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The examination of the nature of community education in Ireland

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Abstract. The central purpose of this article is to highlight the nature, place and role of the community education in the system of adult education of Irish Republic. In order to do so, a general overview of community education is presented. The concepts of community education and community development are also discussed. The nature of community education and training in the Republic of Ireland is fully examined. The various ways and forms of community education that can affect the system of adult education in Ireland are mentioned. The different models of community education are also highlighted. The article shows the broad-ranging outcomes from community education and names the key characteristics of the community education sector in Ireland. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the issues that face the Republic in the system of community education entering the information and knowledge society.

Keywords. *Adult education, community education, community development, social needs, informal education, community education facilitators, community art.*

Problem formulation. Education in all of its forms fosters engagement with community, society and the world around us. In modern society education is a lifetime experience, not limited to the youth years and learning is now seen as a lifelong process that the contemporary community engaged in differently at different stages in the life. The idea of educative community enhances the appearance of a separate sector in education – community education. It can be seen as an extension of the service provided by the system of adult education.

People return to learning for various reasons. Some return to gain qualification that they did not previously have an opportunity to pursue whilst others return to build on their skills. For many, they simply return for social contact and to broaden their experiences. Adult and community education is a response to the lifelong learning needs of the community.

Any discussion on community education must take into account that perspectives vary from context to place. Community education may be seen as an extension of a pragmatic education service designed to target hard-to-reach people, and integrate them into the mainstream, through employment, further education, or rehabilitation. It may be interpreted as a dimension of community development, empowering powerless people to address their own educational and social needs. It also may be perceived as an adjunct to civil society, in which citizenship and participation are enhanced and strengthened. It may be named and understood in different way too. Terms such as non-formal adult education, locally-based adult education, lifelong learning, training and informal adult education are also used as synonyms for community education in different circumstances. Further, community education, positioned within the meanings of community, may be construed as a caring process, and methods shaped to enhance these caring qualities. So, we are going to discuss these myriad dimensions, in the context of exploring differing perspectives and contexts. So, the examination and analysis of the nature of community education in Ireland is a great interest and value for the improvement of the national system of adult education.

Analysis of achievements and publications. Community education is widely examined on the international level by the Brazilian educationalist Paolo Freire, the British commentators Fletcher C. and Thompson N., the American Professor of Adult and Continuing Education Jack Mezirow, the Scottish researcher in community education Jim Crowther. The history, nature and the tendencies of development of community education in the Republic of Ireland are described by many Irish researchers and commentators: D. Barter, B. Collonny, J. Finn, T. Fleming,

B. Grummell, M. Kenny, D. McCormack, M. Murray, A. Ryan, M. Ryan, A. Walsh.

The objective of the article is to provide a discourse review and case study of the role of community education in Ireland. On the basis of the objective of the essay the following tasks are distinguished: 1) to provide an analysis of the nature of community education in the Irish Republic; 2) to explore the relationship between community education and adult education in the country; 3) to identify the outcomes from community education.

The material and the methods. Community education works with local people, it involves some of the most marginalized groups of society. It is local, accessible, flexible and friendly. Why, because it is run by local people for the community so it is based on local needs. Community education puts the learner at the core of provision. In reality this means building the community education provision around the needs of the learners in that community [8].

Many community educators and community activists borrow this term from the theories of Paolo Freire, a Brazilian educationalist and social activist who worked with disadvantaged and illiterate communities. In his work the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', Freire argues that the situation of the oppressed is the result of wider economic, social and political forces. Therefore, part of enabling people to break out of their situation is to allow them to develop a critical awareness of the world around them and their place within it. This process is called 'conscientization'. It is a facilitative process which allows participants to work collectively to investigate the world around them. Through active engagement with each other and the world outside, they become more aware of the forces that are oppressing them [6, p. 16].

Fletcher C. (1980) defined community education as 'a process of commitment to the education and leisure of all ages through local participation in setting priorities, sharing resources and the study of circumstances'. Thus, the community and its educational provisions qualify and enhance each other [1, p. 66].

In Ireland and elsewhere, in recent years, in academic and government policy documents and in the community development sector, the term 'community education' has come to be used to define a particular way and ethos of organizing and delivering education in the community. In the 1980's there was a high level of social deprivation, unemployment and poverty. In response to this, community groups came together to try and address these issues from within. Women's groups were particularly innovative in leading the way in the development of community education. These groups recognized and used education as the primary tool for bringing about social change. People with common concerns were facilitated to come together to collectively look at the issues they were facing and develop ways to address these issues and change their situation. This meant increasing their awareness of the social, political and economic conditions that impacted on their lives and then taking collective action to try and change the way things were. This was the start of a new movement in adult education in Ireland and is what we know today as community education [6, p. 15-16].

