Assessing the relationship between community education, political efficacy and electoral participation: A case study of the asylum seeking community in Cork

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Abstract

This paper assesses the relationship between community education and internal political efficacy. In particular it examines the association between voter/civic programmes run in advance of the 2009 local elections in Ireland and internal political efficacy amongst the asylum seeking community in Cork. A survey is used to test this relationship. The paper outlines the methodological issues faced in conducting research within this community and presents the results of the sample groups' involvement in community education, levels of political efficacy and participation in the 2009 local elections.

Introduction

Community education which draws on the teachings of Dewey (1916) and Freire (1970) has been described as '*a flexible, emancipating process, which enables people to become more agentic in their own lives, and to bring about change in their worlds*' (Connolly 2003, 9).

Political efficacy refers to a citizen's appraisal of her ability to influence and have effect in a political system. Research details the strong relationship between political efficacy and political participation (Almond and Verba 1965, Pollock 1983, McCluskey et al 2004, Valentino et al 2008). Voter/civic programmes fall under the 'umbrella' of community education to the extent that they emphasise its philosophy of empowerment and engagement. In this regard we can hypothesise about their association with an individual's internal political efficacy and electoral participation.

Ireland, unlike many other European countries, experienced little inward migration during the twentieth century. It was not until the 'celtic tiger' economy developed in the late 1990s that the country experienced high levels of immigration and it was

only in 2007 that a Government office with responsibility for integration was established.

The number of asylum seekers entering Ireland reached a peak of 11,634 in 2002 but had declined by two thirds to 3,866 in 2008 (Taguma et al 2009). Asylum seekers in Ireland are entitled to vote in Irish local elections. In terms of educational provision, those under the age of 18 have the right to primary and secondary education while adults are eligible for part time English language and literacy classes as well as other part time courses (e.g. computer courses) provided by voluntary groups.

Community education projects on voting and Irish politics were conducted by civil society organisations, University College Cork and other institutions in advance of the 2009 Irish local elections. This research assesses the relationship between community education (and voter/civic programmes in particular) and an individual's efficacy and electoral participation by surveying members of Cork's asylum seeking community who have and have not participated in these community education programmes. It starts with a discussion of what is meant by community education and then explores definitions and measurements of political efficacy. Finally it assesses their relationship within this demographic.

Adult and community education

The term 'adult education' has a multiplicity of uses depending upon the context and the intention of the user (Lawson 1979, 111). In its White paper on Adult Education the Irish Government argues that it includes aspects of further and third level education, continuing education and training, community education and '*other systematic deliberative learning by adults, both formal and informal*' (2000, 12). This broad definition is underpinned by what it describes as priority areas, namely: consciousness raising, citizenship, cohesion, competitiveness, cultural development and community building. Other purposes of adult education include; facilitating structural change in a dynamic society; supporting and maintaining social order; promoting productivity and enhancing personal growth (Beder 1989, Boggs 1991, Connolly 2003).

The purposes vary according to different philosophical or ideological perspectives. Beder identifies three philosophical traditions in adult education:

1. liberal-progressives who see the good democratic society as the goal of adult education and broadly agree that learning should proceed from experience as opposed to abstractions or discipline-based subject matters.

2. countercritique/reproductionists, such as Freire, Gramsci and Bourdieu, who focus on the relation of education to society and argue that capitalist democracy is flawed by structural inequalities that can be remedied only by a significant reordering of the social system. Feire (1970), in particular, emphasises empowerment and the development of critical consciousness, and sees the role of adult education as facilitating learners to attain this, through dialogue.

3. personal growth advocates, who like the liberal-progressives believe that society is essentially good. They focus on the individual rather than on society. This tradition is associated with Humanism and it views the role of adult education as assisting learners to make choices that maximise their human potential (Beder 1989, 45- 6).

In particular, Beder emphasises the role played by adult education in promoting the democratic order, a view supported by Boggs who contends that '*the quality of democracy seems to depend upon the degree to which civic education can assist adult citizens in finding meaningful bases for participation in public affairs*' (1991, 46-7).

Boggs and Beders' views are reflected partly in Brookfield's discussion of 'adult education of the community' which he argues reflects the tradition of citizenship training in which a democracy requires its members to possess a certain philosophical orientation and a set of civic virtues and where the educator holds the community to be in a state of normative need (1983, 88-9).

