

Growing into Greatness

A Study of a Local History Group of Active-Retired Learners

LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

Social Change

Rapid and profound social and structural changes are being experienced in Ireland, as well as in many advanced western societies. Some of these changes include the increasing globalisation of the economy, rapid developments in Information Communications Technology and also changes in family and social structures. Gone are the extended families of a previous generation. Gone are the voluntary carers of older people in their homes and the doers of many voluntary tasks in the community. This has resulted in many older people leading lonely lives, closeted in their homes and lacking the confidence and courage to take the necessary measures to fully participate in society.

Any consideration of the role of the media in Ireland demonstrates the invisibility of older people due to the great emphasis on youth. How often, if ever, do we see pictures of older people in advertisements? When they do appear, it is to promote medications, mobility aids or retirement homes. Is it any wonder then that older people feel pushed to the edge of society, their contribution and sacrifices over the years unacknowledged and no account taken of the vast store of wisdom and skills that they possess? Such treatment by society causes older people to turn inward on themselves, thereby increasing their further marginalisation from mainstream society, arising from their loss of status associated with no longer being economically productive.

While our country is now very prosperous there still exist many serious economic and social divisions. According to AONTAS, “The existence of such divisions is incompatible with active and equal citizenship. The cohesion of society and consequently its stability are at risk if people are unable to participate in the eco-

conomic and social development of that society” (AONTAS, 2000, p.11).

Learning Needs of Older People

Research in Canada on the learning needs of older people looked at such issues as how to cope with changes in society, the need to make a contribution and the need to be influential (Leclerc, 1985). The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) *Learning for Life* notes that strategies for active ageing stress the critical importance of access to learning as a key tool in coping with change. Adult education can play an important role in contributing to active ageing by promoting social integration and enhancing the quality of life. By reason of the profound changes in Irish society in recent years, older people increasingly find themselves socially excluded from leading full lives as citizens of their country.

Learning for Citizenship

In an article entitled *Learning for Citizenship in Ireland: The Role of Adult Education*, Keogh, (2002) notes that, “A key question for adult educators is: Within the range of adult models and locations, which adult education methodologies and topic/subject areas contribute to the development of citizenship?” Various opinions exist in regard to this question. Some contend that anything taught to adults can be seen as a form of citizenship education while others maintain that a liberal education approach which includes literature, history, geography and/or the social sciences is critical to the development of citizenship knowledge, skills and dispositions. However, many claim that the most beneficial learning will take place not through the formal curriculum, but through positive experiences of participation and, therefore, the adult education experience should itself be “an experience of participation, with a view towards enabling learners to develop the skills, insights and confidence to make their own voice heard and take a full and active role as citizens in society” (Crowther, 2001, pp. 69-70).

Keogh (2002) further maintains that the traditional view of education in meritocratic terms with qualifications as the goal, rather than critical capacities and skills of citizenship, also needs to be addressed. This view is supported by the Council of Europe which sees education for economic advancement as having a higher status than citizenship education. (Council of Europe, 2000).

A Local History Group

A practical example of a project which helps to address some of the above issues is a Local History Group of Adult Active Retired Learners. Initially, the group’s plan

was to study the local history of their own area, in this case Drumcondra, Dublin 9 and its environs. The group has been funded under the Community Education section of the City of Dublin VEC with two teaching hours a week. However, the group's love of learning has embraced far more than the study of local history. It has also included all the social interaction, fun and enjoyment which has taken place since this group of fifteen people started meeting regularly on Wednesday mornings in a room in the local parish centre.

One of the students, Kathleen, relates the reason why learning at this stage is so important to her. *"Life begins at forty they say but I disagree, for at forty one is still involved with family, helping one's student offspring with career choices, keeping the peace.....I say life begins at sixty. By then the nest has emptied and a whole new world of enjoyment opens up. One just needs to be reasonably healthy, mobile and have a modest amount of disposable income."*

Unfortunately, those over 55 who do not fit this description, and "who present one or more of the following characteristics: low socio-economic status, limited or no means of transportation, rural place of residence, low self-esteem, physical disability or illness," suffer from a lack of educational provision to a greater extent than younger people. This is one of the conclusions reached in a study done by Scott Boldt (1998), entitled *Age and Opportunity: The educational needs of people over 55 in the Midland and Western Health Board Regions*. Therefore, in implementing and providing services, attention must be given to the issue of equity. Groups and areas must be given priority in order to serve those most in need.

The Significance of Later Life

One's older years are slowly being better recognised as a significant period in life with a variety of titles being used to describe this period, The Golden Age, The Third Age, Active Retirement, Senior Citizens. The term "old folks" has been mostly banished. Apart from the general run of clubs and associations, there are also organisations geared towards the over 60s, "as older people need a safe space in which responsibilities and commitments can be set aside for a while and questions asked about life's concerns" (Boldt, 1998, p.25). "This is the learning environment in which all adults can grow, develop, mature....and build a stronger sense of identity for the later years" (Fleming, 1997, p. 3). Governments are gradually coming to realise that mental stimulation and social interaction make for a healthier and happier older population.

Our Research

During their time together the group compiled two books: one on the Local History of Drumcondra and another on Glasnevin. Phyllis recalls this experience, *"One of our proudest moments was when we produced and launched our first book on Local History, The Royal Way. It tells the story of the famous places and buildings in our area. Later we produced our second book Off the Rails, a short history of the journey of the Number 19 tram from Glasnevin Hill to Nelson's Pillar"*. Maura also recalls her experience of being involved with compiling this book. *"I found that working together as a team was great. Each member played their part in researching areas, sitting in libraries, pouring over reference books, trying to find more information and all coming back to class each week to share it all"*.

