

**WHAT PLACE DOES ACCREDITATION HAVE
IN LEARNER CENTRED ADULT LITERACY?**

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Abstract

In recent times the field of adult literacy has witnessed many developments. From a position of low status pre 2000 it now finds itself firmly under the Governments spotlight. This is due in the main to the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey published in 1997 in which 1 in 4 Irish adults were found to have difficulty with the simplest of literacy tasks. This newly awakened national interest in adult literacy should seem like a welcome one but with it has brought a bureaucratic, economic, employment and performativity discourse.

Traditionally adult literacy was attributed with a redemptive ethos, with many volunteers working in the field. Through the development of an advocacy agency, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), this redemptive discourse grew into one of critical literacy. This discourse promotes literacy for empowerment, emancipation and social practice. A learner-centred approach is at the heart of the provision.

Currently within adult literacy, the dominant discourse is one of linear progression along the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This is due to many international and national policy influences. The conduit for this progression in adult literacy is through attaining Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) accreditation. FETAC has therefore become a primary focus in the field of adult literacy.

The specific purpose of this thesis is to find out from the perspective of adult literacy students what place they believe accreditation has in adult literacy. In setting the background for the research the thesis aims to trace the changing discourses through a review of literature. The findings of this research portray students who have had a very positive experience with accreditation. Most importantly this research demonstrates that learner-centeredness and accreditation should and can work hand in hand. This positive experience demonstrates the ability of providers to negotiate the tensions between conflicting discourses and succeed in protecting a learner-centred environment. This research provides hope and optimism for other practitioners in the field going forward.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction and rationale for research

We know that it's not education which shapes society, but on the contrary, it is society which shapes education according to the interests of those who have power.

(Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 36)

As an adult literacy tutor for over eight years I have had the privilege of working with many incredible students and practitioners. I have found my place of work as one which fostered a learner-centred approach to adult literacy and which treated literacy as far beyond the technical skills of reading and writing. Students were at the core of the service, with individual and community empowerment as key aspects in the ethos of the centre. Management within the centre were like-minded and their philosophy trickled down to many practitioners. The learning was completely student directed and at the students own pace. Progression for students was always encouraged and this was offered in both an accredited and non-accredited manner.

I feel in 2012 that a major shift has taken place in the field of adult literacy. This shift has taken us away from a truly unique learner centred environment that fostered and nurtured the needs of the students and instead has placed us in an environment where powerful systems and structures dictate the curriculum and demand accreditation. Of course the budgets and funding still exist, the services still exist, the modern facilities are to be beholden, but the essence of literacy as a social practice, a democratic right has been diluted. Instead of a learner-centred approach, accreditation has become the focal point of adult literacy, with emphasis being put on final measureable outcomes which serve to satisfy powerful stakeholders.

The impetus behind this research is to examine the changes in adult literacy that I have outlined above and see what impact they are having on adult literacy students. The specific purpose of this thesis is to give a voice to adult literacy students and document their experiences of accreditation. I want to focus accreditation because of its dominant presence in the discourse of adult literacy today. I want to examine how this discourse works in adult literacy, to whose end does it benefit and what effect is it having on the most important stakeholders of all, the students.

I begin my thesis in this Introduction Chapter by giving a brief background to adult literacy in Ireland and outlining the various bodies that participate in adult literacy advocacy, provision and accreditation. In Chapter 2, I explore the various discourses and philosophies that are at play in adult literacy today in an effort to determine how accreditation has become an integral part of the dominant discourse. In doing this I lay out the background within which I set my research of documenting adult literacy student's experiences of accreditation. In Chapter 3 I document the methodology and methods that I employed during this research, including a reflection on how my ontological and epistemological stances can have huge bearing on the research process. In Chapter 4 I detail the findings from my research process and analyse these findings in terms of relevant theory and my own practice. I conclude by drawing together my findings and analysis and indicate the implications of my research in the broader context of adult literacy.

1.2 Background of adult literacy in Ireland

Bailey (2006) notes how adult literacy occupies a place in Irish adult education in a meaningful sense only since 2000¹. This shift in emphasis Bailey puts down to the results of the 1995 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)². (Bailey, 2006, p. 197) Since this time funding for the sector has increased immensely with €30million being allocated to Vocational Education Committee (VEC) adult literacy services in 2010.³ More importantly student participation has increased, with a rise of 39,647 participants from 2000 to 2011.⁴ Along with this rise in student participation is an increase in students participating in courses leading to accreditation. In 2010 the total number of students participating in certificate courses was 19,241 compared to 1,213 in 2000.⁵

The changes in adult literacy are demonstrable, it is a field that is developing and growing rapidly. As outlined in the previous sections this thesis sets out to examine one aspect of these changes, namely that of accreditation and the effects that it has on students. In order to set the context of this thesis the remainder of this chapter gives a brief outline of the advocacy and statutory bodies involved in adult literacy provision.

¹ In Ireland the conception of adult literacy centres was in the 1970s when the Archdiocese of Dublin established the first adult literacy service. In 1984 an advocacy body called the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established by the Irish government in response to the growing number of adults looking for literacy tuition. The following year, 1985, saw the inception of adult literacy services nationwide under the auspices of the Vocational Educational Committees (VECs). (Bailey, 2006, p. 201)

² The results found that 25% of Irish people had difficulty with the simplest of literacy tasks. (Morgan, Hickey, Kelleghan, Cronin, & Miller, 1997, p. 1)

³ See <http://www.nala.ie/our-key-achievements-glance>

⁴ Sourced from Department of Education Adult Literacy Returns – see Appendix 1

⁵ Sourced from Department of Education Adult Literacy Returns – see Appendix 1

1.3 NALA

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an advocacy agency and ‘independent charity committed to making sure people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs.’⁶ While NALA does not govern adult literacy service providers it does contribute to the thinking and philosophies that underpin adult literacy in Ireland in its research, training, policy and guidance roles. As explored in section 2.2, I discuss the implications of these philosophies as key discourses that exist amongst many service providers and practitioners in the adult literacy field.

1.4 Vocational Education Committee Adult Literacy Services

Each of the 33 Vocational Educational Committees (VEC’s)⁷ operates an adult literacy scheme. These schemes are the main source of adult literacy and adult basic education in Ireland (Irish Vocational Education Association, 2012), although some independent providers do exist. Adult Education Organisers (AEO’s) oversee the VEC adult literacy services with Adult Literacy Organisers (ALO’s) co-ordinating and running each scheme.⁸ VEC adult literacy services are funded by the Department of Education and Skills and also receive funding under the European

⁶ See <http://www.nala.ie/about-nala>

⁷ As structures stand at the time of this research; in 2011 the Government decided to amalgamate VEC’s reducing the number of VECs from 33 to 16 see <http://www.ivea.ie/news/IVEA%20Press%20Release%20-%20IVEA%20Dismayed%20at%20VEC%20Reconfiguration%20Announcement.pdf> for more details

⁸ Each service comprises of volunteer tutors who work with students on a one to one basis and paid tutors who work with students in small groups ranging from 3 to 8 people.

