A Tale of a Discursive Shift: Analysing EU Policy Discourses in Irish Adult Education Policy – From the *White Paper* to the *Further Education and Training Strategy*

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Abstract

This article discusses some of the main findings of a Critical Discourse Analysis of two landmark documents in Irish adult education: Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) and the Further Education and Training Strategy (SOLAS, 2014) (from here on referred to respectively as the White Paper and the FET Strategy). The diachronic approach taken by this inquiry permits an exploration of the ways in which language in policy documents has changed over time, particularly in terms of how policy addresses educational inequality. It is in this way that the notion of a discursive shift could be explored, setting this change in language in starker relief. Policy as discourse shapes the formation of this inquiry so the article briefly explicates the approach taken to a Critical Discourse Analysis. Considerations of methodological nationalism widened the focus to consider the influence of European Union (EU) policy discourses specifically in Irish policy formation and these discourses in the statecraft of the EU and nation states. It is from this perspective that the Irish story is also a European one, so the article analyses how the White Paper and the FET Strategy were framed by the EU policy discourses of 'lifelong learning' and 'skills' respectively. As part of this analysis, this article considers the significance of the redefinition of the notion of 'inclusion' to 'active inclusion' and the sharpening of 'evidence based' discourse in policy resourcing of adult education provision. Finally, the article briefly elaborates on the authors' experience of this research and the value of Critical Discourse Analysis as a normative force and a tool for advocacy.

Keywords: Adult Education, Discourse, Hegemony, Lifelong Learning, Neoliberalism, Policy, Skills, EU, Nation State

Introduction

The education system is … the product of conflict between the dominant and the dominated … It is an arena of conflict over the production of knowledge, ideology and employment, a place where social movements try to meet their needs and business attempts to produce hegemony. (Carnoy and Levin, 1985)

The EU is often seen as an important influence and actor in shaping global education policy. Its interactions see nation states acting as 'norm-advocates' in national policy using discourses which are mediated through EU education policy space (Klatt, 2014). While the subsidiarity principle means that the field of education falls under the competence of the member states, at the time of writing of the *White Paper*, the EU had gained incremental legislative ground for its role in adult education policy. The Treaties of Maastricht 1992 and Amsterdam 1997 enabled permeability in policy formation between education and vocational training, and the monitoring of member states national employment policies. The Luxembourg Process (named following its adoption at the Jobs Summit Luxembourg in 1997) saw education emerge in EU employment policy in the form of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning was viewed as a way to 'transform passive labour market policies into active policies for human resource investment' (EC, 1997 p. 15). It can be said that this coupling of labour and education policy was symptomatic of the shift from Keynesian and welfare state economics of post war international politics (where education is a right and is provided by the state) to the Washington consensus of post-cold war (where education is a service to the consumer that is provided by the market). The resultant proliferation of neoliberal ideas promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) influenced this changing paradigm in policy development, with the origins of lifelong learning arising from economic rather than educational roots. Notably, Jarvis (2007) contended that learning to do without welfare is what lifelong learning was really about:

Far from being ambiguous lifelong learning has emerged as a key instrument of globalisation emerging in discourse at the same time and placing the responsibility for learning on the individual to acquire and chose to lifelong learn with the connotation of irresponsibility for those who do not, and those who cannot, acquire that learning. (Jarvis, 2007, p. 68)

Lifelong learning as a concept was particularly linked to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and EU which informed

the discourse of their policy documents from the early 70s onwards (Finnegan, 2008, Barros, 2012). The EU's most widely distributed policy concerning education entitled *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (EC, 2000), provided lifelong learning with its first formal definition in EU policy terms. From a nation state perspective, this shift in international education policy formation can somewhat explain that while there was no formal EU policy definition of lifelong learning at the time of the writing of the *White Paper*, lifelong learning had already crafted a niche in Ireland's economic policy (DTET, 1997). Irish policy makers embraced the concept of lifelong learning to develop common strategies for employment and education policy, realising unprecedented dialogue under the theme of lifelong learning (Fitzsimons, 2017). Ireland was one of the few nation states that applied the principle of lifelong learning to its policy making and to what is viewed as its seminal policy document for adult education, *Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000). Drawing from the *EU Council Conclusions on a Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (EC, 1996), it was as Lambeir described, 'the magic spell in the discourse of educational and economic policymakers' (2005, p. 350).

