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Maintaining deep roots: the transformative possibilities of adult literacy education

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Abstract

This article explores on the formative influence of adult popular education in the evolution and continued ethos of adult literacy education in the Republic of Ireland. Freire's work has been influential within Irish adult education and community development, informed by Freirean practices of learner-centredness, experiential learning and group learning. This stands in contrast to Further Education and Training system in which the adult literacy services are based, which has become increasingly professionalised in recent years, susceptible to the ideological values and practices of performativity. The article analyses the findings of research reports on adult literacy which used a mixed methods approach. They reveal how the adult literacy sector holds important spaces for educators to counteract systemic pressures of performativity as they work with learners and their communities through the ethos and pedagogies of adult education, but this is constrained in its radical transformative possibilities.

Keywords: adult literacy education, learner-centredness, performativity, transformative

Introduction

This article explores on the formative influence of Freire's ideas in adult literacy education in the Republic of Ireland, which has allowed it to create a distinctive learner-centred approach. However, this ethos is increasingly constrained by the intense performativity demands of a reconfigured adult education sector as explored later in this article. Freire's use of 'interactive and deeply engaging methodologies, on mutually respectful ways of learning and teaching, on critical methods of teaching and research, on personal relationships, and on meaningful dialogue' (Gadotti, 2017, p. 19) have resonated deeply in particular ways in the Irish context. This approach stands in contrast to other sectors of Further Education and Training (FET), where more individualised, curriculum-



led and performance-based modes of education dominate. The FET sector in Ireland has become professionalised in recent years, increasingly susceptible to the ideological values and practices of managerialism and performativity (Murray et al., 2014; Grummell & Lynch, 2018). Rising levels of managerialism in education has led to systemic and ‘institutional disengagement from social and political action’ (Crowther et al., 2006, p. 54), but the adult literacy sector reveals important spaces that still exist for educators to counteract these tendencies as they work with learners and their communities through the pedagogies and ethos of adult education. This article examines how literacy educators in Ireland describe their practice and it considers the scope and boundaries of the collective, transformative possibilities of this form of literacy practice.

Providing an evidence base for adult literacy

This research draws on a significant body of research completed in Ireland by researchers, including the author, over the past five years. This research was commissioned by the main government agencies and representative associations for FET and adult literacy in Ireland to provide an evidence base for national policy. The four key agencies include the state authority responsible for FET in Ireland, An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS), the national adult literacy campaigning and training agency, National Adult Literacy Association (NALA), the representative group for adult literacy organisers, the Adult Literacy Association of Ireland (ALOA) and the main provider of FET including adult literacy services in Ireland, the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). Research includes:

- a report on family literacy completed in 2017-2018 (SOLAS, 2020)
- a numeracy report completed in 2018-2019 (SOLAS 2021b)
- Inclusion of adults with intellectual disabilities in adult literacy services report completed in 2018-2020 (SOLAS, 2021c)
- Inclusion of adult literacy in FET research report completed in 2021 (Grummell, 2022)

This represented a very active period by the state agency, SOLAS which commissioned research to inform strategic planning as recommended by the national *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019* (SOLAS, 2014).

The author conducted one report on adult literacy for SOLAS during this time (SOLAS, 2021c), as well as developing a series of policy briefing papers to analyse the themes emerging from the research to support planning within these agencies. The Adult Literacy Organisers Association (ALOA) commissioned the researcher to complete a study about the inclusion of adult literacy across the FET sector in 2021 to inform their strategic planning (Grummell, 2022). Collectively the research provides a rich picture of the ethos, practices and context of adult literacy education in Ireland.

While the research reports on adult literacy were completed by different research teams, all used a mixed methods research approach. The specific research processes are described in each report and included a desk-based review of existing research, literature and policy documents. An online national survey was completed by the 16 regional Education and Training Boards (ETB) adult literacy services for each report to give the national picture of family literacy, numeracy and literacy support for learners with intellectual disabilities respectively. In each case, this was accompanied by qualitative interviews exploring adult literacy practitioners’ and learners’ experiences of the current context. These interviews provided space to discuss key issues and challenges of adult

literacy, to identify examples of inclusive practice, and discuss institutional and pedagogical approaches to supporting adult literacy. In some cases, focus group interviews and workshops with adult literacy staff, managers and learners were also completed, alongside case studies in adult literacy centres. An overview of the number and type of participants in each research report are listed below.

