'Tracing Our Roots: Imagining Our Future': Lessons to Learn from the Life Histories of Adult Educators in the Republic of Ireland (1970–2010)

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide a contextual backdrop to this edition's focus on analysing the changes from the perspective of policy and practice since 2010, through presenting the findings of an in-depth analysis of the life histories of six adult educators, working in the field of adult education in the Republic of Ireland in the decades leading to 2010. Through the reflections of these six adult educators, this article offers the opportunity to trace the roots and legacies of the field and imagine the future, as they had envisioned it, at that given juncture in time.

Keywords: Adult Educators, Life History

> Our understanding of contemporary education in Ireland is greatly informed by gaining some insights into contexts and changes in the past. (Raftery, 2009, p. 9)

Introduction

Acknowledging the extent to which adult education has experienced significant change, nationally and internationally, in the recent past, this article contends that before we turn our gaze to imagining the future, we would be wise to trace the roots of adult education in Ireland at the turning point of 2010. The findings from a study of the life histories of six adult educators, captured at that moment in time, affords a valuable opportunity to reflect on the legacy of adult education in Ireland before discerning the best actions going forward.

In the context of the Republic of Ireland, and indeed internationally, it is unequivocal to state that the role and function of adult education has changed over time. Peter Jarvis, an eminent adult educator writes that 'the concept of education will always be relative and reflect the social conditions of the time

of definition' (Jarvis, 2010, p. 25). Changing population demographics and the ever increasing pace of technological developments warranting continuous updating of skills and training are some of the main challenges facing the discipline, in both a national and global context, in the 21st century.

While consensus on the value of adult education and lifelong learning has been one of the most remarkable features of the education policy discourse, both in the Republic of Ireland and internationally, it is contended that the field of adult learning and education at policy, structural and implementation levels remains fragmented and is somewhat of a 'Cinderella' character within the Irish education system (Fleming, 2012). If we accept, as given, the central role of adult education in meeting the needs of individuals in contemporary society, then such fragmentation needs to be challenged further and deeply. One further challenge, that may be seen as underpinning many of the others in the literature is that, within the lifelong learning agenda and discourse, the role and place of adult learning and education continues to be underplayed (Maunsell, Downes and McLoughlin, 2008; Holford, Riddell, Weedon, Litjens and Hannan, 2009; Downes, 2014). What then of the role of adult educators?

The Role of Adult Educators
On examination of the literature on the role of adult educators, it is clear that whether one perceives oneself to be an adult educator is a matter of context. There is no accepted taxonomy that includes all those engaged in facilitating adult learning. Even the term 'adult educator' is not universally accepted (Youngman and Singh, 2005). Usher and Bryant (1989, p. 2 as cited in Merriam and Brockett, 2007, p. 16) suggest that a spectrum exists in terms of practitioners' 'consciousness of having an educational role in working with adults. This continuum ranges from the full-time "professional" educator of adults [to] the individual whose vocational and non-vocational activities have repercussions for adult learning.'

While studies exploring the professional identities of teachers in formal education settings and higher education are more plentiful, similar explorations in terms of adult educators' identities have not been undertaken to any large extent, though there are some exceptions (Cf. Dominice, 2000).

Methodology
Given that the voice of the adult educator has been relatively absent in research undertaken and published to date, and certainly within an Irish context, the

present study, therefore, was an attempt to address this lacuna in the literature and to elicit and disseminate perspectives and voices not previously well articulated heretofore.

Mode of Inquiry: The Life History Approach

A qualitative research paradigm was adopted (Cf. Denzin and Lincoln, 2018), while the particular research methodology employed was that of life history. The life history approach aims to connect participants' accounts of their experiences to the historical, social and political contexts in which their professional lives were embedded (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000; West, Alheit, Andersen and Merrill, 2007; Merrill and West, 2009).

The research lens of this study thus focused on participants' professional lives, their becoming, being and envisioning as adult educators in the Republic of Ireland over the decades from 1970-2010. Participants' perceptions of the legacy of adult education and vision for adult education into the 21st century are the specific foci of inquiry of this article.

