

The Education Equality Initiative and the Citizen Learner

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The Education Equality Initiative (EEI) has been established by the Department of Education and Science in an attempt to address educational disadvantage through the strategic allocation of funding to promote equality of access, treatment and outcomes within a lifelong learning framework for individuals and groups.

The aim of this initiative is to develop and assist women's and men's education projects to address gaps in current provision for educationally disadvantaged adults by: undertaking outreach and pre-development work; building local capacity; developing support structures; accrediting learning; encouraging partnerships; analysing and informing policy; mainstreaming learning processes; enabling progression and supporting participants on programmes to shape their educational futures.

In Phase 1 of the EEI (EEI 1) from 2000 – 2003, seventeen projects were funded while a further ten projects have been funded under Phase 2 (EEI 2). The EEI 2 projects are targeted at the following groups:

- Adults with a learning disability
- Adults with self-experience of mental illness
- Deaf adults
- Marginalised rural men
- Roma community in Ireland
- Traveller and other parents seeking to become actively involved in their children's education

The approach adopted by EEI is to fund a small number of pilot projects which address the learning needs of educationally disadvantaged individuals within a range of specific target groups. The overall goal is to ensure that the learning and good practice in relation to educational disadvantage generated by the projects are identified, documented, analysed and disseminated throughout the adult education community, locally and nationally. The ultimate aim is to embed the lessons in policy and practice, thus improving provision for educationally disadvantaged adults and promoting educational equality.

The EEI 2 funded projects promote educational equality by:

- addressing gaps in the provision of learning opportunities
- promoting partnership between statutory and voluntary agencies
- developing innovative approaches to outreach
- developing innovative approaches to teaching and learning
- developing local learning support structures
- facilitating the progression of the identified target groups

The Initiative, which is funded by the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science through The National Development Plan 2000 – 2006 with support from the European Structural Funds, has a budget of €3.5 million. This article will look at how these adult education projects are contributing to the development of active citizenship for very marginalised groups in our society. Their focus is, through a process of educational engagement, to highlight the needs of specific groups within our communities and to provide the supports necessary for their ongoing participation.

The Citizen Learner

While citizenship as a concept has many different connotations it does seem to resonate closely with adult education processes such as the promotion of participation, capacity building and self-direction in learning. Citizenship as a concept manifests itself in adult education in the ‘active citizenship’ model which according to Chanan “taken broadly, can mean any form of productive contribution to society” (1999, p.2). More specifically, the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) *Learning for Life* defines the process of adult education and its relation to citizenship as “enabling individual members of society to take an active role in shaping the overall direction of society – culturally, socially and economically and environmentally.....and to engage proactively in community and societal decision making” (p.7).

Adult education must offer the individual accessing it a learning process which has an 'adult' approach. It must be voluntary, relevant and have a potential outcome that is pertinent to the individual undertaking it. Therefore, to engage the individual voluntarily in adult education, the service must be creative in how it promotes access, the process must be viewed as something that is worth spending time on and the outcomes must be worthwhile for the individual.

The theme of citizenship is evident across the projects funded under EEI Phase 2, in that adults are being engaged in such a way that it affects their lives as individuals and empowers them to challenge the inequalities facing them. While this does not mean that every individual in every project will suddenly become an active citizen in the conventional sense, it does mean that they are developing the capacity to become more active citizens and to challenge the society in which they live.

The projects funded under this initiative are unique in that they have a dual mandate, firstly to deliver on objectives relating to their respective participants and secondly to deliver on the national objectives of providing information to influence policy and practice. The work of all the projects is to engage adults in an educational experience which enables them shape their own education and progression.

For the purpose of this paper the context in which we are speaking about citizenship is the nexus where adult education and citizenship converge, where the individual is engaged in her/his own transformative learning, thereby learning to reason and reflect critically on the society in which he/she lives as well as acquiring skills and knowledge.