Table 1. Overview of participants in literacy research reports

Research Report	Overview of research participants
Family Literacy report (SOLAS, 2020)	Online national survey completed by 16 ETBs
	Observation and 3 case studies at 4 family literacy centres
	Individual and focus group interviews with 26 parents/carers and 131 literacy and school staff
Numeracy Report (SOLAS, 2021b)	Online national survey completed by 16 ETBs
	9 individual interviews and 38 focus groups with providers, tutors and learners
Learners with Intellectual Disabilities report (SOLAS, 2021c)	Online national survey completed by 16 ETBs
	Individual and focus group interviews with 19 literacy and disability support staff; 34 literacy learners and 3 case studies of adult literacy services
	59 adult literacy staff participated in research workshops
Adult Literacy Organisers report (Grummell, 2022)	online national survey with 43 staff across FET
	14 Individual interviews with literacy staff, Interviews with 3 FET directors
	48 adult literacy staff participated in workshops

Each research project intended to explore the structures, practices and issues in their respective areas of literacy and numeracy nationwide. Thematic analysis was used to identify emergent issues from the interviews and case studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while the national survey data was analysed by descriptive statistical methods. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to explore the cross-cutting themes about adult literacy evident in the research (Fairclough, 2001; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011).

Formative influences on adult literacy in Ireland

While Freirean principles are not always explicitly stated in current adult literacy policies, they are acknowledged as formative in the emergence of a diffuse network of locally organised community education, adult literacy and women's education in Ireland (Bassett et al., 1989; NALA, 2011; Connolly, 2014). This overview seeks to respect the varied ideological and educational positions of these groups whilst distilling their experiences together in a narrative about how adult literacy evolved in Ireland. There has been a long tradition of connections between community development, social movements and women's groups in Ireland (Connolly, 2014). National adult education and literacy representative groups such as AONTAS and NALA emerged from this context, organising adult literacy across the country and advocating for a vision of adult literacy based in collective action and social justice. Many working in these groups were inspired

by feminism and Freirean popular education approaches (Connolly, 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017), carrying this thinking and vision into their work.

It is a testimony to the clarity of vision and the enduring idealism and commitment of the founders and early workers with NALA that they argued so cogently and effectively for an approach based on social justice and empowerment of learners stemming from the philosophy of Paulo Freire (Vaughan in NALA, 2011, p. 8).

Connolly (2006) described how this social justice approach in adult education was influenced by popular education and Freire's work which had been 'brought to Ireland primarily through the Roman Catholic religious who had been involved in basic education for adults in Latin America and the Philippines' (p. 41). This influence of the liberation theological approach contributed to the emphasis on emancipatory processes and participative learner-centered ethos in Irish adult education (Brady in Connolly, 2021).

The expansion of community education in 1970s Ireland coincided with growing public awareness of adult literacy, prompted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcast of the adult literacy series *On the Move* into Ireland, and the publication of the Government-commissioned Murphy Report on adult literacy in 1973. Research completed by the Murphy Report gave the first official recognition that literacy issues amongst adults were 'wider than at first thought' (Government Stationary Office, 1973, p. 83). However, enacting national-level action on adult literacy was slow, located as it was in the economically fraught context of the 1973 oil crisis and recessions during the 1970s and 1980s.

Literacy was not a very visible part of the school or post-compulsory education system in Ireland at this time. While the Vocational Education Committees (VEC) had been established in the 1930s to provide vocational education and training in Ireland including post-compulsory education, their main focus was on those under the age of 18 years (Murtagh, 2014). Ward and Ayton describe how Irish adult literacy services in the 1970s and 1980s were 'still run on a voluntary basis with some VECs supporting tuition on the basis of a part-time tutor being allocated a few hours each week as part of the night school to organise the adult literacy tuition' (2019, p. 3). It is only in the later part of the 1980s that specified state funding was provided for adult literacy, initially through the Community and Adult Education Budget in 1985 (NALA, 2011, p. 35-36).

Growing recognition was driven by European level recognition with 1996 declared as the European Year of Lifelong Learning. The publication of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) survey in 1997 was pivotal, which recorded that 25 per cent of the Irish population had basic literacy skills level (Darcovich et al., 1997). This stark figure sparked public outcry, with state recognition and investment in adult literacy following over subsequent decades. The Irish *White Paper on Adult Education* in 2000 identified adult literacy and numeracy as a key priority and established the National Adult Literacy Programme under the National Development Plan (NALA, 2011, p. 60). This was the beginning of the formalisation and professionalisation of the sector. It also marked a shift away from the voluntary, community-orientated and often Freirean-inspired adult education tradition from which the sector had originated. National media campaigns on adult literacy, ongoing collaboration with VECs, the establishment of NALA's literacy website and media, continued research and guidelines on adult literacy, professional development for staff and development of quality assurance frameworks all emerged during these decades. Greater integration of adult literacy into the national landscape of post-compulsory FET sector was evident through its growth in the VECs. This was part of a repositioning of adult literacy into the formal structures of the State's education and training systems.

