‘Tracing our roots: imagining our future’: A life history of adult education in the Republic of Ireland

Kay Maunsell, St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, Dublin, Ireland

Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Introduction
This paper traces some of key structural and policy developments and seminal ‘moments’ that have transformed the face of adult and community education in the Republic of Ireland over the past four decades.

The new empirical research on which this paper is based, ascertains the life history, as it were, of such developments in Irish adult and community education through in-depth analysis of the life histories of those educators who worked at the coalface of adult and community education during this time. The primary focus of paper is placed on adult educators’ perceptions of how adult and community education has shaped and been shaped by the pervading historical, political, cultural and social trends.

Context of the Study
Historically, Ireland has had a strong community-based adult education sector underpinned by high levels of volunteerism (Kavanagh, 2007). In terms of the promotion of the adult education/lifelong learning agenda, it can be said that social forces have always been viewed as key drivers, alongside the political/economic forces that may have been at play (Maunsell, Downes and McLoughlin, 2008). The promotion of the interdependence of the objectives of economic development and social inclusion is a particular characteristic of the Irish context in relation to adult education/lifelong learning and not found across other European contexts (Downes, Maunsell, McLoughlin and Taljunaite, 2006; Holford, Riddell, Weedon, Litjens and Hannan, 2009).

Drawing on archival research of governmental and non-governmental publications on policy and practice in the field of adult and community education, a brief chronological overview of the published literature and data on the structures extant is offered as a context or scene setting. Such a chronological overview will serve as a means of portraying, in relatively broad brushstrokes, the contexts and developments that have occurred in adult and community education across recent decades. Key sources of such secondary data, include inter alia Government Publications, AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education, NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency along with an expanding body of academic writing in the field (Cf. Bane, 2007; Connolly, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Connolly, Fleming, McCormack and Ryan, 2007; Fleming, 2004; Keogh, 2004; Maunsell, Downes and McLoughlin, 2008; Ryan and Walsh, 2004; Waters, 2007)
The 1960s saw a number of such developments, in particular, the provision of free secondary schooling, and offers the temporal starting point for this paper’s exploration of how adult education has been shaped here in the Republic of Ireland over the past four decades or so. Other key developments will also be referenced such as *inter alia* the publications of the Murphy Report (1973), the Kenny Report (1983), the development of national organizations such as AONTAS and NALA, the appointment of dedicated Adult Education Organisers and more recently of Community Education Facilitators, the introduction of the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (2000), the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning (2002), the National Framework of Qualifications (2003), and the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2003), to name but a few.

At the dawn of this millennium, drawing on the objectives set out in the Green Paper *Adult Education in an Era of Life Long Learning* (1998) and driven very much by the Lisbon agenda on the role of lifelong learning in building the ‘knowledge economy’, the Irish Government published its White Paper on Adult Education entitled *Learning for Life* (2000). The White Paper reflected critically on the role of adult education and lifelong learning in Irish society and, recognised adult and community education as a key sector in the lifelong learning continuum. This key document represents the Republic of Ireland’s most significant policy development in adult education/lifelong learning, to date. Crucially, the White Paper marks the adoption of lifelong learning as the ‘governing principle’ of education policy in the Republic of Ireland.

In terms of the current policy vista, *Towards 2016*, the ten-year Social Partnership Agreement, 2006-2015 and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013, will be examined in terms of where they place the importance of adult education/lifelong learning and the objectives which are set out and the actions to be taken in this regard. Furthermore, the government, has since 2007, designated a Minister of State, located within the recently renamed Department of Education and Skills, with special responsibility for lifelong learning.

**Methodology: A Life History Approach**

In recent decades, biographical methods, of which the life history approach is one, have been re-emerging in the social sciences (cf. Chamberlayne, P. Bornat, J. & Wengraf, 2000; Merrill and West, 2009; Rossiter and Clark, 2007; West, Alheit, Siig Andersen and Merrill, 2007). Indeed, the life history approach has become an increasingly popular tool for qualitative researchers attempting to ‘unpack, appreciate and move towards the lived experience of people. It puts them in direct contact with people engaged in the process of interpreting themselves’ (Josselson and Lieblich, 1995, ppix).

According to Tierney (2001) life history is a term that has meant many things to many people and varies depending on the perspective one chooses. Significantly in relation to the theme of this conference, Tierney notes that ‘...life history affords authors and readers critical insights into not so much the dead past as the developing future. (2001, p. 134).

