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Recognising diverse learning rhythms, relationships and temporalities in adult literacy learning

Bernie Grummell 

Department of Adult & Community Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Based on research completed between 2018 and 2022 in the Republic of Ireland, this article examines how the distinctive ethos and relational pedagogy of adult literacy education have been impacted by broader changes in the field and wider society, with significant impact on its capacity to support learners. The learner-centred ethos, ways of working and webs of relationality between literacy learners and staff are increasingly squeezed by rising pressures from the broader socio-political context which promotes a neoliberal view of education for individual improvement and employability. Drawing on Freirean critical education and relational pedagogy, the consequences of this are considered in the three interconnected themes of i) the learner-centred ethos in adult literacy, ii) learner identities and relationships of learning, iii) creative and responsive pedagogies of literacy.

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Adult literacy; relational pedagogy; performativity

Introduction

This article explores how the learner-centred ethos and relational pedagogy of adult literacy education has been impacted by broader changes in society. The scale and extent of these changes for the adult literacy field in the Republic of Ireland between 2018 and 2022 are considered throughout this article in three interconnected areas of the learner-centred ethos in adult literacy; literacy identities and relationships of learning; creative and responsive pedagogies of literacy. This draws on Freirean critical education and relational pedagogy to argue that the learner-centred ethos, ways of working and the strong webs of relationality between literacy learners and staff are increasingly squeezed by rising pressures from the broader socio-political context of neoliberalism, orientated towards individual improvement, performativity and employability.

Freirean literacy education, relational pedagogy, socially situated literacies

Adult literacy education has been influenced by a Freirean approach centred on the life experience of learners that encourages a deeply reflective and politicised engagement (Crowther et al., 2010; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008; Ward & Ayton, 2019). Freire's problem-posing model of education promotes the development of 'critical consciousness; the creative capacities; and the confidence, skills, and attitudes to intervene in the transformation of the social world' (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 72). His theories emphasise how conscientization is transformative on personal, social and political levels where people can become agents for change of the structures and conditions of

CONTACT Bernie Grummell  bernie.grummell@mu.ie  Department of Adult & Community Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland

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their lives. Freire's approach is based on 'interactive and deeply engaging methodologies, on mutually respectful ways of learning and teaching, on critical methods of teaching and research, on personal relationships, and on meaningful dialogue' (Gadotti, 2017, p. 19). These elements of respect, criticality and dialogue in Freirean approaches echo themes in relational pedagogy which emphasises the materiality of learning processes and relationships. Insights from contemporary critical education (Giroux, 2022), socially situated literacies (Street, 2001) and relational pedagogy (Bozalek et al., 2019; Hinsdale, 2016) facilitate a deeper understanding of how adult literacy educators build and sustain relationships of critical learning with learners and with each other.

Work on relational pedagogy in education highlights the contextual and material aspects of the relationships at the heart of learning. Relational pedagogy has been influenced by feminist approaches that explore situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), critical education's emphasis on ways of knowing (bell hooks, 1984; Freire, 1972b) and ethics of care in learning and education (Noddings, 1984; Nussbaum, 1995). Relational pedagogy positions humans as part of rather than distinct in the world (Bozalek et al., 2019), considering how the material realities of the world impact on learning. It brings a socio-political focus to the analysis of learning relationships and practices that, influenced by feminism and critical pedagogy, is oriented towards caring relations in education as sites of recognition, reciprocity and power, in and through education (Cantillon & Lynch, 2017; Hinsdale, 2016; Noddings, 1984; Nussbaum, 1995). This decentring of humanity to position it in relation to its environment and other living forms emphasises a materialist basis to learning and sees learning as embedded in 'meaningful relationships [which are] fundamental to effective learning and teaching and . . . ways of fostering connections, authenticity and responsiveness' (Gravett et al., 2021, p. 5).

