

The Educational Ontology of Paulo Freire and the Voices of Irish Adult Educators

ALEX MCKILLICAN

Abstract

This paper harnesses the teachings of Paulo Freire in order to give a voice to Irish adult educators. The ontological aspects of Freire's theory are central to this task. Freire's ontological understanding of the human experience finds its fulfilment in his theory of conscientization. The two pillars of conscientization are personal and collective awareness. And it is the personal awareness aspect, as it relates to the pedagogy of the adult educator, which we are most concerned with here. The paper highlights how the voices of adult educators should be considered as an ontological 'layer of data' which can contribute hugely to the discourse on adult education in Ireland.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Ontological, Conscientization, Metaphysical, Existentialism

Introduction

I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and re-write my ideas (Freire, 2005, p.58).

In recent years the voices of adult learners have, rightly, been to the fore in the discussions relating to adult education in Ireland. This is a very good and necessary thing. However, we should embrace what the adult educator has to say about adult education. At a time when the growth of an audit culture in education is limiting educators to 'hold tightly to the familiar and cleave to the immediately applicable', the voices of the educators are more necessary than ever (Finnegan, 2016, p.49). It is important to listen these voices as these key stakeholders in adult education have much to say about the educational relationship with the learner and other aspects of adult education and how it impacts on society, the learner, and the educators themselves. After all, adult education speaks to people's highest aspirations (Fleming, 2004).

The ontological aspects in Freire's writings were used to inform the epistemological element of the research. By 'ontological aspects', we mean those parts of Freire's theory which deal with the nature of being. These phenomena were used then to 'inform the epistemological element' of the research. They helped the study to utilise the voices of adult educators to become themselves part of the emerging theory of knowledge. This was done in an attempt to examine those aspects of adult education practice which can only be considered in a metaphysical way, without the constraints of scientism and the technocratic biases which that process incurs. It is of great importance that adult education practice be examined in a metaphysical way, as it is the metaphysical realm of life that perhaps can tell us most about the human experience and what it is to be human, helping us to transcend what is physical or natural. The I-thou relationship is the most obvious of these phenomena. In explicitly 'adult education' experiences I can give anecdotal examples of parents reading to their children, an adult literacy learner being able to send his wife a birthday card ('for the first time in 32 years of marriage'), and other examples of how developing education can enhance someone's experience of the world.

The subjects of this research were adult educators who are at present practising in Ireland. The pedagogy of the adult educator was under investigation. The two primary aims of the research were:

- To investigate the use of Freirean concepts in the practice of Irish adult educators in order to highlight the metaphysical aspects of adult education practice
- To suggest principles which will be useful in investigating Irish adult education practice

When discussing the findings, in light of Freire's theory, there will also be a consideration of how the opinions and views of adult educators can contribute to the current discourse in Irish adult education. The central idea of this paper is that, through their ongoing practice, adult educators have a vital ontological layer of data/knowledge which can help to provide the necessary balance to the discourse of adult education in Ireland. This is an urgent need as current policy within the area is heavily influenced by technocratic and neo-liberal concerns. This phenomenon has the result that the functional and vocational aspects of engagement in adult education are put to the fore, while personal, subjective and inward effects of education in the life of the adult learner are, to a large extent,

ignored. Adult educators know themselves that engagement in adult education can have dramatic effects on the life of the adult learner – effects that can only be considered in a metaphysical way. Although not part of the discussion here, this philosophical position has consequences for adult education in the current political and social climate and in the sharp division between liberal and conservative ideas which have permeated their way into many aspects of life. However, at present we are solely concerned with highlighting the voices of the Irish adult educators and what this means for policy and practice in adult education Ireland.

The Research Paradigm: Ontological and Epistemological

Considerations

The task of ‘disclosing’ the voices of adult educators, in a formal ‘scientific’ sense, was not a straightforward one. Difficulties arose by the framing of key questions in the process. This is where ontology and epistemology assisted because ontology and epistemology are concerned with the fundamental issues: *What* is there to study? *How* can we know about it? *How* do we find what we are looking for? Ontology focuses on the types of things that are a part of the world, how they exist in the world and how they should be researched and studied (Mautner, 2000). Is, as Blackburn (2000) suggests, the social world best seen *via interaction* between individuals, or, do we begin our inquiries with theories of social behaviour or build theories as the research develops? This research embraced the former position and so the existentialist elements in Freire’s theory are the ontological keystone of the project. The idea here was not to examine the voices of adult educators through any type of rational lens, but to allow the emotive aspect of their opinions to come to the fore. And the philosophy of existentialism – and how Freire used it – validates the impassioned aspects of the adult educators’ experiences. It is those experiences that shape their pedagogy and their philosophical perspectives, which in turn impacts their practice. This phenomenon formed an epistemology, or body of knowledge, which facilitated building theory relating to Irish adult education practice. Twinned with this was the recognition that ontology is the metaphysical study of *being/existence* and so permeates all aspects of the adult educators’ lives, not just their practice in adult education.

