

Too Many Left Behind: Can Current Policy on Adult Literacy Address the Need for Social Change in Ireland?

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Introduction

This article traces the development of adult literacy as a field of practice in Ireland. It examines how literacy is understood and looks at key moments in the recent development of policy showing how adult literacy has become a central focus of Government policy in both the Republic and in Northern Ireland. It concludes that while the development of literacy has been largely influenced by economic concerns, there is a need for re-thinking policies if they are to meet a need for change in both parts of Ireland.

Much has been written about adult literacy particularly its meaning, its relationship with the wider socio-political debate about education and how it might be organised. A wide variety of theories and opinions exist and there is no consensus among educators, policy makers or Governments on what should be done to promote a more inclusive literate society.

Crowther, Hamilton and Tett (2001, p.1) note that "definitions of what it means to be literate are always shifting". Assumptions about what literacy is are constantly being challenged by new research and practices, which are redefining the meaning of literacy. Street (1984) defined two models for understanding literacy that he referred to as "autonomous" and "ideological". Each of these discourses generates very different ways of thinking about literacy. The autonomous model postulates that literacy is a set of normative, unproblematic technical skills that are neutral and detached from the social context in which they are used. The 'correct' skills are defined or fixed (by the powerful group) and learning becomes focused on the reproduction of 'correct' skills learned in the classroom and which it is assumed can be easily transferred to real life situations.

The alternative ideological model, sometimes called the social practices model or discourse, recognises the socio-cultural, diverse nature of literacy. Arguing for a social practices model, Hamilton (2000, p.1) notes “Literacy competence and need cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skills, but are relational concepts, defined by the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life and world”. Here power to determine content and curriculum lies primarily with the learner rather than the educational organisation. This approach responds to issues that are derived from people’s own interests and knowledge of the world. A critical approach adds a further dimension to an understanding of literacy by linking it to social and political issues in society. Shor (1991, p.15) notes “critical literacy ... points to providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices”. Lambe (2006, p.17) notes that in general literacy definitions reflect the ideological perspectives of their creators as well as the social, cultural, political and economic environment of the time, making it almost impossible to find a satisfactory and comprehensive definition that suits everybody. An examination of the development of adult literacy in Ireland shows that it has been understood in quite different ways in different contexts.

Adult Literacy in the Republic of Ireland

Bailey (2006, p.199) notes that prior to the 1970s, there was no official recognition of the adult literacy problem in the Irish Republic and no commitment to equality of educational opportunity or to a critical evaluation of the effectiveness of the national school system. It was not until the publication of the Murphy Report (1973) *Adult Education in Ireland* that the needs of adults with ‘low literacy skills’ was fully recognised. The report detailed twenty-two points necessary to develop the adult education system in Ireland, including a recommendation for a special report on the needs of adults with low literacy skills. Bailey (2006, p. 200) notes that while this report had little impact in terms of official recognition at Government level, at community level, people were beginning to volunteer as tutors for individuals who wanted help developing their literacy skills. Because of the stigma attached to having a literacy difficulty, much of the early tuition was offered in people’s homes on a one-to-one basis, protecting the identity of learners from the social stigma of illiteracy. This also kept the adult literacy movement low-key and the problem invisible.

A significant milestone in the development of adult literacy was the establishment of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in 1980. Initially NALA was set up as a membership organisation for all those interested or involved in adult literacy and after five years of lobbying, the organisation was given a small grant to open up an office. Since then, NALA has acted as a coordinating body, harnessing the efforts of all those involved in adult literacy, raising awareness, and lobbying the government for funding and recognition of the issue.

The Kenny Report (1984) was the first Government report to have lifelong learning as its central theme, highlighting the importance of developing a structured adult education system catering to the needs of all adults, including those with basic education needs. In 1985, the Government granted NALA its first funding and the Vocational Education Committees (VECs), the local bodies with responsibility for the organisation of adult education across the Republic, with their first dedicated resources for adult literacy and community education.

During the 1990s, while educators became focussed on the idea of lifelong learning as an integrated part of the philosophy of adult education, the Irish Government became focused on the promotion of education and training courses for workers to develop:

the skills and aptitudes of those in work and those seeking employment by both addressing the needs of the productive sectors and by integrating those who are marginalised and disadvantaged.

(Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 272)

By the mid-1990s, the Irish economy experienced an unprecedented boom, and the education and training system, played an important role in providing trained people in sufficient numbers to contribute to employment growth at this time.