Theories of socially situated literacies provide a critical framework to explore how the material conditions of our lives influence learning as dynamic social practices (Street, 2001), shaped by the broader socio-political and cultural contexts (Giroux, 2022). Critical education approaches acknowledge that the 'Western worldview with the distinct separation between humans and other life forms, its belief in the validity and importance of modern science, its emphasis on technological development' gives a false sense of the materiality of the world (von Kotze & Walters, 2023, p. 19). Socially situated theories play a key role in shifting attention away from the autonomous or individualist approaches to literacy (Allatt, 2020; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Instead literacies are presented as 'a set of social practices . . . associated with different domains of life . . . and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 8). This echoes Freire's contention that literacy is not simply about understanding sounds, words or texts, but that 'reading the word implies continually reading the world' (Freire, 1983, p. 10).

The situated nature and context of learning is acknowledged as a key part of the politicised processes of personal and social transformation in adult learning. This often occurs within group-based learning environments that empower students to collectively reflect and act on the political, economic and social conditions of their lives. It provides space for a 'transformative process as a collective phenomenon and as having social as well as individual origins' (Duckworth & Smith, 2018, p. 172). This is an important element of literacy learning that can support people to learn to 'read and write as an act of knowing and a creative act' (Freire, 1983, p. 10).

From local communities to the performativity demands of the system

Adult literacy provision in Ireland emerged through the voluntary and local action of women's groups and community development centres during the 1970s (Bassett et al., 1989; Connolly et al., 2014). Similar to UK literacy education in this time, these voluntary-based efforts were 'substantially led by practice' (Ade Ojo & Duckworth, 2017, p. 393). Groups worked through a learner-centred, group-based pedagogy of adult literacy, guided by feminism and Freirean adult education approaches (Connolly et al., 2014; Grummell, 2023a). These efforts were not recognised at the time by the formal school and post-compulsory education system in Ireland (Ward & Ayton, 2019). State

recognition of adult literacy needs and provision was slow to emerge until impelled by the publication of key policy reports, with the Murphy Report on adult literacy marking the first official State recognition of the extent of literacy needs amongst Irish adults in 1973 (Government Stationary Office, 1973, p. 83). However, action was slow to follow, with the 1980s global recession resulting in limited action on literacy as economic and policy attention was on other sectors and issues (Ade Ojo & Duckworth, 2017; Limage, 1990). The publication of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) survey in 1997 was a second pivotal point, recorded that one-quarter of the Irish population had basic literacy skills level (Darcovich et al., 1997). This stark figure from international research sparked public outcry, with subsequent State recognition and greater investment in adult literacy provision occurring in Ireland as in other countries (Limage, 1990; NALA, 2011).

The Irish White Paper on Adult Education in 2000 was a third key policy moment which identified adult literacy and numeracy as key national priorities and leading to the establishment of the National Adult Literacy Programme (NALA, 2011). Across Europe, this was 'a period of adult literacy policy with conscious intent on the part of policy makers' (Ade Ojo & Duckworth, 2017, p. 393), which was shaped by the formative influence of UNESCO's and EU's lifelong learning policies (Larson and Cort in Tett & Hamilton, 2019). The Irish White Paper led to greater recognition of adult literacy within the national education system, but in parallel also marked the weakening of the voluntary, community-orientated and Freirean-inspired adult education tradition from which the sector had originated. Many local community-based groups shifted away from basic education provision, in the face of the growing requirements of State funding processes over the following decades. This was part of a long journey of repositioning of adult literacy from its community-based roots into the formal State apparatuses of adult and further education systems.

An extensive network of national Adult Literacy Services with increased provision, personnel and funding emerged in the formal sector through the Education Training Boards (ETBs). The ETBs, formerly the Vocational Education Committees (VECs), are the largest provider of Statutory FET provision in Ireland, working with 27,000 people across a range of unaccredited and accredited literacy courses, including Family Literacy, Back to Education Initiative, English for Speakers of Other Languages, Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education, Skills for Work and basic literacy programmes in addition to a wide range of second level and FET courses (Grummell, 2022; SOLAS, 2021b, p. 12). This marks an expansion from the original basic education focus of community groups to encompass a much wider group of potential literacy learners in family literacy, ESOL and work-based learning contexts.

Policy attention increasingly shapes the development of adult literacy provision through the priorities of the Further Education and Training Act (2013) and subsequent FET Strategic Plans (2014, 2019). These have tied adult literacy practices more closely to the performance imperatives of national FET policies, in a similar fashion to what had happened two decades earlier in UK adult literacy with the Education Reform Act in 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 (Ade Ojo & Duckworth, 2017, pp. 396–398). The most recent and fourth key stage in the professionalisation of adult literacy is the publication of the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy for Ireland in 2021. This Strategy formally locates literacy, numeracy and digital literacy as key competences to help create a more equal, inclusive Ireland, embedded in a wider FET system and imperatives (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 33).