The projects operating under the EEI are diverse in terms of their activities and the groups being worked with. However, the common themes emerging include: empowering people to engage with and challenge the system which serves them or their children; identifying gaps in provision for those on the margins; and making the needs of people more visible to the service providers and policy makers. It is clearly evident across the projects that innovative approaches are engaging people and they are being empowered through the process.

Marginalised Men as Citizens

There is a clear sense emerging from this phase of EEI that something is happening in men's community education. There are two projects working with isolated rural men, Mevagh Resource Centre in Donegal and Nexus Europe Ltd, which is overseeing work with men in Dingle and East Mayo. These projects are working to engage men who are significantly isolated, who have had negative experiences of education and who have limited participation in the communities in which they live. Both the projects initial contact work has been on an outreach basis. This has involved either informing the men about their social welfare rights and entitlements or just talking to them about their issues and listening to what they have to say. The process, while slow, has been successful in voluntarily engaging men in learning programmes.

The Mevagh Resource Centre in Donegal now has a core group of about 15 men who meet on a weekly basis. The weekly discussions cover a variety of topics including politics, history, community issues and health. These group discussions have not only helped the men reflect on and analyse issues but have also helped to build lasting friendships between them.

In looking at this experience of men's community education projects one can see their potential for affecting change. It is now known that despite the overwhelming success of the model of engagement used by projects to engage women, this model has not worked as well for isolated men. Involving men, particularly isolated rural or urban men, in the process of learning takes a lot more time and requires a different type of approach or combination of approaches at the outreach and pre-development stage.

It is hoped that the work of the projects in Donegal, Dingle and East Mayo will highlight the needs of men to policy makers, provide lessons for other agencies working with men and ultimately shed light on the potential for men's community education to not only facilitate men's individual development but to also facilitate their participation as citizens in the communities in which they live.

Deaf Citizens

There are two projects currently funded by the EEI which are tackling issues facing the Deaf Community. The Irish Deaf Society is addressing the literacy needs of its own community by developing a CD Rom which teaches English

through the first language of Deaf people, Irish Sign Language (ISL). This CD Rom is being developed and tested by Deaf people to ensure it meets their needs effectively and it is hoped that this will in turn enable Deaf adults to address their own literacy needs through self-directed learning.

The Kerry Deaf Resource Centre, through the Kerry Deaf Adult Learning Programme, is addressing the educational inequality experienced by deaf people as manifested by the gaps in the provision of education and training opportunities for Deaf Irish Sign Language users in Kerry. To do this the project is building the capacity of local deaf people by delivering an accredited programme in Deaf Studies to 18 Deaf adults. The skills of the participants will also be developed for their future role as Deaf Adult Tutors so that they can then provide this accredited programme to other local Deaf people, their families and to statutory and non-statutory organisations in the area. Additional training is being undertaken by the participants in community studies, committee skills, and conflict management to build the capacity of the participants to work as representatives of the Deaf community. The project has appointed five participants to sit on the management committee of the project so they can shape the direction of the project and gain the experience of engaging with relevant local agencies about their issues. Through this process it is hoped to sustain the impact of the project by enabling participants to work for and represent their own community following project completion. Lynch states that “capacity building individuals to address their own inequality is a key element of the adult education for community action paradigm” (1991, p.7). She also argues that:

unequal outcomes can be addressed in some way by adult education, adult education is about empowerment and resistance especially among those who have been disempowered by the social, economic and education systems. It is a subtle process, whereby people become aware of their oppression and they build the capacity to overcome the oppression (1991, p.7).

Parents as Citizens

The experience of parents with their children’s education and their relationship with the education system is a strong theme across a number of the projects in the current phase of EEI. Interestingly, similar issues regarding levels of disempowerment and lack of confidence in relating to and dealing with the education system are evident from the EEI projects working with both settled and Traveller parents.

The Ballyfermot Partnership project 'Next Steps' is responding to parents in the community who feel disempowered around issues of education. This project is focusing on supporting parents to acquire the skills and confidence to become 'equal' partners in their children's education. It is hoped that the project will empower its participants to have a real and effective voice as community stakeholders in such structures as the Home School Community Liaison and School Completion Programmes.