The *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS), conducted in 1995 and published in 1997, provided the Republic with its first profile of the literacy skills of adults aged 16-64. The study found that about 25 per cent of the Irish population scored at the lowest level (Level 1) and had some degree of difficulty with everyday literacy and numeracy tasks. (Morgan, Hickey and Kellaghan, 1997). The survey drew attention to the substantially lower levels of literacy in Ireland especially in the older age groups and an association between low levels of lit-

eracy and low levels of participation in second chance education and training. The IALS study also showed how poor literacy skills among the adult population negatively affected family, community and work life. This led to the government recognising the importance of improving adult literacy levels for wider social and economic development. It led to substantial improvements in funding for adult literacy provision in various settings and the numbers of literacy learners and tutors has significantly increased. The study focussed attention on the significant mismatch in the resources being allocated to adult literacy provision and the scale of the task. It also showed that younger adults were less likely to experience literacy problems than older ones.

The development of adult literacy policy in the Irish Republic

The publication of the White Paper, *Learning for Life* (2000) confirmed the Irish Government's commitment to the establishment of a national policy for lifelong learning and specifically to the establishment of a well-funded adult education system. The policy document also recognised that adult education can make a major contribution to meeting the skill requirements of a rapidly changing workforce, as well as improving social cohesion and equity in the emergence of a broadly inclusive and pro-active civil society. The White Paper (2000, p.34) went on to acknowledge the findings of the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (1997) that focussed public attention on the urgency of the adult literacy problem marking the first clear recognition by Government of adult literacy as a funding issue. Bailey (2006, p.197) notes that prior to this White Paper there was no national literacy policy and only a very small fund to cover minimal adult literacy services. Since the publication of the IALS, she noted that funding has increased 18 fold and participation in literacy services has increased almost six-fold. So the literacy issue moved to being a top priority in national policy on further education, and to being firmly embedded in policy agendas outside of the education sector.

Adult literacy is also part of the *National Development Plan* (2000-2006), which outlines a vision of the future that provides for greater economic and social development (Bailey 2006, p.198). It is seen as a contributing factor to upskilling the workforce and facilitating greater participation of those on the margins of society (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.191).

The upskilling of the workforce was not however, the main focus of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) which has responsibility for co-ordi-

nation, training and policy development in adult literacy in Ireland. In its revised *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (2005) NALA defines literacy as involving:

listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

(NALA, 2005, p.3)

It's understanding of literacy recognises the importance of the needs and interests of individuals and it is concerned with personal development and building confidence as well as technical skills. NALA's view is clearly that while literacy is linked to economic development and employment, it must not be limited to issues of economics.

literacy is deeply connected with the rights of individuals and communities: it is about their right to have a voice in society; to continue and extend their education; to read and to be read.

(NALA, 2005, p.7)

The NALA guidelines note that the basic philosophy and approach which underpins adult literacy work is based on a belief that effective learning builds on the wealth of life experience which adults bring to their work on literacy development and is informed by the writings of a number of key thinkers in particular Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and Jack Mezirow. For example, an important focus of literacy development in the Republic has been the expression and analysis by learners of their own lives, views and experiences as an essential part of the process of developing their literacy based on the pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1960s.

Adult Literacy in Northern Ireland

Adult literacy classes in Northern Ireland can be traced back to the mid 1950s but it was only after the screening of the BBC television programme *On the Move*, in 1975, that a greater emphasis was placed on the development of provision to meet the basic learning needs of adults.

During the 1970s, the Adult Literacy and Basic Education Committee (ALBEC) was set up by the then Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI), to advise on adult literacy provision and this body remained in existence until comparatively recently. ALBEC was a cross-sectoral body which included members from the different sectors of literacy provision including further education, the training sector, and the voluntary and community sector. It also maintained links with bodies with similar interests in other parts of Ireland and the UK, and promoted quality standards in the delivery of Adult Basic Education (ABE). It acted as an advocate for literacy and basic education practice in Northern Ireland over an extended period of social and political turmoil during which Northern Ireland was governed directly from Westminster and where local politicians had little or no say in the development of Government policy. Its activities included organising conferences, training programmes and providing consultancy and advice to support the development of literacy and adult basic education. It also provided support for tutors, for example, through the preparation of tutor manuals and through publishing student writing. ALBEC represented the interests of a group of committed professionals with minimal financial support from DENI to develop ideas, and to respond to the expressed needs of tutors and learners. While ALBEC might be criticised as largely a talking shop, it did succeed in keeping the needs of literacy learners on the political agenda and it also organised occasional joint cross-border meetings and conferences at a time when there was little political will or financial support to engage in such activities.