This re-prioritisation occurred within the context of a decade-long rise of new managerialism as a mode of regulation across Irish public services, evident in reforms since the Further Education and Training Act 2013 (Grummell & Lynch, 2016; Murray et al., 2014). These included the introduction of national QQI accreditation framework in 2012, the professional registration of FET educators through the Teaching Council in 2013, and annual performance agreements for FET services (SOLAS, 2017). These reflect similar changes occurring across Europe and internationally where the OECD-influenced 'human capital' approach and political project neoliberalism impacted (Giroux, 2022; Murray et al., 2014; Tett & Hamilton, 2019). It

Table 1. Overview of research participants and activities in literacy reports.

Research Report	Overview of research participants and activities
Family Literacy report (SOLAS, 2020)	Online national survey completed by 16 regional ETBs about adult literacy provision in each region Observation and 3 casestudies at 4 family literacy centres Individual and focus group interviews with 26 parents/carers and 131 literacy and school staff
Numeracy Report (SOLAS, 2021a)	Online national survey completed by 16 regional ETBs about adult numeracy provision in each region 9 individual interviews and 38 focus groups with numeracy providers, tutors and learners about their practice
Learners with Intellectual Disabilities report (SOLAS, 2021c)	Online national survey completed by 16 regional ETBs about adult literacy provision in each region Individual and focus group interviews with 19 literacy and disability support staff about their practice; 34 literacy learners and 3 casestudies of adult literacy services 59 adult literacy staff in research workshops
Adult Literacy Organisers report (Grummell, 2022)	online national survey with 43 staff across FET about adult literacy provision in their service 14 individual interviews with literacy staff about their practice, Interviews with 3 FET directors about national provision 48 adult literacy staff in research workshops

marks a journey of adult literacy from its beginnings in locally based community provision to becoming part of the formal apparatuses of the FET system in the post-compulsory sector. Within this is the story of the relationships, pedagogy and ethos at the heart of adult literacy learning.

Methodology: providing a research evidence base for adult literacy

A significant body of research was completed in Ireland by researchers, including the author, over the past six years. It was commissioned by the main government agencies and representative associations for FET and adult literacy in Ireland to provide a national evidence base for adult literacy. The four key agencies include the State authority responsible for Further Education and Training in Ireland (SOLAS), the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), the Adult Literacy Organisers Association (ALOA) and the main provider of the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). Research includes:

- a report on family literacy completed in 2017–2018 (SOLAS, 2020)
- a report on numeracy in 2018–2019 (SOLAS, 2021a)
- Inclusion of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities in Adult Literacy Services report completed in 2018–2020 (SOLAS, 2021c)
- Inclusion of adult literacy in Further Education & Training (Grummell, 2022)

This represented a very active period by the national agencies in researching the evidence base of adult literacy to inform strategic planning. Collectively the research provides a rich picture of the ethos, practices and context of adult literacy education in Ireland which is drawn on during this article.

While these research reports on adult literacy were completed by different research teams, all used mixed methods research approaches, including a national online survey to map provision in each area, desk-based review of existing research and policy, and qualitative interviews and case studies with staff and learners in centres. An overview of the number and type of participants in the four national research reports is presented below in [Table 1](#).

Each research project was conducted on a national scale, intending to capture the practice in their respective areas of family literacy, numeracy, inclusion of adult learners with intellectual

disabilities, and inclusion of adult literacy across FET. Careful consideration was given to ethical issues throughout these research projects, both formally through university research ethics committees and on an ongoing basis through project advisory groups.

