

An Irish Adult Learner in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Narrative Account of my Experience of Working with Teacher Educators in Lesotho

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The educational context in Sub-Saharan Africa

Within the African context, educational attainment is, on balance, low. There are many reasons for this. Some of them are as follows: first of all, nutrition. Malnutrition affects one in three children under the age of five. It is difficult to learn even everyday things on an empty stomach. Malnutrition is linked to ill health and ill health is linked to child mortality. Child mortality is still high in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although UNICEF reported that infant mortality rates 'were down' to 9.7 million children (under the age of five) dying in 2006, it was, nevertheless, down from 13 million in 1990. The majority of deaths still occur in Sub-Saharan Africa: 4.8million (BBC, Health Reports, 2009). Already, a proportion of the population never make it to the childhood or adolescent phase, not to mind adulthood. The survivor child might be lucky enough to attend pre-schooling of some kind: but only 14% of children in Sub-Sahara Africa are enrolled in pre-school education. Even if this child were to be enrolled, often the care is more akin to 'babysitting' than any educational-oriented activity going on, such as Montessori.

Once of school age, the net enrolment ratios receiving Universal Primary Education (UPE) have risen since the Dakar (2000) Educational Goals, the ratio rising in Sub-Saharan Africa from 54% to 70% (and in South and West Asia to 86%). A female child in Sub-Saharan Africa is even less likely to attend school, as 55% of females in Sub-Saharan Africa are not enrolled. Hence, gender is an important determining variable in one's educational attainment outside of other obstacles, such as the access and availability of education in the first place, and, as aforementioned, good health. Access to education is not the only problem within the southern African context (though access to *good qual-*

ity education is). The likelihood of a child attending a good quality educational facility is remote, especially if the child lives in the slums or rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. African countries that have shown the political will to improve their education systems through the abolition of fees and the construction of schools, have shown greater progress in respect of their UPE enrolment figures. In Sub-Saharan Africa, even if the five year old child survives, and goes to school until the end of primary school, it is unlikely that he – or even she – will progress to secondary school. This is primarily because the secondary school system charges fees which are often too great a financial burden for families to bear. Sub-Saharan Africa shows the lowest rates of secondary school attainment with 75% of the secondary school age cohort of children not enrolled. Therefore, to talk of adult education within the African context, in the sense that we understand it, could be misleading, as most adults – especially in this part of the world – are in need of some kind of basic education in order to attain basic standard levels of literacy and numeracy. Here, adult literacy rates are approximately 55% of the population. Therefore, approximately one in two can read or write. Literacy problems are largely linked to poverty and other forms of disadvantage. In Sub-Saharan Africa, it was noted in the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality Assessment (SACMEC II) that fewer than 25% of grade 6 pupils reached a desirable level of reading, and 10% in six other countries (*cited* in EFA Monitoring Report, 2009, p.5). Unfortunately, African governments are not giving priority to youth and adult learning needs. The political will is just not there; nor is the funding allocated to meet their literacy needs.

To summarise, the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa is such that if you reach adulthood, and lucky enough to have received a quality primary education, then you have ‘beaten the odds.’ If you were to further challenge those odds, and were that one person in four that received a secondary education, you would be in a fairly privileged position, and probably male.

Gender parity is a major issue in Sub-Saharan Africa. Again, poverty and other forms of social disadvantage magnify this. Even within the schooling context, textbooks are often gender biased, teacher attitudes regularly reinforce female negative stereotyping, often hampering female performance (*Ibid.* 2009). The basic infrastructure of schools also tends to be poor, such as the lack of electricity, seats, books and other teaching resources one might be familiar with in a western context. Overcrowding is another huge problem, with enormous

teacher student ratios averaging 1:50 but sometimes greater. Teachers, by and large, tend to be unevenly distributed across regions. In order to achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015, Sub-Saharan African countries need to recruit another 1.6 million teachers. This figure could double if one were to take into account the attrition rates of teachers due to HIV/AIDS, retirement or resignation.