In conducting the research, it was important to consider epistemology as the study of knowledge of the social world:

In the debate about ontology and epistemology it is necessary to absorb one thing; knowledge is frail. It is the job of the researcher to make it clear that

in any approach to research (especially one of an interpretive nature), the researcher should maintain that he/she knows it is difficult to be clear about anything – and he/she should not be over confident in conclusions, but be tentative (Thomas, 2009, p.85).

It is hoped, therefore, that knowledge treated in this manner serves to make any conclusions or discussion more reliable, subjective, and trustworthy. A solid theoretical backbone to the research, both ontologically and epistemologically, is even more necessary considering that the research is highly interpretive in both its inquiry and its analysis (Grayling, 1996). This is helpful as it allows the subjective influence (the voices of the adult educators), which are the philosophical *locus* of this research, to be brought to light.

The Research Themes

Paulo Freire's work is informed by aspects of existential theory. He used existential thought to inform the ontological aspect in his theory of adult education (Roberts, 2002). In terms of ontology, three main underlining precepts are identifiable in Freire's work; and they have been used in this research to investigate the above aims of the research. The precepts also informed the questions which were used to interview the adult educators. The precepts, which became research themes, are: 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre, 1946) which leads to 'conscientization' (Freire, 1970); engaging in adult education as [an] 'ontological vocation' (Freire, 1970); and a 'dialogical rejection' of subject/object dichotomies (Freire, 1970). No detailed exposition of those themes needs to be presented for our task in this paper. But, we need to recognise that they are concepts which hold within them a perspective which suits the highly interpretive nature of the research paradigm and overall approach to the research. Using these aspects of Freire's theory allowed for a deeper discussion with adult educators about their experiences of adult education.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

Before examining the questions, which were distilled from the research themes and subsequently used to formulate the interview schedules, it is necessary to briefly consider the objectives of the research. In doing so the complexity of the task when dealing with this type of data (people's subjective thoughts and opinions) will become evident. According to Verma and Beard (1981, p.184), the statement of [a] supposition is a

'tentative proposition which is subject to verification through subsequent investigation. It may also be the guide to the researcher in that it depicts and

describes the method to be followed in studying the problem. In many cases suppositions or hypotheses are hunches which the researcher has about the existence of the relationship between variables’.

If a supposition does indeed make claims with regards to the relationships between variables, and is the key to the researcher as to how the original idea might be tested, we have, in this study, postulated that the ontological elements in Paulo Freire’s educational theory represent a variable which have influence, and can be explored, in the pedagogy of Irish adult educator. We have endeavoured, therefore, to discover whether that is so for this sample of adult educators. The findings of the research, as will be considered below, support the premise that it is possible to present an ontological appreciation of the voices of Irish adult educators from a Freirean perspective.

The findings support the fact that the adult educators are, at the very least, interested in continuing to develop a deeply critical approach to their educational relationship with learners and are interested in, and have much to say about, the metaphysical aspects of adult learning. And giving a voice to the adult educator is very prescient considering today’s somewhat uneasy political, social and philosophical climate.

The research objectives of this study are:

- To advocate concepts which will contribute, positively, to further investigations into Irish adult education practice. These concepts include: (1) The application of an ontological appreciation of Freirean pedagogy, as a research ‘optic’, by the wider academic community in the attempt to further understand the pedagogy of adult educators; (2) *Transformative learning* in interpretive research, such as this, should be conducted where the meaning of experience, for both the researcher and the research participants, continually informs the research strategy; (3) Application of Freirean pedagogy which is seen through an ontological lens should be used and developed as a way to give a ‘voice’ to the Irish adult educator. This could be used to generate other strands of research within adult education.
- To explore the application of Freirean pedagogy, which is seen through an ontological lens in the reflexive examination of the work of Irish adult educators.

As discussed above the research questions which were developed for this study stem from engagement with Freirean theory. The questions are:

- As an adult education provider how do you view adult education?
- What in your opinion does it mean to engage in education in adulthood?
- In what terms do you view your work with adult learners?
- Do you think adult education is a human right?
- How do you view your relationship with your learner?
- Do you think the learner can educate the adult educator?