Thematic analysis of the four reports was conducted to enable systemic and rigorous identification of the cross-cutting themes about adult literacy evident (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Common themes about adult literacy learning emerging include: i) centrality of learner-centred ethos for practices and pedagogy; ii) specificity of literacy learner identities, rhythms and relationships of learning; iii) creative and responsive pedagogies of adult literacy, iv) challenges posed from structural shifts at systemic and societal levels. These themes are discussed below in terms of their significance for maintaining relational pedagogies, collaborative learning and creative and transformative approaches in adult literacy education. While this article focuses on the commonalities in critical education and relational pedagogy of adult literacy as a practice, the research reports themselves highlight the distinctiveness of provision for family literacy, numeracy and adults with intellectual disabilities (Grummell, 2022; SOLAS, 2020 2021a, 2021c).

The heart of the matter – a learner-centred ethos in literacy education

As noted earlier, the formative influence of Freirean learner-centred approach through adult literacy's origins in community education and women's groups was informed by feminist and class-based approaches to education, attracting women

who were interested in learning, but, also, arguably interested in expanding their identities in line with the changes brought about by feminism, a transformation from the traditional perspectives, while acknowledging the reality of women's lives. (Connolly et al., 2014, p. 54)

The Freirean inspired *Training for Transformation* books (1995) by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel were very influential in Irish community development settings at this time, based on their community development work in Kenya with local communities. Freirean approaches were seen as a way of holding learners and their world at the core of their educational practice (Grummell, 2023b).

Adult literacy education in Ireland was defined by a 'student centred approach where the needs, concerns and experience of the students are the focus of learning, rather than an externally structured and enforced curriculum' (NALA, 2012, p. 17). This marked a distinctive situated and relational pedagogy where the learner and their experiences were at the heart of the learning process, rather than being driven by curriculum or subject-based approach typical of formal education systems (Murray et al., 2014; Wheelahan, 2015). These practices have been maintained in adult literacy, with family literacy tutors describe how they use 'context-rich' experiences to create learning that directly connected with the material conditions of people's lives; with sewing classes in family literacy providing a way of encountering literacy and numeracy in a situated way, within discussions about

cutting things neatly and incorporating seam allowances ... metric measures - millimetres and centimetres and so on measuring ... things like symmetry, and parallel lines, and how to spell them properly. (SOLAS, 2020, p. 88)

It is a pedagogical approach designed by literacy tutors to be 'embedded in real-life situations that have relevance and importance to the learner' (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008, p. 670). A numeracy group describe how they role-play purchasing from a shopping catalogue in class and the following week go to a café to order from a menu and pay their bills as their learning (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 69). While the different contexts of family literacy, numeracy and intellectual disabilities have specific literacy features explored in the reports, they share a holistic approach to adult literacy practices based in learners' experiences and knowledge which puts 'the social reality, the vocabulary, and the

experience of the learners at the center of the literacy curriculum' (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 58). This embodied and practice-based nature of learning where relational engagement with the material context is key to literacy learning.

Literacy learner identity, rhythms and relationships of learning

This capacity to keep the experience of the learners at the heart of adult literacy pedagogy is key to the relational pedagogy of adult literacy. A primary commitment to the learner and their experience rather than curriculum or subject area reflects adult literacy's emphasis on materiality and relationships that is core to relational pedagogy (Gravett et al., 2021). People's identity as learner holds particular significance for adult literacy students who can lack confidence about their learning capacities as a consequence of damaging school experiences (Allatt, 2020). The unique learning history and context of adult literacy students impacts on the identities, relationships and rhythms in adult literacy learning.

Developing a strong learning identity

Many literacy learners recount how negative experiences from schooling impact on their sense of identity as learner (SOLAS, 2020, 2021a, 2021c). The Numeracy Report highlights how 'affective reactions, such as fear, anxiety, stigma, and lack of confidence, represent the main barrier to access experienced by adult learners' (2021a, p. 8). This has a devastating impact on learning identities, with profound consequences for learners' livelihoods, opportunities and sense of self (Carpentieri et al., 2010; Feeley & Hegarty, 2013). This is echoed through accounts of brutal experiences of schooling in the records of Irish cultural and social life (McCabe, 1995), as well as in education literature (Quinlan, 2021). Duckworth & Smith describe how the work of literacy tutors is based in a material 'awareness of the historical positioning of the learners and their communities which has resulted in prior inequitable experiences of schooling and society' (Duckworth & Smith, 2018, p. 171). Integral to addressing this is awareness-building about the socio-political conditions of schooling as a system and the inequities that permeate throughout people's learning and lives (Baker et al., 2004). Adult literacy education plays a key role in reshaping learning identities and offering transformative possibilities. The family literacy report reveals how parents 'establish a new learning identity and become integrated into a solidary parent groups and often into the wider community' (SOLAS, 2020, p. 101). Learners and literacy staff describe how learners with intellectual disabilities develop their learning identities when attending literacy classes, gaining greater independence in their sense of self as independent learning beings (SOLAS, 2021c, pp. 67–68). This is highly significant for this group who have been excluded historically from education, employment and social experiences (WALK, 2015). Literacy staff are deeply aware of the significance of building and sustaining a positive learner identity and embed this in a holistic and relational way into the pedagogical process that they co-create with learners (Grummell, 2022; SOLAS, 2020, 2021c).