Overall, financing of education within Sub-Saharan Africa is poor, even though it has improved since Dakar (2000). For instance in SSA, eleven out of twenty-one countries spend less than 4% of GNP on education reflecting low political commitment to education. Most donor aid goes towards basic education, meeting UPE goals – and such aid only comes from a handful of donors.

In all, this backdrop paints a gloomy picture of educational attainment in Africa. The relevant EFA Goals in respect of adult education, although not a prominent feature of the EFA Goals or Dakar Agreement, are as follows:

- Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
- Achieving 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

(EFA Goals and the Education MDGs, 2000)

Given the above context, I work with an interesting and exceptional (relative to the population profile at large) group of people in Africa. I work with ‘formally educated’ adults. Most of the people I have engaged with in Africa to date are teacher professionals, or those involved in some capacity with teacher education. They form part of the above exceptional group of adults who have survived childhood, survived the educational system, and wish to better themselves and improve their own pedagogical skills which they, in turn, can pass on to their students. This benefits the students in the primary or secondary schools under their care.

Given the contextual background painted above, I realise that I work with a very privileged group, though they may not necessarily be from privileged or well off backgrounds. Teachers, by and large, are not well paid in developing countries. Beginning teachers, for instance, often have to wait months for their start-up salary as the grindingly slow bureaucracy is being sorted out. These teachers have not yet been ravaged by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, but with an estimate of 25% (some argue that this is a conservative estimate) of the adult population in a country like Lesotho who have contracted the virus, it is possible that some teacher educators I work with will die – perhaps during our project-life there. Anyone working on a programme such as ours must try, however painful it may be, to take such possibilities into account.

My educational needs assessment visit

When I went to Lesotho for the first time, with only emails and sporadic communications between myself, the Lesotho College of Education (LCE) and the Ministry for Education and Sport (MES) in advance of this visit, I wondered what lay ahead of me. Coming from an international and comparative educational background, I was very much aware of the fact that I was not familiar with the cultural context outside of reading the various academic articles on Lesotho and other travel material which didn't really give me an insight into the Basotho people *per se*: how they *really* lived; what they thought; how they would perceive me; what influence I would have on their opinions and how that influenced how they related to me; what one could reasonably expect and the limits of what was possible. I decided – out of necessity – that the best way to prepare myself was to try and go with as open a mind as possible.

Similar to my experience, other researchers have found a dearth of literature from Southern contributors within the international journals about educational issues in their home countries (Stubbs, 1999; Stone, 1999). Most of the articles one finds are either written by those who live and work in the North, or by expatriates working in the South. There is very little to be found from the perspectives of indigenous people. This makes one wonder about a) the validity of the current research that is available; b) the reliability of the same research. It also raises questions around the kinds of methodological paradigms one applies in the North but which are not necessarily relevant or applicable or even suitable to the South.

Open-mindedness is not easy to define, as our minds are not, as some philosophical traditions once claimed, *a Tabula Rasa*. Rather, the last thirty odd years have inscribed and imbedded in my mind, my consciousness, certain beliefs about the world we live in and how it operates (Locke, 1977). I live my life according to some ethical principles, and I don't necessary subscribe to the notion of relativity when it comes to what I would perceive as 'universal rights and responsibilities.' Nevertheless, rather than superimpose my fixed and perhaps narrow world view on what it was I was to experience, I felt it would be better to suspend (if that's possible), my own values, beliefs, and even thoughts, and most certainly judgements, but to experience Lesotho, and to use reflective tools such as diaries, log books and my notes according to good qualitative practice for the purpose of evaluation, during and afterwards. In other words, I would use the canons of the qualitative literature to enable me to reflect on my value compass while in Lesotho which would allow me to question every assumption or presupposition I might make. This was how I planned to achieve a state of 'open-mindedness.'