Similar points are expressed on civic education which is informed by the political and ideological interests embedded in varied conceptions of citizenship. Some describe it as the education of '*tolerant, rational political actors*' while others claim it is one that it gives citizens the '*organizational and participatory skills necessary to negotiate democracy*' (Dale et al 2007). Some suggest it teaches the '*critical and deliberative skills necessary to participate effectively in contentious public debates*' yet others are uncomfortable with approaches that '*encourage dissent and critique of current policies*' (Westheimer 2004, 232).

Westheimer and Kahne identify three visions of citizenship that may be incorporated into programmes of civic education (2004): the personally responsible citizen (citizens must have good character); the participatory citizen (citizen must actively participate and take a leadership position in community struc-

tures) and the justice oriented citizen (citizen must question and change established systems and structures when they produce patterns of injustice).

The Boggs and Beder discussions primarily focus on the personally responsible and the participatory citizens. Community Education, a form of adult education that is distinct in its ideology, has been described as

> *'a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level…… (and) an interactive challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes'*

(AONTAS 2000, 110).

Its approach is closer to Westheimer and Kahne's justice oriented citizen and its emphasis on empowerment, social justice as well as community and citizen capacity building (Connolly 2003) places it in the countercritique/reproductionist school. In the context of the recent debates on the direction of Irish adult education it is orientated towards the renewal of its commitment to critical citizenship (Keogh 2004, Harris 2005). It involves a broad and '*non-instrumental conception of education oriented to social equality and justice*' (Fleming 2004) that goes beyond '*reductive and economistic abstractions*' of the individual (Finnegan 2008).It recognises that the educational system is 'strongly integrated into the society around it' and that it is a 'central part of the egalitarian agenda' (Baker et al, 2004: 168).

The voter /civic education courses delivered in Cork city and county in advance of the 2009 local election can be classified as community education programmes. The courses consisted of three units delivered over a six week period in UCC and Carrigtwohill community resource centre in late 2008 and early 2009. The goals of the workshop were to help the participants explore areas of concern where they would like to see change happening, identify the root causes of these problems and develop practical ways to change the situation through involvement in electoral and participatory democracy (VPSJ, 2006: iii). These were achieved across three modules/units. The first unit 'our voices our vote' focused on the power of each citizen's individual voice to bring about change. It included technical information on joining the electoral register and completing a sample ballot paper as well as exercises linking 'our voice'/'standing up' for ourselves and our community to voting. The second unit, 'issues', asked partici-

pants to identify issues of concern to them and to reflect on them from a justice perspective. It used group and individual exercises to explore and outline the 'way things are' and 'the way we'd like things to be', the latter task from the perspective of a just society. In the final unit 'candidates', the participants assessed the election candidates in terms of how they serve voters' interests and involved a series of exercises on how voters can keep their representatives accountable between elections (VPSJ, 2006).

The course's aim, approach and delivery methods which incorporate participatory exercises, modelling, open questions and facilitation are in keeping with Brookfield's work on critical theory which emphasises the need to 'hunt assumptions', test their accuracy and take informed action (2012, 24). Based on the principles of Freire, the course is underpinned by philosophies of empowerment, social justice and respect. Furthermore, in line with critical thinking approaches the workshops, without making explicit reference to political ideology, are clear in the values that underlie them and highlight the need to examine the values that inform the actions of political actors. In this regard this course can be differentiated from other adult education programmes offered to the asylum seeking community, such as programmes in computers, languages and childcare.

Political efficacy

A central tenet of democratic politics is that ultimate control of the system rests with its citizens. Accordingly, the extent of influence that citizens perceive within the system, that is their political efficacy, is of some significance (Acock et al 1985, Galston 2001, Dalton 2002, Stoker 2006).

Campbell, Gurin, and Miller's (1954, 187) classic definition of political efficacy describes it as the

> *'the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e., that it is worth while to perform one's civic duties. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change.'*

Political efficacy is important from an individual perspective, as it influences political participation, including voting (Finkel 1985, Easton and Dennis 1967, Baker 1973, Valentino et al 2008). It reflects the overall well being of the citizen and the state, and for this reason Craig, Niemi, and Silver reflect that political efficacy is *'thought to be a key indicator in the overall health of democratic systems'* (1990, 289).

