

# Assessing the Health of Community Education: The Experience of Change from the Perspective of Community Education Practitioners

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the changing adult education landscape in Ireland from the perspective of community education practitioners. It draws on qualitative research which highlights the challenges faced by practitioners in terms of their practice, their relationship with adult learners, and their sense of professional identity. The findings of the study indicate a tension between current adult education policy and the principles and practice of community education. The paper highlights the role community education plays in addressing social and educational exclusion and recommends that practitioners are recognised as key partners in adult and further education policy development.*

**Keywords:** Community Education, Discourse, Status, SOLAS, ETB's, QQI, SICAP, social inclusion

## **Introduction**

Community education provision is 'amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of Adult Education in Ireland' according to the *White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life* (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 112). Such an acknowledgement, along with the fact that a full chapter was devoted to this area of adult education provision, inspired much hope for community education providers across Ireland at the time of its publication. However, since the collapse of the Irish economy in 2008 and the imposition of harsh austerity measures, community education has been experiencing considerable temperature fluctuations. This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the many significant changes brought about by the recent establishment of the following bodies: SOLAS (the new further education and training body); sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs), replacing

thirty-three Vocational Educational Committees (VECs); and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), a merger between four qualifications bodies including the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

Assessing the current temperature of community education involves an examination of contemporary policy, principles and practice, as well as the extent to which these are impacting on community education practitioners and their engagement with adult learners and local communities. This paper is based on a study which sought to do just that.

### **Social Inclusion**

The ‘Matthew’ effect of accumulated advantage exists in adult education in Ireland, where those engaging in lifelong learning are largely drawn from higher socio-economic groups (AONTAS, 2016). Those who arguably would benefit most are least likely to participate. This highlights the need for an inclusive approach which tackles entrenched inequality in Irish society. Inclusion, as a feature of community education, does not mean increasing engagement in existing societal structures, or what Freire called integrating perceived ‘marginals’ in to the ‘healthy society’ that they have forsaken (Freire, 1970). Fejes cautions against this ‘them and us’ approach to adult education in which those who do not participate for whatever reason ‘become constructed as “others” who are in need of normalisation through social policy’ (Fejes, 2008, p. 89). A more radical approach focuses on an emancipatory practice which acknowledges inequities inherent in existing structures and tackles structural inequality and political decisions which favour one group of people over another (Hurley, 2014).

Social Justice Ireland highlights the role of community education in this regard recommending that:

The further adult and community education sector achieves parity of esteem with other sectors within the formal system. This is particularly important given that it is expected to respond to the needs of large sections of the population who have either been failed by the formal system or for whom it is unsuitable as a way of learning. (Social Justice Ireland, 2015, p. 198)

Responding to such educational needs involves sensitivity to context (Russel, 2017). The recent changes to the adult and further education landscape are contextualised within a society experiencing increasing pressures as a result of

austerity, the ever widening gap between rich and poor (Social Justice Ireland, 2016), severe and disproportionate cuts to the community sector (Harvey, 2012), and a prioritisation of skills development over a broader view of education as a tool for strengthening democracy. The phasing out of government support for community development has compounded such challenges for community education providers. This phasing out began with the first wave of closures of community development projects (CDPs) in December 2009, when 14 of the 180 CDPs were informed of their closure by a Christmas Eve fax message from the Department of Education and Skills. In the following year, most of the rest of the projects were transferred to local partnerships (University College Cork, 2015). The Community Development Programme was replaced with the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP). Access to funding for this involves a competitive tendering processes for management of community development budgets, resulting in the co-option of the sector (Fitzsimons, 2017) and a reduction in community autonomy over project activities.

A recent ESRI study, which evaluated the impact of SICAP, emphasises the importance of community development in adult education, finding that outreach and involvement through local community groups had the greatest record in terms of engaging the most marginalised people. It also highlighted significant disquiet about the current policy approach, which has moved away from acknowledging community work and community development as an internationally recognised approach to social inclusion (Darmody and Smyth, 2018).