Another way, often recommended by anthropological-informed literature studies, is to write down one's assumptions in advance, and to reflect on these in the light of the various realities one encounters (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I did not do that in any systematic way, apart from reflecting mentally on it, because all I really knew was that I did not know what to expect, outside of the oft morbid facts that one reads about in development literature (as afore-described). I knew from past visits – albeit to different African countries – that while this may be true, such poverty is not often witnessed by the naked eye. Poverty is often concealed by people who are struggling to maintain their dignity and right to live in the world. It is not something they have on a poster board around their necks. Other times, poverty is blatantly obvious, particularly in comparison to western material standards. Nevertheless, I preferred to imagine – without being idealistic or unrealistic – that I was going to encounter a new reality, outside of the realm of abject consumerism, something more akin to Ireland's recent history perhaps of fifty years ago. What I did bear in mind was President Mary McAleese's phrase when she spoke about Ireland being 'a first world country, with a third world memory' (www.IAPRCB.ie/Conference/Proceedings). *Above all, I knew I was looking forward to going back to Africa.* I was looking forward to meeting the people, embracing another way of life, soaking up the bright sunshine, and listening to what it was my African counterparts had to say.

Before I left, I got some advice from a priest-friend who worked for over forty years in Africa. He said: ‘just because the people in Uganda (and Lesotho) speak English and you speak English, don’t assume you are going to understand what is being said. Their way of viewing, describing and interpreting the world – though using English, might mean something totally different to what you imagine. Don’t make the mistake of assuming you know what’s being said.’ Basically, my friend was advising me not to let the mutually spoken English language fool me into a false sense of security about how the world is from their perspective. A friend reminded me of what George Bernard Shaw thought about this when he described England and the USA as ‘two nations divided by a common language.’ I thought about this from an Anglo-Irish perspective, and our Irish way of using English, which can also be used in a totally different sense to our English counterparts. This was one of the biggest shocks to my system when I went to read for my doctorate in England. I had foolishly assumed, because I was English-speaking, and from a neighbouring island, that communication would not be a problem (the fact that it might have been didn’t even enter my head). I naturally assumed it would not be a problem. I was so very wrong. In fact, I had a far more difficult time than my international counterparts who spoke English as a second language (they had the added advantage of expecting to experience difficulties). Eventually, I realised that my supervisor and I were on totally different channels even though we used the same language to communicate. He did not comprehend the language I spoke in the way that I intended it to be understood. This baffled me initially, but later, I understood it because language, like everything else, is culturally embedded. This was perhaps the single biggest lesson I learned when undertaking international and comparative studies. My second biggest lesson was never to assume anything! Therefore, when my Irish colleague advised me on this issue vis-à-vis Africa, I immediately understood his point.

When I got to Maseru, it was as I had thought it might have been, reasonably well developed, with the evidence of colonialism with regular western style housing, infrastructure and shops. In spite of what I knew to be the situation in respect of poverty, and Lesotho is one of the most materially impoverished societies in Sub-Saharan Africa (as aforementioned), the experience of arriving in Maseru was no different in some respects to arriving in Tipperary town, Sligo or Ballinasloe. Like a medium sized town, or small capital city, it was spaciouly laid out, without evidence of too much industrialised activity or wealth, but nevertheless, pleasant to be there and a warm welcoming attitude palpable.

When I got to my lodge, Lancer's Inn, the electricity was gone. Apparently South Africa had greater demands on electricity which often left dependent Lesotho without regular supplies. Power was generally cut for certain hours of the day. The intermittency of electricity in Lesotho was a regular feature of life. It could happen anytime. It was easy to adapt to once one expected it. However, one was conscious that in the foothills and highlands, there was no electricity, running water or bathroom facilities. So, the shortage of electricity from time to time was merely a minor inconvenience.

When I got to the Lesotho College of Education, I was greeted by the Rector and the Vice-President for Research and Planning. Numerous meetings had been arranged during the week between Education Faculty staff – lecturers who worked on campus and some distant lecturers on a DTEP course (Distant Teacher Education Programme). DTEP educators spent considerable amounts of time in the foothills and highlands teaching, tutoring and involved in teacher practice sessions (supervising trainee teachers). The Lesotho College of Education had a second campus in the Centre of the country, in a place called Thaba-Tseka. I visited this campus and met the staff here too. They were extremely innovative in their teaching methods especially given the very poor internet facilities they had. I could see how creative thinking thrives when needs must. Nevertheless, there is an optimal level before teachers become demotivated. No more than in the western context, teachers get disillusioned if their basic needs are not met and when tireless efforts are not appreciated or dismissed as irrelevant.