Adult literacy practitioners attempted to actively maintain a clear grounding in the ethos of community and adult education from which it has emerged. National guidelines such as NALA's *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* emphasised that 'Freire's view is that developing skills of reflection and analysis enables students to take social action to improve conditions for themselves and their communities' (1985, p. 15). Hope and Timmel's (1995) *Training for Transformation* series of practitioner handbooks were influential in spreading Freirean approaches across Irish adult and community education, especially principles of learner-centredness, experiential learning and community-based praxis. Training for Transformation was initiated in Ireland by members of religious congregations who had been 'involved in overseas development work that was influenced by liberation theology... and [was] a translation of the theories and ideas of the educationalist Paulo Freire into a working methodology' (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 81-82). Inspired by these influences, adult education and literacy agencies across Ireland advocated for the recognition of a learner-centred approach in adult literacy that recognised learners 'as equal and knowledgeable partners in a learning process where they had the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how they wished to learn' (Ward & Ayton, 2019, p. 3).

Government funding for literacy and numeracy grew as the national Adult Literacy Programme expanded in the 2000s to work with a wider network of adult learners from target groups (such as Travellers, Refugees and Asylum seekers and people who are unemployed) and activities (including Family Literacy, Return to Education and English for Speakers of Other Languages). The VECs built an extensive network of Adult Literacy Services with increased provision, personnel and funding being developed over these decades. Smaller community and adult education centres also continued to provide adult literacy, often working as independent centres with a more explicit radical education ethos (Fitzsimons, 2017)

The formal consolidation of the Adult Literacy Services in FET over these decades was reflected in the continued national policy focus, which culminated in the publication of the first *Adult Literacy for Life Strategy* for Ireland in 2021. This 10 year adult literacy strategy is a cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach that positions literacy, numeracy and digital literacy as key competences to help create a more equal, inclusive Ireland (GoI, 2021, p. 33). This reflects the move across government and international policy towards inclusive and integrated policy models based in the wider social, economic and political context.

Current structure and provision of adult literacy in Ireland

The Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are the national providers of post-compulsory Further Education and Training, including the majority of adult literacy in the country, alongside a smaller range of adult and community education groups. They evolved from the VECs, restructured by the Irish state into 16 regional ETBs in 2013. The Adult Literacy Services work within ETBs across different areas, centres and platforms, with multiple partners in the statutory, charitable and community spheres. 27,168 adults accessed local adult literacy services in ETBs in 2021 across a range of programmes (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 12). They also coordinate literacy support across the ETBs to different training and work-based learning programmes (ALOA, 2021, p. 6-7).

The Adult Literacy Services operate under the guidelines issued by the Department of Education and Skills, under the auspices of SOLAS. These guidelines define adult literacy as

the provision of basic education, including reading, writing and numeracy skills, and ICT for adults who wish to improve their literacy and numeracy competencies to enhance their participation in personal, social and economic life (DES, 2013, p. 3).

The more recent *Adult Literacy for Life* strategy describes literacy as:

all of the foundational skills related to reading, writing, maths and technology as well as having the confidence to use them. Literacy should be seen through the lens of the personal, emotional, social and psychological well-being that it provides (GoI, 2021, p. 19).

The functional nature of these statutory definitions of adult literacy as the individual skills and competencies is noteworthy, especially in contrast to socially situated definitions of adult literacy used by national literacy and adult education organisations (NALA, 2020, ELINET, 2016). Functional literacy approaches have been widely criticised for their normative assumptions about literacy standards, and its positioning of responsibility at the level of the individual learner, removing any sense of how people learn in social or political contexts (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011).

An adult education ethos in Irish literacy education

Throughout this increasing formalisation of adult literacy within the FET system, literacy education in Ireland has maintained a learner-centred approach that placed the learner and their experiences at the heart of education practice. The national literacy agency, NALA describes adult literacy in Ireland as based on a ‘student centred approach where the needs, concerns and experience of the students are the focus of learning, rather than an externally structured and enforced curriculum (2020, p. 51). Similarly, Bailey describes a learning-centred curriculum where ‘everyone involved learns through taking part in the process of curriculum development’ (quoted in ELINET, 2016, p. 18). The role of the adult literacy tutor and system is seen as facilitating and supporting a learner-centred ethos through a responsive pedagogy and practices (ALOA, 2021). This approach was influenced by Freire’s claim that there is no teaching without learning and ‘more important than knowing how to teach is knowing how the student learns’ (Gadotti, 2017, p. 25). This learner-centred approach stands in contrast to the subject and curriculum-centred emphasis of other forms of education (Murray et al., 2014). It marks an important difference of emphasis where the learner remains at the heart of the learning process rather than being driven by curriculum or subject imperatives.