Social Fund.⁹ Many of the VEC's in the past have been known to concentrate more on their second level services, leaving adult education - in particular adult literacy - in the background. Due to many changes happening on an international and national scale that the literature review tracks, adult literacy has now become the focus of attention. In this light, during the development of this thesis, the influence and role of the VEC system on adult literacy in the Irish context will be explored.

1.5 FETAC and adult literacy

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) is the statutory body with responsibility for awards and accreditation in further education and training in Ireland since 2001.¹⁰ FETAC maps its awards on to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) from levels 1 to 6¹¹. Adult literacy services generally offer accreditation between levels 1 to 3 and often at level 4 also. FETAC sets out the curriculum in a component specification which details what learning outcomes should result in order for the award to be achieved and assessment techniques that should be employed. Individual providers write up a programme descriptor for validation by FETAC, which includes indicative content and map learning outcomes to specified assessment techniques. A unique aspect of FETAC is the use of the 'portfolio' or collection of work assessment technique.¹²

⁹ See http://www.ivea.ie/services/adult_literacy/adult_literacy.shtml

¹⁰ See www.fetac.ie

¹¹ See www.nqai.ie and www.nfq.ie

¹² FETAC describe a portfolio or collection of work as 'a collection and/or selection of pieces of work produced by the learner over a period of time that demonstrates achievement of a range of learning outcomes. The collection may be self-generated or may be generated in response to a particular brief or tasks/activities devised by the assessor. See page 5/6 <http://www.fetac.ie/doc/WelcomeServlet?DocId=0901df9e80018366>

FETAC has become part of the dominant discourse in adult literacy today. It is the aim of this thesis to examine from a student's perspective, the formative influence and place that FETAC and accreditation has in the adult literacy setting today from the perspective of learners.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As a practitioner in the field of adult literacy I am very au fait with the discourse of literacy for empowerment, emancipation and as deeply embedded in social practices. Recently I have become increasingly aware of other discourses that exist in the field of adult education as a whole and more specifically in the realm of adult literacy. The discourse of empowerment, emancipation and social practice that once dominated the provision of adult literacy within my place of work is now being steadily eroded. In its place currently is a new discourse of vocational literacy with an augmented emphasis on accreditation and qualifications.

My research is focused on a particular aspect of the change in discourse, that of accreditation. I intend to capture and explore this shift in discourse during this review of literature as it will form the background for my research. I believe that the intersecting of these differing discourses creates tensions for both adult literacy practitioners and students alike.

2.2 Adult Literacy for empowerment, emancipation and as social practice

2.2.1 Introduction

In this section I aim to examine the philosophies that have underpinned my experience as an adult literacy tutor commencing from my initial tutor training. As I outline below the approach that I have experienced has come from a philosophy promoted but not prescribed by NALA and taken on board by many adult literacy

providers nationwide. In this section I look at where NALA has drawn its philosophy from and explore its key theorists. I examine the influence of one key theorist in particular, Paulo Freire, as I believe his theories and philosophies are crucial in understanding this distinctive discourse that has formed the backbone of adult literacy over the last number of decades. I also examine the variance in the interpretations of Freire's ideas and importantly look at Freire's position on the topics of course structure, curricula and assessment which pertain directly to my research topic. Finally I address the power relations at play in the field of adult literacy and outline how they can impact on students' experience.

2.2.2 Overview of the philosophies underpinning adult literacy in Ireland

The approaches and philosophies that have particularly shaped the modern literacy discourse in Ireland have included those of Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and Jack Mezirow¹³. (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2005, pp. 9,10,11) These philosophies are ones that promote literacy for empowerment, emancipation and social practice. It is this philosophy of a wealth model, building on life experience that runs deep through the practices of many adult literacy centres and practitioners. The wealth model uses the students own talents and life experience as key cornerstones in the process of literacy development and is in stark contrast to the model of deficit, where students are seen from a view point of being empty vessels which need to be remediated.¹⁴ (Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001, p. 2) This ideology is behind the unique approach to adult literacy in Ireland. (Bailey, 2006, p. 210) It is important to note at this point that while this ideology exists, it is a contested issue, which I will explore further in the literature review.

¹³ These approaches are noted by NALA in their 2005 publication of Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work.

¹⁴ This wealth model ideology is also associated with an emerging school of thought in the United Kingdom, New Literacy Studies (NLS).

Paulo Freire has been long associated with the world of adult literacy and he can be attributed with a social-change philosophy (Draper, 1989, p. 73) espoused by NALA. In addition to learners using their own world experience in their literacy development, NALA concurs with Freire's theory of social action through self-reflection and analysis. (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2005, p. 10) Though there are many followers and adoptions of Freire's theories in adult education, it is important to note that various different interpretations of Freire's ideas exist. I will delve deeper into Freire's theories and approaches later in this chapter and examine the opposing interpretations and contestations of his concepts that exist across the field of adult education.

Intertwining with Freire's theories, Jack Mezirow's philosophy of transformative learning deals with the possible changes in an adult's internal frame of reference and how through critical reflection they can begin to view the world in a different way. (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2005, p. 11) It is evident from the findings of my research work with adult literacy students, that transformative learning is a valid outcome of adult literacy provision. As you will read in the findings chapter participants in this research described the changes in themselves and in the deep rooted beliefs they had about themselves.

It is also noted by NALA that Carl Roger's humanistic philosophy is a core approach to the work of adult basic education. (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2005, p. 10) In fact it could be said that where the adult literacy places itself on a continuum which Roger's suggests, is directly on the pole of the person-centred approach. (Rogers, 1983, p. 185) This person centred approach, or learner centred approach as it is referred to most commonly in the adult literacy field, is key to creating an environment where the learner is the focus of the process. In this environment the learner feels supported and relaxed and participates actively in a process of learning relevant to their interests and individual lives.

According to NALA the above ideas and theories are encapsulated in their following definition of literacy.

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change. Good practice in adult literacy work starts with the needs and interests of individuals. It is concerned with personal development and building confidence as well as technical skills.

