

Equality and human capital: Conflicting concepts within state-funded adult education in Ireland

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Abstract

This article offers a critique of the concept of equality as it informs the White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life (2000). It also outlines the extent to which human capital theory can be seen to have effectively colonised lifelong learning from the outset of its adoption by the European Union with highly constraining implications for state-funded adult education in Ireland.

Key words: (Equality, Human Capital, Lifelong Learning)

Introduction

As is acknowledged on the website of the Department of Education and Skills¹ (DES), *Learning for Life, White Paper on Adult Education* (DES: 2000), remains the unchanged foundation document of Irish government policy in the sector of adult education where the state is directly involved as funding stakeholder. Equality was espoused as one of three principles underpinning the White Paper, the others being Lifelong Learning as a Systemic Approach and Interculturalism. This paper offers a critique of the White Paper's standpoint on equality in the light of developments in equality theory in the interval since its publication. It also offers an analysis of the extent to which the position is further compounded by the wholesale adoption of human capital theory within the theatre of lifelong learning of which adult education is a key field. Accordingly, it contrasts the perspective on equality informing the White Paper with that which has emerged meanwhile in the field of equality studies. Following this it traces the progress of human capital theory since it first emerged in 1961 and its penetration of lifelong learning throughout the European Union since the

1 www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Further-Education-Training/ As viewed on 25/01/2015.

mid-1990s, before concluding with the challenges faced by adult education in the quest for a society characterized by what is designated equality of condition.

Equality as espoused within state-funded adult education

At an early stage in the White Paper the express vision adopted for adult education comprised: a national programme of Adult Education within an overall framework of lifelong learning on the basis of its contribution to six priority areas: Consciousness Raising; Citizenship; Cohesion; Competitiveness; Cultural Development; and Community Building (DES, 2000, p. 28).

This augured well for the development of adult education policy which would have at its heart not only a participatory approach to learning but also the promise of real engagement with the building of a just society. Expectation was then heightened with the adoption of *equality* as one of the three principles underlying adult education, as indicated above (DES, 2000 p. 30).

The principle of equality is duly summarized in the Paper. It is worth reprising the central tenets of this summary and its tacit acknowledgment of the unequal state of Irish society:

The Government recognises that barriers arising from differences of socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability and gender continue to hinder the emergence of a fully inclusive and cohesive society. (DES, 2000, p. 33)

Following the positing of educational attainment and qualifications as key determinants of inequality, the Paper then sets out a strategy for the field:

Clearly, if Adult Education is to counteract the impact of disadvantage in early school participation and achievement, there must be careful targeting of initiatives on those most in need (DES, 2000 p. 33).

The earlier visionary promise is thereby stifled at birth. While the vision animating the concept of equality as posited in the Paper is one of a society characterised by inclusivity and cohesion, there is clear acceptance that the existing model satisfies those hallmarks. Consequently, the task for adult education is to facilitate access to that reality, equality amounting to nothing more than a nebulous, unqualified condition which is dependent on the provision of educational opportunity. Thus confined, the paper fails to engage definitively with the principle of equality. While access to education is important, equality has implications which are societal-wide and go far beyond inclusion in the status quo.

Accordingly, there is no further attempt in the Paper to elaborate on what is meant by an inclusive and cohesive society. Instead, the truism that exclusion from the existing model is the experience of many adults arising from ‘the impact of disadvantage in early school participation and achievement’ is cited. Following from this, the strategy adopted as a panacea for this historically shameful state of affairs is unveiled as the development of ‘an all-embracing system for second-chance and Further Education in Ireland’ (DES, 2000, p. 84). The top priorities cited are ‘to address the low literacy levels of the Irish adult population ... (and) the large numbers of Irish adults (1.1m aged 15–64) who have not completed upper second-level education’ (DES, 2000, p. 84) as if this is to ensure the onset of a society characterised by equality. Ultimately, the strategy that emerged from this flawed appraisal of what was needed to generate equality subsisted in what were designated as four pillars:

- a National Adult Literacy Programme as the top priority;
- a Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) providing for a significant expansion of part-time options under Youthreach/Traveller, VTOS and PLC courses, with a particular emphasis on promoting a return to learning of those in the population with less than upper secondary education;
- an ICT Basic Skills programme for adults as part of BTEI;
- increased flexibility and improved organisational structures for self-funded part-time Adult Education in schools (DES, 2000, p. 85).