Research Context, Analysis of Data and Theory Development

As this investigation is a piece of critical educational research, every element of the research design followed an *anti-positivist* paradigm (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2008); we are not interested in objectivity, predictability, controllability or the construction of laws and rules of behaviour concerning the pedagogy of the adult educators. The design of this research was, however, influenced by an *interpretivist* paradigm. It was considered more interesting, from a human perspective, for the researcher to attempt to understand, describe, and interpret Irish adult education practice through the thoughts and opinions of its actors – Irish adult educators. The data collection for this research was carried out in regional Educational and Training Boards (ETBs) which are in the mid-west and south region of Ireland. The subjects of the research are professionals who are engaged in the provision of adult education. They are both tutors and managers of adult education programmes. Protective pseudonyms have been used to disguise the identities of the participants.

The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire was inspired by many thinkers. Building on the theories of a diverse number of intellectuals in his own theory, he was influenced by the Socratic Method whereby dialogue is used as an epistemological tool and not a methodology (McLaren and Silva, 1991). Freire's work was also shaped by Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, Marx, Engels and Sartre (Dale, 2003). Freire understood humans as both *thinking* and *being*. His ontological understanding – his interpretation of existence, reality and being in the human condition – is dualistic. This is the theory of reality as being composed of two exclusive elements which, for Freire, translated as consciousness and thinking and

matter and being. It is important to consider now which is primary and which is derivative: consciousness and thinking or matter and being? To answer this, we can map Freire's ontological interpretation of the nature of being. Freire is concerned with examining the relationship between thinking (idealism) and being (materialism). Thinking is related to consciousness and this leads to idealism, while being relates to matter and practice, and this leads to materialism (McLaren and Leonard, 1993). Idealism may be broken into subjective idealism and objective idealism. At this point Freire's ontology becomes related to the political world of the adult learner: 'In order for the oppressed to be able to wage their war of liberation, they must perceive the reality of the oppression not as a closed world, from which there is no exit, but as a limiting-situation which they can transform' (Freire 1970, p.27). It is important at this juncture to be reminded of the fact that the political world which Freire theorised about was a very different place to the Ireland of 2019. Most educators would accept, to (broadly) varying degrees, that educational opportunities in the area of adult education in contemporary Ireland cannot be compared to the Brazil under military dictatorship in the 1970s. Freire, as stated in the quotation in the introduction, advises not to use his theories unless we re-invent those theories.

He saw the world as being interpreted by historical, economic and social forces (Freire, 1970, p.72). Here, the influence of the theories of Marx in Freire's work becomes evident. The influence of Marx and historical materialism on Freire can also be demonstrated by Freire's exploration into the duality of the concept of humanisation. Freire says, 'concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition [sic] of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality' (Freire 1972, p.26). According to Freire, this duality may be transcended by applying a dialectical understanding in our attempt to make sense of the world. This is accomplished through a critical understanding of language. He propounds that language and its dialectical relationship with thought and world and the dialectical inter-relations of language itself – ideology, social class and education – break down the duality of the situation so that a new understanding of the world emerges. When taking a closer look at some of the transcripts from the adult educators, this type of understanding is evident.

When developing his ontology – Freire's understanding of how we come to *know* the world through the senses – he did so by interpreting the world as an objective reality; a reality which is entirely independent of the existent (the subject), but which is a world that is capable of being known (Freire 1970, p.72).

Dialogue is the human phenomenon to which Freire's ontology is anchored (Freire 2005, pp.72-74). Freire explains how dialogue is ontological in nature when he says: 'Revolutionary leaders and educators do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation', but in order to come to know through dialogue with them, both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation – the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist' (Freire 2005, p.146). Therefore, Freire sees the human being as having a body which is conscious, and it must be understood as such. For Freire (1970) education was a means to liberate. He asserts that liberation should come about through a uniquely human dialectical process; Freire's 'dialogical rejection' of subject/object dichotomies. He believes, however, that it is the opposite which is actually happening in the educational process, proposing that information is not passed on but deposited; here the learner is an object, and the educators are the subjects. Freire believes that in such a situation men and women become uncreative:

Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently, receive, memorize and repeat. They do have the opportunity to become collectors and cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is men themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. Knowledge emerges only through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 1970, p.53).