Varied rhythms and elements of literacy learning

Given the varied learning journey and past experiences of literacy learners, many hold diverse literacy and numeracy capabilities. This is described as a 'spiky' learning profile,¹ where 'learners in a group can differ enormously both in terms of diversity in learning skills and across and between learners' (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 69). Many learners show strengths in specific areas of literacy and numeracy while finding other aspects challenging. This variability of literacy skills has to be situated in the specific learning contexts, motivations and experiences of learners, which tutors can recognise and affirm. Adult learners can 'reinforce their self-perceptions of low levels of numeracy skills by dismissing their own numerate behaviour as mere "common sense" or as something that

does not involve mathematics’ (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 61). The literacy capacities of adults with intellectual disabilities can be often ‘complicated by greater than average difficulties in communication skills, social skills, and the ability to retain and apply new knowledge’ (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 61). This requires literacy tutors to be highly skilled and responsive in their pedagogy to cater for this diverse range of learning motivations and capacities within and across groups. This stands in contrast to other curricular-led forms of formal schooling which attempt to standardise learning according to similar levels.

Many literacy learners demonstrate a ‘wavy line of progression’ throughout their learning journeys. Unlike the linear progression expected in the formal education system, learning can be interrupted for adult literacy learners as they take time away or learn at a different pace. For learners in family literacy, they may have an interrupted learning trajectory linked to key life events, such as their children’s progression in school or their employment context (SOLAS, 2020). Many adults with intellectual disabilities report express a continual demand for lifelong and lifewide learning as they are often not included in other FET, higher education and employment opportunities. Learners may lack educational capacities and expectations, and so require upskilling and reinforcement of literacy skills on an ongoing basis. This can mean ‘lateral progression’ as learners may need ‘varying amounts of time to complete courses at the same level and taking several courses at the same level rather than progressing “upwards”’ as the accreditation system demands (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 75). Crowther et al. (2010, p. 652) similarly notes how adult learners are ‘dipping in and out of provision’ as suits their life conditions and possibilities, which does not match easily on accreditation systems.

Relationships of learning and the collective nature of literacy learning

Given the diverse needs of adult literacy learners and the responsive nature of its pedagogy, building strong relationships of trust between tutors and learners, and within learner groups is vital. Central in this relational work is the capacity of literacy tutors to create ‘trust in the room’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 74). This occurs at all levels of the literacy service, including from the initial engagements with porters ‘recognis[ing] new literacy or ESOL students before they identify themselves . . . [and] gently welcoming them’ (Grummell, 2022, p. 62). This capacity to be deeply empathetic and attuned in all encounters with learners is a crucial part of relational pedagogy which is tuned ‘into the objects, bodies and spaces that constitute the material mattering of learning and teaching’ (Gravett et al., 2021 p. 6). Literacy staff are described by students as being incredibly kind to students, with literacy managers identifying deep listening, intrapersonal and communications capabilities as essential (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 50). Kirkwood talks about the importance of relationships in counselling and adult learning contexts as ‘a resonance, an attunement . . . a means of making a direct connection’ (2012, p.70). This relational aspect is key for learning, but is often overshadowed by the concentration on functional and pedagogical aspects of the learning process. The literacy reports note that relationships are an

invisible and unrecognised part of the teaching process. The skills and time involved in making good connections with colleagues and learners are taken for granted . . . and left very much to the good will of those involved. (SOLAS, 2020, p. 79)