As many adult learners have testified in journals such as *Explore*, large numbers of individuals have been empowered by the programmes entailed under this framework since it was first launched in 2001. Such empowerment is not, therefore, without significance. But wider access to education, such as was introduced in the final third of the 20th century, has not led to societal equality. In excess of two million full-time students have progressed from 2nd level to higher education between 1966 and 2006² (after which point they could have been expected to begin exercising influence on the socio-economic condition of the nation). Meanwhile, AONTAS (The National Adult Learning Organisation) concluded that there were ‘approximately 304,900 people participating in some form of adult learning in 2012’³ a figure which implies that significant numbers

2 www.heai.ie/en/statistics/students-attending-all-third-level-institutions

3 www.aontas.com/blog/2012/08/28/how-many-people-are-participating-in-adult-educati/

of people have participated in this field during the decades before 2012. Indeed much adult education, especially community education, has been concerned with equality, and the N.O.W (New Opportunities for Women) project was an important initiative in this regard in the early 1990s. Nonetheless, significant inequality has persisted. An insight into factors that have militated against the potential of community education is revealed in a number of recent research studies. In *Roads to Learning*, a report on education and training by women's groups in North and West Mayo it was noted that:

... while the women's groups tend towards community activity, none indicated an involvement in political activity. This is a crucial exclusion as these women's groups profess to be driven by community education – "an agent of social change and community advancement" (DES, 2000) and community development principles.' (2004, p. 16).

In an exhaustive study of community education in Donegal a finding relating to structural inequalities noted that only 'a minority of providers see the exploration of structural inequalities, through group work, as the goal of community education' (2008, p. 66). Perhaps the most significant finding is located in the study *Community Education: More Than Just a Course*, conducted by AONTAS on behalf of the DES:

... the lack of a consistent approach to the management of ALCES (Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme) – funded community education across the VECs means that the unique process and role of it expressed in the White Paper may not be being implemented uniformly. This conclusion is borne out by the fact that VECs were less likely to use process-focused criteria such as participatory methodologies, a focus on social/community action or those pertaining to critical analysis, to make decisions about what groups to fund. Yet, these aspects of methodology are, according to the White Paper, what make community action unique. (Bailey & Ward, 2011, p. 102).

In the *The Spirit Level*, the study of inequality in the so-called Developed World, Ireland's relatively unfavorable position over a wide range of social and health indices, when juxtaposed with income inequality, is graphically revealed. For instance, using data sourced from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the authors, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010, p. 23) illustrate that, while Ireland veered towards high income inequality, on an index of child well-being it was deemed to be only about 66% that of Sweden, the highest.

As they also illustrate, extrapolating from the *United Nations Human Development Report 2006* (UNHDP, 2006) the richest 20% of the Irish population were then almost six times richer than the poorest 20% (*ibid.*, p. 17). Their data refers to early stages in that decade so that it is not unreasonable to suggest that the various indices they explored would nowadays show considerable deterioration, namely increased inequality, given the austerity visited on Ireland since 2009. Evidence to support that contention is indeed to hand in the findings of the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2014) in its *annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC). The upward path of grinding inequality is clearly illustrated by changes in the deprivation rates experienced by many members of Irish society:

Changes in deprivation rate⁴ 2007 – 2013

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
11.8%	13.8%	17.1%	22.6%	24.5%	26.9%	30.5%

All of the foregoing evidence calls into question both the conceptualisation of equality in the White Paper and the measures adopted to counter enduring inequality. A society characterized by equality continues to prove elusive when predicated on empowerment of the individual through access to educational opportunity. Education for individual empowerment, the all-prevailing model in education, needs to be problematized since the juxtaposition of wider access to education and growing inequality strongly indicates that social mobility rather than the elimination of inequality is the over-riding outcome.

Inglis (1997, p. 2), drawing on Foucault, distinguishes between empowerment and emancipation:

empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power.

4 Without heating at some stage in the last year. Unable to afford a morning, afternoon or evening out in the last fortnight. Unable to afford two pairs of strong shoes. Unable to afford a roast once a week. Unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day. Unable to afford new (not second-hand) clothes. Unable to afford a warm waterproof coat. Unable to afford to keep the home adequately warm. Unable to afford to replace any worn out furniture. Unable to afford to have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month. Unable to afford to buy presents for family or friends at least once a year.

Later, he sets out the challenge when he elaborates:

empowerment ... has become synonymous with concepts as varied as coping skills, personal efficacy, competence, self-sufficiency, self-esteem, mutual support, natural support systems, community organization, and neighborhood participation. By contrast, education for liberation and emancipation is a collective educational activity which has as its goal social and political transformation. If personal development takes place, it does so within that context. But this process involves structures rather than individuals (Inglis, 1997, pp. 10 – 11).