Freire (1974) stresses the importance of developing a critical perspective while engaging in adult education. Indeed, a constant theme in both Freire's practical work and his theory is the significance of how engaging in adult education programmes relates to the world around us. Even when aesthetic moments arrive during engaging with texts, for example, the learner must remain critical: 'Education is joyous to the extent that it becomes an active, dialogical, critical process, texts can become 'beautiful' when critically engaged. Unless it is critical, education cannot become an act of 'knowing' (Freire 2005, p.111). Holme (2004) advises that in order to engage in education in a full sense, adult learners need to unveil the meanings of educational content and texts in order to consider the socio-economic influences that are to blame for them suffering from educational difficulties in the first place. Freire forced adult education

into the consciousness and vocabulary of western educators (McLaren, 2005). He engineered an appreciation of adult education which underlined the relationship between low levels of education and the 'uselessness of endlessly obsessing with the mechanistic side of education' (Freire, 1970, p.41).

So, considering education as Freire saw it can be understood as a counteraction against a central problem with the idea of functionality: meaning that this is a functional pedagogy which defines itself in the educating of adults in order that they might participate effectively within society. Feeley (2007) suggests, it is not concerned with examining the social inequalities which are to blame for the unequal dispersion of educational opportunities that places the adult learner in the adult education class. A functional approach to education naturally reproduces unequal relationships: 'The *denunciation* of dehumanizing, countering, oppressive aspects of everyday reality was inextricably linked to the *annunciation* of the path to transformation. This dual relationship was pertinent for oppressor and oppressed alike, both of whom are dehumanized by a continued, unequal relationship' (Freire, 2007, p.26).

In addition to his belief that functional literacy reproduces unequal relationships, Freire considers that 'although the subject of humanization has always been humankind's central problem, humanization has now taken on something with all the hallmarks of a concern which can no longer be simply ignored' (Freire, 1970, p.28). This concern for humanisation results immediately in the identification of dehumanisation. Thus, the individual begins to recognise and examine the amount to which dehumanisation has taken place. The individual may now ask if humanisation is a real possibility. Furthermore, Freire believes an examination of history, in objective terms, together with humanisation and dehumanisation, are a possible outcome for the individual who is an 'uncompleted' being aware of their incompleteness. Freire states: 'considering that both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first (humanization) is the people's vocation' (Freire, 1970, p.31).

Humanisation brings us immediately to the identification of dehumanisation, not merely as an ontological outcome (or some 'result' of our *being*), but as a retrospective and historical actuality (Freire, 1974).

The Ontology of Freire

Much of Freire's ontology was influenced by the philosophy of existentialism. In existentialist thought, the subjective experience of the human being is at the centre of enquiry into the human experience. It considers the human being not just as a thinking being, but as an acting, living, and feeling human individual. In existentialist thought the body is not distinct from consciousness or being: 'to distinguish between a mind and a body or between the mind and the world, to make the 'I think, therefore I am' of the mind a certainty and to doubt the body, would be to follow the Cartesian mind body dualism' (Earnshaw, 2006, p.136). According to Sartre, 'consciousness exists its body' (Sartre, 2008, p.329). For Sartre there is no duality. There is also no duality between mind and body in Freirean ontology (Freire 1970). (It is this appreciation of the act of engaging in education that this paper embraces. And some of the comments from the adult educators below compound this idea). Engagement in adult education is an act made manifest by the body and mind (the consciousness) together. Therefore, educational engagement should be viewed as an inter-dependent relationship between the world of ideas and the historical/material world. Sartre (2008) maintains that when we talk about our bodies a problem arises, for we are confusing our inner intuition i.e. our experience of our bodies through our senses, for example, pleasure and pain, with the data that comes from other areas in life such as clinical and biological environments. This, for Sartre, is not a good thing as this leads to a conflation of the senses and external and physical experiences (Cox, 2002). Sartre (2008) believes that we do not actually experience our bodies in this way. Rather, he says, we 'live our bodies' (Sartre, 2008, p.302). Sartre (2008) hypothesises that consciousness is 'in' consciousness. Although consciousness can reflect on itself, he maintains it dissolves the Cartesian duality by asserting that it is by our senses that we exist in the world (Earnshaw, 2006). This cessation of Cartesian duality is so meaningfully expressed by Gabriel Marcel when he says: 'I *am* my body' (Marcel 2009, p.12). Another writer and theorist to express an anti-dualist understanding of the relationship between our minds and our bodies – an appreciation which for us is important as it relates to the experiences of adult education both for the adult educator and for the adult learner – is Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty constructed an anti-sceptical account of reality which is not dualist and has its foundations in perceptual experience. According to Cooper (2008) the originality of Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of the world we as human beings experience is on account of the focus he accorded to the role of the body in the construction of the spatiotemporal world; for Merleau-Ponty, a human