The needs assessment exercise was conducted quite quickly. Interested staff attended prearranged sessions if they were interested in getting involved in collaborating on research projects with their Irish counterparts. I did not have any project topic(s) in mind, rather I sought ideas from the group on areas that was of relevance to a) their own professional teaching practice, b) the Lesotho National Education Sector Plan, and/or c) of interest to Lesotho College of Education in respect of their own Strategic plan. It was pretty much an open playing field, except that I did mention that the projects would have to be linked in some way to 'teaching and learning' objectives. The faculty staff seemed pleased, and immediately there was a discussion, chaired by the VP for Research Planning, on topics of interest. Ideas were discussed; people with expertise on each topic identified, and finally, an agreed list of eight to twelve topics was identified. Over the course of the week, several more meetings were held, each of approximately two hours duration, and finally, the list was whittled down to two main topics, with three

others on reserve should the Centre get further funding, then these topics would be the source of further investigation at that stage. This whole funnelling process appeared to work very well. It appeared to be democratic. Everybody got their say. As such, the ideas I had about the Needs Assessment Exercise were ruled by the following principles:

I wanted the choosing of topics to be a collaborative effort, with both the agreement of staff, the right level of expertise on board, and also, with the blessing of the Ministry of Education and Sport, the Permanent Secretary whom I had the pleasure of meeting and discussing the topics identified with them for their tacit approval. I also had discussions with the Education Officer in Irish Aid in order to keep it informed about progress, and also to listen to what its members had to say in respect of the chosen topics.

The LCE Vice President for Research Planning laid out the matter and asked for expressions of interest in their own areas. I felt, from observing the dynamics of the meeting, that it appeared to be a democratic process. Everyone present was asked their viewpoint. Somebody from the floor was allocated to write the minutes. The minutes were verbally recited back at the end of the meeting. Corrections were made. Action points were agreed upon or modified.

Attendance at the meetings was also indicative of the level of interest. This interest was sustained. Those who could not attend meetings sent apologies, and arrived at subsequent meetings. There was a great buzz, momentum and excitement around the fact that there was an open floor, a relatively open agenda, and an opportunity to become involved, as a group, with international members, on a research project.

Of course, this was not LCE's first time being involved in international projects. They had previously been involved in the DELPHE project with the UK and Durham University. So, in a sense, what I was bringing to the table was not anything new *per se*. However, as nobody was remunerated to show up, or – as far as one could ascertain – induced to be there, it appeared that the enthusiasm was infectious. This was reflected in the level of participation at meetings, subsequent meetings, and in signing up to various teams attached to each project.

We also offered PhD Scholarships (independent of the projects) to LCE staff who were interested in progressing professionally to doctoral level. This too had a huge interest and uptake. Detailed applications with expressions of interest were submitted by the end of my stay, and a panel of 5 including independent personnel from the National University of Lesotho (NUL) put together the kind of criteria required. The selection process took place after my visit, and the candidates and their related topic chosen appeared worthy of the scholarship funding.

Again, it would be naive to think that there were no background politics (micro-politics) during my visit. I had no ‘insider knowledge’ *per se*. I did not have a ‘mole in the camp.’ I could only judge from the reactions, presence and informal conversations which followed each meeting. No doubt there were different vested interests at play, and people wanted their own subject-areas highlighted, especially if there were the possibility of extra resource funding, trips abroad, and possible remuneration for extra work undertaken on the project (though none of these were either promised or mentioned). Nevertheless, previous donors would have a legacy of similar goods and services, and therefore that perception may have been there. All this might be true. However, if so, they were very good at hiding ulterior motives, or maybe they were interested in their own professional development. In any case, my experience of working with the Basotho people was akin to that which I read by other researchers who conducted work in Lesotho – a very positive experience.

