

# Up Here it's Different: Community Education in Rural East Donegal

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## **'Up here it's different'**

This familiar advertising slogan used to attract visitors to the rugged beauty of Co. Donegal, was correct in highlighting that things are different in Donegal, although not for the reasons we might connect with tourism. For many, Donegal evokes nostalgic images of old, rural Ireland such as close community bonds, unspoilt landscape, strong agriculture and fishing industries. Unfortunately such idyllic reminiscences are somewhat at odds with the realities of life in Donegal, often described by residents as 'the forgotten county.' While a beautiful landscape and a strong sense of community in many parts of the county are positive features, its overwhelming lack of development throughout the 'Celtic Tiger' era is evidence of its neglect in comparison to many other counties in the Republic of Ireland. According to Haase and Pratschke (2008), Donegal is the most disadvantaged local authority area within the whole country, situated within the most disadvantaged region in Ireland – the Border Region. Haase and Pratschke also state that the county of Donegal has a Relative Index score<sup>1</sup> of -10.0 and is termed a disadvantaged area, compared with the national Relative Index Score of 2.1. Relative Index Scores among electoral divisions (EDs) in Donegal range from -58.3 (Island of Aran) to -8.6 (Letterkenny Urban District) to 7.4 (Bundoran Rural ED, Donegal's most affluent area; Bundoran Urban ED has a Relative Index Score of -1.7).

Traditional employment in the agriculture and fishing industries is no longer viewed as viable for many families and individuals, resulting in unemployment and deeply felt changes within communities. Combined with weak infrastruc-

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<sup>1</sup> Relative Index Scores provide a standardised measurement of relative affluence or deprivation in a given area at a specific point in time.

ture, no train service, poor bus services, high levels of early school leaving and high unemployment rates, Donegal is different and disadvantaged. Common perceptions of ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland tend to view the conflict as contained within the six counties. However, sectarian, political and economic tensions have left profound scars in communities along the border. Without documenting the difficulties, violence, trauma and heartbreak of this period of recent history, it is important to recognise that;

No community can speak of itself without speaking of and to its history. Historical understanding and memory are intrinsic to any functioning notion of Community.

(Deane, 1994, p.xiv)

The ‘Troubles’ have left an indelible mark on communities with ramifications such as a lingering hurt and suspicion that can often affect inter-community relationships. The macro and micro tensions have a particular legacy for East Donegal with the neglect of the State impacting on nearly every community in the county. And these are outstanding issues before the current economic recession has been considered. While many of the towns and villages in Donegal exhibit some of the aforementioned economic, political, cultural and social issues, this article will concentrate on the villages of St. Johnston and Carrigans in East Donegal. These two villages, with a combined population of approximately 2,500, are situated two miles apart, along the River Foyle and border the counties of Derry and Tyrone.

### **St. Johnston & Carrigans – rural communities in East Donegal**

St. Johnston and Carrigans are in a rural area that is isolated due to its natural geographical location along the border and is negatively affected by weak infrastructure, poor roads, a near absence of public transport provision, a lack of social housing and difficulties in accessing essential services in areas such as health and education. With a 2006 Relative Index Score of -22.8, St. Johnston is classified as a very disadvantaged area (Haase & Pratschke, 2008), while Carrigans<sup>2</sup> is deemed a disadvantaged area with a score of -11.6.

Hand-in-hand with such high levels of disadvantage are high rates of educational disadvantage with 39.0 per cent of the population in the St. Johnston and 29.1 per cent of the Killea ED having only Primary Level Education compared with 18.9

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<sup>2</sup> The village of Carrigans is part of the Killea ED, therefore the above statistics relating to Carrigans cover a wider ED.

per cent nationally. In addition, only 14.1 per cent of the St. Johnston population and 21.2 per cent of people in the Killea area have third level education compared with the national rate of 30.5 per cent. Figures from the 2006 Census stated that the unemployment rate in St. Johnston was 19.2 per cent, more than double the national average; the male unemployment rate was 19.6 per cent compared with 8.8 per cent nationally, while the female unemployment rate at 18.6 per cent was in stark contrast to the national rate of 8.1 per cent. The male unemployment rate in the Killea ED was 17.4 per cent while the female unemployment rate was 12.7 per cent. The current economic recession has not had a positive impact on these unemployment rates.