being's 'primary mode of knowledge is in the hands' (the body) (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.143). However, running parallel to this notion of the body is his idea of consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not a matter of 'I think that', but rather is a matter of 'I can' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.137). As such, Merleau-Ponty insists that we must 'exercise our operative intentionality' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.144). This 'I can' idea (this *upsurge* of being, we may say) is an interesting notion for our attempt to examine the voices of the adult educators from an ontological perspective. Embracing this perspective, we can form the premise that being involved in adult education – either as a learner or educator – presents an individual with the opportunity to further 'authenticate' one's existence. Therefore, I wish to draw a subtle distinction between what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'lived' body and the 'objective' body.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) the 'objective' body (the material body of bones and flesh) has a 'merely contingent' relation to its owner. However, it is the 'lived' body – the body of the 'I can' (to borrow Merleau-Ponty's phrase) – which is not separable even in thought from one's existence. We can postulate then that engagement in adult education – whether as a learner or educator – can enhance the 'I can', as an ontological phenomenon of being which re-aligns the workings of our 'objective' and 'lived' bodies to our minds and consciousness. Adult education, therefore, can be, and is, a kind of ontological tool. Education, and our mechanical and intellectual engagement in it, is informed by the senses. Therefore, it helps adults to realise their metaphysical potential-in-the-world. In fact, we may even surmise that it can provide the individual with another opportunity to come face to face with his or her incarnate self.

So, how does this highly technical understanding of the human experience relate to Freire's ontology? In every step of their quest for freedom it is necessary for people to view themselves as men and women involved in the ontological and historical vocation of evolving fully into a complete human being: 'reflecting and taking action now, become vital when one does not erroneously attempt to dichotomize the content of humanity from its historical forms' (Freire 1970, p.48). And this idea is developed further here when we see the human being as a being which is yet incomplete. Because of this incomplete state the individual is the only being who treats not merely his/her actions and deeds, but his/her very self as the qualifier of reflection. Through this ability he/she marks himself/herself out of all the other animals as animals cannot separate themselves from their routine and are therefore incapable of contemplation and reflection (Freire, 1970). This comparison of Freire's is not to be viewed as a naïve and superficial

distinction. It is by examining this distinction that we see the parameters which shape and delimit the action of every individual in his/her *life space* (Roberts, 2002). (Adult education can play a major role in this experience). Animals are unable to define objectives or influence their modification of nature with no meaning beyond themselves. An animal is basically a 'being-in-itself' (Heidegger, 2008; Freire, 1970; Sartre, 2008). Richard Shaull supplements this Freirean interpretation of the distinction between man and the world of an animal by saying that 'a human being's ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in doing so moves towards ever new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively. This *world* to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a *given* reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved' (Shaull cited in Freire 1970, p.14). Human beings who are attentive to their activity in the world, and who carry out the objectives which they select – including their relations with the wider world and with other human beings – colour the world by means of their imaginative presence. Indeed, humankind's existence is unlike the existence of an animal; it is historical. People not only live but exist; 'animals live out their lives on an a-temporal, flat, uniform prop; humans exist in a world which they are constantly recreating and transforming' (Freire, 1970, p.80).

Conscientization

What follows is a brief description of the Freirean theory of conscientization. The basis of Freire's theory of conscientization is dialogue: 'Dialogue is an encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world – dialogue is an existential necessity' (Freire, 1970, p.69). Human beings, according to Freire (1974), emerge out of their submersion and gain the faculty to intervene in reality. This happens due to *conscientizacao* (Freire, 1970). *Conscientizacao*, usually referred to as 'conscientization' is the strengthening of the attitudes and awareness of all emergences: 'One of the cardinal principles in Freire's philosophy is that of a man's vocation to *be more* – more, that is, than what he is at any given time or place. There are thus no developed men except in a biological sense. The essence of the human is to be in a continual non-natural process. In other words, characteristic of the human species is its repeatedly demonstrated capacity for transcending what is merely given, what is purely determined' (Veiga, 1993, p.9). In the same way that a person's ontological and historical vocation may be hampered by particular socially manufactured constructs – that one's understanding is 'therefore, on one level, conscientization, or the process of becoming aware, provides a space in which one's perception

of reality may change' (Blackburn, 2000, p.17). Conscientization is more than a mechanically driven intellectual process – it is the essence of a dialectical process which manifests action. Conscientization leads to reflection, which leads to action, which brings us to liberation (Freire, 1970). In the same way that existential philosophy calls for an individual to rigorously assess their own lives in an attempt to come to an authentic awakening, the Freirean theory of conscientization invites the individual to become aware of social, political and economic contradictions (and non-contradictions and opportunities)² which are present in society (Freire, 1970; 1974).