Instead, I had the sense in LCE and Lesotho that people were glad to have some external bodies taking an interest in their work and welfare and progress, and the Basotho people could shape these projects according to their own needs and specifications. I felt confident of the commitment on behalf of LCE and its colleagues, and I also felt confident that the projects finally arrived at were of mutual interest to both our Centre and LCE; that the expertise was available in both camps, and that it would be a major collaborative effort on both sides that we hoped would be of mutual benefit. For this reason, I looked forward to the follow up session which was to be held in Ireland some months later.

Reflections on the notion of ‘educational development’; being an ‘outsider researcher’ and the notion of ‘donor-led funded’ research. Prior to my needs assessment trip to Lesotho, I had done some extensive reading on the whole notion of ‘educational development’, ‘education for development’, ‘education for sustainable development’; the contestable concept of ‘development’ itself: devel-

opment for whom? The nature of development: is development a good thing? How does one define 'good'? Development – to and for what end or purpose? What does 'sustainable' mean? How can one ensure the sustainability of educational development? Who is driving the development agenda, and why? (Tucker, 1999; Sadar, 1999; Munck and O'Hearn, 1999; Tanaka, 2005; Timmons Roberts and Bellone Hite, 2007). In fact, this whole area itself comes down to the notion of power and power relations, and how these are handled and whether or not power can ever really be truly democratic when the resources are heavily weighed on one side – the donor side – is a contestable area. Without going into the arguments for and against, I'd rather just acknowledge at this point that such questions have been raised, considered and are not fully resolved nor may ever be. Suffice to say that it is a contestable area, and whether we can ever act without prejudice regarding our own ethnocentric assumptions, ideals and values is indeed doubtful, even with the best of intentions. Nevertheless, if one were to examine and reflect upon one's own ideological persuasions, and examine these in a dispassionate way, inviting the critique of others, and opening up our work to the world regarding our peers, our Southern Partners, our colleagues for greater scrutiny, then it is less likely to be prejudiced or self-serving, or at least, such weaknesses in any research can at least then be highlighted.

While the development debates were all to the foremost of my mind before and during and following my field trip to Lesotho – especially the concept of development itself – questions such as 'whether what I was embarking on had even any relevance to Lesotho, my Basotho colleagues, their own interests, development or progress?' haunted me and weighed heavily on my conscience. Nevertheless, while considering all the debates, I decided to 'park' them, as I still had a job to get on with. Instead, I decided to take my priest friend's advice – he who had spent half his life in Africa – which was to listen, learn, and most of all, not to assume that I understood what was being said – therefore, not to assume one understands immediately, but rather to question everything (not literally of course) but rather to suspend judgements, conclusions, assumptions for further consideration, observation and clarification. He encouraged me to learn as much as I could from my African counterparts, as I would have a lot to learn from them. I knew instinctively he was right. This also concurred with the indigenous literature I had read on working within an African context, books such as that of Musaaazi (1986) *Planning and Development in Education: African Perspectives.*

Similarly, in respect of being an outsider to the research context, there is a huge amount of literature on this area (O'Sullivan, 1999; Bridges, 2001; Lincoln and Guba; 1985). Such authors discuss both the advantages and limitations of being a 'cultural stranger' within a research context (O'Sullivan, 1999). Broadly, it can be advantageous when a context is looked at with 'fresh eyes.' New paradigms can be used to describe familiar phenomena. Different approaches can illuminate new insights, giving 'insiders' a fresh perspective on their work, values, mores and *modus operandi*. The downside of course is that nuances can be missed; observations can be misinterpreted; and a different value system may be assumed to apply to different contexts (the American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead's controversial findings in respect of sexual attitudes and mores within the South Pacific and Southeast Asian traditional cultures is a case in point). Where this becomes most obvious is the raw adaption of reform measures in education which work wonderfully in one context, and which fail miserably in another. The discipline of international and comparative education likes to especially focus on this issue. And to move it a step further, the work of such authors of Tanaka (2005) and Schweisfurth (2002) critically examine whether or not the cross-cultural transfer of educational concepts and practices is a good thing; and how these can be applied, and what precautions need to be taken. Contextual factors and the mediation of policy at the national, regional and local levels often do not take cognisance of the 'host' or 'receiving' countries' cultural, historical, geographical, demographic; religious and political histories (Griffin, 2001). The chances therefore of a successful application of another country's initiatives are doubtful. A good example of this is the adoption of, for instance, market oriented educational policies, cross nationally, particularly between the UK and the USA (commonly referred to as the 'transatlantic dialogue' (Phillips, 2002), without any regard for the cultural context when such initiatives are 'parachuted in'). Evidence showed that the mediation of such policies was thwarted to satisfy different interests at the various stages of implementation (*Ibid.*, 2001; Griffin, 1998). Hence, unsurprisingly, the end result of the implementation of similar policies in different countries varied enormously.