Adult literacy in Ireland does not explicitly follow a Freirean literacy ‘process of decodification and codification, of collective problem solving and discovery, [which] allows learners to develop the tools to teach themselves how to read and write’ (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 62). However, it has been strongly shaped by Freirean values which has enabled it to hold a learner-centred ethos at its heart. Freire’s problem-posing or emancipatory model of education emphasises the development of ‘critical consciousness; the creative capacities; and the confidence, skills, and attitudes to intervene in the transformation of the social world’ (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 72). Personal transformation is an important element of adult learning and is central to the learning capacities that adult literacy supports. The extent to which learning transformation permeates from personal to socio-political levels is crucial in an emancipatory approach. It raises the key question of whether literacy education in Ireland supports adults to challenge the political, economic and social conditions of their lives, and become collective agents for change of the structures and conditions of their lives. The rising

focus and ideology of performativity in the FET system to which adult literacy services belong, results in adult literacy being limited in its politicised and emancipatory intent.

A constant challenge for literacy education is how it is moulded and squeezed by these wider imperatives of the education system and broader socio-political context which supports a functional view of adult literacy for individual improvement and employability. The focus on personal transformation is often transmuted into individual employability and development growth rather than capacity-building for social and political transformation. Adult literacy offers an interesting case study of an education service that operates as a smaller part of a larger FET system to form strong webs of transformative learning between literacy learners and staff in individual and group learning contexts. The scale and extent to which social and political transformation can occur within these small spaces and relationships of learning becomes a vital issue which is considered throughout this article. Of question is whether it is a critical literacy ‘which ties pedagogical practices in different spheres of social life to configurations of power. Pedagogical practice becomes a political act’ (Mayo, 1995, p. 363). This question is explored below through the constituent elements of learner-centredness, impact of schooling, group learning, responsive pedagogies and relationships of learning.

Centrality of learner-centredness

Adult literacy education in Ireland traditionally has been premised in a learner-centred ethos and pedagogies that begins with and builds on a learner’s experiences and knowledge throughout the learning journey (Shor & Freire, 1987a). Adult literacy practitioners emphasise participative and democratic learning processes, with learners encouraged to actively collaborate in decision-making about their learning (Grummell, 2022, p. 29). In this sense, it has followed Freire in putting ‘the social reality, the vocabulary, and the experience of the learners at the center of the literacy curriculum’ (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 58). In many cases, learners are actively involved in choosing the topics and material covered. Literacy staff are deeply committed to literacy education and its learner-centred approach, appreciative and knowledgeable about the pedagogical process they co-create with learners (SOLAS, 2020, 2021b).

Literacy is something that changes and evolves depending on the situation that a person is in on a given day, on a given week. If they are unemployed, if they are working, if they are going to the doctors or have to meet a teacher... that’s what we need to work on [...] we’re learner-centred (SOLAS, 2021c, p.75).

As I have already noted, while the extent and type of problem-posing and political action in these learning relationships can be questioned, the Adult Literacy Service’s commitment to learner-centredness gives it a strong and unique basis in Irish FET which is reminiscent of adult education’s work at local community level in small ways and spaces. It is an approach to learner-centredness that facilitates us ‘to view our immediate experience with a critical perspective...[which] enables individuals and societies to challenge power’ (Allais, 2014, p. 247). Crowther et al. (2006) identifies three aspects of popular education necessary for social and educational transformation that offer useful parameters to explore learning:

- its curriculum comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle

- its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development
- it attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action (Crowther et al., 2006, p. 54-55).

While there is evidence of curriculum emerging from the experience and interests of people and a collective group-based pedagogy, the extent to which the third component occurs has to be critically questioned. Much of literacy education emerges from the concrete life experiences and material interests of people's lives. This creates conditions of learning that resonate directly for learners, for example placing abstract mathematical concepts in a real life context of 'the angles in a roof and what you need for the pitch to work and so on. Then it meant something, but when it's done in school with just a blank triangle' (Grummel, 2022, p. 64). It highlights the significance of 'literacies learning arises directly out of, and connects specifically with, the issues that the groups are exploring. It is therefore embedded in real-life situations that have relevance and importance to the learner (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008, p. 670).