The strength of our research is based on peoples' recollections of growing up in the area, thereby providing a richness of reminiscences and primary sources gathered from neighbours, families and friends. Maureen says that, *"Remembering one's childhood can open flood gates of memory and bring back the wonderful times we had growing up in Drumcondra"*. Stories like Maureen's need to be rescued from oblivion and preserved for future generations. Maureen also recalls her first visit to the National Archives while researching information. *"One of the most interesting and moving visits was the day we went to the National Archives off Aungier Street in Dublin to do some research. What a revelation!..... To our utter amazement and delight, we actually succeeded in getting some necessary information, and even found everyone around us very helpful"*.

Social Interaction

The lives of these older people have been greatly enriched not only by their love of learning, but also by the social interaction which this involves. The group is fortunate in having access to a local parish hall one morning a week. Older adults are more likely to attend in places which are accessible and familiar (Price & Lyon, 1982). Frank, a member of the group with a lifelong interest in history says, *"Through this class, I have expanded my knowledge of local history and I am now more aware of many historical places and buildings in Ireland. I also find myself learning without any effort"*.

It is interesting that Frank found himself learning without any effort. This reflects the insights of a talk given by Fleming at an Age and Opportunity seminar in Dublin in 1997:

Cultural elders, like Seamus Heaney, grow into greatness over many years

and reach the height of their powers at a time when the rest of us may be considered 'past it'. No one would (or should) suggest that great artists should retire from productivity, from making their contribution to society, at an arbitrary age of 60 or 65. No one doubts their ability to continue to grow and to reach new heights. Quite rightly, no one notices their age. Likewise, for all our elders, it is time that a new assumption should replace the old myth: that we continue to have the ability to learn and to contribute, and the right to have access to new learning, no matter what our age (p.11).

Exploring our Heritage

Though living all their lives in Dublin, many members of the group had never been to the main heritage sites of the capital city. Therefore, a very significant part of the group's learning took place around the city on visits to places such as: the Book of Kells in Trinity College, the Dáil, St Doulagh's Church, Kinsealy, the Chester Beatty Library, the Jewish Museum, Kilmainham Jail and Wicklow Gaol. Another memorable outing was on the 24th September 2003 when the group visited Áras an Uachtaráin and met President McAleese. This visit was very uplifting for the students.

This class came about because the people themselves expressed an interest in setting up a local history group. Since then, this experience has changed all their lives. Brid joined the class when she retired from paid work *"I enjoy subjects with a historical content, both on television and in books, so the class forms a link between the two. The group is very sociable and we have plenty of laughs"*. As well as building on existing interests, provision of education for older people must be aware of their need "to develop new interests and talents...to use their leisure time well, to socialise and to meet new people" (Boldt, 1998, p. 101).

Tutor's Thoughts

This was my first time to facilitate a group of active-retired learners and to teach Local History. At first I was quite apprehensive and unsure of myself. This experience has enabled me to see that active-retired and Older people have a wealth of talents and opportunities, just waiting to be explored and tapped. Therefore, it is recommended that those who are in positions to advance and to implement policies should endeavour to promote the use of the skills and experiences of older people. They should also be involved in decisions with regard to the facilities and programmes designed to meet their needs.

The group's knowledge of Local History, through very relevant primary and

secondary sources, has also enabled me, as their tutor, to become a learner, while at the same time facilitating the learning of the group, all of which has hugely enriched my life. In sharp contrast to our days at school when learning seemed such a burden, it has now become a source of enlightenment, fun and excitement and given us a sense of real belonging and togetherness. Is this the true wisdom that repays all our efforts?

Concluding Comments

This class has become a welcome and significant part of the weekly schedule of this group of active retired learners. Its significance is best summed up by the remarks of participants themselves:

"Wednesday is a special day in my week. Participating in this class has hugely enriched my life."

"At this class we never seem to stop learning."

"This class has opened many doors of learning for me, some I never knew existed."

"Older people often feel invisible since we are no longer as active in society as we used to be. These classes have helped me to realise my worth as a senior citizen, continuing to make my voice heard in society."

"When I first joined the class, I felt that I knew nothing even though I had raised five children. I gradually came to appreciate the wisdom and skills that I did possess and this helped me to have better self-esteem."

These comments support the findings from the Age and Opportunity Study which advocated that what counts as education has to be broadened and its value has to be seen in wider terms than its currency in the world of work. People who are no longer economically productive can be sidelined as no longer of value to society. But through adult education initiatives such as the one described here they discover that the true self is based on who they are, not what they do. There is an onus on all members of society to remember the contribution that has been made by senior citizens. A true concept of civil society must embrace everyone from individuals to organisations, and from governments to community, as participants in the celebration. In 1999, the United Nations chose Towards a Society for All Ages as its theme for the year and out-

lined five key principles for older people to include independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity (Green Paper – *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*, 1998). As can be seen from the above article, most of these principles have found an echo in the experiences of the older people in the Local History class and support a broader concept of citizenship and education for lifelong citizenship. As Fleming suggests:

This search for who we are goes on in this new context and new agendas for our growth and development constantly emerge. The psychological challenge of older age is to address the aspects of who we are in a way and in a context that did not exist before. The knowledge gained in the successful working out of this stage is called wisdom. (1997, p. 2).

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