Working in rural, disadvantaged communities such as St. Johnston and Carrigans requires a community development approach, valuing the lives and histories of each member of the community while seeking to build collective capacity to challenge the issues that affect the broader community.

### **The community and voluntary sector in Donegal**

In spite of our county's socio-economic difficulties and recent past, Donegal is a county of promise, of people seeking healthier, sustainable communities and a better society. Evidence of this movement of hope and change is the community and voluntary sector within Co. Donegal, a sector which has recently been damaged by the ending of Peace II funding and the consequent closures of a high number of community and voluntary projects. This funding source was invaluable to many communities within Donegal, assisting groups to address the needs of their communities, be they geographic, communities of interest or function. However, even with the heavy blow of funding cuts, a strong sense of community prevails and significant community activity continues to occur.

Activities within the community and voluntary sector in Donegal are far from homogenous, responding to a wide range of issues, needs and interests. To offer an insight into the diversity of activities, underpinned by an equally diverse spectrum of ideas and values, Popple's differentiation of eight models of community work practice is useful. These models are: community care; community organisation; community development; social/community planning; community education; community action; feminist community work; and black and anti-racist community work (2000, pp. 56-57).

### **Community development**

As a social activist and paid community development worker, I, like many colleagues, advocate a community development approach, which according to Lloyd 'is about social change linked to social justice, using a process that is collective, participative and empowering' (2000, p. 24). This approach is inseparable from other models of community work practice as it incorporates elements such as community education, community action, feminist community work and black and anti-racist community work. Community development, with its underpinning aim of social transformation towards an egalitarian and just society, is a different way of thinking, organising and acting compared to community-based work or service provision. While community development strives for collective empowerment, action and change, it is informed by a deep respect and recognition of the needs of individuals within communities, utilising a holistic approach that pays attention to the lives, experiences and history of each person.

Community development is important in any community, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged communities, as an activity that allows communities 'to express their felt human needs, and have some of them met' (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004, p. 156). Crickley suggests that community development removes the barriers to participation experienced by disadvantaged communities and 'is concerned with building active and sustainable communities, based on justice and respect' (2003, p. 42). The following quote by Ledwith synthesises the ethos of community development:

Community development begins in the everyday lives of local people. This is the initial context for sustainable change. It is founded on a process of empowerment and participation. Empowerment involves a form of critical education that encourages people to question their reality: this is the basis of collective action and is built on principles of participatory democracy. In a process of action and reflection, community development grows through a diversity of local projects that address issues faced by people in community. Through campaigns, networks and alliances, this action develops a local: global reach that aims to transform the structures of oppression that diminish local lives. A critical approach calls for a unity of theory and practice (praxis).

(Ledwith, 2007, p.1)

Explicit in this definition is the centrality of community education in community development.

### **Community education as an integral part of community development**

Community education, as an integral part of community development, is also concerned with social change and the achievement of a just and equal society. Jarvis describes education as ‘an essential tool in the process of community development’ (1995, p. 36), while Connolly proposes adult education as being ‘an essential element which transforms community development into a radical movement for social change’ (1996, p. 35). Connolly also suggests that adult education and community development are interdependent, with each playing a vital role in the implementation of the other’s principles. ‘Community development not informed by adult education remains domesticating and hierarchical. Adult education without community development stays personal, isolated and socially less powerful’ (Connolly, 1996, p. 40).

Transformative community development cannot happen without critical education, whether that occurs in nonformal, informal or formal settings. Critical education differs from traditional education in which the teacher (and the education system) view students as empty receptacles who must be filled by their ‘bank clerk teacher’s’ knowledge. In this traditional form of education, it is the teacher’s role to bank their information, and the experiences and status of their students is not regarded. The students are deemed as objects in the learning process, with education being something that is done to them rather than with them.

### **Freirean pedagogy**

The traditional method is incompatible with Freirean pedagogy, that challenges the teacher-student relationship, and indeed the entire traditional approach to teaching. Freire (1993, p.53) views teachers and students as co-investigators in learning and later states that teaching is ‘not about transferring knowledge or contents... there is, in fact, no teaching without learning... Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning’ (Freire, 2001, p.31).