(National Adult Literacy Agency, 2005, p. 12)

While the main essence of adult literacy for empowerment, emancipation and as social practice stems from the philosophies and approaches espoused by NALA, they are not prescribed philosophies (Vaughan, 2004, p. 79) and are only exercised by like-minded individuals. In certain circumstances these values filter down through literacy services and in many cases individual provider's philosophies depend largely on that of their leadership.

The ideals and philosophies of Paulo Freire permeate this unique approach to literacy in Ireland. (Bailey, 2006, p. 210) Throughout the remainder of this section I will therefore examine in more detail Freire's ideas and concepts and trace their location as key cornerstones in a discourse of literacy for empowerment, emancipation and as social practices.

2.2.3 *Key Theorist - Paulo Freire*

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educationalist who devoted much of his life to working with adults from poor regions who experienced literacy difficulties. He wrote many volumes on his theories of a liberating education and an education for social change. He is therefore a key contributor to this particular discourse of adult literacy and closely associated with key ideas of empowerment, learner-centeredness, transformative learning and critical consciousness. It is for this reason that I feel it is imperative to look in detail at Freire's ideas and concepts and examine their links to adult literacy practice in Ireland today.

Freire's approach to education is cemented in his hypotheses that all education must communicate and that this can only be done by taking a dialogical approach. (Freire, 1970, p. 58) Freire explains that this dialogical approach should be the basis of the student-teacher relationship and he supposes that

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.

(Freire, 1970, p. 53)

This means that instead of the teacher working in a didactic, authoritarian fashion, he or she works with the students in a dual process of dialogue and inquiry. Freire terms the didactic and narrative make-up of many educational situations as "banking education", where the students are passive recipients of information that their teacher passes on to them. (Freire, 1970, p. 53) Freire also believes that banking education reduces knowledge to a static and inert matter, never to be questioned or queried by students. Alternatively Freire suggests that

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other.

(Freire, 1970, p. 53)

It is through this process of dialogue and dual inquiry that students begin to critically consider their world and become as Freire describes “conscientized”. (Freire, 1970, p. 55) That is, students become more critically conscious of the world and thus move towards “their ontological vocation to become more fully human.” (Freire, 1970, p. 55)

In the context of adult literacy in Ireland, this dialogical and non-banking approach are the essence of the learning experience. The student and teacher relationship is one steeped in communication and dialogue. In a mainstream school system which failed many adult literacy students, the experience was that the teacher was the expert, the person in authority who sat at the top of the class and dictated to students what they needed to know. Adult literacy services aim to create a learning environment intensely in contrast with this authoritarian model. This Freirean approach is endeavoured in adult literacy by the teacher sitting amongst the students as opposed to at the top of the room. Frequently the teacher is referred to as the tutor, a less powerful word, a word that does not ignite fear in the students. The tutor represents themselves as a guider or facilitator in the learning process, not as the expert whose knowledge is unquestionable.

This two-way style means that in addition to the students learning from the tutor so too the tutor learns from the students. Together, tutors and students participate in a co-learning process that involves dialogue, respect and a dual creation of knowledge. (Freire, 1970, p. 62) In this way students are continuously active in the learning process and thus have more interest and motivation to participate.

The Freirean approach does provide some tensions. While the tutor goes to great lengths to create an environment of equality and a dual process of learning, the tutor still holds quite an amount of power. Acknowledgment of the difference between being a tutor and a student, and the broader systemic and cultural power relations involved, is critical in the relationship from the outset. This decreases and increases the tutor's power immensely as will be examined later in this literature review.

Freire lays great emphasis on the issue of marginalised and oppressed peoples. He sees education as a key element in both maintaining oppression and in the search for liberation. Freire believes that employing the banking method of education serves to maintain the status quo, i.e. a world created by the oppressors. He states that "the educated person is the adapted person, because he or she is better "fit" for the world." (Freire, 1970, p. 57) By this Freire means the educated person is someone who has been "filled" by "deposits" from teachers, someone who does not question but rather accepts the world as it is presented to them.

In direct contrast to the banking method maintaining the status quo, Freire believes a dialogical, communicative education provides the platform for social action and liberation. This is achieved through what Freire terms as praxis - action and reflection. Freire asserts that "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it." (Freire, 1970, p. 60) Through problem posing the student and teacher make meaning of their world. Freire believes that

In problem posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process, in transformation.

(Freire, 1970, p. 64)

This gives hope to people, empowering them to reflect and take action on their own lives, instead of accepting the status quo and resigning themselves to a life of oppression.

In the context of adult literacy in Ireland, social action is noted as being of the key outcomes of literacy provision. It forms an integral part of the definition of literacy by NALA

.....Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.....

(National Adult Literacy Agency, 2005, p. 12)

Through a dialogical education students can become empowered to see their own situation in the world and act on it. Adult literacy students who experience this type of education typically grow in confidence and grow out of their embarrassment. Literacy education gives them the power to control their own lives and make decisions for themselves. Out of individual empowerment can grow the liberation or emancipation of groups of people or communities.

Freire speaks of education as never being neutral and always being political (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 13) In his introduction to Freire and Macedo's work, Henry Giroux (pg 7) describes literacy for Freire as

..part of the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one's experience. To be able to name one's experience is part of what it meant to "read" the world and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities that make up larger society.

(Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 7)

This stance sets out the intense political and social fabric of literacy. Literacy is made of not only technical skills like reading, writing and language ability but is

inextricably linked with power, human agency and social transformation. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 8) As previously stated present day definitions of literacy from agencies like NALA concur with this premise.

From my own experience I have seen students transform like caterpillars into butterflies. Even those with the lowest of confidence in themselves and their skills, can transform. Heads hung low are slowly but surely lifted into bright, questioning faces that are not afraid to look you in the eye. Even this seemingly small physical transformation speaks volumes as in itself it shows the growth in confidence to engage in dialogue with another human being. These small tentative changes are only the beginning of looking at the world head on and reflecting and questioning things that previously went unnoticed. This transformation can also be seen from the findings of this research (see findings chapter) where participants speak of their new interest in their world. This ranges from questioning services and making legitimate complaints to making more informed decisions, be it in the workplace or at the ballot box.

Through the adult literacy movement, I feel there is little evidence of a massive transformation in the collective sense. This type of transformation is more evident through community education, like in the case of the women's movement. This is an important/significant issue, but beyond the scope of this research thesis.

Accreditation by its very nature results from a pre-set standardised curriculum. Freire speaks of education as sustaining a dominant ideology through a dominant curriculum. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 36) Instead his aspirations are of a liberating education, which unveils this dominant and hidden ideology.