A key feature of the current SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy is its prioritisation of adult education as a tool for skills development. This has also created a challenge for community education providers who view the purpose of education more broadly. This concern is acknowledged within the FET strategy itself:

Interviews with stakeholders revealed important challenges in combining the maintenance of the inclusive ethos of the community education sector (for example), and at the same time matching the needs of employers. (SOLAS, 2014, p. 26)

### **Quality Assurance in Community Education**

There is no argument between policy makers and practitioners about the need for quality in community education. Numerous quality assurance resources

have been produced and utilised by the sector over the years (Fitzsimons, 2017), for example the *Guide to Best Practice in Women's Community Education* (AONTAS, 2009). In recent years, significant reform has taken place in the area of quality assurance in adult education, most notably since the establishment of QQI. However, it is worth bearing in mind the view that much reform in education 'emerges out of a struggle between groups to make their bias (and focus) state policy and practice' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 65) and that quality is interpreted differently depending on values, judgement and cultural context of the interpreter (Fitzsimons, 2017). The extent therefore to which new QQI quality assurance and programme validation policies amount to an improvement in the learning experience and outcomes for people who are socially excluded is open to debate.

The White Paper acknowledged the role of the community sector in 'curriculum planning and design and in decisions regarding pedagogical approaches' (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 118). However, the temperature of community education in terms of its capacity to participate in this work, and to continue to offer 'quality assured' accredited courses will be more measurable over the coming years, as community education providers manage the challenges of 'reengagement' with QQI and navigate new programme validation policies and procedures (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2017). Furthermore, the current QQI fees structure will add a significant burden to an already struggling sector. Such fees amount to a double, hidden cut where funding provided to community groups by one government department is being taken back by another agency of the state. Such concerns are adding to a climate of uncertainty for community education providers who wish to autonomously continue to develop and deliver programmes leading to QQI awards, as many had done in partnership with FETAC.

### **Discourse**

An examination of policy in adult and community education would not be complete without an acknowledgement of the influence of discourse in its development. Discourse involves the production of knowledge through language, or the practice of 'producing meaning', which enters in to and influences all social practices (Hall, 2006). This is in line with the ideas of French theorist Foucault, who highlights the disciplinary and regulatory power of discourse (Edwards, 2008). Italian philosopher Gramsci calls this influence 'common sense', or a collective knowledge that becomes accepted as beyond question, and therefore a powerful force in shaping society (Crehan, 2016).

Bernstein suggests that discourse can provide ‘the means whereby external power relations can be carried by it’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 4) and therefore promotes the importance of analysing the structure of discourse. Doing so, in the context of current policy will highlight the predominant use of certain language such as the term ‘further education and training’ which has replaced that of ‘adult education’. Where this former term had originally been used to describe a specific type of provision within the broad adult education sphere, it is now being used to name the entire sector (Murray *et al.*, 2014). Murray suggests that the use of specific types of terminology in adult and further education policy and practice represents an ‘attempt at legitimising a particular approach or philosophical position in relation to learning and professional practice’ (Murray, 2014). This approach, which is primarily concerned with the acquisition of skills, shies away from questions about systemic change and an analysis of the structures which perpetuate inequality (Ryan, 2014). Where acquisition of skills leading to employability is the primary goal of educational policies, the learner becomes perceived as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market place (Doyle, 2017).

Economic historian Karl Polanyi challenges these contemporary ‘common sense’ notions of market driven societies through an examination of the social and economic history of mankind. He found that the market economy, rather than being an inevitability, is an entirely unprecedented venture in the history of the race and that ‘gain and profit made on exchange never before played an important part in human economy’ (Polanyi, 1957, p. 45). He makes the crucial point about the changelessness of man as a social rather than an economic being, a point that is frequently raised in contemporary discussions about the purpose of education.

‘Activation’ is another term to become more prevalent in recent policy discourse. The phrase ‘social inclusion’ has been replaced with that of ‘active inclusion’ and, as previously mentioned, the Community Development programme was replaced with the Social Inclusion *Community Activation Programme*. It is accepted in social sciences that our values enter in to all our descriptions of the social world, and that most of our statements, however factual, have an ideological dimension (Hall, 2006). The concept of ‘active inclusion’, rather than being informed by practice on the ground, emerged on the European arena in 2005, under the UK’s EU presidency (Durnescu, 2015). Implicit in such terms as active inclusion and community activation is an underlying assumption that if people are not contributing in an explicit way to the economy, they are in

need of ‘activation’. This assumption disregards the other familial, community or societal roles they may be fulfilling.

The FET strategy defines active inclusion as ‘enabling every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society and this includes having a job’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 7). Furthermore, the ESRI report *Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future* states that the ‘main priorities and rationale of provision are to promote economic growth and development and to address social exclusion arising from economic inactivity’ (McGuinness *et al.* 2014, p. 111). Rather than acknowledging the complex societal and political factors which contribute to social and economic exclusion, this language suggests only a sense of personal culpability. Not only does the use of such language indicate an ideological position on the part of policy makers, it also influences how policy makers respond to the needs of people who are socially excluded.

