancy that his wife experienced when improved literacy enabled him to manage the household bills for the first time in their marriage. The subsequent reversal in their long-estab-

lished spousal roles put a strain on their relationship: ‘she started to feel that I had taken over her job, I suppose’ (Participant, Past Learners Focus Group).

These findings indicate that community education has a profound impact on families. Beginning with the learners, their educational experiences enhance their individual human capital and identity building capital. This level of personal transformation introduces a new degree of bonding social capital within families which can give way to new relationships being forged between spouses as well as between adults, children and grandchildren. These interactions strengthen and support everyone respectively.

Impact on communities

The theme of community was one of the most prevalent throughout the study. Being a member of a community has a physical, psychological, and social connotation for participants (Cohen, 1985). This sense of community in turn yielded a politicising as well as an educational impact on participants. These included: an increasing awareness of social issues within the community; enabling participation in adult education; integrating learners into the community; community engagement and giving back to the community; and increased use of community facilities and resources.

Participants in this study displayed an acute awareness of most of the social issues that affect their communities. Even from the outset of interviews, where experiences of formal education were sought, many stories were prefaced with lines such as “your address is your biggest problem when you’re trying to get a job”. A variety of other socio-economic issues were raised by learners, examples include young motherhood, long term unemployment, crime, drug use and the consequential stigmatisation that is experienced by the entire community. The correlation between class and educational exclusion was identified by many learners, particularly in the context of how opportunities to recognise the talent of people from disadvantaged areas were often missed, thus preventing any effective social mobility. However, there does appear to be a greater overall understanding of the role of education in counteracting social marginalisation. The development of such awareness is important given that Freire (1986) argues that people must be enabled to develop a critical awareness of the world around them and their relationship to it in order to become empowered.

The research findings highlight that community-based adult education is perceived as being “owned by the community” and that it should be kept “within

the communities”. For the majority of learners, basic logistics meant they felt local access to classes influenced both their decision and ability to participate. In this sense community education was a geographically bonded concept. As a result, transportation, costs (e.g. towards a tea kitty) and childcare arrangements were the most heavily cited factors in accessing a course. However, most of these barriers were overcome by community provision.

An important issue that arose in the course of the focus group discussions relates to that of territory; the sense that people belong to “certain parishes” and areas. For some, the range of courses available in the local community limited the educational horizon of local residents. However, the sentiment was quite strongly expressed that adults have a bounded sense of community and “won’t go outside of their own area” (Participant, Tutors Focus Group). Additionally, a number of the learners spoke of how community education classes actually helped them to integrate into the community, which they saw as being extremely important given that they had moved into the community from elsewhere.

There were numerous examples of how participation in classes and the subsequent establishment of informal networks (social capital) and increased self-confidence (an element of human capital), led to increased community engagement. The majority of focus groups recalled examples of where people were involved in activities that were organised by the local community. In these ways, adult learners in Limerick City are offered a number of different opportunities to be active in their local community. These opportunities include the establishment of parent-support groups, nominations to Boards of Management of local schools and signing up to other locally-run activities such as yoga and dancing. In these ways, community education in Limerick City openly facilitates the development of linking capital in the community.

One of the most striking factors to emerge during discussions with learners about their knowledge and use of community facilities was how participation in classes was generally their first encounter with such facilities. This is as an extremely important development in terms of building capacity within a community. Many of the learners spoke of how they had walked by buildings such as community centres, family resource centres and community development projects and had never known what they were. One man, for example, told of how he walked by his local community development centre every day for years on his way to and from work and never even noticed it was there until he began classes. This was echoed in every focus group. The ability of community educa-

tion to raise participants' awareness of the amenities in their community is a less apparent, but valid and worthwhile contribution to any community.

Impact on wider society

The social benefits of community education also extend into the local and national political arena. In this research study learners referred to voting in elections, empowered by the fact that they could read party manifestos and fill out the ballot sheet for the first time. Lobbying to safeguard community education was also cited on numerous occasions, arising from awareness among learners of the link between funding cutbacks and a reduction in the number of classes available. Participating in community education is thus directly and indirectly fostering a desire for social change, which has culminated in political action by some adult learners. Such engagement, in the broader context of civil society, is critical. As Harvey (2014, p.72) contends 'voluntary and community organizations are known to contribute knowledge, expertise, ground-truth and a long-term perspective to the policy-making process.'

The development of an informed social awareness among participants not only inspired forms of political activism, it also contributed to the development of empowered relationships with social institutions. One clear indicator of this change was how the increased personal confidence of learners extended into their relationship with institutions and their interaction with professionals and statutory agencies. Learners spoke of being able to offer opinions (to individuals and agencies) for the first time, in turn feeling rewarded on a personal level, and as a consequence being empowered to continue learning.

Community education classes in Limerick City have also created opportunities for people of different age groups to interact and socialise with one another. The cooperation between mixed age groups who may traditionally have had no previous interactions with one another should be seen as a highly beneficial outcome. It helps create bridging social capital and may reduce ageism and age discrimination as a consequence.

It is important to note that amidst the multitude of benefits cited during the research, barriers to participation in community education were also identified. While some are logistical and easily resolved once classes commence (e.g. sharing lifts), the two most significant barriers are previous educational experiences and financial considerations. Many learners commented on how difficult their formal education experience was and, accordingly, had a degree of fear and hes-

itancy about returning to education: “I’ve met people lately who were carrying this burden around for years and felt desperate about education” (Participant, LCAES Focus Group). In the context of financial barriers, this can be attributed more to costs associated with attending classes (cost of transport, materials, etc.) than class fees per se, which are typically nominal in nature. However, in light of the current economic climate even minor costs can present a perceptible barrier to access and/or participation.

Conclusion

Community education is at an interesting juncture at present in Ireland. Upstream policy developments as well as a national financial crisis have contributed to structural changes in the organisation of community education. However, at a time of economic and social upheaval, it should be equally important to remember the social and transformative – individual and social – abilities of community education. This research adds its voice to recent calls to reiterate the social and radical model of action that community education inspires. To this end, this article has documented the impact that community education is having on Limerick City, by mapping the social benefits of this type of education for its adult learners, their families and communities. From their initial community education experience, adult learners can progress through stages of personal development and confidence to develop supportive relationships with their family members as well as with their peers in the classroom. Moreover, taking part in a community education class is presenting its participants with opportunities to create and sustain social support networks for themselves. All of this has resulted in a better understanding of the processes of change and increased social awareness. In summation, the article demonstrates that adult learners experience significant improvements in their lives which go far beyond any economic impact that community education might bear. To this end, community education is a key community resource and asset which, if allowed to adhere to its grassroots model, will offer a transformative base for adult learners, their families and wider community.

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