The group basis of literacy learning is crucial in the ‘learner-centred approach to the small groups [and t]he welcoming environment . . . that is created’ (Grummell, 2022, p. 57). McKillican describes this as ‘*being-in-the-world together* . . . It is through our relationships with each other that we make sense of the world’ (McKillican, 2017, p. 65). This is evident across literacy centres where learners engage with others, build relationships and establish new learning identities (Grummell, 2022; SOLAS, 2021a, 2021c). For learners with intellectual disabilities who have limited options after schooling, the Adult Literacy Services offers greater

independence not only through learning, but through travelling to literacy centres independently, socialising with others and seeking education and transformative possibilities for their futures. Literacy staff describe ‘how a learner with a mild intellectual disability went from here . . . applied for a job, got it, came back and told us about it and said “I only did it, because I came here and ye told me I could do anything”’ (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 70).

Literacy staff were cognisant of the disjuncture that can occur when the systems requirements collide with the supportive environment they are endeavouring to create. The focus on data gathering in FET systems which centres have to implement can have intimidating consequences for learners. One tutor describes a new learner who when faced by the initial assessment screening,

immediately he left, [saying] ‘I have to go. I have to do something’ . . . I just been putting somebody through a situation where before they even started the course in this really lovely, warm, supportive, very welcoming environment that we have for the first thing to be this screening. I just think it is at odds with what we do. (Grummell, 2022, p. 74)

This is part of the challenge that literacy services face as systems imperatives as FET system imperatives for measuring and reporting learner data comes into conflict with the relational conditions of learning. These systems demands for learning metrics have been growing in the FET system in Ireland since the reforms of FET sector from 2013 onwards discussed earlier, and are increasingly evident in the administrative and data management processes which FET centres have to operationalise. Literacy staff and learners continue to navigate this, emphasising a co-constructed process of literacy learning underpinned by respectful mutuality. This is evident in the pedagogical approach whereby literacy learners and tutors co-construct a curriculum that resonates with a learner’s life experiences, with content that starts from the ‘vocabulary used by learners in their daily lives and not the words chosen by curriculum developers’ (Freire & Guimarães, 1984 in Schugurensky, 2011, p. 13). Literacy staff describe their thoughtful engagement with programme design and pedagogy, spending time discussing, considering and co-developing learning which responds to learner’s needs. This requires ‘huge amount of flexibility’ in the relational and pedagogical process (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 65), with literacy tutors working empathetically to relate with students, building learning capacities and independence amongst learners, developing responsive learning approaches and supportive learning environments (SOLAS, 2020, pp. 86–88). This can and does hit up against systems requirements and institutional processes, with management trying to navigate between both (ALOA, 2021).

Management staff highlight the importance of ‘carefully selecting literacy tutors with the experience, expertise, [and] teaching philosophy and disposition suited to working with adult learners’ (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 79). While this pedagogical approach and relationality is still central in literacy practice, managers acknowledged that this is particularly challenging when many literacy tutors lack job security as they are employed part-time and paid primarily for direct contact hours with little opportunity for career progression (Grummell, 2022). Similar to the UK context, this results in ‘large amounts of “underground” working, whereby tutors routinely engaged in working well beyond their job descriptions’ (Hodkinson et al., 2005, p. 2 cited in Coffield et al., 2007). Essential elements of the literacy role such as the careful and responsive relationships and the co-design of bespoke curriculum are not a formally recognised part of literacy tutors’ workload in the current FET system and so occur increasingly become an unrecognised and invisible part of their work (SOLAS, 2020, p. 79). Adult literacy provision is one element of an increasingly complex set of programmes which FET centres deliver, and their representative organisation highlights the need for their terms and condition to match those of staff in equivalent positions across FET (ALOA, 2021, p. 40). Staff in other sectors of education highlight similar issues where their capacity to relate

with students is undermined by the demands of curricular and assessment imperatives of schooling and higher education systems (Giroux, 2022; Lynch et al., 2012).