The writing of the *FET Strategy* was preceded by a global financial crisis in 2008. This crisis saw flagship policy documents issued in relatively quick succession from the European Commission Directorate General (DG) for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. 'Skills' replaced 'lifelong learning' in the titles of these documents: *'New skills for New Jobs-Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs' (2008a)* and the *'Agenda for new Skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment'* (EC, 2010a). They manifested consensus in approach towards economic recovery informed by key actors including the OCED, International Labour Organisation (ILO), G20, and the United Nations (UN). 'Skills' were framed not only in terms of the individual and the workforce, but also in terms of a 'global race for talent' (EC, 2010a). The *FET Strategy* mirrored these policy concerns around high rates of low qualified, mismatches between skills in the labour market, developing labour market intelligence and providing the right mix of skills (EC, 2008a). The concept of skills replaced lifelong learning as common ground in EU and national policy and was propagated as 'the major structural challenge of the decade' (Panitsides and Anastasiadou 2015).

Statecraft

A formalisation of EU and nation state interactions through a new form of governance called the Open Method of Coordination (OMC)[1] saw a by-passing of the subsidiarity principle through this new governance arrangement (EC, 2006). This enabled a more coherent EU and nation state policy focus on the part to be played by education and training as the source of economic prosperity. It can be said that the OMC was a move beyond Weber's (1978) conceptualisation of the legitimate and territorially bound authority of the state as an entity and legislative authority. This meant that interactions between the EU and the nation state were, to a certain extent, no longer bound by such bureaucratic principles. It is with this view that one can observe more broadly the processes of policy formation in terms of EU to nation state interactions. Where political agents like those lobbying for policy formation act strategically to pursue particular agendas. What is useful when analysing policy as discourse is how these interactions effects the privileging of some political strategies over others to meet these agendas through what Jessop (2007) calls 'strategic selectivity'. As generators of 'strategic selectivity' the EU and the nation state adopt strategies that aim to impose unity and coherence to government activities. An important added dimension to this consideration is Jessop's concept of 'discursive selectivity', which acknowledges the role of discourse to influencing 'strategic selectivity'. In this way one can see how discourse, in the pursuit of 'strategic selectivity' draws on social imaginaries such as globalisation, lifelong learning, skills and the knowledge economy to give coherence to policy visions and goals. Laying the foundations for this inquiry's argument, it can be said that the EU and nation state's selection of some strategies over others are 'discursively -selective', whereby policy formation is shaped to be contingent with these agendas (Milana, 2014). As will be discussed later, it can be seen how these agendas manifest as primarily about pursuing economic objectives rather than objectives for a more equal and inclusive society.

Visions and simplifications of a complex hope

Hegemony is defined in the Gramscian sense 'as a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class' (Mayo, 1999, p.35). Hegemony, developed through our social interactions (in work, education etc.) sees a naturalising of our social relations and ideologies that are

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1   The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is an approach to political coordination and draws on tools such as indicators and benchmarks as well as on comparison of best practice, monitoring and peer review (Keogh, 2004).