Examinations of the Findings

What follows is not an exhaustive list of the contributions from the adult educators, but rather a sample of those offerings. The chosen pieces serve as vignettes, which, it is hoped, demonstrate the deep level of thinking and feeling of the adult educators for adult learners and adult education.

Nessa: Well, partly I view adult education in a functional sense. Obviously, people are here to improve their vocational skills. But I think it [adult education] is connected to them [the adult learner] in a more inward way. Education, and their lack of it, relates to feelings about themselves – their feelings of failure... of inadequacy about a bad experience in the past. Even I think their feelings about themselves as a person. They... feel inadequate. Education, and the lack of it in an everyday sense, makes them feel inadequate. It can be quite disturbing to them. It shakes them up. So, I view adult education as both a human right on one level, but I view it as something deeply personal to the adult also. Education is growth. The educational process is far reaching.

Aidan: I view adult education, and indeed my role as an adult educator, as being a much bigger thing than just teaching someone to improve their skills or to get a job. If adult education was just about skills, important as that is, the focus would be entirely on the technical aspect of the content and other practical stuff. But I view adult education as being much more than that. Because it taps into their whole life... and that is my starting point... before they ever put pen to paper or discuss assessments or module descriptors.

2 The author believes that the phenomenon of conscientization can positively support existing structures also; conscientization could positively compound aspects of the values and traditions of western society. But, that is to be examined on another occasion.

I view adult education as possibly representing someone's 're-starting' [sic] point. Education can help someone go somewhere in an inward way.

Vincent: I think adult education is so important in the adult and I try to instil this into my learners also. Adult education and community education, it is important to remember, is not a charitable thing. I mean to say this – adult education is a 'right'. But it is more than just a 'right'. Think for one second. Take any of the arts – like science, music, or poetry – all the things that make life worth living. Life is not just about an income. OK, if someone's educational standard is very low they are probably going to have a low income also. Education can also affect their social life. I view adult education as impacting all areas of an individual's life. And I know from previous learners that when a learner does begin to engage in education they grow... they encounter more potential in themselves.

Magda: Developing education in adulthood can be daunting at first for the adult learner. I have seen it myself. I have seen over the years the change in body language even. When learners come through that door – not all learners mind you, but most – when they come through that door their shoulders are slouched, they are timid; their voices even can seem meek. But here is the power of adult education in adulthood. Eventually, because education is a hard road, the fact that they are developing their skills they are also, literally, beginning to come out of their shells. An adult learner even begins to carry themselves more proudly.

Nessa: You know education in adulthood can be a very personal thing. And, by that I mean... for example, I will never forget a woman I had as a student. She was in her 40s. She had two children when she was no more than a baby herself. She had no education, and no real help from her husband, I might add. She raised those two children and they turned out OK. Now, I knew this woman to see, after all Westtown (pseudonym) is not a big place. She always looked as if life had got the better of her, y'know. Well, anyway didn't she walk in here one day [sic]. I began to take her for one to one tuition. She was weak but was determined. That was a number of years ago now – today that woman has studied for an arts degree. Now, my point about adult education being a personal thing is this. Yes, she happens to be studying for a degree but when I see that woman now – she no longer looks as if life has gotten the better of her. She now has gotten the better of her own life. That's what education... developing your education as an adult... can do. Education in

adulthood I think is a spiritual thing as well as anything else. By spiritual I don't necessarily mean religious.

Aidan: I view my work with adult learners as having a process to it. When I start working with new learners, I generally tell them a little about myself... some different experiences... they usually respond to this. I centre my work on sharing. I think if you can get to know each other as adults and on an equal level; then that is where the work can begin. I always view my work as having a strong element of sharing to it. But that sharing has a cut-off point – I would never discuss anything that has got to do with private things in our lives.

Nessa: Actually, there's no getting away from it... I view my relationship with my learner as being deeply connected to my own life. I think my own personal life experiences and the courses that I did... I think all of that was contributing to me saying 'you know... better learning takes place if we can be human with each other and if we can understand each other... and then if we can understand each other and if I can ... you know... not 'step' into your life but at some level I can listen to your life and share parts of my own. It's a kind of journey.

Vincent: I think that it's OK to show a little bit of vulnerability. In other words that it is OK to show that you [as the educator] don't know everything. They are adults... they know the body language and they see... that's the way they look at things in their life... they will figure out if you are real.