Participant Profile

The participants in this study were six adult educators, who, at the timing of the interviews in 2010, had been working in the field of adult education for all or most of their working lives, hence, the timeframe of 'a working life' of forty years for this study, from 1970-2010.

These six adult educators, three of whom are male and three female, while drawn from diverse disciplinary backgrounds had shared the profession of adult educator for some three decades at the least, with most of the sample having worked in the field for over four decades. At the time of interview, the participants were working across a range of adult and community education contexts: adult basic, vocational and training, community and/or higher education and were engaged in a wide range of professional endeavours *inter alia*: teaching, facilitating, advocating, networking, fund-raising, writing, researching, community development, activism, administration and policy development.

Sampling in this research study was purposive and criteria based. The sample was selected on the basis of two of Miles and Huberman's (1994) sampling approaches, namely criterion sampling and logic of maximum variation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) such a sampling strategy increases the possibility of accessing an array of multiple perspectives on a topic.

The Research Process

Qualitative in-depth interviewing is the primary method of generating data in this research study, through which the interviewer asks specific questions to obtain knowledge of the interviewee's world that relate to the study's research questions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale (1996, p. 19) proposed that 'the research interview is a specific form of conversation' and furthermore suggested (*ibid*. p.1) that 'if you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them'.

As this research study involved interviewing colleagues in the field of adult education, Rubin and Rubin's (2005, p. 14) concept of 'conversational partnerships' seems an appropriate approach to the research relationships. This approach acknowledges the partnership between the interviewee and the interviewer and allows for a congenial and cooperative experience to develop as both 'work together to achieve a shared understanding'.

The research, undertaken in partial fulfilment of a post-graduate qualification received ethical clearance from a University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were ascribed an initial/pseudonym to protect identity, their real names and identifying information are not included in any documents related to the study.

Some Issues of Sampling

In the first instance, the relatively small sample size of six participants in this study limits its generalisability to other populations, fields or time periods. Thus, while the limitation of small sample on the generalisability of the findings is a valid one, nonetheless, the richness of the data collated through the use of life history methods has compensatory potential and such a methodological approach was best matched to the overall objectives of the study.

A second issue relates to the inherent bias that occurs when non-probability sampling is employed, as was the case in this study. This approach it is accepted can lead to what are termed 'cohort' effects coming into play. This study, however, does not claim that these participants are the only adult educators who might have a perspective to offer to this study rather, that given that they have matched the set criteria, their perspectives can shed light on a sparsely researched field.

In a related vein, doing research in my 'own backyard' as it is referred to by Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 25) also raises a number of issues in respect of the

freedom with which participants will disclose to somebody they know already, and or who works in their field. It is my view, that participants had the necessary assurance as to the ethical standards being applied to data collected through the interview process to speak openly about their life histories as adult educators.

Findings from the Study

This section sets out the findings arising from the research process undertaken for this study. A decision was taken to select and prioritise particular aspects of the data, particularly those which related to the two broad themes of adult educators' perceptions of the legacy of adult education and their vision for adult education into the future.

Perceptions of the Legacy of Adult Education

In their responses to the question on what they perceived to be the legacy of adult education, participants in this study cited changes in the ethos of the education system and the learning environment or culture that is created.

> Well, schools generally are a million times better institutions than they were in my time. They're not the violent, horrible places that they were and that says a lot. There is a far better relationship, far more genuine relationship between teacher and student. (Participant D)

Participants noted that in their view the learning environment has become more learner-centred. The concept of not just accessing the 'voice' of the learner, but holding it as central to the learning process, was perceived to not be as alien as might previously have been the case.

> I would certainly say the awareness that this must be learner-centred, genuinely learner-centred. That they must be a part of everything we do. They must be a part of the decision making. (Participant E)

Infrastructural developments were also acknowledged.

> Money/Investment - which were not there in the 1980s. There was nothing. They definitely needed money and that did develop structures. That was hugely important. (Participant F)

Progress in the field of adult education in Ireland in terms of both its conceptualisation and how it had come to be were also acknowledged.