largely discursive (Fairclough, 2010). Hegemony and its power lie in its shaping of our consciousness. It is through this, that our conception of a 'common-world view' is made and therein the values of our shared worldview. This 'everyday thinking', made up of a tapestry of stories, create a narrative providing simple explanations for the way the world is or the way it must be (Hall and O'Shea, 2013). For Gramsci, education is one of the many ways this 'common-sense' can be disseminated to maintain a particular world view and exercise hegemony. Linking class dimensions to this dynamic, he viewed the limiting of access to 'powerful knowledge' as confining people and communities to the 'margins of economic and political life' (Mayo, 1999, p. 8). Fleming (2004) usefully describes adult education as being at the interface between the needs of the economy and the needs of society. As a policy object, it is at this interface that adult education and its work is found. Its policy terrain can be seen as an ideological one whereby hegemony legitimises certain values and beliefs through discourses of 'common sense' that shape its purpose and formation. Often described as 'second chance' the Irish state has taken an increasingly functionalist view of adult education in terms of its contribution to economic and political order without any consideration for its civic role and its potential for critical action or radical change as proposed by Freire (Grummell, 2007). Critical education, concerned challenging dominant ideas through a process of critical thinking and dialogue, can uncover how society and social structures shape one's everyday reality and concern oneself with how this reality could be different (Fitzsimons, 2017). Critical pedagogy and Freire's concept of 'praxis' engages students in a learning process that is not imposed but enables learners to be self-determined whereby they can realise their power as critically engaged citizens who question the process of education and the process of democracy (Giroux, 2010). This process, as described by Freire, is a coming into consciousness, a state of 'conscientization' where one is enabled to see beyond the veil of 'common-sense' to the social, political and economic contradictions (Freire, 1970). And so, it is from this perspective that the challenge for adult education in policy can be seen as a 'complex hope'. This complex hope is one which recognises the historical and structural inequalities that need to be overcome (Grace 1994, in Thrupp and Tomlinson, 2005). This inquiry found when analysing EU and national policy discourses, ambitions for social justice and the notion of social justice itself has become ever more contested. This has seen sharpening in policy formation and therein policy language in how social justice is realised; from social justice discourses drawn from the notion of the social contract and driven by the 'common good', to discourses of social justice

realised through the 'market state', whereby individuals are responsible for themselves as human capital (Thrupp and Tomlinson, 2005).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Social representations of the world through language and discourse is the major concern of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It aims to reveal the ideological work in texts like policy and how they work to represent a world view, relate information, identify and prioritise problems and frame solutions to those problems. The use of CDA is not about an ideological position, nor is it claiming absolute truth, but rather uncovering power dimensions in policy language and how its values are articulated in policy formation. In this way it can reveal how language and discourse is used in policy to resource or not resource, to select and deselect, to legitimise and delegitimise. And so, when one is analysing text one is alternating between what is 'there' and the discourse types(s) that it is drawing upon (Fairclough, 2001). What is for consideration here, is how discourses like globalisation, lifelong learning and skills can work in policy to represent complex social realities while acting as social constructions in policy formation for its problems and solutions. These discourses provide selective representations, simplifications and condensations of 'highly complex economic, political, social and cultural realities, which include certain aspects of these realities and exclude others, highlight certain aspects, and background others' (Fairclough, 2010, p.507). Fairclough contends that texts inevitably make assumptions: 'what is 'said' in a text is 'said' against a background of what is 'unsaid', but taken as a given' (Fairclough, 2003). Existential assumptions assume that globalisation exists and that there is a 'knowledge-based economy'; propositional assumptions convey for example that globalisation is a process and that it is linked to economic progress; value assumptions assume that globalisation, adaptability, efficiency and flexibility are desirable or, for example, that a lack of these attributes is a risk to the economy and society.

Fairclough (2003) links the notion of 'common-sense' assumptions in text to hegemony. These assumptions within policy texts have their foundation in a 'world of texts' as Fairclough puts it. For this analysis one can see how 'lifelong learning' and 'skills' in national policy draws explicitly and implicitly from a wider world of texts including those from the EU, OECD etc. And, as no form of communication in texts like policy is possible without some 'common ground', power and hegemony lie in its capacity to shape the nature and content of this common ground. This makes assumptions and implicitness important to the notion of ideology (Fairclough, 2003). It is from this perspective that one can

critically analyse how 'lifelong learning' and 'skills' act as common ground in the *White Paper* and the *FET Strategy*. And is particularly relevant when considering how these discourses can act as common-sense in policy formation which allows them to be judged in terms of their social effects rather than their truth values (Fairclough, 2010, p. 32). It can be said that these discourses work in policy to create a fatalistic 'no alternative' and conceptualisation of social justice within goals of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005).