Theorists distinguish between internal and external efficacy dimensions (Craig et al 1990). Internal efficacy involves the self-appraisal of one's capacity to understand and act within the political environment (Morrell 2003). Possessing the belief that one is a capable political actor is a reflection of the individual's psychological strength (Clarke and Acock 1989). In some political science literature the term 'political competence' has been used to refer to this dimension (Lambert et al, 1986). Internal efficacy comprises self-perceptions of: political knowledge; political understanding; confidence to engage in politic matters; and capability in political matters (Craig et al 1990). The second dimension, external political efficacy, relates to an individual's appraisal of the accessibility and responsiveness of the political system and it agents to their personal input (Acock and Clarke 1990).

The principal considerations in internal efficacy are of the individual's own political competences. Education, particularly civic education, has been shown to boost internal efficacy (Galston 2001, Pasek et al 2008, Kahne and Westheimer 2006, Lopes et al 2009). A positive relationship between internal political efficacy and political participation is also well documented (Balch 1974, Valentino et al 2009).[1]

The emphasis on empowerment and capacity building in community education, indicate its relevance for general feelings of personal competence, i.e. internal political efficacy. A more informed voter, equipped with the critical thinking skills is more likely to challenge the status quo, to 'hunt assumptions' to resist 'ideological manipulation' (Brookfield 2012:5) and to make the decision that best meets their needs and values. We can therefore hypothesise that community education, particularly voter/civic education will have a positive association with internal political efficacy, and voting participation.

Methodology, findings and analysis

The research developed a project specific survey questionnaire that was administered in asylum-seeker residential centres in Cork.[2] Expert consultations with residential centre managers, outreach officers and NASC officers (Cork based immigrant support Non Governmental Organisation), as well as a focus group with asylum seekers, were organised to refine the survey questionnaire and to receive advice on the logistics of conducting the surveys and establishing points of entry to the centres and the community.

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1 Finkel (1987) and Valentino et al (2009) note that the relationship is not necessarily one-directional, as participation is also likely to affect one's perception of political competence.
2 The questionnaire is available on request.

The 'political and community education' items included in the survey questionnaire were largely open-ended to capture the level and context of respondent participation in voter/civic courses. Closed-ended items on attendance and satisfaction with such courses were also included. Comparable items relating to 'non-political' courses captured the respondents' overall educational experience in Ireland.

The political variables measured were taken from existing political efficacy research and used Likert scale closed-ended questionnaire items. The items used reflect Craig et al's (1990) approach to measuring internal political efficacy. Socio-demographic information such as: age; gender; race; education level; and length of residence in Ireland was also gathered.

Methodological issues

The focus group was held on 23rd June 2009 in the NASC office with 5 participants from diverse age, ethnic and residential status backgrounds. The group focused on the draft survey and the feedback received included concerns around:

- Possible personal identifiers (nationality, age etc).It was noted that this could be particularly sensitive for asylum seekers, as there may only be one or two members of smaller countries seeking asylum in Ireland. Thus if a participant from one of these countries wrote down their nationality, they could be easily identified. This question was changed and the question used by the Central Statistics Office in the 2006 census was used instead. It asked participants to identify their ethnic or cultural background and gave the following options: White, Black (African or any other Black background), Asian (Chinese or other Asian background) and other (including mixed background).

- The question on status in Ireland. Members of the focus groups highlighted that for many African migrants the issue of legal status in Ireland is sensitive and complex. Also it was suggested that the question had negative connotations and that asylum seekers would not answer the question on status no matter how much anonymity was promised. This question was removed from the survey as due to resource limitations it was decided to focus solely on the asylum seeking community.

- The personal efficacy questions and their placing in the questionnaire, in particular. As one participant observed: '*This feels very personal. First you ask me where I am born, my age now you are asking me about my personal abil-*

ity straight away'. Before the focus group, the questionnaire started with questions on personal data, then captured interest in politics and then ten personal efficacy questions. After the focus group the number of personal efficacy questions was reduced to five and they were placed on the second page. Also the questions on personal data were placed at the end of the questionnaire. Another participant remarked that the personal efficacy items may be difficult to capture with asylum seeker respondents as they find themselves in a country where '*they do not have power in their lives'*.

- The language and terminology used. For example some sentence structures were identified as confusing due to the number of response categories. Also the participants did not favour placing the negative option first. Phrases like 'seldom' were identified as possibly being problematic. Finally all agreed that the survey was too long for those who did not have English as their first language. In response the survey was significantly shortened (from ten to four pages) and the number of response categories reduced.

Conducting the survey

The survey questionnaire was conducted in the communal areas of six Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) residential centres in Cork.[3] As those who participated in the survey were self-selecting, the findings of this research are specific to the sample.