Magda: Let me tell you that adult education, as in the immediate tutoring of adults, can be very taxing. Adults can drain you emotionally but that's part of it. You hear a lot of things, but you need to respect that. Sometimes I think I'm some kind of therapist. However, although you need to respect privacy you are there primarily to get through the work. I respect my learners deeply as I was one of them.

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

As alluded to in the introduction, the voices of adult learners have had an impact on Irish adult education from both a pedagogical perspective and, to a certain degree, a policy development perspective. Vital as that is, the voices of adult learners were not our concern here. The priority here has been to engage in a theoretical way with the voices of Irish adult educators. By applying a Freirean lens to the vignettes reproduced above we can at least bring these opinions

into a theoretical realm and in the process add not just to the significant body of Freirean educational theory, but also to contemporary discourse on Irish adult education. The overarching theme which the voices of these educators presents us with could be translated as a type of caution. And that caution is to step back from the technocratic and political concerns of adult education and to keep a focus on those aspects of adult education which permeate the ontological experiences of the adult learner and, indeed, the adult educator. The following comments may serve as recommendations for policy, practice and future research or they may simply be observations.

When considering the views of the adult educators we may suggest that adult education policy development must not fall into a pedagogical malaise whereby we solely acknowledge the economic benefits of adult education. In parallel with these concerns, perspectives on adult education, such as presented here, should promote the communicative, humanising, and transformative aspects of this area of education, particularly as they effect the personhood of the individual. Adult education teacher training programmes should include a focus on becoming/being a reflexive educator. Therefore, distinct policies need to be embraced within the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which highlight the need for continuing professional development and in-service training for all adult educators.

Adult education policy makers should be increasingly sensitive to the critical and emancipatory theories of adult education espoused by Paulo Freire. This would continue to promote the socio-economic and functionalist aspects of adult education development while highlighting and encouraging the 'consciousness raising' (ontological) aspects of adult education. The educational relationship between the adult educator and the adult learner *must* be thought of as having a mentoring aspect to it. This should be reflected more in the discourse on Irish adult education and in programmes of initial teacher/tutor training. Adult educators (if not already doing so) should embrace the understanding of their pedagogical experience – how a philosophical examination of one's attitudes, beliefs and biases can contribute to the understanding of how one forms an educational relationship with adult learners. This will have positive theoretical and methodological repercussions for their practice in adult education.

This research has shown how an ontological appreciation of the voices of adult educators can help an adult learner to bear witness to the primordial recollection of their being; this understanding of the impact of adult education development

on the consciousness of the adult learner should have profound implications for adult education research and practice.

As has been advocated throughout this paper, the application of Freirean ontology to examine the voices of adult educators could be utilised by the wider academic community in the attempt to further understand the pedagogy of adult educators. This has application in the examination of the adult educator/adult learner educational relationship. This in turn will have significant implications for the further understanding of the democratising effects of adult education in society. This type of research promotes and upholds the notion of *transformative learning*. Interpretive research of this kind should be conducted where the meaning of experience, for both the researcher and the research participants, continually informs the research strategy.

Making recommendations for policy, practice and future research was and is the most challenging aspect of how to reframe and re-imagine Paulo Freire's theories in an Irish context. Although we were able to make some solid recommendations, that aspect of this research is still in development. But, what we can say with confidence is that adult education discourse in Ireland is dominated by perspectives that have been informed by the application of critical theories of human history, society and the human condition. These ideas have their genesis in Marxist theory, namely dialectical materialism. This suits the dominant idea of the unequal sharing of power in society especially by structures which are patriarchal in nature. But, critical theories are in many ways an over-simplification of society and the human operating and living in society. We must be careful not to blindly accept the Marxist view that human beings are simply computers made from meat. Although Ireland is now a secular country with the formal and informal separation of church and state having taken place, as individuals we are still hard-wired, as it were, to be Christians. In our personhood, our language, our laws and our institutions we are still living down-stream from Christianity. And so the findings in this study suggest that adult education practice is something which is far more sensitive to aspects of the human condition which would better be examined by applying a Judaeo-Christian lens, regardless of the metaphysical truth behind that historic event. The opinions of the adult educators strike at the heart of what it is to be human and to be sharing the world with other people. Adult education research should not only embrace those aspects of Freire's theory which focus on the socio-economic, functional or political aspects of education, adult education research should also focus on those elements of Freire's theory that allow us to

formally analyse aspects such as how adult education can bring us to a closer understanding of ourselves in our relationships with other people. Research should focus on how we engage with and act in the world as a subject in relation to other subjects in a world which is scaffolded by an objective moral truth.