This unveiling is one of the main tasks of liberating education. The reproducing task of the dominant ideology implies making reality opaque, to prevent the people from gaining critical awareness, from

“reading” critically their reality, from grasping the *raison d’être* of the facts they discover.

(Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 36)

Freire notes the tensions in creating an environment in which a liberating education can occur and yet not allowing looseness or being ‘laissez-faire’ in the process where students are left to their own devices. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 46)

To an outsider looking in, adult literacy education in the past may have a loose or ‘laissez-faire’ appearance. In reality, many tutors were walking the Freirean tightrope of trying to be ‘radically democratic, responsible and directive’. Freire and Shor (1987) both acknowledge that a sense of rigour and structure exists in having a set curriculum and without this the demonstration of rigour of a liberatory course is difficult. In the context of adult literacy in Ireland today, this is the very pinhead that tutors and providers are dancing on. The last decade has seen funding and provision of non-accredited classes dwindle. This is due in the main to the lack of measurable outcomes and of apparent rigour of these classes. In fact it was in these classes in the past, where the possibility of a liberating education was more likely, in that there was no pre-set curriculum. Instead learning was student directed allowing for a more dialogical education.

It is FETAC who set the curriculum for most of the accredited programmes that adult literacy providers can offer to students. The FETAC curriculum could be described as one that is open to individual interpretation in that it outlines the standard that needs to be achieved through specifying learning outcomes. How they are arrived at and in what manner is up to the provider or individual tutor. It is clearly within the individual providers and tutors control to decide in what manner they deliver the course while addressing the learning outcomes dictated by FETAC. I will discuss this further in the section on power relations in adult literacy.

Shor also notes how the traditional concept of rigour ties in with modern concepts of performativity and value for money.

With testing and measurement, the authorities decide if the money is well-spent or not, cost effective.....if the professional educator is earning his or her money. A certain amount of information transferred to a certain number of students in a certain time equals rigour, school money well-spent, and teaching wages well earned. You can see again the business culture behind traditional “rigour”.

(Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 79)

I will explore this notion later in my analysis of the new dominant discourse in adult literacy - literacy for economic benefit.

Freire acknowledges the overarching issue of power in education

We know that it's not education which shapes society, but on the contrary, it is society which shapes education according to the interests of those who have power.

(Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 36)

As I described previously, adult literacy practitioners in recent times are feeling the effects of this power. It is felt through the many changes that have taken place in the field, specifically the ‘push for accreditation’, accountability and productivity. The knock-on effect of these power relations is inside the classroom between tutor and student. Tutors endeavouring to create a dialogical process are constrained by pre-set curricula and tick box exercises. This creates a tension in the relationship and as I previously acknowledged both increases and decreases the tutors power immensely.

The tutor's power is decreased from the powers above who are dictating what must happen inside the classroom in order to justify funding and provide visible results. Contradictorily this is where I believe tutors can exercise their power against the

systems dictating to them. By deciding what approach to take in the classroom, tutors have immense power in their hands. It is easy for tutors to fall into the routine of working to the curriculum and in essence make the learning process a tick box exercise. By doing this tutors are completely falling back into the authoritarian mode of teaching, vastly in contrast with Freire's dialogical approach. Instead of exercising power over the system they use that power over the students. From the student's perspective, I believe that immense power therefore lies in the hands of the individual tutor and when the classroom door is closed the choice is to create a dialogical liberating experience or fall back into the old authoritarian, didactic mode. I believe it is crucial for practitioners to acknowledge the power relations that exist within the tutor – student relationship and also between the systems and structures that have so much influence on what occurs inside the classroom.

Literacy that obscures the power relations inscribed in its construction ultimately disempowers. It treats as technical what is in fact socially and politically constructed and is therefore misleading.

(Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001, p. 3)

This appears to be putting a lot of power into the tutor's hands and by default a huge responsibility. I feel that the unstable short-term basis on which tutors are employed does not help in this regard. I believe that providers and literacy services in general can choose to exercise this power, either against the controlling systems by promoting dialogical education in their centre, or against the students by promoting a tick-box, curriculum driven agenda. In the findings chapter it is evident how the power of the centre and by default the tutors, can have a massive positive effect on student's experiences.

'Liberatory education must be understood as a moment or process or practice when we challenge the people to mobilise or organise themselves to get power.' (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 34) By the very nature of this statement, it is evident that Freire's

approach is one that promotes empowerment and radical change. Through NALA's definition of literacy, it is easy to see their aspiration to Freire's radical approach '.....Literacy increase[s] the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.' (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2005, p. 12)

Though NALA espouse the radical philosophies of Freire, they do not control the educational philosophy of each individual literacy service or each individual tutor. Traditionally it could be said that the majority of literacy tutors shared a common educational philosophy, with many of them beginning as volunteers. The philosophies of many of these adult educators can be traced back to a 'theocentric' root. (O Fathaigh & O Sullivan, 1998, p. 6) This 'theocentric' approach was in essence a redemptive approach espoused by the Catholic Church. (O Fathaigh & O Sullivan, 1998, p. 2) The impetus behind this approach was to 'compensate' and 'remediate' by helping people with problems and to put things right.

O' Sullivan (2008) argues how this redemptive approach is 'explicit in literacy....' with 'the assumption on the part of providers and advocates that they know what adults need and how they ought to change.....' (O'Sullivan, 2008, pp. 17, 18) This redemptive approach is acknowledged by Ryan et al (2009) but they argue that 'critical reflexivity is absolutely necessary to overcome the temptation to see oneself as a redeemer'. (Ryan, Connolly, Grummell, & Finnegan, 2009, p. 130) I would concur with this entirely as initially my main motive for becoming an adult literacy tutor stemmed from a redemptive, wanting to help approach. I feel since I began tutoring that I have developed my philosophy to be a more radical adult educator. Many factors have been involved in this development. Working in a centre that espoused radical philosophies, continuous professional development with like-minded bodies and critical reflexivity have all contributed to this personal shift.

It is also important to note that many adult educators take Freire's ideas on a more liberal basis. They do not buy into the radical elements that Freire espouses. Many educators disregard the need for the politicisation of adult education and disagree with the integration of social movements into adult education. (O'Sullivan, 2008, pp. 17,18,30)

Recent changes have seen adult literacy tutors coming from new educational philosophies, not so radical but more in line with the traditional authoritarian model or the new neo-liberal human resource model. Ryan et al (2009) note the 'external forces that influence adult education (for instance national and global economic trends and the demands set by the state and international policy bodies).' (Ryan, Connolly, Grummell, & Finnegan, 2009, p. 133) This new economic ideology will be discussed in the following section.