The monthly statistics report of the RIA at the time of survey (December 2009), indicated a residential asylum seeker community of 6,482 at a national level, 919 residents were based in Cork centres. As a third of the centres' residents were under the age of 18, the Cork survey frame at this time was 625. The sample for this survey was 71 respondents. The survey sample is comparable to the sample frame, in terms of gender and the residential centre location. The age of those surveyed ranged from 18 to 44 years old.

The survey involved respondents completing a questionnaire on a one-off basis. While a panel design which surveyed respondents before and after participation in community education would better investigate the relationship between education, efficacy, and participation; this was beyond the resources of this project. The transient nature of those in residential centres, and the difficulty of accessing respondents also limited the possibility of such a design.

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3   The centres surveyed include: Ashbourne House, Glenvera, Millstreet, An Poc Fada, Clonakilty and Kinsale Road. Residents in the Mallow centre opted to not participate in the study.

The survey is not statistically significant, given that those who filled it out may be more engaged or knowledgeable. Yet it does provide an insight into the impact of political education on this under-researched community. Therefore this research is best regarded as a pilot study. The non-random nature of the sample and the sample size did not make it possible to generalise the results. The distribution of the responses is presented on an item by item basis.[4] Cross tabulation of community education, internal efficacy, and participation was used to explore the relationship between the variables. Gender effect on these variables and relationships was controlled for. The subsample size made it impractical to control for other demographic variable effects.

Results

Of the 71 respondents, 44% of them resided in one centre (the Kinsale Road centre), the largest one in Cork. In terms of gender, while one participant did not provide gender, 40 respondents (57%) were male and 30 (43%) were female. The majority (52%) of the participants were aged between 25 and 34 and no one older than 44 participated. The educational attainment of respondents was as follows: no formal education (1%); primary education (18%); second level education (38%); university undergraduate (24%); university postgraduate (10%); and non-response (9%). In response to the question on ethnic or cultural background 73% of the respondents said that they were of Black origin, 8% classified themselves as Asian and 13% identified themselves as White.

Over three quarters of the respondents (79%) had taken an adult or community education course in Ireland. These included courses on: computers, the English language, childcare, and women's health. Almost half (48%) of them had taken a second course. There difference in the proportion of respondents that participated in any course, on age group, educational attainment, or length of time in Ireland, was negligible.

Fewer than a third (31%) of respondents had taken a voter/civic course with 8% of them having taken two. A greater proportion of male (35%) than female (26%) respondents had taken a voter/civic course; this was also true for participation in other (non-political) courses. A comparison of other background variables illustrated that black, older, more educated, and longer term residents were more likely to have participated in voter/civic courses.

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4   Attempts to create a scale measure of internal efficacy were not supported by Principal Axis factoring and Scale Reliability analysis results. The Cronbach's Alpha (.592) emerging from scale reliability analysis of the four items is not supportive of a reliable internal efficacy scale.

Those who participated in voter/civic courses were more likely to express an interest in politics (95%) than those who had not participated (62%). They also were more likely to identify with an Irish political party (participants 42%, non-participants 2%) and to have had contact with a politician (participants 53%, non-participants 29%). A greater proportion of course participants expressed a connection with the Irish community (60%) compared to non-participants (53%). Moreover a greater proportion of course participants expressed a connection with the migrant community in Ireland (60%) compared to non-participants (50%).

Table 1: Participant responses (%) to internal efficacy survey items

Internal Efficacy Items	Disagree	Neither disagreed nor agreed	Agree	n
1. I consider myself well able to participate in politics	17.7	33.9	48.4	62
2. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of important political issues	15.9	27.5	56.5	69

While respondents were presented with four survey items on internal efficacy in the questionnaire, there was some duplication in item focus. Table 1 displays the response distribution to the two items which are focus of subsequent discussion, and which feature in Craig *et al* (1990). The proportion of respondents expressing high internal political efficacy (those who agree) on item number two (57%) is higher than for item one (48%). The proportion of respondents replying with middle category responses to each item is relatively high.[5]

While 48% of respondents agreed with item one, more male respondents (55%) agreed than female respondents (35%). Agreement on item one increased across the age groups; 29% for 18-24 year olds; 55% for 25-34 year olds; and 57% for 35-44 year olds. The trend across educational groups showed that those with postgraduate education were more 'efficacious', that is had higher levels of efficacy, (57%) than those with primary level education alone (40%). Interestingly those who identified with Irish political parties, and had met a politician were more likely to feel efficacious than those who did not.