Negative burden of schooling and subsequent exclusions

Many literacy learners carry heavy burdens of oppression from negative schooling experiences and subsequent socio-economic, cultural and political misrecognition. Literacy learners describe negative experiences from schooling and a lack of confidence from lengthy absences from learning. This has a devastating impact on their self-belief in their capacity to learn, with profound consequences for their livelihoods, opportunities and sense of self (Carpentieri et al., 2010; Feeley & Hegarty, 2013). This is echoed through numerous accounts of damaging and often brutal experiences of schooling in the records of Irish cultural and social life (McCabe, 1995), as well as in research literature (Quinlan, 2021). It is often intertwined with structural and cultural inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity and disability that intersect across people's lives (Baker et al., 2016; Lynch, 2021). Duckworth and Tett (2019) describe how adult education approaches can validate learners'

experience and deconstructed the old knowledge, where they blamed themselves for being 'thick' and 'stupid' because they struggled in literacies and instead substituted it with the construction of new, shared knowledge where they were able to see the inequalities and violence in their lives this had stemmed from. (Duckworth & Tett, 2019, p. 372)

The ability of adult literacy to create conditions for collective learning and capacity-building is striking. Literacy education has been an ongoing presence in the Irish adult education landscape, offered in every community across the country through the ETB centres and other adult education providers. It has carved an identity within education that is quite distinctive to the more radical basis of community education (Fitzsimons, 2017) and social movements (Finnegan, 2019). By Freirean popular education standards, the scale of activity in these literacy projects is at a more personal and localised scale rather than being strongly politicised, working with individuals and groups who are learning within and about their community and living contexts. These literacy activities are striking in their strong ethos of learner-centredness and group learning, their embeddedness in local contexts and the potential for personal and social transformation.

Mutuality and solidarity of group learning

Adult literacy is often group-based, beginning in individual or small group tuition through unaccredited programmes that respond to the conditions of learners' lives. The group context of literacy learning is acknowledged as vital, as people 'learn in groups where diversity is welcomed [and] it provides for rich learning opportunities (SOLAS, 2020, p. 57). It provides a solidarity or a 'being with' which is an 'intervention as a subject of what happens in the world' (Freire, 2001, p. 72-73). Group tuition can provide the conditions for 'collective consciousness-raising that can enable people to talk back to the power that has constructed them as wanting' (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008, p. 668).

In an education system increasingly dominated by systems imperatives and performance metrics, education spaces – particular these small, local and relatively unseen spaces – can sustain vital forms and possibilities of 'talking back' collectively to power. They hold people's life experiences at the heart of the learning, offering potential for transformative social learning that engages with people's material conditions, supporting the development of critical thinking and building relationships and collective identities as learners.

Responsive and multi-modal pedagogies

The literacy reports identify specific capacities as essential for adult literacy tutors:

- being learner-centred
- creating caring relationships to improve learners' confidence and build capacities
- using responsive and creative pedagogies and forms of assessment

These are echoed by international research about the experiences of numeracy tutors (Oughton, 2018; Swain, 2005) and literacy tutors (Crowther et al., 2010, Allatt, 2020). Literacy staff describe a deep level of engagement with programme design and pedagogical processes, spending time within learning context to discuss and develop learning which responds to each learner's needs with a 'huge amount of flexibility required in adult literacy' (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 65).

This deeply responsive and caring pedagogy is congruent with the learner-centred ethos of adult literacy. While other forms of education make similar claims, their capacity to care is often undermined by the demands of curricular, assessment and systems imperatives (Lynch et al., 2012; Giroux, 2022). Most literacy education begins with a needs assessment and co-development of a curriculum based on learner's life experiences to ensure that learning starts from the 'vocabulary used by learners in their daily lives and not the words chosen by curriculum developers' (Freire & Guimarães, 1984 in Schugurensky, 2011, p. 13). This learner-centred approach is crucial for literacy and is key in its potential to move towards transformative learning and action. In an era when educators across schooling and higher education describe overwhelming pressures of performativity, outputs-driven approaches and measurement (Clarke et al., 2000; Lynch et al., 2012), this research indicates that adult literacy has managed to maintain a learner-centred ethos and a caring and learner-responsive pedagogy.