Certainly we've moved a long way. What was adult education when we started? Adult education was the night classes. There wasn't even the notion of adults studying in the daylight. (Participant E)

The transformative power of adult education, drawing on the seminal writings of theorists such as Freire (1972) and Mezirow (1991, 2000), were also reflected in participants' interviews.

I think adult and community education has allowed those people who have been so disenfranchised because of the injustice of poverty … has allowed such people to find their voice. And I think people who live in communities that have been designated as disadvantaged are suddenly, through education, highly articulate, or more than able, not only to name their experience but to engage in a critical analysis of their experience with some theoretical reflection and also then to engage in the praxis of transformation. (Participant B)

A further legacy noted was the embedding of lifelong learning not just in terms of the political and/or educational discourse but also in the realities of individuals' lives, and particularly in terms of those who, heretofore, would have been at risk of educational disadvantage and the consequent marginalisation that that engenders.

Hopefully some of that is wearing off on the young population so that when they get to be young adults or adults, even in this community, that they would want to actually have some of their adult education, whether it's their degrees or whatever, more within their own local context but it wouldn't be because the first chance was so bad. It's because maybe the first chance was better so maybe that would influence a different way of maybe conducting adult education, or at least you'd use these models that we've been talking about with people who aren't so disenfranchised. (Participant C)

Speaking to the legacy of adult education Participant A, encapsulates a range of advancements within the timeframe 1970-2010. Taken as a whole, reference is made to the scope of adult education, the role of the individual learner, the widening network, the professionalisation of the field, the body of knowledge available and the concept of adult education as a right.

We have at least established, in every area that we possibly can, the idea that learning is lifelong process, it is untenable now to think that learning ends

anywhere … I think that is the huge legacy. And I think lots of people have taken advantage of and been advantaged by their engagement with the world of learning. And I think lots of people on the ground … are better connected to each other at that human level and at that support level than there were before … there are people around who see themselves now as involved in community development and that their task is to support each other in learning. You know that was a very thin group of people thirty or forty years ago. And people have been successful in being qualified and trained and finding work and jobs as well, so there is a profession now of adult educators and even though they can be whacked or fragmented they're there. There is a body of knowledge, there are people, there are students, there are successes and all that had to be struggled for … There are people who now know that it is their right, even though the state hasn't acknowledged it yet, people know they have a right to learn. (Participant A)

A Vision of Adult Education

Arising from the invitation to envision adult education into the future, participants' responses were predictably diverse. Participant A was clear that before we can move on, in to the future we, as a society, must first undertake a clearing of the ground or catharsis in relation to the 'hurt' caused to individuals through their engagement in the education system.

> We have yet to become preoccupied with how vicious our school experience is or has been. Really it is the next one … because it is not a taboo anymore. (Participant A)

This response may be located in the growing body of literature, both biographical and academic, on the adverse impact of the educational system on individuals.

Participants also envisaged a range of systemic changes necessary – particularly relating to the education system as a whole, and the position that adult education holds in relation to compulsory formal education within the lifelong learning continuum. This theme mirrors the discourse on the place of adult education within the lifelong learning framework.

> And it's also maybe about creating a system and programmes of the realisation of adult education from the bottom up, as distinct from what we have now got, our White Paper that's written by the more centralised Department of Education. (Participant C).

The related concepts of participatory democracy and learner empowerment were explicitly viewed by four of the six participants as lying at the very heart of the realisation of the other objectives in adult education.

> And that is where the vision should start: educate everybody to participate fully in this society and then we can engage in the niceties and the added extras. That would be my vision … and what I'm talking about here is absolutely realisable, if there was a commitment. (Participant B)

> If you could have the decentralisation of education at all levels but where education is viewed to be a social good that ought to be encouraged in the context of local democracy. (Participant C)

A further theme emerged when participants engaged in imagining the future of adult education, related to embedding adult education more fully within a human rights and human rights education framework.