The Ennis Community Development Project entitled Traveller Homework Club and Parent Support, is developing a traveller homework parent support programme to capacity build parents to work as volunteers assisting the tutors and running the homework club in St. Joseph's Senior Training Centre. The programme also incorporates elements of personal development, intercultural awareness and equality which it is hoped will assist parents to in turn look at their own education. Two participants will sit on the Management Committee to direct the project and build their capacity and experience of working with key local agencies represented on the committee.

At a national level Pavee Point's Parents and Traveller Education Project is focusing on the involvement of Traveller parents in their own children's educational provision by addressing the needs of parents to in turn participate in national fora, so that they can effect change. The project has set up a National Traveller Parents' Forum to assist parents to discuss issues in relation to the provision of education for their children. A video is being developed to be used as a resource for training with Traveller parents on the education system and their role within it. Seminars involving Traveller parents have been held nationally and the recommendations arising from these seminars have been communicated to the joint working group of the Traveller Education Strategy. In this way, Traveller parents now have the opportunity to directly influence the development of Traveller Education Policy and how education is accessed by their community.

Supporting Learners with Self-Experience of Mental Illness

Schizophrenia and other forms of mental illness are realities for a significant number of Irish people. Research has shown that 1% of the population has schizophrenia and between 4%-8% develop some other forms of mental illness during their lifetime. The stigma surrounding mental illness and the legacy of institutionalisation has negatively impacted on the chances of people

with self experience of mental illness to gain access to appropriate and relevant education and training. Schizophrenia Ireland are running a project entitled 'Mental Health in Education' which is driven by the need to include people with mental illness in mainstream education as part of their recovery and to foster equality in education for people with disabilities.

The project is being piloted in the Liberties College, Dublin and seeks to facilitate the integration of students with self experience of mental illness into mainstream education, addresses awareness issues amongst staff and supports the involvement of participants in the existing structures within the college. The project has also developed and delivered an education and awareness programme for educators, administrators and other professionals.

The Roma Community

The City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee have conducted a study involving Roma men, women and children/young people entitled, *Meeting the needs of the Roma Community in Ireland*. A key element of the project was to develop effective ways of communicating, building trust and consulting with the Roma community regarding processes of participation, service development and delivery. The report found that the most successful education programmes and models of working are those in which service providers have some knowledge and understanding of Roma history, culture and traditions and where the Roma community represent themselves as active citizens and are consulted in the evaluation of such programmes.

Supporting Learners with Intellectual Disabilities

Dun Laoghaire VEC runs a project called 'Exploring our Potential' which is supporting learners with intellectual disabilities to develop a profile of their skills, achievements and interests to facilitate their progression into mainstream education. This is being done through the delivery of an accredited programme in the arts. The emphasis in these modules is to link daily art practice in the classroom to the community through art workshops with existing arts' practitioners and through visits to local and regional exhibitions. It is hoped that the link between class activities and activities in the community will assist the learners in establishing their own creative identity.

Contemporary theory would suggest that active citizenship is necessary for a legitimate democracy. But this legitimate democracy is only possible through

the equal participation of all citizens. It is important that people with intellectual disabilities are given the support to be full and active members of society, to be active, visible citizens. Ultimately, the work of this project will endeavour to facilitate real access for adults with intellectual disabilities to mainstream education and employment which will build their capacity to live and work in the community as equal citizens.

Conclusion

What is common across the projects funded under EEI is that their work is not just about addressing educational inequality, it is about building the capacity of adults to return to further education or training for employment. The key role for each project in engaging with the learner is to facilitate individuals in identifying their own needs so they can in turn address these needs more effectively within society.

One cannot view the experience of the adult learner or any learner for that matter and their relationship with education in an isolated sense. It is, as the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) *Learning for Life* states, a process of “enabling individual members of society to take an active role in society” (p.29). What must be recognised and valued here is the experience of ALL adult learners within these different learning contexts and the impact that adult education in its different forms can have in engaging individuals as both learners and citizens and the ultimate contribution which this can make to creating a more equal and participative society.

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