Literacy tutors describe a wide range of multi-modal and creative pedagogies they draw on to support learners, includes arts, music, games, cooking, photographs, digital and historical research. This is a deeply 'interdisciplinary and participatory approach to knowledge production' (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 37). These allow people to experience

learning in an interactive way that is not dependent solely on reading or writing. This matches the ‘creative ingenuity to adjust the pedagogy for each new group of students’ that Freire describes (Freire & Shor, 1987b, p. 28).

It’s quite a task to ensure that everyone is getting what they [need] but it is what literacy tutors can do, that’s what we are trained to do and it is different to any other [FET] services in that respect (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 70)

Building relationships of learning

Literacy education in Ireland holds a strong sense of the importance of building relationships of trust between tutors and learners, and within learner groups as a core part of transformative learning. Central in this relational work is the capacity to create ‘trust in the room... and then letting people kind of come forward themselves’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 74). Tutors’ ‘efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in men [sic] and their creative power. To achieve this, he must be a partner of the students in his relations with them’ (Freire, 1972, p. 49). Many tutors were conscious that this relational work was not solely within the literacy session but also involves supporting the inclusion of learners in the social life of the education centre.

Highly developed affective capabilities, with personal qualities of empathy and patience are identified as essential qualities for literacy tutors (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 50). Staff work empathetically in relating and communicating with students to build capacity and independence amongst learners. Duckworth and Smith describe how creating a safe learning environment is premised in ‘an awareness of the historical positioning of the learners and their communities’ which has resulted in prior inequitable experiences of schooling and society (2018, p. 171). Integral to this is building an awareness of the political conditions of schooling and its consequent inequities throughout people’s lives. This can occur through a ‘problem-posing education aims at a constant unveiling of reality and power structures (through the process of conscientization) and at the development of creative power to transform those structures’ (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 72).

The Family Literacy Report describes how ‘family literacy programmes respect local, vernacular language and literacy’ which is essential to supporting ‘schools and parents in reducing the cultural gap between them’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 35). The significance of these relationships of learning are not well recognised in education practice or research, and

tends to be an invisible and unrecognised part of the teaching process. The skills and time involved in making good connections with colleagues and learners are taken for granted... and left very much to the good will of those involved. (SOLAS, 2020, p. 79)

This lack of recognition also negates the wider impact of adult literacy work in people’s lives and communities. The Family Literacy Report described how ‘parents establish a new learning identity and become integrated into a solidary parent groups and often into the wider community (SOLAS, 2020, p. 101). For learners with intellectual disabilities who often have limited options open to them after school, the Adult Literacy Services offers greater independence not only through literacy and numeracy learning, but in giving people the right to decide what they will learn, to travel to centres independently, to socialise beyond their immediate context and to seek transformative possibilities for their futures. Respectful and trusting relationships are core to the interdependency that Freire emphasises (1972). These elements of socio-political and cultural recognition are

acknowledged as key elements of transformative education, but difficult to achieve in a system that stifles the learner-centred, collective and caring relationships of adult literacy.

Performativity and literacy education

The power of Freire's work lies in his recognition of how broader social and political imperatives impact on the transformative potential of learning (Freire, 1972). While elements of literacy education are clearly grounded in principles of learner-centredness, collective group-based pedagogy and personal and social transformation, educational practices have been severely curtailed by the growth of performativity and reporting requirements imposed through the annual performance targets in Irish FET (Redmond, 2015; SOLAS, 2021). Performativity is understood as 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation' that monitors, guides and transforms education in a systemic way (Ball, 2006, p. 144). It has been a core part of a new managerial culture associated with neoliberalism which prioritised outputs and targets, measurement by performance indicators and emphasised the language of choice, competition and clients across the public sector (Clarke, 2001; Lynch et al. 2012).

New managerialism became increasingly evident in Irish further education as a mode of regulation when the sector was reformed in the wake of the Further Education and Training Act 2013 (Murray et al., 2014; Lynch & Grummell, 2018). This included requirements for the professional registration of FET educators through the Teaching Council in 2013, the introduction of national QQI accreditation framework in 2012 and annual performance agreements introduced in the SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019 to fulfil EU targets on lifelong learning (SOLAS, 2017). While many of these measures were welcomed, the neoliberal ideology framing them privileges market-driven criteria of employability and an outputs-orientated approach to education (Lynch et al. 2012; Allais, 2014). The oppressive qualities of the neoliberal capitalism restricts the transformative possibilities of learning (Giroux, 2021). The Adult Literacy Service in Ireland is particularly impacted by the setting of performance targets for increased numbers of learners and progression rates. This includes targets for a 10 per cent increase in the number of literacy learners achieving accreditation at QQI Levels 1 and 2 annually and a 10 per cent increase in certification levels from courses (SOLAS, 2017, p. 16).