2.3 Adult Literacy for the economy

2.3.1 Introduction

In 2012 adult literacy occupies a space in the spotlight through constant government and media attention, due to international surveys yielding worrying statistics.¹⁵ Adult literacy also fits in neatly with the lifelong learning rhetoric of European and other neo-liberal agendas. With this increased emphasis it is contradictory that adult literacy as experienced practitioners and students of old knew it - now has actually taken a back seat. Of course the budgets and funding still exist, the services still exist, the modern facilities are to be beholden, but the essence of literacy as a social practice, a democratic right has been diluted.

Instead ‘the discourse of literacy as technical skill and vocational competence has become dominant.’ (Papen, 2005, p. 15) Literacy for literacy’s sake, it has now been reduced to vocational literacy, the skills to perform tasks in the workplace and to contribute to a productive economy. In recent policy and reports, literacy for citizenship and personal growth are dutifully mentioned, but more in an apropos fashion. This section takes a look at the political discourses, policies and government directives that are shaping adult literacy in Ireland today.

2.3.2 Neo-liberalism and adult literacy

Alongside the evolvment of a dynamic adult literacy movement in Ireland, major changes have been noted and effected throughout many other facets of society and life. Many of these changes have been as a result of an increasing neo-liberal agenda and thus an increased focus on a market-driven economy and society. Ireland’s main commitment in recent years has been to a global promise of free trade, a market

¹⁵ International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS); Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

driven economy and a dominant global system of capitalism, with massive multinational corporations at the helm of proceedings. (Sklair, 2002, p. 7) We live in a neo-liberal state and as Olssen and Peters (2005) point out ‘Neoliberalism is a politically imposed discourse, which is to say that it constitutes the hegemonic discourse of western nation states’. (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314)

In the field of education and adult education, many commentators including Finnegan, (2008), Lynch, (2006) and Gleeson & O Donnabhain, (2009), have documented the changes that a market-driven neo-liberal agenda has brought about. Adult literacy has not escaped the clutches of this agenda and so emerges a discourse in adult literacy which is in stark contrast to the philosophies discussed previously. Inez Bailey, Director of NALA summed up these tensions succinctly saying:

It can be said that the adult literacy philosophy in Ireland is the antithesis of the dominant education ideology of an economically driven society, where the focus is strongly on the acquisition of knowledge and skills for the sustenance of the labour market. In that context, such an ethos will have to be guarded on an on-going basis.

(Bailey, 2006, p. 212)

What Bailey is referring to is the adoption of “literacy” as a key area to target in order to help achieve a productive and competitive economy. Major influences on literacy in this vein have emerged through the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (Hamilton, Macrae, & Tett, 2001, p. 23) Significantly, a survey carried out in 1995 by the OECD, called the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), has held much weight in this regard.

Prior to the publication of the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1997, adult literacy occupied a backseat in relation to Government attention, funding and backing. Hamilton et al note since the publication of the IALS all policy and

media publications use the results of the IALS as a starting point for development of the sector. (Hamilton, Macrae, & Tett, 2001, p. 23) ¹⁶

The results of the IALS for Ireland found that 25% of Irish people had difficulty with the simplest of literacy tasks. (Morgan, Hickey, Kelleghan, Cronin, & Miller, 1997, p. 1) As a devoted disciple to capitalism and the neo-liberal agenda, the adult literacy ‘problem’ was one which Ireland needed to deal with promptly in order to increase its market value and increase its productivity. If more of the population have better skills then the market will flourish, after all knowledge is capital. (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 330)

2.3.3 Human Resource Discourse

Hamilton et al in 2001 note how a “human resource” discourse in literacy has emerged as a result of the EU and OECD influences. (Hamilton, Macrae, & Tett, 2001, p. 36) Hamilton describes how in 2012 literacy fits into an EU-wide human resource model.

The human resource model of education sees literacy as a commodity to be exchanged within the global market place. It asserts that large sections of the adult population need to be ‘up-skilled’ to cope with the rapidly changing competitive global environment, linking literacy directly with economic development, individual prosperity and vocational achievement in what are claimed to be universal relationships.

(Hamilton, 2012, p. 170)

This individual unit perception of learning in the human resource model is in direct contrast to the social practice model discussed earlier. Hence NALA’s concern, (Bailey, 2006), that the dominant economic discourse would completely eliminate

¹⁶ See www.nala.ie for 1 in 4 statistics

the humanistic and social practice philosophies of literacy. These contrasting discourses provide for a sector that is somewhat floundering, in that it finds itself being pulled in opposite directions. At the heart of this, the students are the people who ultimately suffer the consequences and it is the purpose of this thesis to establish how this economic agenda is impacting on them. I am specifically looking at the issue of accreditation in adult literacy as I feel it has been the poster boy for the increased economic and human resource agenda. In order to trace the root of these changes the following section looks at current adult literacy policies in place and specifically those on the topic of accreditation.

2.4 Policy on adult literacy in Ireland

2.4.1 Introduction

As noted previously new economic discourses have emerged in adult literacy over the last decade and it is my opinion that these are as a direct result of national and international policy. I believe that these policies directly correlate to changes being experienced by tutors and students on a daily basis. This section explores current adult education policies in place and traces their effects in the practice of adult literacy today while specifically looking at policy on accreditation in adult literacy. Grummell (2007) notes the economic domination of adult education policy in recent times.

Education policies in Ireland and the United Kingdom have been dominated in recent years by a discourse of economic change, especially through the capitalist structures of globalisation and market competitiveness.

(Grummell, 2007, p. 7)

As a result of embracing a human resource model of literacy, Hamilton (2012) identifies a number of things in modern day adult literacy policy.

Formal learning is privileged over informal learning; standardised and measurable outcomes are preferred for demonstrating achievement. The 'good' literacy learner is constructed as a responsible citizen contributing to global prosperity.

(Hamilton, 2012, p. 171)

As regards Ireland's policy on adult literacy, the above rings true. In this section I will look more in detail at the national policies and governmental papers that are steering adult literacy today. In doing this I endeavour to unveil how forces far removed from local sites of adult literacy practice are at the root of the changes being experienced.

2.4.2 *Adult Education Policy in Ireland*

The first dedicated adult education policy paper¹⁷ was published in 1998, one year after the publication of the results of the IALS. One of its priorities was to address the literacy problem.

The most urgent Adult Education task is that of confronting the literacy problem in Ireland. The Green Paper proposes a National Adult Literacy Programme targeted at redressing the major literacy problem as identified in the recent *International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD, 1997)*.....

(Department of Education and Science, 1998, p. 8)

The concern with pushing an economic agenda to increase the population's productivity and competitiveness is clearly evident in the Green Paper.