Furthermore,

Education for Freire is never neutral: it either domesticates by imparting the values of the dominant group, so that learners assume things are right the way they are, or it liberates, allowing people to reflect critically on their world and take action to move society toward a more equitable and just vision.

(Merriman and Caffarella, 1999, p.325)

In disadvantaged communities such as those in Co. Donegal, a Freirean approach to community education and community development is crucial. Fundamental to Freire's work is the concept of conscientisation, which Freire (2001, p.55) describes as the critical awareness of the material, social, political, cultural and ideological conditions in which we find ourselves, conditions which almost always generate divisions that make it difficult to construct ideals of change and transformation.

The pinnacle of conscientisation is critical consciousness, which Ledwith (2007, p. 97) describes as 'the stage at which connections are made with the way in which the structures of society discriminate, reaching into people's being, shaping their lives in prejudiced ways.' Mezirow (1991, p.136) states that critical conscientisation entails a 'rigorous critique of the dehumanising social, political, and economic structures supported by ideologies. Through praxis, the union of reflection and action, learners engage in action to bring about social change.' Critical consciousness and praxis are necessary for transformation, both within community development and adult and community education but as Ledwith states 'critical consciousness is not liberating until it becomes a collective process for change' (2007, p.6).

While critical consciousness is a key aim of critical education, Freirean pedagogy begins by understanding where students are coming from – not simply their physical location but also how their frames of reference, and ways of being in the world, have been formed by social, economic, environmental and political influences. An important feature of Freire inspired adult and community education is learner – centeredness, which places the adult learner at the centre of the education process, recognising them as autonomous beings that bring with them, to the classroom, a range of experiences and knowledge which impact on their thinking and participation. Community workers and educators 'must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed' (Freire, 1993, p.77).

### **Theory into practice**

Such critical perspectives inform the direction of my own work as a community activist and educator, and I have been involved in the community and voluntary sector in Donegal for over eleven years. From November 2007 to February 2009, I was employed as a community development worker with the St. Johnston and Carrigans Family Resource Centre (FRC). The two villages are affected by a wide range of socio-economic difficulties, that members of the community seek to overcome through the FRC. Established in 2000 and managed by a voluntary management committee, the FRC offers a wide range of services and supports to the community including: 'Stepping Stones' playschool; parent and toddler group; youth project and after school service; lunch club for Older people; meals on wheels; counselling service; community based adult guidance; 1:1 advocacy and support; clerical services; women's group; men's group; and various community education programmes.

### **Provision of community based educational initiatives**

Community education is an established area of activity within the FRC and in our daily work we met members of the community who express an interest in different types of programmes, from literacy to arts and crafts to community based third level programmes. At the time of writing, the FRC was a partner in the Centres for Learning Programme with Letterkenny Institute of Technology, that resulted in the delivery of accredited third level modules and courses in the FRC. Partnership approaches to provision were an integral part of the FRC's work, with the FRC and Donegal Adult Learner Guidance Service (Co. Donegal Vocational Education Committee) working together to deliver a community based adult guidance service. Not only did this service result in positive impacts for the individuals who used it, the service proved itself to be a valuable way of becoming informed of educational needs within the community, enabling us to organise relevant programmes, while also supporting adults to access programmes outside the community. The success of this service reiterates the necessity of responding in a person-centred way to each individual's needs, which in turn benefits the individual and the wider community.

Providing community education in rural communities affected by a range of socio-economic difficulties necessitates a unique and person-centred course of action. Rather than deciding that a certain course should be run in the community, then organising the course and recruiting through the use of posters, leaflets etc, we strove to provide courses informed by the needs of the community. Such provision begins by building relationships with members of the community, getting

to know them, their hopes, fears and the issues arising in their lives. We sought to build relationships by talking to people when they come into the FRC, stopping to meet people on the street, making contact by telephone and taking advantage of other opportunities to get to know members of the community, including visiting groups who use the centre.