Following the demise of ALBEC, a Basic Skills Unit was established in 1999 within the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) to act as an advocate and advisory body to promote and develop quality basic skills learning opportunities for adults. At the same time other Government initiatives such as the University for Industry (Ufi)/ Learndirect Essential Skills Pilot Project was established to assist adults to find new ways of improving their basic skills for employment. The Learndirect experiment aimed to meet Government strategic economic, learning and skills objectives through providing accessible, relevant and flexible learning using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as an integral part of learning (Mark and Donaghey, 2002, p. 9).

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) also provided Northern Ireland with its first ever comprehensive survey on levels of literacy. The results showed that some 24 per cent of those aged between 16 and 65 (around a quarter of

a million people) performed at the lowest level of prose literacy as defined by the internationally agreed measurement instrument of the IALS survey. Those adults most likely to perform at level one were in the lowest income brackets, in receipt of social security benefits, unemployed and with lower levels of educational attainment. Further detailed analysis of evidence indicated that the older age groups performed worse than 16-25 year olds, with over 40 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women at level 1 in the 56-65 age group. A total of 36 per cent of those identified at level 1 were unemployed (DEL, 2002, p. 20).

The development of adult literacy policy in Northern Ireland

From the late 1990s, a series of policy reports on lifelong learning in Northern Ireland set out a rationale for the development of literacy policy. In 1999, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) report on *Lifelong Learning: a New Learning Culture for All* proposed a new framework for the development of lifelong learning for the twenty-first century. This paper was strongly influenced by the UK Government's Green Paper (1998) *The Learning Age: a Renaissance for a New Britain*, which emphasised the importance of "the continuous development of skills, knowledge and understanding essential for employability and fulfilment" (DEL, 1999, p. 3). The paper emphasised the particular contribution that lifelong learning can make to economic development, to healing the divisions of society, to supporting social cohesion, and to helping communities respond to social and economic change. It also acknowledged that adult learning was not sufficiently well established in Northern Ireland and outlined a set of interlocking proposals, aimed at creating a culture where continued lifelong learning would become the normal pattern. The paper went on to stress the importance of increasing general skills levels to improve international competitiveness, enabling individuals of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to enhance their employability in a rapidly changing economy. The paper set out key aims for the development of lifelong learning that includes increasing participation from previously under-represented groups, providing more coherent relationships between education and training and the skills of the regional economy, and providing greater ease of progression through the system of qualifications. The strategy also emphasises the importance of "the development of basic and key skills in the context of skills, knowledge and understanding, essential for employability and fulfilment" (DEL, 1999, p.1), thus underlining the importance of adult literacy as a set of technical skills which can assist economic development.

In 2002, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) launched the Essential Skills Strategy and Action Plan. The strategy document *Essential Skills for Living: a framework and consultation paper on adult literacy* (2002) was one of the first policy documents developed with local involvement in the decision making process. The development of this strategy also coincided with the setting up of a new short-lived power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland that brought educational policies under the scrutiny of local ministers for the first time in many years. The document notes the contribution that poor literacy and numeracy make to social exclusion and exclusion from the labour market and sets out a framework and actions to improve the essential skills of literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland. The strategy sets out a broad vision for improving literacy and numeracy among adults. It notes the need to:

provide opportunities for adults to update their essential skills to assist them in improving their quality of life, personal development and their employment opportunities and by so doing to promote greater economic development, social inclusion and cohesion.

(DEL, 2002, p. 6)

The strategy defined essential skills as: “the ability to communicate by talking and listening; reading and writing; use numeracy, and the ability to handle information” (2002, p. 5). It also noted that ICT can also be regarded as an essential skill and as a medium to draw many into learning (2002, p.19). DEL (2002, p.19) noted that the benefits of improving literacy and numeracy as developing skills and abilities which help learners to develop the competence and confidence to express ideas and opinions and to make decisions and to solve problems, and so enhancing the quality of everyday life. The report also set out a framework for the development of a regional curriculum based on the core curriculum in England and for the accreditation of learners at five levels of entry. The improvement of tutor qualifications was set out as a priority and while not addressing the development of ICT skills specifically, the strategy did recognise the importance of ICT skills as a medium for drawing many adults into learning.

The importance of literacy, numeracy, and information and communication technology (ICT) as essential skills was further emphasised by the publication of the *Skill Strategy for Northern Ireland* (2004) which reinforced the importance of essential skills and recommended they be extended to include computer literacy (2004, p.9).