¹⁷ Green Paper (1998) on adult education "Adult Education in an Era of Learning". Prior to this adult education policy was included in general education policy.

The process of globalisation and increasingly rapid technological change creates an economic imperative to continually upgrade skills if competitiveness is to be maintained.

(Department of Education and Science, 1998, p. 13)

This is in-keeping with the dominant discourse of the OECD and EU and the human resource model of education.

The subsequent White Paper (Learning for Life) was published in 2000. It lays out six priority areas which it aims to cover; Consciousness Raising, Citizenship, Cohesion, Competitiveness, Cultural Development and Community Building. (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 28) Out of this list of six C's only one seems directly linked with economic matters, yet it is an economic agenda that consistently develops throughout the policy document. On this theme Fleming (2004) notes how in the White Paper 'the Government sets as a priority the learning that supports economic development' accompanied by a 'rhetoric of social inclusion and equality but that too has an economic intent.' (Fleming, 2004, p. 15) Another primary theme throughout the policy is the notion of lifelong learning as promoted by the European Union. Again this notion is steeped in economic connotations peppered with virtuous expressions of life preparation, personal development and social inclusion.

More recent reports have concreted the economic intent of literacy from a government perspective. The National Skills Strategy¹⁸ lays out clearly how the economy depends on a skilled workforce and how basic literacy skills are an integral part of this. Since the downturn of the economy in 2008, the issue of increased productivity is ever more to the forefront of the government's agenda. In their report Building Ireland's Smart Economy¹⁹ they refer to certain principals including

¹⁸ See www.skillsireland.ie for more details

¹⁹ See http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/BuildingIrelandsSmartEconomy.pdf for full report

‘productivity per person’ as a key measure of economic progress and investing in human capital and developing the skills base confers a competitive advantage on the economy’. (Department of the Taoiseach, 2008, p. 33) This type of rhetoric is echoed in new SOLAS²⁰ adult education consultation documents.

These key policy documents all speak with rhetoric of the human resource model and adult education and literacy specifically, is championed for productivity and economic competitiveness. Measurement is a key term in the human resource discourse. Measurement of achievement, progress and productivity are now an integral part of literacy provision. Thus by default, accreditation is seen as the means of achieving all these outcomes, with the bonus of having added benefit for the student. As accreditation is the topic of interest for the purpose of this thesis, I will look in detail in the next section at where accreditation within adult literacy lies in respect to current government policy and directives.

2.4.3 Policy on Accreditation and Progression

Accreditation has taken its dominant place in adult literacy today by means of national and international policy. It has become the conduit for movement or progression up through a European-wide framework of qualifications.

The OECD and the EU broadly share a view of countries, and their citizens, as competitors in a global marketplace. They concur on the importance of developing policy indicators that can measure performance across nations. The EU promotes the harmonisation of educational and training qualifications to facilitate the movement of labour across member countries.

(Hamilton, 2012, p. 173)

²⁰ SOLAS - On 22 July, 2011, the Government decided to create a new authority to be responsible for the coordination and funding of Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. See http://www.education.ie/admin/servlet/blobServlet/fe_solas_consultation_paper.pdf

The result of the OECD and EU promotion of creating a Europe-wide educational framework was first noted in Ireland in the 1998 Green Paper and set in stone in the subsequent White Paper. (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 154) This policy paper laid down the foundation for a national progression and accreditation system along with the formation of a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This national framework fits into an overall European wide framework, which Europe champions in order to create ease of movement between countries and harmonisation of educational qualifications. The advent of a national qualifications framework for non-university vocational and training awards resulted in the creation of two councils namely the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) as set out by the White Paper (2000, p. 155) Thus entered the notion of FETAC into the discourse of adult education.

Specifically on adult literacy, the White Paper set out the goal of expanding and diversifying adult literacy services that, the “continuum of one to one tuition to group work to progression to certified learning options”, be developed. (2000, p. 87) This small, seemingly benign point of interest within the context of the whole policy on adult literacy has proven to be a dominant matter. In fact it is my experience that progression to certified learning is not optional rather the opposite. The following report sheds some light on why accreditation has become concreted in adult literacy discourse.

In 2007, the Department of Education and Science (DES) requested the NALA²¹ to explore how accountability in adult literacy could be progressed. Thus the report on “Exploring assessment for accountability purposes in adult literacy” materialised. This report made recommendations that the VEC adult literacy returns be amended

²¹ NALA’s Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ) Mainstreaming Steering Committee carried out this exploration and report. See http://www.fess.ie/images/stories/assessment_account1.pdf

so as to refer to the new National Framework of Qualifications. The idea was that each adult literacy participant would be mapped onto this framework as “Working towards a standard equivalent to the National Framework of Qualifications Level 1” and so on. (NALA Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ) Mainstreaming Steering Committee , 2007) This recommendation was subsequently put into the guidelines, “Level definitions for the Department of Education and Science VEC adult literacy returns”. (NALA, 2008, p. 13)

The result of this administrative change now sees all adult literacy students whether they are working on an accredited course or not, mapped onto the NFQ. I believe this in itself speaks volumes as it implicitly sets the discourse of qualifications and certification to the fore as well as linear notions of learning and progression. This is in keeping with Hamilton’s (2012) assertion that international directives wish to map students to agreed frameworks in order to monitor productivity and performativity. Progression is seen an upwards movement through the levels. Crowther et al consider the dominant way that literacy is thought of, as being ‘a ladder that people have to climb up’. (Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001, p. 2) They go on to surmise that the

‘frameworks used to define this ladder are top-down ones, constructed largely in terms of pre-vocational and vocationally relevant literacy requirements’.

(Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001, p. 2)

This deficit model sees students as needing educational remedies in order to fix their problem and move them up the framework ladder. It is in stark contrast to the wealth model described in the previous discourse of adult literacy. Recent reports²²

²² This vision of performativity is also articulated in the National Skills Strategy which states that ‘by 2020 Ireland will have a well-educated and highly skilled population which contributes to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy.’ Skills Ireland also notes the aspirations to have 48 per cent of the labour force with NFQ qualifications at

promote movement up the NFQ. This type of rhetoric and goal setting from policy reports all points to a massive push towards accreditation, at the behest of the economy. Even at the higher end of the qualifications framework, academic inflation is rife. Upward progression on the framework is valued over lateral progression.

In “Exploring assessment for accountability purposes”, there is concrete evidence of accreditation being used as an accountability tool in adult literacy. This report identifies that ‘the balance between the flexibility and the rigour of an accountability system was identified as key’ in adult literacy provision. (NALA Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ) Mainstreaming Steering Committee , 2007, p. 5) The report also goes on to state the three main purposes of assessment as being quality assurance (accountability), accreditation and teaching and learning purposes. It is interesting to note that the authors of the report had some concerns with the increasing emphasis on accreditation.