By getting to know members of the community, community development workers and educators get to know the community members' educational, employment, personal or career interests and issues, and which programmes might best respond to their identified needs. When a number of people articulated a common interest, we sought to provide appropriate community based programmes, recruiting additional participants through face-to-face contact or telephone conversations. Programme organisation, design and recruitment were shaped by the needs of the community using a personal or face-to-face approach. This approach also allowed us to become aware of the barriers faced by each individual in accessing education, barriers that often include a lack of confidence, fear, transport difficulties, lack of childcare, motivational issues, previous negative experiences of education, financial costs, family or personal difficulties. In being aware of such barriers we sought to develop our educational programmes to overcome these barriers.

### **Community education programmes for men**

Through meeting male members of the community we realised that many of them wanted something different to the 'typical' community education programmes. There is also recognition within the wider community education sector that men are underrepresented in the programmes. Bearing this in mind, we began to look at programmes we could possibly run for men, in response to the suggestions made by those with whom we talked. We explored existing and successful models, with the Easilift minibus driver programme appearing as a possible option. This programme trained participants as minibus drivers, providing them with a range of related training, including child protection, first aid, passenger assistance training (PATS), minibus emergency evacuation procedures (MEEPS). We felt this programme might be a good option but that it would require some further development in order to meet the needs of our participants.

The men who were interested in returning to education had either left school early, were unemployed or underemployed. Some had also expressed an interest in improving their basic skills. In considering the socio-economic and educational background of our participants and reflecting on their suggestions for



a programme, we felt that a programme for men could include the Easilift training but would need to be adapted to meet the identified needs of the participants. Alongside designing an appropriate programme, we met with possible funders who were willing to work in partnership to co-fund such a programme, as long as it met the requirements of the different agencies.

### **The ‘Accelerate’ programme**

Consequently, we developed the ‘Accelerate Programme’, a minibus driver training programme with a difference. In addition to the driver training which could be delivered with Easilift (theory test preparation, driving lessons, child protection training, basic first aid, Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme (MiDAS), Passenger Assistance Training (PATS), Minibus Emergency Evacuation Procedures (MEEPS), manual handling (objects) Digital Tachograph training and basic vehicle maintenance); we included the ‘Signposts’ module, basic computers, adult guidance and SafePass.

The ‘Signposts’ module was tailored to meet the Specific Learning Outcomes (SLOs) of the FETAC Level Three Communications module, in order to fit with the ethos of the programme and meet the requirements of both the learners and funders. The module had a number of key aims: develop basic skills, prepare learners for employment; provide guidance around educational and career opportunities. In addition to specific learning activities to meet the SLOs of the FETAC L3 Communications module, the ‘Signposts’ module included form filling (theory test, job applications), C.V. preparation, job application procedures and interview preparation. Participants undertook the ‘Pathfinders’ programme (an electronic educational guidance resource) and met with the DALGS guidance counsellor to explore personal progression routes, enabling them to explore their own skills, talents and interests, becoming more aware of the most appropriate educational and employment opportunities. The basic computers module was accredited at FETAC L3 with the Safe Pass training also accredited.

In line with our community education ethos, influenced by Freire, we felt the educators were central to making this programme a positive and transformative learning experience and worked closely with Co. Donegal VEC and Easilift to ensure that we would have the right tutors to deliver the programme. Not all the trainers operated from a community education perspective, but we strived to bring educators in to teach on the programme who would value and respect our adult learners throughout this programme and utilise participative methods.

It is impossible to talk of respect for students, for the dignity that is in the process of coming to be, for the identities that are in the process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school. I can in no way underestimate such knowledge. Or what is worse, ridicule it. (Freire, 2001, p. 62)

The ‘Accelerate’ programme began on a cold night in January 2008 with twelve male participants, eleven of whom journeyed through the ten months of varied learning. One participant dropped out as the night the class was held (Wednesday) clashed with the Champions League and no amount of encouragement or support could change his mind. This was important learning for us as an education provider – choose your night carefully! The programme received funding from Co. Donegal VEC, The Department of Social and Family Affairs and FÁS. As with any partnership programme, difficulties can arise with funding and as the participants were not all unemployed, some of the intended funding was withdrawn after the programme began, with implications for our organisation.