Inglis is drawing on more than Foucault, of course. His exposition of emancipation resonates with ideas emanating from Freire and especially those on praxis and critical, transitive consciousness. Of the latter, Freire says it is:

... characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitutions of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and for the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old – by accepting what is valid in both old and new (1973, p. 18).

This could be seen as a charter for critical dialogue and analysis but one which would put practitioners at risk of being at odds with certain funders as revealed in the research report *Not Just a Course*, and noted above.

It has to be regarded as ironic then that one chapter of the White Paper – that on Community Education – thoroughly echoes Inglis and Freire when recounting the egalitarian thrust of:

- its collective social purpose and inherently political agenda – to promote critical reflection challenge existing structures, and promote empowerment, improvement so that participants are enabled to influence the social contexts in which they live;
- its promotion of participative democracy. It sees a key role for Adult Education in transforming society. (DES, 2000, p. 113).

This chapter might thus be seen as an enlightened annex within the paper as a whole, possibly reflecting the demand from all quarters of the adult education field for radical responses to the plight of the large proportion of Ireland's adult population experiencing low levels of literacy, following the publication by the OECD of *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* in 1997. It is likely to have been greatly influenced by certain non-governmental, independent figures who were consulted in depth⁵.

Perspectives on equality post 2000

While an increasing number of individuals and organisations engage in highlighting inequality and contributing to a growing dialogue, Baker et al (2004/2009) have led the way in theorizing equality in the interval since the publication of *Learning for Life*. At the outset, they distinguish between three levels of equality: basic equality; liberal egalitarianism; and equality of condition which is the model they advocate. Table 1 is a reproduction of the summary framework formulated by Baker et al (2004, 2009, p. 43) illustrating how equality of condition compares with basic equality and liberal egalitarianism.

5 While inputs were invited from many quarters and many others were received besides, particular contributions were invited from Professor John Coolahan and Dr Anne Ryan and, in particular, Dr Tom Collins who was accorded leave of absence in order to act as adviser – all three from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. These assisted in drafting and re-drafting the text but editorial function was confined to the Department of Education and Science. (O'Dea, 2000).

Table 1. Basic equality, liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition

Dimensions of equality	Basic equality	Liberal egalitarianism	Equality of condition
<i>Respect and recognition</i>	Basic respect.	Universal citizenship. Toleration of difference. Public/private distinction.	Universal citizenship. 'Critical interculturalism': – acceptance of diversity – redefined public/private distinction – critical dialogue over cultural differences. – limits to unequal esteem
<i>Resources</i>	Subsistence needs.	Anti-poverty focus. Rawls's difference principle (maximise the prospects of the worst off).	Substantial equality of resources broadly defined, aimed at satisfying needs and enabling roughly equal prospects of well-being.
<i>Love, care and solidarity</i>		A private matter? Adequate care?	Ample prospects for relations of love, care and solidarity
<i>Power relations</i>	Protection against inhuman and degrading treatment.	Classic civil and personal rights. Liberal democracy.	Liberal rights <i>but</i> – limited property rights; – group-related rights Stronger, more participatory politics. Extension of democracy to other areas of life.
<i>Working and learning</i>		Occupational and educational equal opportunity. Decent work? Basic education.	Educational and occupational options that give everyone the prospect of self-development and satisfying work.

Liberal egalitarianism can be said to constitute the model that tends to prevail throughout the so-called Developed World. However, as Baker et al (2009, p. 25) point out, 'a key assumption of the views we describe as liberal egalitarianism is that there will always be major inequalities between people in their status, resources, work and power.'

Power relations are ubiquitous. Inglis (1997, p. 1) reminds us of Foucault's argument that 'power must be seen not as something which is static and possessed, but which circulates within and between us.' Acknowledging this phenomenon, we have a responsibility to deploy it to ensure greater equality in the wider governance of society. That means a more thorough engagement with democracy than casting a vote. While the ballot box confers considerable power on the voter and has yielded greater potential for political equality, as Baker et al (2009, p. 29) put it:

... we need to contrast these equal political rights with the fact that economically and culturally dominant groups have much more influence on public policy in all liberal democracies than disadvantaged groups.

Our responsibility to society means going further, therefore, than:

Liberal democracy and the conception of political equality that goes with it (which) are thus themselves in line with the general idea that liberal equality is about regulating inequality rather than eliminating it (Baker et al 2009, pp. 29–30).