..... in developing an accountability process, the sub-group is concerned that accreditation would not become the most valued aspect of participation, and considers that it is vital that participants continue to take part in adult literacy learning activities with an option of accreditation.

(NALA Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ) Mainstreaming Steering Committee , 2007, p. 6)

2.4.5 Policy Conclusion

Prior to the White Paper and the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications, accreditation was a viable option for any adult literacy student. Since

Levels 6 to 10; 45 per cent of the population with qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5 and the remaining seven per cent are likely to have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3 while aiming to progress to higher levels. See www.skillsireland.ie

the mid-2000's much adult literacy tuition has been offered to students on the basis that accreditation will be gained by the completion of the tuition, even though this may not be explicitly expressed. The understanding of accreditation as an option for students has been turned into an obligatory accountability exercise which justifies funding and demonstrates value for money. Additionally, accreditation provides the conduit for progression up the qualifications framework, thus ensuring a more skilled society which ultimately benefits the markets and satisfies funders. In other words what appears as a beneficial and valuable option for learners has actually been altered to become a required rationalisation which benefits more the economic markets and establishments that administer funding.

2.5 Conclusion: Adult literacy students – caught in the middle of conflicting discourses

I have endeavoured to outline the two main discourses that exist today in Irish adult literacy. One is literacy for empowerment, emancipation and as social practices, as espoused by NALA and various practitioners, and the other is literacy for a productive skilled workforce, in essence the economy. It is my belief that the latter discourse is the dominant, hegemonic discourse at present.

Hegemony is the process by which we learn to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that end up harming us and working to support the interests of others who have power over us.

(Brookfield, 2005, p. 94)

In current adult literacy practice, the presence of accreditation and certification in the majority of programmes is almost taken for granted. This is in stark contrast to a couple of decades ago when accreditation was a viable option for literacy students, if they so wished. This approach was in-keeping with a philosophy in adult literacy, where the student and tutor work collaboratively and dialogically and the student is the director of the process.

Accreditation should be optional, in the students own time and the ultimate benefactor should be the student. In this way, the accreditation holds value and worth for the student and naturally in turn for society. Accreditation provides much sought after recognition for adult literacy students. Baker et al and Young speak of the increased self and social esteem that accompanies recognition and achievement. (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2009, p. 35) (Young, 1990, p. 57) I will explore the concept of recognition in my analysis of research findings later in the thesis.

Since the economic imperative is for people to move up the literacy ladder and accreditation is the conduit for this to occur, then it is natural that accreditation and certification become the cornerstones of the hegemonic economic discourse. In my opinion, from the state's point of view, the purpose of accreditation as such is two-fold. Firstly, it is the vehicle for moving up the National Framework of Qualifications, thus creating a more skilled work force and thus resulting in a more productive and competitive economy. Secondly, accreditation serves as a means of accountability and a measure of quality procedures which are heavily emphasised in the human resource and neo-liberal discourse.

As Brookfield suggests, accreditation has been embraced as a hegemonic discourse, though not enthusiastically by all. Practitioners and providers of old still hold firm to their assertions of a holistic, critical literacy that ultimately benefits the students and their immediate communities. Others, initially reluctant, have embraced this economic discourse and now champion accreditation, placing it at the heart of literacy provision.

Keyes (2004) notes tensions in adult education brought on by the presence of accreditation while Grummell (2007) also notes the tensions present in the conflicting discourses in adult education as a whole.

Education becomes a controlling force that integrates people into the existing social and economic order. The critical discourse in adult education becomes marginalised and incorporated, negating its civic and political possibilities. Adult education becomes a part of the world of work and training, incorporating people's actions to the functions and requirements of the marketplace.

(Grummell, 2007, p. 9)

Thus the critical literacy discourse is silenced by the dominant hegemonic one, in this case the neo-liberal, human resource discourse. This causes friction in sites of practice, in other words, the classroom, where many tutors battle on a daily basis to

hold dear to their philosophies while adhere to the rules and regulations this new economically driven discourse has imposed on them.

For those who are the most important stakeholders in adult literacy provision - the students, it seems the knock on effect is finding themselves in the midst of these conflicting discourses. The purpose of this thesis is to document the voice of the students, by letting them tell their stories and experiences of accreditation in adult literacy.

Chapter 3 Methodologies and Methods

3.1 Introduction

I have chosen the topic of examining basic adult literacy student's experiences with accreditation because it is an issue that I have great interest in. It is a concern that visits me on a daily basis and it also happens to be a current dominant discourse in the field of adult literacy. This has been the driving force for me in doing the MEd in Adult and Community Education. After completing the HDip in Adult and Community Education in NUI Maynooth in 2011, enrolling on the MEd seemed the most natural decision to make. I had taken so much from the HDip year and I felt it had developed me immensely in both a professional and personal capacity. I felt ready to continue on my learning journey and use and develop my skills even more and most importantly, actively explore an area of adult education that I am passionate and concerned about. In this chapter I aim to outline my research methodologies and also the methods that I employed during my research. In addition I will define my ontological and epistemological stances in relation to my research topic.

3.2 Methodology

Methodologies are a set of principles 'that stem from the researcher's epistemological stance or philosophical/political position'. (Antonesa, Fallon, Ryan, Ryan, & Walsh, 2006, p. 70) It is therefore imperative to set out from the start what my methodologies are and in doing so explore my ontological and epistemological

stances as they are the essence of my research. I will examine where my stances lie within existing research paradigms and identify which one resonates most with me.

3.2.1 Through a personal lens - my ontological position

An ontological position 'involves asking what you see as the very nature and essence of things in the social world'. (Mason, 2002, p. 14) In order for me to explore with adult literacy students their experiences of accreditation I believe it is imperative for me to explore my own experience with accreditation. This has helped form my ontological perspective and will have a bearing on this piece of research. This research provides an ideal opportunity for me to challenge my own assumptions that have been created as a result of my own experiences.

Through my own educational experience I have experienced and survived the 'banking' approach, with little or no significant learning. I achieved the accreditation but felt it held little worth. I felt like a fraud for achieving it. On the other hand I have also attained accreditation that I felt had great value as the learning was meaningful and applicable to my life. In these circumstances it gave me great confidence in myself. In short I believe that accreditation can have immense value for students, once the right conditions for that accreditation are in place. Those conditions include, a dialogical approach, a learner centred environment, subject interest and life applicability, student ability, a realistic timeframe, innovative teaching methods, support, encouragement, feedback and continuous evaluation and assessment. These conditions are, I feel, lead to deep and meaningful learning and are amongst the most important in the accreditation debate.