The White Paper to the FET Strategy: From Lifelong Learning to Skills Discourses

The White Paper: A vision for lifelong learning

Lifelong learning in the *White Paper* gave the context for adult education's recognition and development for the future (Fleming, 2001). It was this recognition that makes it a landmark document for those working in the field, particularly in terms of critical adult education and community education (Connolly, 2008). Its wide-ranging consultation process gave visibility to the work of adult and community education which up to this time was an invisible part of adult education provision (Fleming, 2001; Fitzsimons 2017). Positioning adult education within the broader realm of lifelong learning discursively served to determine the *White Paper*'s shape and purpose from the outset. This enabled it to frame its policy significance 'beyond the sectoral concerns of adult education only' (DES, 2000, p. 30). As 'common ground', lifelong learning acted to rhetorically resolve its social justice goals with its economic ones, and the role of lifelong learning rather than adult education to realise these policy goals. Drawing on a discourse of change it positions lifelong learning as a response to this as a 'new departure':

> This is truly a new departure by the State in shaping its educational thinking ... to one in which lifelong learning becomes the overriding principle. (DES, 2000, p. 24)

Visions for lifelong learning in the *European Council Conclusions on a Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (1996) were mirrored in the *White Paper*. Human capital and social justice discourses were combined in its vision statement and linked to the notion of the knowledge society (Fairclough, 2000). The visions of the *White Paper* draw from knowledge society discourses to shape its ambitions towards a well-developed education system. This education system is one that can produce a workforce that is 'adaptable and willing to learn new skills' (DES, 2000, p. 9) and can act as 'a major selling point in the new knowledge society'.

Educational inequality in the White Paper

Vivid images of adult education in the *White Paper* can be found where it describes learning in the home, literacy within formal education, community education, and self-funded education. The structural and intergenerational features of educational inequality, including the impact of a parent's education on the educational attainment of their children are recognised in the *White Paper* from the outset:

> We know that increasing children's participation and benefit from education is heavily dependent on also enabling parents to support their children's learning. (DES, 2000, p. 9)

The *White Paper* links consistent poverty, the role of education in addressing poverty, and in particular, the role that Adult Education can play in addition to school in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty:

> Parental levels of education exert a critical influence on children's participation in education and their school performance … adult education particularly the community education strand can play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. (DES, 2000, p. 49)

Learning within the space of the home, intergenerational learning and familial learning is explicitly linked to the literacy attainment of children:

> Children who 'come home to a house which does not encourage reading, or the development of reading skills is at risk of underachieving in school'. (DES, 2000, p. 91)

The engagement of the lifelong learner in lifelong learning is described as voluntary and self-motivated, contending that 'the learner rather than the provider is at the centre of the process' (DES, 2000, p. 32). It aims to:

> Secure the learner-centred aspect of adult education in the approaches and policies it proposes … it transforms power relationships between the provider and learner in favour of the learner. (DES, 2000, p. 32)

However, manifestations of a transfer in power relationship are not evident for educational initiatives working with the 'low skilled'. Access, eligibility and financial support to attend programmes like the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) are subject

to the discretion of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. Eligibility is dependent on one's social welfare payment status and on condition that the course will improve chances of getting a job:

> To continued welfare payments will be subject to their satisfying the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs … that the persons concerned are still available for and actively seeking work, and that the course is likely to improve their chances of gaining a job (DES, 2000, p. 98).

> Subject to the discretion of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. (DES, 2000, p. 97)

A dedicated chapter for community education and its referencing throughout the *White Paper* pays particular attention to its capacity to reach 'large numbers of participants, frequently in disadvantaged settings' (DES, 2000, p. 110). The *White Paper* describes community education as 'pioneering new approaches to teaching and learning' (DES, 2000, p. 110) and as 'one of the most dynamic and distinctive elements of the adult education sector in recent years' (DES, 2000, p. 16). It outlines the role of adult education and community education in particular as having a 'crucial role' in addressing educational inequality (DES, 2000, p. 49). Observing the *White Paper*'s lexical appreciation for the complexities and implications of educational inequality one would expect a commitment to resourcing of these crucial learning spaces with an all-encompassing approach. However, these commitments are outlined on conditional terms:

> Community Education Providers will access funding through a competitive bidding process … the level of funding available will require that criteria for a rigorous prioritisation process are developed, and that joint frameworks for accountability and quality assurance form an integral part of the approach. (DES, 2000, p. 117)

Tracing social justice discourses through the *White Paper* one finds visible tensions. These tensions are most evident where the resourcing of these learning spaces is deliberated. Government commitments to resourcing learning spaces that address educational inequality (community education, literacy, part-time self-funded education) avoids commitment, deferring to the principle of lifelong learning and its systemic approach.