If adult education were to embrace Equality of Condition (Table 1), among the responsibilities it would place on the field are: facilitating a more inclusive yet critical perspective on citizenship; advocating the distribution of resources conducive to all-round greater well-being; fostering love, care and solidarity as a norm; championing participatory democracy as accepted practice in every context; pursuing secure, positive educational and occupational experience for all. Much adult education theory insists the field must have a role in this. O'Shea and O'Brien propose that:

... there is a modern view that transformation is possible and that through education as a form of personal conscientisation, collective action and solidarity, we can transform our world (2011, p. 5).

In discussing Habermas's relevance to adult education Brookfield writes:

Habermas steadfastly refuses to ditch modernity's dream of using human reason to create a more humane world. Part of that dream is bound up with the possibility of adults learning to speak to each other in honest and informed ways so that they can hold democratic conversations about important issues in a revived public sphere. Since learning to talk in this way is the most important hope for creating democracy, there could hardly be anything more important in civil society for Habermas than adult education (2010, p. 128).

However, transformation of this neo-liberally dominated world is a challenge of increasing magnitude since much of what happens throughout all of contemporary learning is determined by the uncritical adoption of human capital theory as a guiding paradigm.

Human capital: A constraint on adult education

Those most associated with originating the theory of human capital were Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, both economists at Chicago University. In December 1961, Schultz opened his Presidential address to the annual meeting of the American Economic Association as follows:

Although it is obvious that people acquire useful skills and knowledge, it is not obvious that these skills and knowledge are a form of capital, that this capital is in substantial part a product of deliberate investment, that it has grown in Western societies at a much faster rate than conventional (non-human) capital, and that its growth may well be the most distinctive feature of the economic system ... (Schultz, 1961).

The idea of human capital has since been extended pervasively into the unwitting consciousness of the individual who is then increasingly persuaded by the state and those who dominate the economy to assume greater responsibility for her/his so-called human capital. Among the many available definitions of human capital, that offered by the OECD is instructive:

Human capital is broadly defined as a combination of individuals' own innate talents and abilities and the skills and learning they acquire through education and training ... the business world, which has eagerly embraced the concept of human capital, tends to define it more narrowly as workforce skills and talents directly relevant to the success of a company or specific industry (OECD, 2007, p. 2).

Human capital has been embraced by the business sector as indicated in the title of an Irish Business and Economic Confederation's (IBEC) (2008) leading publication *The Essential Guide to Human Capital Management and Measurement: How to Measure the Impact of HR Practices*. The state too has been a major apologist for human capital theory with all the implications that follow for public services, including education. Surprisingly, there is little critique in the public policy area in Ireland of the extent to which it has come to colonise the entire spectrum of lifelong learning – including adult education – so that much of what passes for best practice can be seen to spring from human capital theory. Accordingly, much of adult education, which now languishes under the Further Education and Training Act, 2013, is increasingly coerced into being instrumental. This is best exemplified in the *Guidelines for VECs: Aligning further education provision with the skills needs of enterprise*, issued by the DES in 2013 and which is unabashedly utilitarian. Several adult education programmes reside under this umbrella.

A Union breached

In 1993 the European Union (EU) revealed how fully it had become captivated by human capital theory in its White Paper *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment: The Challenges and Ways Forward into the 21st Century* which also heralded the adoption of lifelong learning. In order to sustain economic growth and turn this into jobs, this White Paper proposed the following as one of six specific actions:

Raising the stock of human capital: The inadequacy of present education and training systems in meeting the challenge of long-term competitiveness should be addressed by developing a range of measures, in the context of national structures ... (p. 133).

As promised in the foregoing Paper, another – the *White Paper on Education and Training: Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* – was published in 1995. Having correctly pointed out that traditional preoccupation with paper qualifications “locks” out much talent and had led to an elite ‘which is not truly representative of the available human resource potential’ it then indicated what should happen in its place:

we need to make the best use of skills and abilities irrespective of how they were obtained and to enhance everyone's potential by catering more closely for the needs of the individual, business and industry. What is needed is a

more open and flexible approach. Such an approach should also encourage lifelong learning by allowing for and encouraging a continuing process of skill acquisition (p. 15).

Having adopted human capital as a dominant force in lifelong learning, the EU has assiduously pursued it. Much of the escalation in recent years is traceable to the Lisbon Strategy as agreed by the European Council in 2000.

The goal of this strategy was to enable the EU ‘to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.’ (European Council, 2000, p. 1).