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5   The other internal efficacy items presented to respondents were: *I feel I could do as good a job in political office as most other people* and *I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people*. It is evident that the former item is similar to item number one, and the latter item is similar to item number, in Table 1.

Participation in a voter/political course is associated with higher levels of political efficacy, as 61% of course participants agreed, with item 1 compared with 39% of non participants. No respondent who had participated in a voter/civic course disagreed with the item. Our research revealed that participation in non-political courses does not have a positive effect on internal efficacy. While 56% of those who presented as politically interested agreed with the item, only 16% of those who were not politically interested did so. It is therefore possible, that political interest guided their decision to participate in a political course and their perception of internal political efficacy. However, looking only at politically interested respondents; the proportion expressing efficacy is still higher among voter/civic course participants (63%) than non-participants (48%).

In relation to the second internal efficacy item (Table 1), similar patterns emerge in relation to: gender, age, and education. Those who identified with Irish political parties are more efficacious (78%), than those who did not (55%). Political course participants were also more likely to agree with this statement (70%), than non-participants (54%). Again, the politically interested were more likely to agree to this statement (65%), than the politically uninterested (27%). Controlling for interest, among those who categorise themselves as politically interested; those who have participated in political courses are more efficacious (72%) than those who have not (67%).

Electoral Participation
Table 2: Respondents and the 2009 local election

	Percentage
Awareness of right to vote	80
Registered to vote	62
Voted	48

All of the respondents were entitled to vote in the June 2009 local elections and the overwhelming majority of them (80%) were aware of this. Yet only 62% were registered to vote by June 2009 and 48% voted in the election (Table 2). While an equal proportion of male and female respondents were aware of the right to vote, 55% of males registered to vote and 75% of females registered to vote. Fewer male (43%) than female (57%) respondents voted. Older age groups were more inclined to vote. The turnout levels across the age groups were: 42%

of 18-24 year olds; 46% of 25-34 year olds and 60% of 35-44 year olds. Those with a higher level of educational attainment in advance of coming to Ireland were more likely to vote than others. Moreover, the length of time that one spent in the country increased the likelihood of having voted in the 2009 election.

Table 3: Participants/non participants in voter/civic education and the 2009 local election

	Course Participants	Neither disagreed nor agreed
Awareness of right to vote	95	70
Registered to vote	95	47
Voted	75	38

Table 3 shows that those who participated in voter/civic education courses were more likely to be aware of their entitlement to vote in local elections than those who did not; and to have registered for the 2009 elections. They were also more likely to vote in the June 2009 elections than non-participants.

As in the case of political education, the relationship between internal political efficacy and voting participation is positive among asylum seekers. 57% of those with high efficacy on the first efficacy item (see Table 1) voted, while only 46% of those with low efficacy voted. On the second efficacy item, 49% of those with high efficacy voted, while only 36% of those with low efficacy voted.

The relationship between voter information programmes and voting is more prominent among those with high efficacy, than low efficacy. Moreover efficacy appears more important in the electoral participation of women. On the first efficacy item, male respondents are equally likely to vote, irrespective of efficacy level. However, among female respondents, 100% of those who agreed with this item voted, only 50% of those who disagreed with the item voted.

Conclusion
This research faced many challenges namely language barriers, access to the survey community, and their apprehension of involvement in a political survey. All of these impacted on the response rate. The small *n* meant that the survey findings were not statistically significant. Therefore this paper presents observations rather than findings for generalisation and should be viewed as a pilot study.

Nonetheless, returning to our initial hypothesis, this research notes a positive association between participation in voter/civic education and internal efficacy that is qualified by gender. It observes that those that participated in such courses were more likely to have been aware of their electoral entitlements, to have registered to vote, and to have voted, than those who did not. In doing so it provides some tentative evidence of the value of voter education programmes in enhancing electoral participation amongst this marginalised community. Further research within this community, particularly panel design approaches, is required to prove this conclusively. Moreover further research is required to explore why those members of this community did not vote. This study has focused primarily on political participation through voting. The authors are mindful that voting alone is not sufficient to empower citizens and also recognise the role of participatory and deliberative democratic processes to widen citizen engagement and deepen it by offering more opportunities for informed and critical engagement with the dominant neo-liberal political discourses.

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