Lifewide education poses particular systemic challenges … the appropriate resourcing of different learning sites … economies of scale and quality assurance issues will always require some selection and designation of providers … requires ease of movement and progression between learning sites based on parity of esteem between providers. (DES, 2000, p. 32)

A balance must be struck between the need to support innovation and empowerment through local initiatives, particularly in disadvantaged areas, and the need for systematic and strategic investment. (DES, 2000, p. 117)

This inquiry found that lifelong learning in the *White Paper* was a malleable term that was tailored to serve a policy agenda. It sharpened an alignment for the purpose of adult education with the human capital agenda and became a policy term for a 'new educational order' (Field, 2006). It facilitated an unbalanced compromise which was played out in its visions for lifelong learning and social justice without having to really commit to addressing educational inequality at all. It can be said that this was a moment of appropriation, whereby these learning spaces were enveloped the discourses of lifelong learning and its systemic approach.

The FET Strategy: A vision for a skills equation

The *FET Strategy* and its policy vision for the reform of the adult education field 'marked a major shift in the way adult education was framed in Irish policy' (Finnegan, 2017). Further Education and Training (FET) replaced 'adult education' as the umbrella term for the field. This was a shift and narrowing in policy view of the work of adult education to a 'training/ reskilling paradigm' (Murray, 2014, p. 113). To use the words of Taylor and Henry (1994), observing a similar policy umbrella in Australia, the formation of FET has a 'stretched nature sheltering as it does a fragile consensus, in turn sheltering a number of disparate and not necessarily compatible interests' (cited in Taylor, 1997, p. 30). Skills replaced lifelong learning as the 'common-sense', shaping the policy formation of the *FET Strategy*. Its policy vision coherently centred on the metaphor of the 'skills equation'. Employers and their needs were placed at the heart of this 'skills equation' with 'skills matching' to address the needs of employers and the provision of skills that are 'genuinely valued':

Skills development and wellbeing lie at the heart of the *FET Strategy*. Employers lie at the heart of skill needs, while the learner lies at the heart of the FET service. (SOLAS, 2014, p. 4)

The *FET Strategy* presents 'skills' as the policy panacea for the social and economic challenges faced by the Ireland in the wake of the economic crisis. In a similar way to lifelong learning in the *White Paper*, skills are poised as the answer to an internationally shared reality. Described as the 'global currency of 21st Century economies' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 64), the policy goal aims for 'greater alignment between FET provision and FET-related employer skills needs' to 'withstand disruptive global, national or local business forces' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 19). From the outset it explicitly links the purpose of skills with the development of human capital and the wellbeing of the economy:

Skills as a resource for economic growth

Skills as drivers of employment and growth

Skills as drivers of productivity increase

Skills and 'smartening' of the economy

Skills as a driver of social inclusion and social mobility

Skills as an insulator from unemployment.

(SOLAS, 2014, pp. 4–5)

Educational inequality in the FET Strategy

It is not without significance that education inequality *FET Strategy* is described in terms of 'learning failure' and Further Education and Training as a way to 'remedy past deficiencies' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 22). Describing the unemployed as 'inactive', it is a discursive shift from the *White Paper*, taking a narrow policy view of the adult learner and their life experience. The *FET Strategy's* policy formation around educational inequality positions 'skills' as the driver to 'social mobility and social inclusion (SOLAS, 2014, p. 4). Viewing the adult learner in terms of their skill attainment, it aims towards the construction of the 'employable citizen'. The *FET Strategy's* concerns about 'skills depreciation', the difficulty in realising a 'skills match' and the limitations of skills themselves in realising 'better social or economic outcomes' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 78) are not considered in terms the complexity of how educational inequality is experienced, or how social mobility is realised. While this can be seen as a discursive shift from the concept of 'lifelong learning', the simplifications one can associate with skills discourse are not dissimilar. Skills can be seen as underpinning an evolution in

policy thinking and formation around how social justice is achieved. Common-sense 'employability' and 'skills' discourses colour visions for a 'smart economy' and are reconciled with a new hybrid and neoliberal version of inclusion known as 'active inclusion'.