Creative and responsive pedagogies

In line with the learner-centred and relational ethos, literacy staff reveal a deep level of engagement with programme design and pedagogical processes, using their ‘creative ingenuity’ to design multi-modal and creative pedagogies to support learners (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 28). Literacy tutors are adept at programme development, with

a lot of hard work designing those programmes and making sure that everything that happens within the programmes is done to a really high standard. So, it is really around being very reflexive . . . and having that adult learning strengths-based approach (SOLAS, 2020, p. 72)

The capacity for reflexivity is vital for adult literacy tutors, and requires that tutors are well prepared for their sessions in order to be able to adapt in the moment.

planning is so important because you have to be prepared in your sessions for anything to happen . . . because sometimes . . . you have to scrap the whole lesson that you had planned after three minutes. So where do you go then? What resources are you drawing on at that point? (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 47)

Reflexivity also allows literacy tutors to use ‘other methods and creative ways of working . . . more role plays and incorporating more video work or imagery’ (Grummell, 2022, p. 80). Considering ways that are not dependent solely on reading or writing requires literacy tutors to have a deep awareness of the learning potential of multiple modes of communications, including oral, aural, visual, embodied, affective and kinaesthetic. For example, tutors describe how numeracy is explored in embodied and spatial ways during walks around the area with learners discussing linear structures and proportions in local buildings and bridges (SOLAS, 2021a, 2021c). They reveal a complex multi-modal creativity used to ensure real world engagements that has a material resonance for learners through ‘context-rich’ experiences (SOLAS, 2020, p. 11).

While similar types of creativity and responsiveness are evident across many forms of teaching, the literacy reports reveal how these highly attuned responsive capacity and pedagogical sensitivity are inherently relational in quality and crucial for adult literacy. It requires literacy tutors to be tuned into and responding to learning issues that have implications for pedagogical practices, such as the different paces and rhythms of learning or the legacy of previous negative learning experiences. Literacy staff describe how it is ‘quite a task to ensure that everyone is getting what they [need] but it is what literacy tutors can do, that’s what we are trained to do and it is different to any other services in that respect’ (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 70). They use their pedagogical, relational and organisational capacities in highly skilled, creative and responsive ways that is deeply attuned with their learners and the environment.

Discussion: implications of a responsive and relational pedagogy in the wider context of performativity in FET

These adult literacy practices and relationships have been severely curtailed by the growth of performativity and reporting requirements in the Irish FET sector (Redmond, 2015; SOLAS, 2021c). It is part of a new managerial culture associated with neoliberalism which prioritises the tracking of learners and their progress through performance indicators and growth of market-driven logics across the public sector (Clarke et al., 2000; Lynch et al., 2012; Tett & Hamilton, 2019). As discussed throughout this article, performance

measurement criteria renders invisible or severely restricts the pedagogical and relational aspects of learning (Allais, 2014; Bozalek et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2012). The introduction of performance targets for each service in the FET Strategic Plan had a big impact on adult literacy providers, and FET centres. Currently, performance targets for the Adult Literacy Service in Ireland require a 10 percent increase in the learner numbers achieving accreditation at QQI Levels 1 and 2 and a 10 percent increase in certification levels from courses annually (SOLAS, 2017, p. 16).

Managers in literacy services spoke about the pressures this places on them at an institutional level, as ‘students count against you when you keep them for literacy maintenance purposes’ (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 75). The responsive ethos of Freirean approaches, where learners’ need guides literacy practice are now actively counted against the literacy service, as non-achievement of performance targets impacts negatively on future resourcing and staffing of the services. This pressures staff, especially management, to focus on targets and progression rates for the FET centre as a whole rather than what learners or tutors might need in a given relationship of learning. Managers spoke of trying to protect their learners and tutors from these system imperatives set in annual Strategic Performance Agreements and their ongoing struggle to maintain the ethos of literacy learning in FET centres (Grummell, 2022). It also impacts on how literacy is practised, echoing the wider lack of flexibility in curriculum, assessment timetabling, limiting how they can ‘meet the highly varied individual circumstances of potential learners’ (Ade Ojo & Duckworth, 2017, p. 400).

Literacy staff have to request extensive personal data from learners when they first come to the service for the FETCH online application portal and the PLSS system.² Both systems were developed as centralised data and information systems as part of the strategic goals of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019. They present accessibility issues for learners with literacy, confidence and cognitive difficulties and can be experienced as intimidating for learners, as well as making trust-building challenging due to the extent and complexity of personal information required (SOLAS, 2020, p. 69). While Adult Literacy Services have developed more accessible and abridged versions of these data systems to support learners; staff and learners feel that creating a more accessible portal and forms are preferable and would demonstrate high-level commitment to inclusive practice (SOLAS, 2021a, pp. 58–59).