### **Methodology**

The study on which this paper is based was framed within an interpretive paradigm, through which the researcher strives to understand and interpret the world in terms of its people (Cohen *et al.*, 2005). In keeping with the community education aim of providing a forum for the voices of otherwise silenced people (Connolly, 2003), and bearing in mind the difficulty for the sector in developing a collective voice (O’Neill and Cullinane, 2017), the purpose of this study was to give voice to participants. A qualitative methodology therefore was chosen, drawing on the Freirean principles of dialogue.

The chosen data collection technique was semi-structured interviews. Such an approach is ideal for interviewing participants who are articulate, are not hesitant to speak and who can share views and ideas comfortably (Creswell, 2015), as was the case with participants of this research.

The study is also influenced by critical theory, the intention of which is to emancipate the disempowered, redress inequality and to realise a democratic society based on the promotion of individual freedoms (Cohen *et al.*, 2005). The research is characterised by joint efforts and commitments of participants and researcher to change practices (Charmaz, 2005).

Community education is characterised by considerable diversity in terms of personnel, structure and funding. In order to reflect this diversity, three

categories of community education practitioner were interviewed for this study: 1) community based practitioner, 2) community education tutor, and 3) community education staff employed by an ETB. The breakdown was as follows:

<b>Category of practitioner</b>	<b>Number of practitioners interviewed</b>
Community based practitioner	6
Community education tutor	3
ETB employed community education practitioner	4

Of the four ETB employed participants, three were Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) and one was a community education resource worker. The participants represented diverse geographical locations as they were based in a number of different counties including Limerick, Waterford, Kerry Wexford, Dublin, Kildare and Galway.

Convenience sampling was used and participants were chosen on the basis that they had at least five years' experience working in the area of community education. This experience allowed for detailed exploration of the key themes (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Data analysis involved detailed examination of the data and a dissection of the text in order to identify key concepts. These concepts were then coded and clustered in order to allow patterns and key themes to emerge (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

### **Findings**

The study highlighted the role that community education plays in addressing the complexities and issues associated with poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. It also built on previous studies acknowledging the wider social, personal and intergenerational benefits of community education. However, a key theme to emerge was that policy developments have indicated a lack of acknowledgment of this and that community education is in danger of losing its identity within the current policy framework.

The contributions from participants highlighted frustration and anxiety associated with increased social problems as a result of austerity, budget cuts,

increased bureaucracy, and labour market activation policies at the expense of an acknowledgement of the broader purpose of community education. A sense of professional dissonance among research participants is also evident within the study.

### *Community Education and Social Inclusion*

A dominant theme to emerge was that community education has a wider focus and broader outcomes than labour market activation. All participants highlighted the role of community education in increasing community and civic engagement, reducing isolation, the promotion of interculturalism, improving mental and physical health, and progression to further education and training. The following comments from participants illustrate these points:

I think the more we support adults in education, the better the chances are for their children and grandchildren, for the next generation, so that investment pays dividends for the next generations coming. It's so short-term or short-sighted of us to ignore. (Community based participant)

Getting a job isn't the end game. It's getting out of the house, it's getting off medication for depression, it's being able to raise their children, it's all sorts of other outcomes that are hugely valid and also save the country a serious amount of money. (ETB participant)

I think here in [names city] ... where there have been lots of divisions between communities ... having people learning together, has had a positive effect, in terms of cross-city, local development. (ETB participant)

[The adult learner] was doing a nails [beauty therapy] class ... she's [now] on the parent's council, she's organising an event for the school, that's how lots of groups operate. (ETB participant)

The role of community education in terms of tackling intergenerational inequalities and reducing the costs to the economy associated with poverty was also promoted:

[The] women say it encouraged their own children to continue their education or to do their lessons or their exams. (Community based participant)



There's a lot of talk now about ... pumping money to the health system and I often think to myself 'well what about prevention?', I often think community education actually plays a part in that. (Tutor participant)

I see it hugely as a gateway to further education. (Tutor participant)

However, it was clear from the study that when community educators seek to contribute such perspectives they are often met with a neo-liberal outlook which is difficult to challenge (Fitzsimons, 2017). One participant sums this sentiment up as follows:

There isn't that vision of education that would enable the community education sector to be valued as having a real contribution to make to the quality of life, within the current discourse. (Community based participant)

This discourse was highlighted by participants who struggled to align it with their own values. For example, the term 'learner-centeredness' arose as a discussion point in the study. It is defined by one participant as follows:

It starts off with outreach, it starts off with talking and listening to people, what they want. The second thing then, is designing the programme around the learners. (ETB participant)

However, concern is expressed about the change in the interpretation of the term:

That understanding of learner-centred has changed ... from the learner being the starting point, the centre, the one that determines, to being the learner as the individual, moving up through a system of education ... about the progression of the individual learner ... I think it's related a lot, to the labour market activation, job readiness, employability. (ETB participant)

Definitions of this term are considered within the literature. Where current policy discourse offers a view of learner centeredness as being either equated with consultation, or independent learning and having access resources, Murray (2014) suggests that learner centeredness is an exercise in democracy and equality, which ultimately benefits society by encouraging active, and most importantly, critical citizenship.

Despite the fact that the term 'learner-centred' is not defined within the FET

Strategy, there is a statement that further education and training is ‘both learner-centred and participative in its pedagogical approach’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 22). A contradiction, however appears within the Strategy when it aims to ‘implement a new integrated FET planning model to ensure relevant learner centred, flexible and employment-led provision’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 140) .

### *Bureaucracy*

In times of cutbacks there is very often a rush by policy makers to impose strict ‘value for money’ rulings where education and learning becomes downgraded as something to be measured and transferred (O' Brien, 2016). A significant development in FET provision in 2017 was the roll out of a new information technology system the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS). One element of this new system is data collection which requires learners to provide detailed personal information (DDLETB, n.d.) if they wish to participate in adult and further education programmes. The research uncovered much disquiet about the use of this new system in community education which, by its nature is different to more structured, institution based provision, as can be seen in the comments below:

You know systems abhor the nuances or the exceptions. (ETB participant)

I think some of the other questions in terms of the jobless household questions or your education level ... I think that's going to have a huge impact on ... who actually engages with courses and how many courses we'll actually be able to run. Because by the time we do all the paperwork, you're going to have to add on hours to each course to get that done which means there'll be less courses overall. (ETB participant)

The potential implications for engagement were also expressed as follows:

I think the implications are that people just won't engage ... it puts people off. (ETB participant)

It won't happen ... they won't give them, they are so afraid of giving out the information, like what do they need the PPS number for? Again is it, to be able to count how many people are coming off the social welfare, or to go back and say ‘well, you're on disability and you shouldn't be on this, and you should be available for work, and you shouldn't be doing this course?’ They want you to educate them but yet if they're on social welfare they should be available for work. You know some of the things are a contradiction to each other. (Community based participant)

The challenges of quantifying the impact of the use of such data collection were also expressed as follows:

I think the ones who actually come and refuse, you get some idea, you can quantify that. I think there's another group of people that will hear on the grapevine that if you're going up there they want to know this, this and this. (ETB participant)

A recent study highlights similar concerns among Adult Education Officers (AEOs) of ETBs, and raises a concern about the viability of such new policies and the 'lip service to social inclusion' (Russel, 2017, p. 50). The creation of the Community Education Facilitator role, following the publication of the *White Paper*, was an acknowledgement of the importance of engagement with local communities in order to promote educational inclusion. However, a side effect of such aforementioned new policies is that the possibilities for community engagement have been dramatically reduced, as one participant highlights below:

I'm in the office more. I'm sitting in front of a computer more. I'm inputting data, I'm writing less qualitative reports. I'm doing more quantitative reporting ... I'm more embedded in the ETB structure, by virtue of changes around reporting and funding. (ETB participant)

The demands of accreditation are also highlighted and how they can create a tension between theory and practice:

You lose something in the formal aspect because ... it's top down. You can't use their own experience in the way that you could if it wasn't formal. [With non-accredited courses] you have the freedom to do what interest them so you can go where they go rather than have to keep pulling them back and saying 'no we have to do this because it's the requirement'. (Community based participant)

You spend your entire course producing evidence to show learning outcomes ... there's absolutely no hope of them having progression because there's been no proper engagement. (Tutor participant)

This concern has echoes of Chomsky's warning about 'subtle mechanisms which contribute to ideological control ... [such as supporting and encouraging people to] occupy themselves with irrelevant and innocuous work' (Chomsky, 2003, p. 239).