From Social Inclusion to Active Inclusion

'Active inclusion' replaced the concept of 'social inclusion' in the *FET Strategy*. It can be said that the concept of 'active inclusion' represents an evolution of the notion of 'social inclusion' to a more defined neoliberal view, whereby the inclusion of the citizen into society means their 'integration into the market either as consumers or producers' (Gaventa, 2010, in Mikelatou and Arvanitis 2018, p. 501). This represents a discursive shift, not only in terms of its marginalisation and silencing of social justice discourses, but a hybridisation of those discourses with economic discourses. Social inclusion as a concept is understood as the inclusion of a citizen into society, whereas active inclusion can be understood as an individualised and targeted welfare intervention (Kunzel, 2012). Active Inclusion in the *FET Strategy* is explicitly drawn from the *European Commission Recommendation on Active Inclusion of People Excluded from the Labour Market*, (EC, 2008b). It seeks to combine three pillars. The first outlines the individual's right to resources and social assistance to live in dignity. The second addresses the issue of 'inclusive labour markets' which urge member states to provide for active labour market measures that will raise the employability of the workforce, raise the quality of jobs at the bottom of the labour market and review tax incentives and disincentives for those on low incomes. The third, outlines the need for access to quality services such as housing support, affordable childcare and health and care services. Importantly, the Recommendation outlines that these three pillars should be implemented at national level with the right policy mix (EC, 2008b). However, the decentralised and discretionary nature of policy implementation at national level has seen few countries go beyond a strictly labour market and welfare intervention. Policy research on the application of active inclusion across the member states (which does not include Ireland) show that 'labour activation' and 'enabling' policies which favour improving individual's capacities can co-exist (Kunzel, 2012). And while the *FET Strategy* acknowledges that those with low levels of education are more likely to experience in-work poverty and precarious employment, its application of 'active inclusion' takes a predominately labour activation approach. In addition, there is an absence of policy considerations for realising an 'inclusive labour market' as an evolution to the 'inclusive society' which should see some policy attention on the notion of sustainable

employment and the quality of jobs at the bottom of the labour market. Most pointedly, its application of active inclusion reveals a strategic use of evidence and 'evidence based' discourses to serve its policy narrative for 'employability' which fails to address complexities of how social and educational inequality is experienced.

Evidence based is a discourse like any other

Ball (1993) contends that policy making is not a rational and scientific process but an ideological one based on ideas and assumptions about how society should be organised, and resources allocated. It can be said that 'evidence based' policy making and 'outcomes based' funding was an evolution to the *White Paper's* 'rigorous prioritisation process' and 'accountability'. Bringing us back to the notion of a 'complex hope', Head (2013) contends that distinctions must be made between evidence that can be 'deployed directly' to solve technical issues and how policy addresses what requires more complex problem solving around structural and social inequality. It can be said that term 'evidence based', purports to position policy making as a neutral process whereby it is working 'in a neutral, rationalist, and a political fashion' to solve social problems and that this use of evidence is different to the way policy was made before (Newman, 2017, p. 213). With regard to linking research and evidence for policy formation, Connolly argues that 'validation of knowledge creation is still as site of struggle' whereby positivist research is asserted as 'the only valid source of information and knowledge on which decisions and policy should be based' (2016, p.95). Newman (2014) considers how evidence-based policy making is damaging to policy making because it creates a 'hierarchy of evidence, which favours some forms of knowledge over equally valid forms'. This creates a 'powerful metaphor in shaping what forms of knowledge are considered closest to the truth in decision making processes and policy argument' (Newman, 2014, p. 218). The *FET Strategy* drew heavily and strategically from its SOLAS commissioned research; *Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future* (ESRI, 2014) and the National Economic Social Council (NESC) *A Strategic Review of the Unemployed* (NESC, 2013). It used this research to underpin its policy argument for skills and employability, contending that this was a departure from what was done before which it contends was 'determined more by legacy than by evidence-based needs' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 8).