In 2005, the DEL commissioned a review of the *Essential Skills for Living Strategy* which noted that the strategy was on track to achieve or possibly exceed its targets for participation, with participants reporting positive experiences of training. The report noted that the strategy was critical to the success of the economy reinforcing as it does the link between social exclusion and exclusion from the labour market and concluded that it needs to be continued as a priority area.

In Northern Ireland, Government funded provision has been focused on addressing the skills gap in the workforce and on progressing individuals into employment. Approaches to literacy which have a strong social, cultural or citizenship focus have tended to develop outside of the formally accredited learning provision, particularly within the voluntary and community sector. The projects can be traced back to the early 1990s, and are closely linked to the Peace Process in Ireland. This brought additional funding, mostly from the European Union which enabled projects with a wider social and community remit to develop. One of the problems of this type of provision has been its short lifespan.

Measuring adult literacy needs

An examination of the development of adult literacy in Ireland shows that there have been few attempts to measure the extent of need. However, as McGill and Morgan (2001) note, “the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in Ireland, has provided Ireland with its first ever comprehensive study of literacy needs showing around one quarter of adults in each jurisdiction (24 per cent in Northern Ireland and 25 per cent in the Republic) as having problems with the simplest literacy task” (p.57). This they note as having “implications for the equality agenda” (p.54). The IALS has also led to considerable funding being given to adult literacy both North and South. While the advent of significant funding has been welcomed by many as a way of significantly increasing participation in adult literacy education, some have pointed to limitations in how the IALS survey was conducted. It was based on a particular conceptualisation of literacy which focuses on a functional approach and gaining basic measurable skills. This is sometimes referred to as a ‘deficit model’ which sees the purpose of literacy education as one of teaching the individual the literacy skills necessary to function in society. Critics of this approach claim that this devalues the validity of the very different, diverse literacies which people engage in, and which characterise most societies.

Different understandings and approaches to adult literacy

A closer examination of the development of adult literacy in Ireland, North and South, shows that different understandings of adult literacy have led to different policies and practices.

In the Republic, two distinct approaches to understanding literacy can be delineated. On the one hand, the economic boom in Ireland has led to a general concern for a focus on the development of skills to meet the needs of the economy, which has encouraged an approach to literacy which focuses on the acquisition of skills for work. This approach is most noticeable in Government Reports such as the *White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000) and the *National Development Plan* (1999). On the other hand, the concern of NALA, the national co-ordinating body for adult literacy and of many practitioners is based on a much wider understanding of adult literacy. The NALA guidelines on literacy which are underpinned by a broader understanding of adult literacy and which are based on a particular philosophy of adult literacy, sees it as going beyond a deficit model. With this model the tutor or teacher often has an underlying, but usually acknowledged assumption that the learner is in some way inadequate or unfortunate because they lack the knowledge and skills that must be provided by the teacher. NALA advocates what it calls a 'wealth' model where learners realise their own strengths and knowledge and where learners learn how to learn (2005, p. 9 -10). They are encouraged to explore opportunities for further learning from an understanding of their own life experience and the questions this raises. The model assumes people learn best where the subject matter is relevant and when learning is based on active participation. It postulates that when learners participate in decisions about the learning process they are encouraged to evaluate their own learning and they are more likely to develop independence, creativity and self-reliance. The wealth model is based on the ideas of well know theorists such as Carl Rodgers. It also draws on the ideas of Jack Mezirow on transformative learning which makes it possible for learners to develop new perspectives and to take action based on this new view of themselves, their families and the wider society. This kind of critical reflection is connected to Paulo Freire's view on education and social action (NALA 2005, p. 10-11). These ideas have contributed to the development of a learner-centred concept of adult education where the needs, concerns and experience of the learners are the focus of learning, rather than an externally structured and enforced curriculum based on, for example, the economy.

NALA (2005, p.11) notes that a more challenging concept, also at the centre of adult literacy work in Ireland, is the learner-directed approach. This means that rather than curriculum and approaches being formed by tutors who take into consideration the needs of learners, it is formed by the learners in discussion with their tutors. Tutors then facilitate the learning that the students wish to pursue and encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning.