> That's, I think, a new way – when I say 'new' I mean new in the sense of, it's not that new but maybe it's 20 years or something like that – of language and practice and State obligations, so the persuasion or the motivation for the State to maintain an interest in adult education in a way that is more emancipatory, respect I think is growing in that context, which is great. (Participant C)

One participant also envisioned that we need to build and strengthen the connection between the day-to-day practice of adult education and the broader landscape of learning for life. To not lose sight or 'vision', as it were, of the bigger picture that ultimately adult learning and adult education have fundamental value.

> You're trying to get a message across to people - it isn't just the functionality of literacy, it's not just talking about the spelling and the breaking up of the words. It's like if you want to teach someone to make a boat you don't actually just give them the pages with the instructions, you give them the love of the sea. I think that's what we need to get that message out there and it's visionary. I think, at the moment, that what the country lacks, is any kind of vision. (Participant F)

While Participant E invites us to remember the past in any exercise of envisioning or create the future of adult education.

A vision? I don't know. Well, you know, all I could say is they must keep going back. You go forward but go back, back to the future. I just hope they never lose where it began, the initial, what the whole thinking was which began it all.(Participant E)

An exercise endorsed by O'Sullivan (2008) who called for us to turn theory on ourselves as adult educators. Such an invitation to reflect on the learning from the past in a sense can ensure that each generation of adult educators are not working from what Participant D refers to as 'a blank canvas'. For this participant, however, the lens rather than turning to the past needs also to face towards the future given the ever changing contexts of our modern world (Cf. Inglis, 2008).

We are constantly harking back to the past and we think in terms of incremental changes rather than operating on a blank canvas. The world has changed utterly and new approaches are required to address new challenges. (Participant D)

So what then did participants perceive to be these 'new' challenges in 2010 and to what extent are they ir/relevant in the current milieu of adult education a decade later?

Challenges Going Forward
A range of challenges for the future were referred to by participants in relation to how we come to conceptualise ourselves as a society broadly, and the structures and resourcing mechanisms in place in the adult education sector. Having dedicated professionals working in the field also emerged as a challenge going forward in realising the 'vision/s' elaborated upon in the previous section.

One participant, taking a broad overview, makes reference to the role that adult education can play in terms of re-imagining our lives.

We really have to learn how to move forward from here as well, in a different way. (Participant A)

Coherent and integrated structures were also seen as a prerequisite and were perceived as posing a particular challenge to current practice:

There has to be a plan and there is no plan. There are 25 different plans and there's jockeying for position between the people with the different plans (Participant D)

And using the imagery of the helicopter as providing an aerial overview, this participant calls for sustained and continuing leadership, within government structures, dedicated to the adult education sector.

> There is a need for somebody in the helicopter being able to see all the bits and pieces and for some clear direction being given. The first thing, however, is that the person in the helicopter must understand the system. (Participant D)

> We're looking for people with vision, who'll move outside the box, who won't say, 'Oh, that's not my job, I'm not doing that. (Participant F)

While others referred to the need for the streamlining of structures in terms of interagency networking regarding learner and programme databases so as to address the perennial challenge of duplication within the system.

In 2010, the 'hoary chestnut' of the provision of adequate and ring-fenced financial resources was perceived by most participants as the fundamental challenge to moving forward in the field of adult education.

> It's probably time for a new *White Paper* and I would say that before they begin it, the absolute campaigning should be we want on the table the percentage of the education budget that's going to be there to resource it. (Participant B)

While two participants made explicit reference to the need for predictable, dedicated funding at the service level, as opposed to funding dedicated to prescribed programmes. The grounds for this refer back to the diversity of learners' needs and it was perceived that if the criteria for funded programmes were overly restrictive, then this poses challenges for adult educators, in terms of resources being available to meet the particular needs of adult learners from diverse backgrounds.

Challenges pertaining to human resources were identified particularly in terms of the context of adult learning, the complexity of the practice and professionalisation within the field.