In Ireland, community education is outside the formal education sector, with the aims of enhancing learning, fostering empowerment and contributing to civic society. It is located in communities which can be area-based or issue-based, or around some other value [4].

The 2000 White Paper Learning for Life is the landmark and key reference point for adult education in Ireland in general and community education in particular. Its goals have subsequently been restated in important Irish policy documents, such as the social partnership agreement Toward 2016, the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, with commitments to addressing educational disadvantage through lifelong learning (Government of Ireland, 2007) and Sharing our future – Ireland 2025 (Forfas, 2009). The importance of community education was restated as a priority in the Programme for Government 2011-2016 [2, p. 8].

The White Paper on Adult Education (Learning for Life) has set out the broad context for the development of community education. It identifies community education as a part of a wider adult education agenda, however it outlines how community education is distinct from adult education in terms of its ideological underpinnings and the value placed upon 'participants as equal learners', 'concern for communal values' and its 'inherent political agenda [6, p. 23].' Although there is a strong connection between the underlying ethos of 'general' Adult Education and Community Education, there is the nonetheless this key difference: Community Education enables participants to emerge with more than new personal skills and knowledge. They also emerge with a strong capacity for social action, a sense of collective empowerment and an ability to tackle issues of social justice [3].

Community education is defined by two meanings, both of them are proposed by the Irish Government's first ever White Paper on Adult Education in 2002. On the one hand, it can be seen 'as an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community' [9, p. 110]. The second view sees community education in a more ideological sense 'as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level, it is as an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes'[9, p. 110].

The Irish National Adult Learning Organisation AONTAS describes community education in its policy document as 'a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community, and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to disadvantages and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within the community' [3, p. 7]. This definition reflects the capacity of community education to support participants in their struggle to understand the multiplicity of issues that they as individuals and as members of communities face. The document also states that 'Community Education has a two-fold, interconnected aim for participants: the personal acquisition of skills, knowledge and development of potential, and social and community empowerment and advancement' [3, p. 7].

Clearly there is a range of approaches in relation to how community education is understood and defined. It is

important as providers and educators that we understand the various definitions and reflect on our own thinking and understanding of community education. The first definition which sees community education as an extension of the service is quite functional whereas the second definition sees community education as a tool for change at personal and communal levels [8]. Among a great variety of approaches to community education, the main one is a 'hybrid' approach of a 'community organisation' and a 'community development' model under which education is delivered in local areas in response to the community's identified needs; for example, programmes that combat social isolation and foster personal development [4].

Community education generally takes place outside institutions and responds to the needs of the community. It is education in the community, with the community and by the community [7, p. 20].

The Irish scientist Brid Connolly shows that learning and education are not just psychological processes. The social relationships that make up society are hugely important to community education, and while it does respond to individual learning needs, it also develops with the individual a sense of community and social justice leading to collective action. While outcomes from community education may include acquisition of skills and knowledge, it is critical reflection on issues that sets the community education learner apart. Here lies the most important outcome – the ability to critically reflect – to understand issues of concern and power is crucial to community education.

The Programme for Government prioritises community education as part of Lifelong Learning, along with adult literacy and vocational training for jobseekers. Community education can transform individual lives and contributes to social cohesion. It enables civil society to play a key role in education with local groups taking responsibility for, and playing a role in organasing courses, deciding on programme content and delivering tuition. It provides opportunities for intergenerational learning, builds self-confidence and self-esteem and for those with low skills or a negative experience of formal education. It can provide a stepping stone to further learning, qualifications and rewarding work. The European Commission has also emphasized the key role of civil society in the promotion of adult learning, particularly in cultivating non-formal and formal learning, as well as the need to prioritize learning communities and social networks [4].

It is useful to consider the different models of community education. There are two concepts which focus on various models:

– community education as a service includes community organization model (education is made available to people in local areas – this is often carried out by providers outside the community) and community 'development' model (based on organizations and agencies working closely with local groups to co-ordinate and provide local services including education to address local problems);

– community education for social change considers community action model (the focus of the provision of education is on addressing local social exclusion with some instrumental learning being generated) and social action model (focused on making academic education accessible to the working class – facilitating access to power and influence in order to create fundamental social change) [10, p. 50].