Community education is described in the *FET Strategy* 'as a critical access point for many adults who left school early and/or who have personal, familial, or communal experience of socio-economic exclusion' (SOLAS, p. 96). The

ESRI consultation found that 'across the stakeholder groups there was strong recognition of the need for these forms of provision' (ESRI, 2014, p. 84). The measurement of outcomes that relate to 'personal development as well as employment outcomes' were one of five 'most-widely mentioned strategies flagged by over 150 submissions to the DES led consultation process' (ESRI, 2014, p. 84). This pointed to a significant concern about the narrowness and formation of data collected for validation of outcomes. In this regard, *FET Strategy* does not reflect the outcomes of the ESRI consultation, which outlined the 'need to think 'creatively' about measuring outcomes and the need for measurement to be 'non-threatening' to potential participants' (ESRI, 2014, p. 77). Its research also outlines that there is a need to 'ensure *appropriate* (italics in original) metrics are developed' (ESRI, 2014, p. 84), and 'the importance of avoiding the unintended consequences of accreditation' (ESRI, 2014, p. 121). The NESC (2013) in its principle findings, responds with recommendations to address these widely expressed concerns from the consultation:

> SOLAS should adopt a holistic view of what constitutes success for unemployed learners and support the collection of data on learners' views as well as 'hard data' on qualifications and outcomes … there are significant 'softer' achievements such as increased confidence, more developed group skills and social skills, and that the option of non-accredited learning can be important for particularly disadvantaged groups … there are models to evaluate social return on investment that are particularly useful for these types of programmes. (NESC, 2013 p. 80)

Community education is strongly expressed in the *FET Strategy* as a 'vital link' in addressing educational inequality, yet in the consultation its proposed future funding model will be based on 'outcomes'. There are no assurances given that the new funding model will reflect the concerns and recommendations of the research, stating that 'until such time as the information exists' it will sustain funding and review the budget for community education on an annual basis (SOLAS, 2014, p. 26). This language acts in a similar way to the *White Paper*, with the use of evidence-based discourses emerging as most pervasive in policy formation for educational inequality. It appears most vividly where the *FET Strategy* points to concerns raised by the NESC review which found that there was 'variable quality across the FET sector around the matching of individuals to the most suitable and meaningful education and training programmes' (NESC, 2013, p. 82). The NESC review outlined that one of the strongest messages coming from their consultation was the role of guidance as a determinant of success for the FET sector:

The role which good guidance plays in ensuring that unemployed people identify courses for which they are motivated and capable of completing … when unemployed people do not complete courses, resources are wasted and other learners, providers and the unemployed themselves are negatively affected. (NESC, 2013, p. 82)

It recommends that:

It is important that protocols and procedures are further developed … on a priority basis for LTU (long term unemployed) enrolling on FET. (NESC, 2013, p. 82)

While the NESC research identifies the role of guidance as a determinant of success, the *FET Strategy* maintains that the NESC research indicates that any improved protocol procedures between the Department of Social Protection (DSP), Adult Education Guidance Services and the ETB would 'not be sufficient in itself to deliver improved outcomes for learners' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 82). And that 'an evidence base is needed on the role of guidance in FET' to match learners to the most suitable and meaningful education and training programmes. Drawing from the NESC research it outlines a number of areas that require improvement in terms of meaningful provision, including the limited employment outcomes arising from programmes such as the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI):

- The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) has only one-in-five advancing to employment.