As an element in this, the voice of the adult educator can be used as an ontological layer of data in order to enhance and more deeply understand practice. This would influence further exploration of the role of the educator and adult education within society and in our communities. The voice of the adult educator could be used to counterbalance the dominance of scientism in educational research and policy. An example of this in adult education is the recent emphasis on accreditation at all levels. Accreditation brings with it a technocratic coldness that dilutes the more human aspects of the education process. Everything is being measured and pathways are being created where pathways don't necessarily exist. Adult education may become overburdened by this, particularly basic education and community education, which are very delicate and complex phenomena within the adult education arena.

As is evident in this research, adult educators do not overly politicise their practice. This is an important notion because this view would counterbalance the dominance of critical theory in adult education and its ongoing critique of things that were thousands of years in the making – namely institutions such as the family, the church and the state, and the relationship of the individual to those phenomena in our lives. Notwithstanding some current difficulties, the Irish and European individual, and his and her relationship between his and her private and public self, has been finely crafted for two millennia by these institutions and we should, therefore, be careful to not discard these things – the very fabric of Western society.

Finally, the paper has highlighted how the voices of adult educators can be very valuable in the current climate of epistemological flux in educational and social research and can constructively contribute to a balanced dialogue between both sides of the social, educational, and political spectrum in Ireland.

References

- Blackburn, J. 2000. Understanding Paulo Freire: reflections on the origins, concepts and possible pitfalls of his educational research. *Community Development Journal*. 35(1) pp. 3-15.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. 2008. *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.

- Cooper, D. E. 2008. *Existentialism*. London: Blackwell Publishing.
- Cox, G. (2002) *Sartre: a Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum.
- Dale, J. A. 2003. Freire, Aristotle, Marx and Sartre: a critique of the human condition. In: *Mid-west Research to Practice Conference in Adult and Continuing Education*. [Online]. IUPUI. [Accessed 24 April 2020] Available from: <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/310>
- Heidegger, M. 2008. *Being and Time*. Translation by Macquarrie, J., and Robinson, E. London: Blackwell Publishing.
- Holme, R. 2004. *Literacy: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Earnshaw, S. 2006. *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum Publishing.
- Feeley, M. 2007. Redefining Literacy from an Egalitarian Point of View. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*. Dublin: AONTAS, pp.15-28.
- Finnegan, F. 2016. The Future is Unwritten: Democratic Adult Education Against and Beyond Ne-liberalism. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*. Dublin: AONTAS, pp.46-59.
- Fleming, T. 2004. *The State of Adult Education*. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*. Dublin: AONTAS, pp.9-18.
- Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Freire, P. 1972. Cultural Action for Freedom. *Harvard Educational Review: Monograph Series*, Number 1.
- Freire, P. 1974. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. London: Continuum.
- Freire, P. 2005. *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*. Translation by Macedo, D. Cambridge MA: Westview Press.
- Freire, P. 2007. *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. London: Macmillan.
- Grayling, A. C. 1996. Epistemology. In: Bunnin, N. and Tsui-James, E. P. eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Marcel, G. 2009. *Being and Having: An Existential Diary*. Translation by Farrer, K. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Mautner, T. 2000. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Penguin.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translation by Smith, C. London: Routledge.
- McLaren, P. 2005. *Red Seminars: Radical Excursions into Educational Theory, Cultural Politics, and Pedagogy*. New York: Hampton Press.
- McLaren, P., and Leonard, P. 1993. *Paulo Freire: a Critical Encounter*. London: Routledge.

- McLaren, P., and Silva, T. T. 1991. Language, Experience and Pedagogy: a Tribute to Paulo Freire. *Access*. **10**(1), pp.38-48.
- Roberts, P. 1998. Extending Literate Horizons: Paulo Freire and the Multi-dimensional Word. *Educational Review*. **50**(2), pp.105-114.
- Roberts, P. 2002. *Education Literacy and Humanization: Exploring the Work of Paulo Freire*. London: Bergin and Garvey.
- Sartre, J. P. 1946. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Sartre, J. P. 2008. *Being and Nothingness*. London: Routledge.
- Thomas, G. 2009. *How to do your Research Project*. London: Sage.
- Veiga, C. 1993. *From Conscientization to Empowerment*. London: Sage Publications.
- Verma, G.K. and Beard, R.M. 1981. *What is Educational Research? Perspectives on Techniques of Research*. Aldershot: Gower.