Each of the 11 participants passed the FETAC Level 3 modules (Communications and Computer Literacy), passed their D1 minibus driving test and undertook the wide range of Easilift organised training. An external evaluator was hired to evaluate the programme and feedback from the participants, tutors, provider and funders have demonstrated this programme to be highly successful. The programme was also highly commended in the 2009 Aontas National ‘Star’ awards.

### **What’s transformative about teaching people to drive buses?**

One may read this article and question where is the Freirean ethos in teaching people to drive buses? By upskilling people in such a way, are we simply responding to the needs of the economy or are we moving in the direction of individual, community, and eventually social change? There does appear to be a contradiction between the critical, transformative education I have posited as necessary in community development, and the ‘Accelerate’ programme. Upon closer examination it is apparent that there is little contradiction. The methods used to recruit participants, and the design, delivery and support of the programme were influenced by a community development approach, which begins at where the individual is at. Responding to individuals’ needs is necessary to build trust, skills, relationships, and a sense of a collectivity and solidarity as the group develops. The programme had many positive impacts for the participants: increased confidence and skills for

participants; progression into further and higher education programmes and/or employment; employment promotion for some; greater awareness of, and sense of connection to the FRC with participants and their family members participating more in FRC programmes. Such steps can be life-changing for individuals, and are important in the slow and challenging process of community development, paving the way for more critical and collective action.

The ‘Accelerate’ programme may not appear to have had the explicit intention of galvanising participants into action, but it has responded to the needs of its participants, benefiting them, their families, the FRC and the wider community; valuable impacts that contribute to the overall development of the community, laying the foundations for more critical education and action. The evaluation of the programme demonstrated the success of the programme and it reaffirmed the importance of building community education programmes around the needs of the participants, not delivering a one size fits all programme. Programmes such as ‘Accelerate’, are tailored to the needs of the participants, paving the way for critical education through providing positive learning experiences in a supported environment, essential for individuals who may have had negative experiences in the formal education system.

### **Reconciling the perspectives of educators and community activists with the requirements of learners and communities**

Educators with a Freire inspired critical perspective, teaching within apparently uncritical programmes, can foster critical thinking through the use of appropriate materials and pedagogy, enabling participants to collectively and critically analyse their world and become more active – key outcomes of community development. And while critical education is necessary for social change, sometimes learners aren’t ready, willing or interested in becoming critically conscious. Perhaps a positive learning experience, against a backdrop of negative ones, is their priority. And this is where community education in response to the needs of participants is necessary, as Connolly suggests ‘community education is a flexible, emancipatory process which enable people to become more agentic in their own lives, and to bring about change in their worlds’ (2003, p. 9).

Enabling people to become more agentic in their own lives is a central aim of both community education and community development, with this process occurring at each person’s individual pace and in response to their needs. Equally important are the next steps, supporting and encouraging people to become more agentic

in their communities and responsive to wider needs. It is useful for community educators and activists to recognise the differences between the different models of community work practice (Popple, 2000) and be clear on their own position. Community educators and activists operating from a community development model often have to reconcile their critical perspectives with the needs of communities and recognise that personal and social change is slow and requires innovative approaches such as community education programmes such as the 'Accelerate' programme, which could be described as uncritical. Yet such a programme can have more benefits, be life-changing for the individual and their families, and make a greater contribution to the project of social change, than a programme top heavy on social analysis with seemingly little relevance to the participants' life, experiences and interests.

The role of community educators and activists is paramount in programmes such as 'Accelerate' in terms of creating a space to deliver education with a critical content, paving the way for further education, participation in the community and action. Utilising critical materials and discussion topics in a Freire inspired method of co-investigating and problem posing, learners and educators can together develop critical consciousness in a way appropriate to the learners and communities, ultimately moving towards change.

People external to the community provide the catalyst for critical consciousness, community workers are critical pedagogues working in informal educational contexts in community. Our role, through a diversity of projects, is to create the context for questioning that helps local people to make critical connections between their lives and the structures of society that shape their world. The process is one of action and reflection.

(Ledwith, 2007, p. 31)

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