Within the Lesotho context, I found that being funded by Irish Aid had resonated positively with the local community. I was informed that this was primarily as a result of the impact on Lesotho of the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa. When this happened, a number of large donor agencies which had worked in Lesotho left permanently and moved to South Africa immediately, leaving the Basotho people feeling somewhat abandoned. However, Irish Aid retained their

presence in Lesotho, and their level of support. For this reason, Irish Aid was perceived locally as 'being there for the long haul', and not going where it was developmentally popular to be. Another more cynical viewpoint that was put to me threw a different angle on this: 'Irish Aid were still giving money, therefore, they were still welcome of course.' Though true, I was often taken by surprise at the level of appreciation and respect that my Basotho colleagues had for Irish Aid, and what it represented. Perhaps both viewpoints can be held in parallel.

There are some obvious ethical considerations around working with donor funding *i.e.* the research must maintain its own integrity; findings must not be unduly influenced by the wishes, desires or prejudices of the donor; reports must not be skewed unnecessarily/unnaturally to fit various categories of deliverables, outputs or whatever measurement are put in place by the donor. Nor should weaknesses of the research or limitations of its effects be minimised for fear of lack of further funding, etc. While it is important to stay within the parameters of the research proposal which was originally funded, it may be necessary to go outside strict parameters to achieve a better result. On the other hand, this must be balanced with the donor's obligation to the public to monitor and evaluate the projects and its funding to ensure the best 'value for money' and returns to all those who are expected to benefit from the project's work.

Large donor funding agencies have been criticised for superimposing their own paradigms on indigenous communities which are powerless to resist pressures from their own government or the international agenda. Here, I make specific reference to the work of Joseph Stiglitz (2006) and the negative impact (environmentally, socially and culturally) of IMF and/or World Bank countries on the poorest of the poor. Here, I also wish to refer to the abject failure of the superimposed Structural Adjustment Programmes which had a disastrous effect on entire countries' economies. Even when such failures became apparent, such donors still continued with their beleaguered policies. Some argued that this was primarily because such policies were devised by economists devoid of any sense of cultural awareness or sensitivity to the issues at the grassroots level. For well over a decade (in virtually every discipline) the research-based evidence in the literature which highlighted the problems and failures of SAPs was overwhelming. Economic policies, it appears, do not operate in isolation from other aspects of human endeavour.

Although Irish Aid is not one of the major players in the development arena, such as USAID, Ford, Rockefeller Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation or the UN bodies, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, or even DFID, nevertheless, they have had a steady impact on the ground, and that impact is growing through forging greater strategic alliances with different Ministries and institutions, including Higher Education Institutions. So far, Irish Aid's approach has been to allow HEI's apply for Strategic Cooperation Funding that is aimed at building research capacity in Ireland vis-à-vis Africa (and various IA development initiatives going on there). The second prong of Irish Aid's approach is for Irish HEIs to work with their African counterparts to help build research capacity in Africa, with the ultimate goal of poverty reduction through, for instance, encouraging good governance in education, so that the goods may be shared by the general public (EFA Monitoring Report, 2009). Although Irish Aid's latest policy is to work with Ministries (and there are mixed opinions as to whether this is the most effective way to tackle educational disadvantage, given the excellent work some NGOs do, such as 80:20) nevertheless, it is a policy that helps to forge good relations between African Governments and the Irish Government – by placing trust in its systems. Those who have worked in Africa for years often argue that this can be an ineffective way of working for reasons already mentioned. Suffice to say, Irish Aid also funds such NGOs as 80:20 and others on the ground who work at the grassroots level, in order to have a wider practical influence. At this point, it must be said that Irish Aid is also in the course of reviewing its own strategic goals and plans. What future direction is taken from a policy perspective remains to be seen.