In contrast, pronouncements on adult literacy and lifelong learning in Northern Ireland, contained in policy reports such as the *Essential Skills Strategy* (2002) and the *Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland* (2004), have been the key shapers of adult literacy and how it is understood. A core national non-governmental organisation with public funding similar to NALA does not exist and there is no obvious forum with a respected independent voice for adult literacy and which can influence co-ordination, training and policy development. While the recent history of the development of adult literacy shows that the Department for Employment and Learning has sought to establish an independent voice, for example through bodies such as ALBEC and the Basic Skills Unit, these quangos have generally not been effective.

In Northern Ireland, Government policy as outlined in the *Essential Skills for Living Strategy* (2002) sets out a framework and actions to improve the essential skills of literacy and numeracy with the national standards and the core curriculum in literacy and numeracy in England being adopted. An examination of policy statements shows that the Government's view of literacy is primarily influenced by the need to meet the skills requirement of a rapidly changing workforce. The need for social cohesion and equity as well as the emergence of an inclusive civil society is also recognised as important in the future vision set out in the *Essential Skills for Living Strategy* (2002, p.6) though how this may be achieved is not clearly articulated in the strategy.

Different policies in Ireland, North and South, have inevitably given rise to different practices. In Northern Ireland, tutors experience has been shaped by a skills focused curriculum that does not actively promote tutors or learner involvement in shaping the curriculum. There is an emphasis on the accreditation of learning organised mainly through Colleges of Further and Higher Education. Tutors are required to undergo formal, accredited, externally validated, training organised through Further and Higher Education Colleges and Queen's University, Belfast. In contrast, in the Republic of Ireland, literacy

learning takes place largely through informal learning groups in the community where the curriculum is agreed between tutor and students, the majority of tutors being volunteers. Initial tutor training is organised largely within local literacy schemes and accredited tutor training programmes for experienced paid practitioners are offered nationally largely through the Waterford Institute of Technology.

In general, the policy agenda is significantly different between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of the economy in the North and a greater emphasis on the equality and social cohesion agenda in the South.

The international dimension and adult literacy

Given the many common concerns expressed in policies and strategies in adult literacy in both parts of Ireland, it would seem reasonable to ask to what extent there has been a sharing of ideas, common concerns, examples of good practices and exploitation of opportunities to work together in the two parts of Ireland? Given that close geographic proximity between Northern Ireland and the Republic and given they are both members of the European Union which seeks to encourage closer cooperation between members states and which provides financial measures for such cooperation, one might expect a closer level of cooperation between the two parts of Ireland. Despite incentives there is little evidence of direct involvement of Government Departments and Agencies in cross border co-operation on adult literacy. Instead co-operation is left to the good will of individuals and groups who have sometimes taken up opportunities to promote adult literacy activities and develop short-lived co-operation projects.

The Republic's White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (2000) devotes a whole section to co-operation with Northern Ireland. It notes areas for development including teacher, school and youth exchanges and mutual recognition of qualifications but there are no references to co-operation in the field of adult literacy education in the report. In contrast, the Northern Ireland policy documents on adult literacy make few references to cooperation or how this might be improved.

The emergence of a peace and reconciliation process in Ireland, which isn't tied to existing funding structures, has provided new opportunities to improve

practices and to promote cross border initiatives in adult literacy. One such example is the Literacy and Equality in Irish Society (LEIS) Project (2006, Lambe et al;) which has enabled stakeholders including learners in adult literacy to come together to explore issues relating to adult literacy and equality in Irish society with particular emphasis being placed on the post conflict situation. Another example of co-operation is the establishment of a working group of key adult literacy public sector stakeholders to examine policy development in the UK and in Ireland. Much more might be achieved through greater co-operation on the development of policies and practices in a wide range of fields including recognition of qualifications, development of curricula and quality management.

Conclusion

In the past decade, the Island of Ireland has seen considerable change in the growth and development of literacy policies. There has been a particular focus on meeting the needs of the economy spurred on by a focus on developing skills which promote economic prosperity on both sides of the border. Such policies have undervalued the needs of every individual and the wider social benefits which learning can bring through social inclusion and active citizenship. The advent of a Peace Process in Northern Ireland and across the Island of Ireland provides a unique opportunity to focus not simply on economic goals, but on real social, cultural, political and environmental challenges which promote change. Adult literacy practice can make a unique contribution to engaging the most marginalised in a journey which can bring about a lasting peace in a new democratic and inclusive Ireland. To achieve this, policies which promote understanding and dialogue and which acknowledge the wider social benefits of learning must be encouraged. It remains to be seen if those charged with the job of developing policies to promote real change can take up the challenge to promote democratic learning through building learning partnerships which can make a real difference to learners' lives.

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