Literacy staff argue that these data management systems remove many relational and pedagogical aspects of learning from view and hence from consideration for decision-making or resource allocation. Flattening relational learning and social capabilities into a list of outputs that focus primarily on attainment and progression ignores the richness of personal and social learning that occurs for literacy learners. It channels learning into linear pathways and that ignore the diverse realities of the learning trajectories that occur during a person’s life. Allais argues that learning outcomes frameworks see knowledge as ‘something that can be broken into little bits which can be selected and combined at will’ (2014, p. xx). These have occurred globally with the rise of large-scale data measurement by OECD and others (Tett & Hamilton, 2019). The reality of people’s varied learning rhythms and literacy journeys is a more socially contextual, fluid and dynamic process than the standardised bite-size approach that such measurement models allow. They ignore and curtail many of the social, relational and transformative aspects of literacy learning. Literacy staff are aware that learning outcomes in a literacy context need to consider the ‘affective, as well as the cognitive, domain’ (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 50), acknowledging that learners develop ‘soft skills and personal development and confidence and life skills, they don’t necessarily fit the boxes of QQI [qualifications framework] but they can be the things which can lead to a more independent life’ (SOLAS, 2021c, p. 50). Standardised assessment and measurement tools renders invisible the learning that occurs dynamically in everyday context (Cumming & Gal, 2000). Greater recognition of how the specificities of knowledge and learning progression are attuned to diverse learning rhythms, relationships and temporalities of learning is needed across education and social contexts.

Conclusion

A critically informed relational pedagogy allows us to move beyond the emphasis on cognitive, rational and technical aspects of learning towards a more complex understanding of learning as affective, embodied and relational. This recognises learning as a ‘interdisciplinary and participatory approach to knowledge production’ which Freire has emphasised (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 37). A relational approach allows us to explore human relationships as ‘entangled within the spaces, places, contexts and environments with which they occur, and take account of how objects, bodies and materialities impact upon learning, teaching and connection’ (Gravett et al., 2021, p. 1).

The research on adult literacy reveals the complex, embodied and dynamic nature of the learning relationships. The relational and person-centred orientation of literacy education draws on ‘context-rich’ experiences to create learning that directly connected with the material conditions of people’s lives. Together literacy learners and staff co-construct a learning process that works in the context and words of people’s lives. Literacy tutors become deeply attuned to learners’ rhythms, relationships and contexts of learning. They describe a deeply relational engagement with programme design and pedagogy that responds empathetically and creatively to learners’ needs and contexts which resonates with the needs of many forms of education and social service provision (Cantillon & Lynch, 2017).

This type of literacy learning may be limited in terms of how it develops conscientization as the ‘deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes [learners’] lives and of their capacity to transform that reality’ (Freire, 1972a, p. 51). Instead, adult literacy tends to operate at ‘locally orientated form of consciousness-raising’ and recognition (Grummell, 2023a, p. 157). While transformation at a local level is very important for individual learners, the wider context of neoliberalism described earlier means that systems imperatives for data tracking and reporting come into direct conflict or dissonance with the relational conditions of learning (Ade Ojo & Duckworth, 2017). As Lynch contends, this positions human relationships ‘in transactional terms, as the means to an end . . . trust, integrity, care and solidarity are subordinated to regulation, control and competition’ (Lynch, 2015, p. 16). Reclaiming a critically informed relational pedagogy is key for a ‘pedagogy of hope’ (Freire, 2004). As Duckworth and Smith remind us ‘in transformative pedagogy, literacy becomes a lever for agency where bodies are not static, but have the ability resist inequality across the personal and public domains travelled’ (in Tett & Hamilton, 2019, p. 28).

Notes

1. <https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/glossary/spiky-profile>
2. FETCH is the Further Education and Training Courses Hub - Home – FET Course Hub (fetchcourses.ie); PLSS is the Programme and Learner Support Systems - FET Statistics | Solas | Data Analytics.

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ORCID

Bernie Grummell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0021-8136>

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