Managers in literacy services spoke about the pressures brought to bear upon them in the annual discussions about their Strategic Performance Agreements, describing how 'students count against you when you keep them for literacy maintenance purposes' (SOLAS, 2021c, p.75). This becomes a crucial issue as achieving this performance target is linked to annual resourcing and staffing of the services. It places pressure on staff, especially management, to focus attention on targets and progression rates rather than learner needs. Managers in literacy describe how they try to fulfil the reporting requirements through 'strategic compliance', but similar to Mayo et al.'s research in the UK this was increasingly difficult to manage (2007, p. 674-675). Included in this pressure is the persistent tension of using text- and numbers-based data management systems to record outputs. Literacy staff also describe how the language and processes of data systems are experienced as deeply oppressive and disempowering by learners and how it undermines trust in the learning relationship (SOLAS, 2020, 2021b; SOLAS 2021c).

The disparity between the use of data management systems and performance targets versus the reality of people's varied learning rhythms and literacy journeys is a continuous source of tension in literacy provision. Newman highlights how evidence-based policy-making creates a 'hierarchy of evidence, which favours some forms of knowledge over equally valid forms' (2017, p. 218). Allais (2014) argues that the 'complexity, structure

and organization in bodies of knowledge' (p. 192) is disempowered by a learning outcomes framework which sees knowledge as 'something that can be broken into little bits which can be selected and combined at will' (2014, p. xx). Literacy staff echo this, describing how the complex lifelong learning is not easily recognised within formal monitoring systems of FET. They recount how this learning is subsumed within the narrower frame of 'transversal skills' as 'core learning outcomes... native language, communications, mathematics, digital media, employability and citizenship competences, critical thinking, problem solving and making arguments' (QQI, 2018, p. 6).

The focus on increasing numbers and progression of learners ignores much of the interpersonal capacity and solidarity building that is a central element of literacy learning. It flattens learning into bite-sized facts disembodied from the social impact of knowledge (Allais, 2014). Crucially, it silences potential for conscientisation and politicalised action (Freire, 1972, 1972a). The recognition of capabilities that are important in adult literacy, such as learner confidence, group work, relationship building, critical thinking and social action are vital for transformative learning. Flattening these capabilities into a list of outputs that focuses primarily on attainment and progression rates ignores the richness and diversity of personal and social transformative learning amongst learners. It also channels learning into linear pathways that ignore the realities of the learning trajectory that can occur during a person's life in a series of interruptions, pauses and re-engagements.

Measuring progress is one of the hardest areas ... because what seems intangible can be so rich for [the learner] ... The progression might be that the learner, who had never been in a learning setting now comes in every week, engages fully, participates (Adult Literacy staff in SOLAS, 2021c, p. 75).

Literacy staff argue for greater recognition of the role of non- and unaccredited programmes in preparing learners to move towards accredited programmes and different forms of learning (SOLAS, 2020, p. 51). Greater consideration is needed about what learning progression is, the timeframe for learning to occur and whether progression can be measured through the predefined levels of qualifications frameworks which are not suited to the diverse learning rhythms and temporalities of literacy learning. Carpentieri noting 'that learners may be 'dipping out' [of learning] for a while, generally because of other responsibilities... Inconsistent does not necessarily mean non-persistent' (2007, p. 20). The imposition of set timeframes and predefined boundaries of outputs on learning in the data management systems is a major restriction on learning imposed by systems requirements rather than learners' needs.

Critically informed research and transformative education

The lack of recognition of the elements of transformative learning in the formal performance metrics of the FET system is deeply problematic for literacy learning. Literacy staff report how they resist this in different ways including through creative means of supporting learners (SOLAS, 2021b, 2021c) and continually noting their concerns in research and consultations. Acknowledgement of this by the statutory bodies is evident, especially in terms of current efforts to develop qualitative learning indicators and varied progression pathways. However, the data management system and annual reporting requirements remain in the FET sector to date (SOLAS, 2020, 2021c).

Giving voice to these tensions and struggles to gain greater recognition has also been a key part of what adult literacy staff, representative organisations and learner forums do

as a form of advocacy and collective action on behalf of the sector. Significantly, this can offer hope where one of the tasks of the educator is ‘to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be’ (Freire, 2004, p. 9).