Thoughts for the future of the 'Adult Learner' within the African context

At this point, it is important to point out that Adult Education is not a priority in any of the major educational agreements dealing with developing countries – neither primarily in the Dakar Agreement of 2000 or the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In fact, adult education barely gets a mention. Nevertheless, in the beginning of my paper, I wrote that approximately half the adults in sub-Saharan Africa are functionally illiterate. In spite of this, the main focus of governments is currently on achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE). This is certainly the focus in Lesotho. This of course is laudable and necessary in order to prevent the next generation from becoming lost by entering that 'culture of silence' that Paulo Freire wrote so passionately about. Nevertheless, we cannot afford to ignore or disenfranchise and consider as doomed this generation of adults. Informal and non-formal education gets little attention, simply because

of the priority being placed on UPE at the moment following the MDGs. The exception is however within the NGO sector, which although is less well funded than other organisations who work with the formal sector, does try to work with communities and encourage informal and non-formal education. This is often linked vocationally to apprenticeship or training.

Within the area of comparative and international education, Professor Lalage Bown wrote that the first conference in the UK by BCIES (British Comparative and International Education Society) that focused on the comparative study of adult education was held in 1986. The first international conference on this topic was held in Exeter, New Hampshire, USA in 1966 which met to 'review and refine a framework for examining adult education activities, programmes and institutions in various countries on a comparative basis and to examine and describe similarities and differences in such activities in line with this conceptual framework' (Bown, 1986 *citing* Liverright and Haygood, 1968, p.57). Bown stated that adult education had, in fact, a long history in Exeter, USA and that as early as 1918, a voluntary organisation called the 'World Association for Adult Education' was set up. This was led by a British enthusiast Albert Mansbridge. In the UK, the best known English advocate was Robert Peers who held the Chair of Adult Education in the University of Nottingham from 1923-1953 (*Ibid.*, 1986).

UNESCO and the World Bank had been active in the promotion of Adult Education worldwide. The 1985 Conference in Paris on adult education had certain staff members, such as Paul Lengrand who promoted the idea of 'lifelong learning' (*Ibid.* 1986, *citing* Lengrand, 1975). Other notables were Ettore Gelpi who was interested in the idea of lifelong learning and work (*Ibid.*, 1986, *citing* Gelpi, 1978) and Faure (*Ibid.* 1986 *citing* Faure, 1972) who wrote the seminal piece of work *Learning to Be*, promoting a new model of lifelong learning gleaned from examining all the various models which were in operation across Europe at that time. Since then, the notion of lifelong learning has gone from strength to strength, and this past decade has been the decade of lifelong learning. Such concepts were also promoted by organisations such as the OECD which advocated the importance of outputs (learning) rather than the inputs (education, training, and self-study). To a large extent, this illustrates how the neo-liberal agenda, the marketisation of education, and the promotion of the commodification of education have become part of the national agenda. Given that we live in a modern economy, the new emphasis was not really on education for education's sake, but rather on the continuing acquisition of knowledge (OECD, 2004). The recent

White Paper, *Learning for Life* illustrates how such ideas were to be transposed into a national context. For instance, the ICTU's website stated quite clearly that the main driving forces behind the lifelong movement in Ireland were: the influence of EU policies and streamlining effects of EU programmes; globalisation and industrial restructuring; focus on partnership as a problem-solving tool, and; union led EU projects as promoters of change (www.ictu.ie/learning/lifelong). Given that we are now told that we live in 'a knowledge economy', education and lifelong is no longer seen as a privilege and luxury, but a necessity in order to survive in today's world. In Africa, the situation is somewhat different though it is impacted by similar forces from the west. Hence, neo-liberalism has created an even greater chasm between the North and South. This chasm may eventually be bridged by modern technology. However, we are a long way from that right now. The issue in Africa has to do with school leavers from primary education who have little or no opportunity to go on to second level schooling because of school fees. Even the quality of education they receive up to this point may be dubious. Hence, one has a lot of illiteracy, and there is a desperate need to raise the basic standard of education. There is a dearth of services to operate within the community to capture this cohort of people who have been more or less abandoned by the formal system of schooling.