The member states were all urged ‘to take the necessary steps’ to meet such targets as:

a European framework should define the new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning: IT skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills; a European diploma for basic IT skills, with decentralised certification procedures, should be established in order to promote digital literacy throughout the Union (*ibid.*, pp. 8 – 9).

Lifelong learning was therefore to be at the centre of the strategy but, as defined, it can be seen as largely focused on human capital development.

Furthermore, towards the end of 2005, the EU Commission submitted a document to the European Parliament and to the Council recommending the adoption of a set of key competences as central to the lifelong learning project, furthering the elevation of human capital theory to a position of primacy within education. The Council was persuaded to accept this proposal: ‘the development of skills and competences is a key element of lifelong learning strategies’. (European Council, 2005, p. 21).

Ultimately, these competences – compiled by ‘experts’ from 31 countries and European level stakeholders – comprised eight in total:

1. communication in the mother tongue
2. communication in foreign languages
3. competences in maths, science and technology
4. digital competence

5. learning to learn
6. interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, and civic competence
7. sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
8. cultural expression

(*European Commission, 2007, pp. 1 – 12.*)

Of the eight competences, two at most – “interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, and civic competence” and “cultural expression” – can be deemed to address social issues. Consequently, this prioritising of competences, when contrasted with the absence of a tradition of critical pedagogy in all sectors of education, inevitably works to ensure that social justice issues are fated to occupy the margins. Human capital theory was now placed firmly in the ascendant, the rationale being one of annexing the prevailing system rather than reforming or re-directing it.

Ireland follows suit

As indicated within the section on BTEI in *Learning for Life*, Ireland duly replicated the colonisation of lifelong learning by human capital theory, despite much progressive rhetoric earlier in the paper:

Access to information and communications technology training, electronic technician training, language skills, enterprise development, business, tourism, art and craft, childcare, and a broad range of disciplines within the industry and services sector will form part of the approach A particular priority will be to increase provision at Foundation and Level 1 or equivalent for those with low skills ... (p. 93).

The annexation of lifelong learning by human capital grew apace in the decade following publication of *Learning for Life*. In the *National Development Plan (NDP) 2007 – 2013: Transforming Ireland: A Better Quality of Life for All* (Department of the Taoiseach, 1997), an entire chapter is designated Human Capital Priority. Within this, all spheres of lifelong learning are expressly co-opted by human capital:

Further investment in human capital will support greater adaptability in the education and training systems, with a particular emphasis on up-skilling those already at work, those who wish to return to work, including older people, and those whose need for learning is greatest (p. 41).

The NDP ends with the pronouncement ‘Lifelong Learning is the guiding principle for education and training policy in the context of the Lisbon Agenda’ (*ibid.*, p. 189). It was now clear that the education system was to be deployed in pursuit of a particular agenda which called for a narrowing of vision to take account of the instrumental function education should pursue in serving the needs of the economy.

This was to be accompanied by ritual gestures towards wider participation by marginalised adults – an activation sub-programme was to target the unemployed; people with disabilities; lone parents; women; migrants; older workers; part-time workers and ex-offenders. The specific output projected for this sub-programme was ‘To expand the workforce’ (*ibid.*, p. 189), clearly reflecting a human capital rather than a social ethos.

The onward march of human capital continued uninterrupted with the appearance of such policy documents as *The Human Capital Investment Operational Programme* in 2007 (Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment) and *Building Ireland’s Smart Economy* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2008). It continues with the ongoing reports of the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs.

The invasion and colonization of state-supported adult education by human capital theory is most clearly illustrated in the DES *document Back to Education Initiative (BTEI): Operational Guidelines 2012*:

... priority must be given to those most educationally disadvantaged ...
At this level, priority will be given to programmes which demonstrate a response to critical skill shortages as outlined in the National Skills Strategy (*ibid.*, p. 6).

While the fourteen categories identified as constituting the target groups reveal a genuine concern with ‘social inclusion’, ultimately this could be said to be merely in keeping with basic equality criteria and far removed from any attempt to take account of equality of condition.

Conclusion

Adult education, in view of its intrinsic commitment to the principle of equality, must be free to take account of the greater epistemological clarity now available about the concept, to undertake social critique and to support the social action that is an inevitable outcome. An upgrading of the principle of equality in keeping with equality of condition, fueled by a vision of social justice, would seem to demand a radical overhaul of the thrust of state-funded adult education, together with community education. Such emancipatory development would throw off domination by the neo-liberal, human capital paradigm, and substitute a judicious balance between providing for the social justice needs of Irish society and those of the open, Irish economy.

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