Community education can be interest based that is people who share a common interest or activity. Many people of different ages and backgrounds get involved in community education. Basically anybody can get involved in community education and this is true especially of community, voluntary groups and local interest groups. Examples include women's groups; men's groups; traveler groups; community arts groups; people with disabilities; older people in the community and refugee groups [7, p. 20].

The needs of women in education arise from the structural inequalities they face including isolation in the home due to their performance of most of the caring duties, lack of self-esteem from being viewed as subordinate citizens, and for many, income and educational disadvantage [1, p. 46]. Women's community education offered programmes of non-formal and formal adult education, but it also provided the space for informal learning, plus, vitally, childcare within caring [5]. Many women's community education groups also work at a political level to lobby for change. For older people adult learning works to prevent their isolation and social exclusion as they grow older and to help them maintain well-being. [1, p. 46].

The results and their discussion. The White Paper acknowledges the individual, social/collective, and political outcomes from community education and names the key characteristics of the community education sector in Ireland as:

– its non-statutory nature;

– its rootedness in the community, not just in terms of physical location, but also in that activists have lived and worked for many years within the community, have a deep knowledge and respect for its values, culture, and circumstances, and an understanding of community needs and capacity;

– its problem-solving flexible focus based on trust;

– its process rather than syllabus focus – participants are engaged from the outset as equal partners in identifying needs, designing and implementing programmes, and adapting them on an ongoing basis;

– its respect for participants and its reflection of their lived experience;

– its concern with communal values and its commitment to match curriculum and pedagogy with the needs and interests of participants;

– its promotion of personalized learning and flexibility within the environment of a learning group;

– its goals include not just individual development but also collective community advancement, especially in marginalized communities;

– its placing a key emphasis on providing the support necessary for successful access and learning – particularly guidance, mentoring, continuous feedback and dialogue, childcare etc;

– its collective social purpose and inherently political agenda – to promote critical reflection, challenge existing structures, and promote empowerment so that participants are enabled to influence the social contexts in which they live;

– its promotion of participative democracy;

– it sees a key role for Adult Education in transforming society [9, p. 113].

Proposals identified in the White Paper included the appointment of community education facilitators to promote and support the development of community education and a 'long termed funding' source for and increased investment in the sector. In 2003, 37 community education facilitators were employed by the Vocational Education Committees and since then have been supporting a range of groups around the country [6, p. 24].

In her article 'Listening to the Voices' (2003) Brit Connolly describes 'facilitation' as fundamental to community education. She asserts that through facilitative process participants are able to take part in 'self directed' learning where "instead of the teacher controlling the syllabus, the participants control the process, identifying their own learning needs. The role of the facilitator is to create the critical environment and to provide expertise in the subject or topic" [6, p. 16].

Conclusion and the prospects of the above research. The survey results showed that community education sector in Ireland is a very flexible way of learning in modern society. It can be suitable for everyone who needs not only new knowledge and skills, professional development, life experience, but also rehabilitation, socialization, communication, collective consciousness and community support. In the current economic climate it is imperative that adults, particularly those most marginalized, are able to obtain appropriate, accessible and professional community education opportunities that meet their personal, social, civic and economic needs. Community education, in all its forms, makes a valuable contribution to individuals, families and communities in Ireland, especially the role that it plays in supporting the needs of disadvantaged groups of people. Community education is an effective, value-for-money educational service that has many beneficial outcomes for the learner. Modern society has a particular need for this type of educational provision.

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Сытник О.И. Характеристика регионального образования в Ирландии

Аннотация. Главная цель этой статьи заключается в определении сути, места и роли регионального образования в системе образования взрослых в Ирландской Республике. Дана общая характеристика регионального образования. В статье рассматриваются разнообразные определения этого понятия. Автором представлены различные способы и формы регионального образования, которые могут повлиять на систему образования взрослых в Ирландии. Различные модели образовательного сообщества также отмечены. В статье проанализированы результаты регионального образования и названы основные характеристики сектора регионального образования в Ирландии. Кроме этого, автор исследует вопросы, которые требуют решения в системе образования взрослых в Ирландии на пути к переходу в информационное общество и общество знаний.

Ключевые слова. Образование взрослых, региональное образование, региональное развитие, социальные нужды, неформальное образование, координаторы регионального образования, региональное искусство.