### *Professional Identity and Status*

Despite the increased standing of FET in recent years, the study uncovered disquiet about the diminution of recognition for community education within the new policy framework. A symptom of this is evident in discussions about the current status of community education practitioners, with one participant stating:

In the last number of years, I would have had a huge voice at the table ... I'm now not even consulted about anything. (ETB participant)

This notion of reduced status for community education practitioners emerged during the study. The selection of quotes below is drawn from the data and offers an insight in to how participants believe community education practitioners are perceived:



This lack of recognition has impacted on notions of professional identity and the ability of participants to work in a manner consistent with their values and educational philosophies:

I just don't think there's enough respect for community ed and how powerful it can be as an instigator of change. I think we don't get the credibility because ... we're not the job activation people. (Tutor participant)

The social inclusion stuff over here is just a by the way, it's not headline, it's not PR. (ETB participant)

Traditionally a fundamental feature of the community education practitioner role has involved authentic engagement with participants and local communities. As with CEFs, however, the evidence suggests that maintaining this focus has become increasingly difficult:

People have said to me recently, it doesn't feel like a community education centre because people are in their offices, closed doors, don't want to be interrupted because they've all their reports to do. (Community based participant)

Further evidence of this sense of professional dissonance among practitioners is evident in the following contributions:

Learner engagement ... all of that kind of work has gone off the radar entirely ... My contact now with learners would be through class visits ... it's the quick chat, but they see you in kind of a cigire [inspector] role anyway when you're coming in like that. (ETB participant)

Things are changing at such a rapid rate. We had a full afternoon with tutors recently, we talked about PLSS ... about FARR [Funding Allocations Requests and Reporting] ... about DCS [Document Centric Solutions], their pay system, about reg forms, we talked about attendance forms. At no point did we talk about curriculum development, or learner support ... when we're brought together as an ETB staff it's about systems, it's about procedures ... Any time I've ever been at anything regionally as a cohort of staff it's been about systems. (ETB participant)

This idea of education for emancipation, it's gone ... You know, the whole idea of equality and of transformative learning, that discussion, people are very awkward around it. (ETB participant)

This sense of a challenged professional identity indicates a tension between the ‘why’ of the role, particularly in relation to broader social concerns, and the current focus of the ‘how’ – methodologies, progression routes etc. (Finnegan, 2016). This space for reflection and professional development is limited as a result of practitioners’ precarity, funding requirements and resource shortages, factors which impact on any discussion around development (O’Neill and Cullinane, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Despite the challenges highlighted within the study, there is cause for optimism. There is evidence indicating a recognition of community education in recent documentation. For example, the role of community education in supporting SOLAS to meet its objectives, in terms of removing barriers to FET, was highlighted in a recent study, commissioned by SOLAS themselves:

A suite of measures which are focused around outreach to communities, and particularly vulnerable groups should continue through existing mechanisms and institutions ... Stakeholder organisations, such as the voluntary sector ... have unique and valuable insights into the needs and concerns of these groups. (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017, p. 55)

Additionally, within the *FET Strategy*, two of the most widely identified recommendations, within over 150 submissions to the consultation, are that SOLAS and ETBs should facilitate the delivery of community education through community groups, and that SOLAS should measure outcomes that relate to personal development as well as employment (SOLAS, 2014).

This point is reinforced by the Community Education Facilitators' Association (CEFA):

Community education has stayed close to the grassroots communities irrespective of the institutional configuration under which it receives its funding. What is important is that its role be recognised, its contribution valued and maintained in the midst of the crisis. (CEFA, 2014, p. 5)

Furthermore, community education is closely aligned with development education and can support the government in reaching its target towards the fourth UN *Sustainable Development Goal* (SDG) which is focused on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNDP, 2015). Under the *National SDG Implementation*

*Plan* Ireland has committed to ensuring by 2030 that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development (Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, 2018). Working in partnership with community education providers will support the advancement of this target.

That the community education budget under SOLAS has not been reduced and is currently ring-fenced is also a cause for optimism. However, the FET strategy states that the budget will only be maintained until ‘such time as the information exists that will allow for the establishment of a new funding model based on appropriate metrics’ (SOLAS 2014, p. 26). What constitutes ‘appropriate’ will depend on value judgements and perspectives of those involved in policy development in this area. Consequently, the effectiveness of that system will be contingent on who is tasked with its development, and the motivations behind it. Bearing in mind Freire’s caution against marginalising certain groups from decision making in the area of education policy, this study argues that community education practitioners should be central to this process:

One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action programme which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a programme constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. (Freire, 1970, pp. 83–84)

A commitment on the part of policy makers to tackling social and educational exclusion will be evidenced if there is dialogue and the full participation of community education practitioners, among others, in relation the development of adult and further education policy.

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