According to Goodson and Sikes, the rendering of lived experience into a ‘life story’ is but one interpretive layer but these authors contend that the move to ‘life history’ adds a second layer and further interpretation of the data at hand (2001, p. 17).
'Studies of individuals’ lives might allow us to see the individual in relation to the history of his/her time, allowing us to view the intersection of the life with the history of society, thus illuminating the choices, contingencies and options open to the individual.' (2001, p. 62). Life histories of organisations, issues and groups can, according to Goodson and Sikes, also provide vital contextual background.

The life history-based interview approach was employed in this research study with the explicit purpose of elucidating both the lived history and the envisaged future of the field of adult and community education in Ireland across the past four decades. The research study presented in this paper attempts to build on the work of, among others, Ivor Goodson who has employed this research approach in the United Kingdom to examine the profession of teaching (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) and Ari Antikainen, who has used life-history methodology to explore adult learners experiences of adult education in Finland (1996, 1998).

**Participants:** The sample of six participants in this study were chosen using a purposive approach. The sample was selected on the basis of two of Miles and Huberman’s (1994) sampling approaches, namely:
- criterion sampling: cases that meet some criterion; in respect of this study the criterion being that the participant would be identified as a key educator in the field of adult and community education in the Republic of Ireland within the timeframe of 1960-present.
- logic of maximum variation: documenting diverse variations and identifying important common patterns across key educators who worked in a range of adult and community education contexts, such as within adult basic education, vocational education, higher education.

As this research study will be about interviewing colleagues in the field of adult and community education, Rubin and Rubin’s (2005) concept of “conversational partnerships” seems an appropriate approach to the research relationships. This approach acknowledges the partnership between the interviewees and the interviewer and allows for a congenial and cooperative experience to develop as both "work together to achieve a shared understanding" (Rubin and Rubin, p. 14).

**Research Questions:** This research study employed a semi-structured interview schedule of open-ended questions. The key research questions addressed in this paper relate to the following:

i) What, based on your experience were the key a) historical, b) political, c) cultural and d) social forces which influenced the shaping of adult and community education policy and practice in the Republic of Ireland?

ii) How do you perceive that key policy developments in the field of adult and community education evolved?

iii) Based on your experience, how, if at all, have key policies in the field of adult and community education come to be operationalised in practice?

iv) What is your ‘vision’ of how adult and community education as proposed in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) Learning for Life might best be realised in the coming decades?
Data Generation and Analysis: The research proposal successfully achieved ethical clearance from the Research Ethic Committee of Queen’s University, Belfast and was subsequently endorsed by the Research Ethics Committee of St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra where the researcher is employed.

Each participant received a personal letter outlining the rationale for the study and inviting them to participate, a statement of the study in plain language and a consent form requiring their signature prior to participation.

Participation in the study involved a primary interview of one and a half to two hours duration. Interviewees also participated in follow-up interviews of circa forty-five minutes to one-hour duration to allow further development of the themes emerging in earlier interview(s). The flexibility of undertaking a series of interviews, including primary and follow-up, allows the participant further occasion to recall events/issues of relevance to the study as well as providing additional opportunity/ies to develop/expand on their initial responses.

All interviews were digitally recorded with interviewees’ permission. Each audio file and transcript was given a pseudonym to protect interviewees’ identity. Interviewees were subsequently contacted to review their transcripts and could request a follow-up interview to address any issues relating to this matter. Protecting interviewees’ identity and confidentiality was a primary concern of the study, notwithstanding, the limits to confidentiality. Participation in the study was on a wholly voluntary basis and participants could withdraw consent at any time and/or desist from responding to any particular question(s) should they so wish.

The data gathered through the individual life histories was comparatively examined using the analytical tool of NVivo; a software programme which allows for the analysis of very rich text based information, where deep levels of analysis on either small and large volumes of data are required. This data analysis software programme adopts a structured thematized approach to textual/discourse/narrative analysis.

KEY FINDINGS
The main findings which have emerged from this study would indicate that the range of legislation, policies, research and infrastructures developed across the last four decades provides strong evidence of the Irish State’s pursuance of the adult education/lifelong learning agenda. However, from a critical perspective, the value of this research lies in the examination of the relationship between structural and policy developments and the on-the-ground experiences of adult and community educators, as the comparative analysis of the life histories of the key adult educators interviewed highlight a growing unease at the perceived shift of impetus, by the State, towards an agenda of lifelong learning for economic reasons, with consequent detriment for the attainment of stated social inclusion objectives. The perceived implications of such a shift in policy and/or practice will be discussed further.
References
Ryan A and Walsh T (Eds.) (2004). *Unsettling the horses: Interrogating adult education perspectives*, Maynooth, MACE.

This document was added to the Education-line collection on 30 June 2010