> It's something about this kind of warm relational context, coupled with the formality of the content. So how do you marry those? Well one of the ways you marry them is to have highly professional people. (Participant B)

While acknowledging the crucial role that volunteers contribute to the sector, the need to have an adequate body of trained and dedicated personnel was perceived as a key challenge to future growth and development within adult education. In the context of increasing moves across Europe towards professional standards for adult educators, Nicholl and Edwards (2012) in cautioning against normative discourses of professional development that such moves should be grounded in 'detailed empirical research on the pedagogies of professional development and practice in adult education' (p. 233).

Finally, concerns were raised by participants as to the impact of how adult education will respond to the changing world in which we live, particularly in terms of the impact of the economic climate and the growing neoliberal agenda.

> The tension I think now is that we would go back to a form of adult education where it is absolutely skills-based and focused on connection between this industry and what you're learning, again the dominance of the economic concerns and how to keep alive that holistic model and also the transformative education model that we've been speaking about. (Participant C)

The general concern, reflected therein, being, that the dual mandate regarding the purpose of adult education, particular to the Republic of Ireland (Mark, 2007; Maunsell *et al.*, 2008 and Holford *et al.*, 2009) would be eroded given the, then, vista of increasing financial cutbacks.

Conclusion

While there is little doubt, at the time of writing this article, that the range of reports, structures and the weight of government activity provide evidence of the pursuit of an agenda for lifelong learning, what has changed?

Recent statistics showing increases in the participation rates in lifelong learning in Ireland are a welcome development (European Commission, 2017; SOLAS, 2018). When analysed deeper, however, Ireland's participation rates remain lower relative to the EU-28 average and lower rates of participation amongst certain vulnerable groups persist. Given the robust evidence-base on the positive impact of lifelong learning in addressing personal, social and community inequalities, O'Reilly (2018), referencing the OECD (2018) roadmap for 'inclusive growth', calls for state investment to prioritise widening, as well as increasing, participation in adult learning to ensure parity of access to lifelong learning.

While nationally and internationally, adult education may be seen to be held as 'a public good worthy of public investment (UNESCO, 2016, p. 129), with Budget 2018 showing modest increases in areas of relevance to adult education (AONTAS, 2018), nonetheless, it would appear that the main competing perspective in Ireland remains 'not so much ideological as simply giving financial priority to adult education over other areas' (Maunsell *et al.*, 2008, p. 5).

Returning then to the role of the adult educator, von Hippell and Tippelt (2010), drawing on research with German adult educators, highlight the potential of adult educators' contribution to increasing participation in adult education. In politicising their role, Nesbit (2006) contends that adult educators 'have a responsibility to raise important and challenging questions and to build upon their students' lived experiences about how inequalities play out in communities, lives, and workplaces' (p. 184). The findings of Youngman and Singh (2005, p. 9), add further to this debate in that they argue for 'adult educators themselves to be proactive in shaping national and institutional policies and in promoting their interests.' While Irish sociologist Tom Inglis (2009, p. 114) centralises the role that adult educators can play in bringing about this shift in society when he speculates as to 'how adult educators and community leaders can help create a mature, learning society?'

In conclusion, this article places at the fore the argument that participation by and input of adult educators is fundamental in addressing the gaps perceived internationally between policy and its implementation in the field of adult education (UNESCO, 2010). If this view is, as it would appear to be, so central and accepted a position held by the body proper within adult education internationally, then the findings from the research study forming the basis of this article strongly endorse Youngman and Singh's (2005) contention that 'the voices of adult educators need to be given greater prominence in national and international discourses on adult education and learning' (p. 1).

When taken together, these six adult educator's life history accounts of the legacy of achievements in the field, their vision for change and their perceptions of the challenges inherent in such change, one might contend that the adult educators who participated in this study viewed themselves as agents of change and therefore intrinsically saw both their roles as adult educators and the field of adult education itself as the means by which the goal of 're-visioning' our society may be achieved.

> What I think adult education is, adult education then is the system that is put in place to help us learn our way out into beyond. (Participant A)

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