- Generally, little is known about what the unemployed (and the 20% unemployed) use BTEI for, i.e. how long they stay on it, what awards they achieve, what employment impacts the awards have etc. (SOLAS, 2014, p. 83)

While these programmes may have realised limited employment outcomes, the NESC research also identified significant educational outcomes which were ignored by the *FET Strategy*. VTOS sees 'two in five use it to progress to more advanced education' (NESC, 2013, p. 30). And the BTEI Programme, which works with adults for whom 60% have achieved less than upper secondary education, sees 'continuing with BTEI (45%) or some form of additional education/ training (13%) as the dominant outcomes' (NESC, 2013, p. 43). Taking a narrow employability rather than a wider educational policy view *FET*

Strategy not only fails to recognise the educational gains of these programmes, but also fails to consider these successes in terms of the reality of the labour market; that those with the lowest skills are at the greatest risk of being the working poor. When tracing evidence-based discourses in the *FET Strategy*, no real policy value is given to the capacity of guidance, or initiatives such as VTOS and BTEI to make real educational gains for adults that may mitigate against these risks. In a similar way to the *White Paper*, the use of evidence-based discourses are most pervasive in policy formation around educational inequality. However, it can be said that the *FET Strategy* demonstrates a 'discursive shift' in the use of evidence-based research in policy making pointing to a political and value-based use of research to align with a policy narrative. Its use emerges as more about reconciling these different value perspectives and its merits as political rhetoric rather than any bureaucratic aim (Ball, 1993).

Conclusion

For this inquiry, the *White Paper* (2000) and the *FET Strategy* (2014) as two points in time offered a unique opportunity to analyse an evolution from a discourse and language perspective. It enabled considerations of the notion of a 'discursive shift' in how language in policy determines a space for the social justice work of adult education. In this way the implications of lifelong learning and skills discourses in policy could be set in starker relief; demonstrating how these discourses work, and how they now work ever more sharply to supply simplifications and condensations of complicated realities in policy formation. These unified coherent strategies in policy obscure the diversity, breadth and imagination of adult education in pursuit of visions that are shaped by globalised imaginaries. Milana (2012) outlines that while adult education practice is locally implemented, adult education as policy object is impacted upon by the discursive patterns of globalisation, and therein a neoliberal ideology, substantiated through EU and nation state policy interactions. A policy-as–discourse analysis can uncover how discourses can work to construct policy problems, while also shaping the solutions to problems (Milana, 2012; Bacchi, 2009).

There is no doubt that the *White Paper's* continuing value as a policy document is its expansive reflection of the consultation process that shaped its formation. Its voices enabled imaginaries and discourses of the social justice kind to shed light on the work of adult education and its complex hope. As an evolution, the *FET Strategy* offers a 'featureless map' (Finnegan, 2017). That said, however, it can be seen from this analysis that 'lifelong learning' and the economic lens

it brought to the formation of policy in the *White Paper* sowed the seeds for the 'skills equation' in the *FET Strategy*. Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which helps us understand the pervasiveness of hegemonies' economic determinism, is not without hope (Gramsci, 1971). His vision for a 'counter-hegemony' or alternative vision for society has insights that can be drawn on for the workings of resistance which can challenge the simplifications inherent in this economic policy lens. This counter-hegemonic work can reveal what brings certain policy discourses to prominence, their contradictions, redefinitions and silences (Thrupp and Tomlinson, 2005). It is with this perspective, that policy can be seen as an outcome of ideological struggles between the different political actors whereby there is a privileging of some political strategies over others in pursuit of 'strategic selectivity' (Jessop, 2007). Analysing policy as discourse can enable 'policy insiders' and 'policy outsiders' both within and between the EU and nation states, to work with a social justice agenda and engage in 'policy activism' (Yeatman, 1998). The EU and the nation state are not monolithic, which can allow for alternative conceptions for the formation of education that can be counter hegemonic (Borg and Mayo 2006). Jessop's theory of the state as a social relation offers light and possibility to these interactions whereby policy actors can work to engage in a 'war of position' on the economic determinism shaping adult education policy. As Gramsci indicated, it is through these social relations, that much, though not all, of the present hegemonic relationships are developed and contested, and given the incompleteness of these arrangements they can allow spaces in which counter-hegemonic action can be waged (Mayo, 2013).

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