Two factors, again identified by Bown, which are crucial to the success of any adult education and lifelong programmes to succeed within the African context are: a) the political will through policy making, and b) the political will through public opinion. She cites the example of Nigeria where the National Open University which was opened in 1983 was in jeopardy after one year of operation, and was suspended in 1984. The political will, she claims, was not there to sustain it, and media opposition to the NOU created the climate for its suspension, which was not helpful. On the other hand, Uganda's Makerere University has an excellent Centre for Continuing Education which has been very successful in mobilising itself to deal with second chance learners akin to the Nigerian situation. In contrast, the political will is there to sustain it (though unsurprisingly, it did decline during the Idi Amin years). In Lesotho, there is an outreach centre as part of the NUL campus which deals very effectively with adult education and lifelong learning. It offers courses and outreach centres right across the country, though many are poorly resourced. Similarly, Lesotho College of Education, as part of the teacher training/education programme, operates the aforementioned four year part-time degree called DTEP (Distant Teacher Education Programmes) which takes cognisance of the rural community and environment, and offers its teach-

er education services on an outreach basis. The equivalent full time on-campus degree takes three years. The DTEP programme is very successful and has been running a number of years. I visited one of its outreach centres in Lesotho, in Thaba-Tseka, and was very impressed by their ability to maximize their creativity despite meager resources.

In Africa, adult education has been seen as marginal, both in relation to public policy and government priorities (Adult Education Report, 2006). More work could be done on the relationship between the role of the state and its relationship to adult education. Infrastructure to support this kind of activity might include the building of local libraries, the support of local ACE communities and programmes, cultural festivals and museums, to mention but a few ways in which governments can be proactive. Bown (*Op. Cit.*) recalled in her article how adult education thrived in Britain with the lifting of taxes on newspapers, the public financing of libraries and the development of freely accessible museums (p.73). Of course governments often fear the political mobilisation of its adult citizens should they become educated, where they are enabled to shake off the shackles of poverty, the culture of silence, and where they can find their voice to express their opinions, will, demands. The kind of social unrest that sometimes comes with 'consciencisation' happens, but this is no more than a democratic demand for government to be accountable to and for its citizens (Bown, 1986; Freire, 1977).

African society will not be able to progress in a modern economy should they not have the skills to participate in the new world order, which may confine Africa to a permanent state of under-development, underachievement; under-utilisation of its resources, and the constant exploitation by others to satisfy their needs. If from no other perspective but from a universal rights' perspective, each child, each adult, each individual in Africa deserves the right to develop their own abilities and potentials, in freedom, in peace and in harmony. Education, 'a drawing out' enactment, can contribute positively to Africa's realisation of this potential. Education, and particularly adult education, may enable Lesotho, for instance, less dependent on South Africa, and become master of its own destiny politically, economically, socially, and culturally.

Epilogue: From an Irish perspective

Meanwhile, I, as an Irish adult learner, will continue to learn, listen, and not assume, as I go about discovering and enjoying Africa which has brought me so much joy, insights about myself and myself in relation others, some of which I

have shared with you here. Inter alia, my experiences to date have taught me one important lesson: we have far more in common with our Basotho colleagues – a shared British colonial past, a similar sense of humor, an easy-going, flexible and adaptable approach to life, to problems and to living, a similar love of folk-lore, of music and song, than anything that divides us. The one sharp differential of course (aka the elephant in the room) is our life chances in respect of health and longevity, and wealth which enable *me* to have greater control over my life and destiny. It is this chasm that I strive to bridge in my own small way.

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