Representative associations maintain a learner-centred ethos in an attempt to hold a sense of the politicised and transformative potential of literacy education and engage in political advocacy on behalf of learners, albeit in a system increasingly dominated by performativity requirements. Advocacy has promoted a socially situated view of literacy as having socio-cultural, economic, political, cognitive and affective dimensions, highlighting how it is deeply linked with the rights of individuals and communities to have their voice and to learn (NALA, 2012, pp. 6-7). This rights-based approach shifts attention from an approach of what learners might (be assumed to) lack to foreground people’s interests and active realisation of their learning capabilities and collective political agency (Freire, 1972). However, it is limited in terms how it engages with a deeper problematisation of social, economic, and political conditions of learning. Fitzsimons’ research on community education in Ireland noted that 35% of community education practitioners expressed a radical/ critical education philosophy (with 17% specifically citing a Freirean approach). While this is a significant number, equally significant is the remaining number who expressed a humanistic or no philosophical alliance (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 119). While similar national level research has not been conducted in other areas of adult education in Ireland, the literacy reports do reveal that a substantial number of literacy staff expressing radical and critical education philosophies, influenced by Freirean traditions of adult literacy. This is clearly evident in their pedagogy and work with learners as presented earlier, but systems imperatives constrain its potential to support deeper critique and transformative action.

Conclusion: sustaining spaces, conditions and possibilities for transformative education

Adult literacy education in Ireland has been formed and still maintains an adult education ethos inspired by Freirean principles which has enabled it to sustain a distinctive pedagogical approach. It is a form of learning which is open to all and guided by its learner-centred values. It is based in learning from practice that emerges from people’s material conditions, is grounded in strong relationships of learning that creates transformative possibilities and supports reflections on the conditions of people’s lives. It holds a caring and relational pedagogy which is crucial for learning and a precondition for transformative action. It has several key criteria of a Freirean educative process including a dialogic and participative methodology, use of creative methods that are responsive to learners’ needs, a democratic relationship between learner and tutor, and a curriculum that originates from the material conditions of learners’ lives. What is not as evident is the shift towards problematisation, and how it moves to ‘make the connection between reading and writing, on the one hand, and their role as agents for social change, on the other’ through the process of praxis ‘as reflection and action...upon the world in order to transform it’ (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 57). It lacks the explicit focus on the politicised nature of education and the democratic intent of ‘Popular education [that] assumes a view from below’ (Walters and von Kotze, 2019, p. 8). This lack of clarity about philosophical intent is reflected in the mixture of humanistic, radical and no philosophies held by adult and community educators in Ireland (Fitzsimons, 2017). Therefore, literacy learning often remains as a locally-orientated form of consciousness-raising rather than conscientisation, based in a caring and learner-responsive pedagogy

that empowers individual learning, but not necessarily the ‘deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes [learners’] lives and of their capacity to transform that reality’ (Freire, 1972b, p. 51). It holds value in supporting staff to maintain a learner-centred group-based pedagogy and the adult literacy system to retain a strong learner-centred ethos in the face of the intense demands for performance measurement outputs. It creates a context of democratic learning that can provide the conditions for ‘collective consciousness-raising that can enable people to talk back to the power that has constructed them as wanting’ (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008, p. 668). This is vital for learners who have been oppressed by previous schooling and societal exclusions. These are all elemental aspects of Freirean approaches to adult education and are held centrally in the practices and values of the adult literacy field.

However, this ethos is constrained by the outputs-based forms of knowledge demanded by current data management systems in FET. As Lynch reminds us ‘[f]ocusing on measurable outputs has the ultimate impact of defining human relationships in [learning] in transactional terms, as the means to an end – the end being high performance and productivity’ (Lynch, 2015, p. 16). The continual pressures of linear and outputs-orientated models of attainment and progression in the Annual Performance Agreements raises key dilemmas for practitioners and policy-makers across FET to consider in terms of its implications for education and learning. Lynch notes how neoliberal pressures in education subordinate ‘trust, integrity, care and solidarity ... to regulation, control and competition’ (Lynch, 2015, p. 16). The lack of a strong sense of the politicalised nature of its pedagogy potentially makes adult literacy education susceptible to the current performativity demands, but yet, its emphasis on learner-centredness and a responsive pedagogy has enabled adult literacy to hold ground. The emphasis on strong relational, collaborative, creative and transformative aspects enable adult literacy education to retain small spaces, conditions and possibilities for transformative education that is vital. However this needs to be grounded in a structural analysis and praxis that recognises that education is a political act ‘based on an emancipatory rationality, nurturing both critical awareness and learners’ capacity to liberate themselves from oppressive situations and to affect social change’ (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 58).

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