3.2.2 How do I know what I know? My epistemological position

I come to my conclusions and form my opinions from on the ground experience. My epistemological perspective therefore comes in the main from experience. It also

comes from a shared, socially constructed experience with many other colleagues who had similar experiences. Literacy classes have increasingly become a tick box exercise, swamped in a restrictive curriculum that pertains to be learner centred. Behavioural learning outcomes are now the order of the day, while time limits restrict the teachable moments that can take place. What concerns me most is that, with one of the most vulnerable groups of people, those with literacy difficulties, the systems and structures are now playing with their lives. A system that failed them once is being recreated before our very eyes and no one is shouting stop. Those practitioners that try to highlight the issue are silenced and thus through fear of retribution, through job loss, insecure job status, restricted funding or the like, stay silenced.

For these very reasons I want this piece of research to give adult literacy students a voice in this debate. I believe knowledge is ‘something which has to be personally experienced’. (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 6) By examining the experiences of students, together we can create a new knowledge on the accreditation issue.

Giroux’s take on being literate is “To be literate is not to be free, it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one’s voice, history and future.” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 11) This particularly resonates with me and my aspiration is that my process of research be as Giroux sets out, one in which adult literacy students

..begin to analyse how they actively construct their own experiences within on-going relations of power and also how the social construction of such experiences provides them with the opportunity to give meaning and expression to their own needs and voices as part of a project of self and social empowerment.

(Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 7)

In other words I believe that the process of students examining their own experiences of accreditation can provide them with a means to voice and express their needs and concerns and to appraise the current dominant ideology of accreditation as revealed later by the participants in the findings chapter. In this way the process becomes meaningful not only for me as the researcher but also for the participants. It can provide them with an opportunity to critically evaluate and document their opinions on a topic that is so much part of their world. In doing this, both I as the researcher and the students as the participants, can look at the powerful influences that international and national systems and structures have on adult literacy. Providing feedback to the participating centre on student experiences will also be a key aspect in the research process and I believe this will prove valuable for them in their provision of literacy services.

I also hope that this piece of research in creating new knowledge can exercise some influence, however small, into the on-going accreditation debate. If it can provoke an idea of transformation in the dominant discourse, it will have surpassed all my expectations.

3.2.3 Paradigms

My ontological and epistemological perspectives lead me to have natural affinity with the social constructionist paradigm. The nature of this research is to examine the experiences of adult literacy students with accreditation. Creswell (2003) speaks of social constructivists seeking to make sense of the world in which we live by examining participants views on the subject being studied. (Creswell, 2007, p. 8)

‘The goal of [social constructionist] research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied.....the more open ended the questioning, the better as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings.....

(Creswell, 2007, p. 8)

As the researcher I understand the extent to which my own ontological and epistemological perspectives have on the research. In addition I very much identify with the feminist paradigm in giving a voice to the marginalised and also recognising that there is more than one voice to be heard and that not all student's experiences will be the same. Cohen et al (2000) believe feminist research 'challenges the legitimacy of research that does not empower oppressed or otherwise invisible groups' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 2000, p. 35) They also note the links between the feminist paradigm and Freire on conscientization and empowerment, stating that 'in feminist research, women's consciousness of oppression, exploitation and disempowerment becomes a focus for research – the paradigm of ideology critique. (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 2000, p. 36) In doing this research I wish to give a voice to adult literacy students' appraisal of the dominant issue of accreditation.

3.3 Methods

The type of research that I employed in this thesis is of a qualitative nature. I want to examine and record the real life experiences of adult literacy students with accreditation. My chosen method of research is one to one interviews. In keeping with Creswell's interpretation of social constructionism above, I wish to conduct the research in as open-ended a manner as possible in order to document the student's real life stories.

Initially I wished to work with two adult literacy centres that I have had no previous connection with. I felt that this was important for the thesis as I believe researching in the centre in which I work would be too emotive. I felt I could go to these two centres as a more objective researcher. I also believe that what I experience in the

centre in which I work may not be replicated identically in other centres so therefore exploring the practices of other centres seemed like the natural option.

After making initial contact with both centres I decided to just focus on working with one of the centres. The first Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) had responded to my request in a most positive manner while in the other centre, the ALO was more guarded. I realised at this stage that focusing on two centres would be beyond the scope of this thesis and so I therefore made arrangements to work with the first centre that was more open and willing from the outset. I felt that there was great trust in my research proposal and a willingness to engage. I believe that being a practitioner researcher was a huge factor in this. The assumption of certain shared knowledge and experiences between practitioners can make research access and engagement easier.

An initial meeting with the ALO gave me a sense of a centre that was happy and positive. I found their openness to let me interview students very refreshing. I honestly wondered could this be true, is this centre really so positive? Being aware of the role of the 'gatekeeper' I was actually quite sceptical going to interview the students, thinking would they all be chosen so as they would say positive things.

I conducted four one to one interviews over the spring mid-term break. It was an ideal time for all of us. The interviews took place in the centre and it meant that the students were in their own surroundings, yet we had peace and quiet and no disturbances. Before the interviews took place the ALO had given me the four phone numbers to call in order to arrange the interviews. Initially I was a bit surprised at this but on reflection it was a good idea as it meant I had initial contact over the phone with the participants and at least they knew what I sounded like.

The interviews went amazingly well. The students really opened up to me and I felt were very relaxed. I told them a bit about myself at the outset and I think knowing I

was a tutor made them feel at ease. I also believe the fact that the interviews took place in their centre and at a quiet time made for ideal conditions. My aim was to let the students tell their own story in as open a way as possible. I had devised a list of questions or topics (see Appendix 2) that I felt were crucial in addressing the research topic

For the purposes of working and researching with adult literacy students I really believe in the importance of being a practitioner. It is potentially a very emotional situation for students, potentially bringing up memories and issues for them that evoke a lot of sentiment. Being a practitioner makes me extremely aware of these vulnerabilities and I can understand and empathise with the students. It was clear to see and hear the emotion in all of the interviews I did, even I felt my eyes well up at times and get goose bumps on my arms.

I was nervous about the interview process. I wanted to let the students tell their story yet I needed to direct it very gently if necessary. I didn't know how I should act in the interview as I was very conscious of not putting words in their mouths. Through the first interview I deliberated, should I be encouraging and affirming the participant as he goes along? I finally decided to just be the way I am when I am with my own students, just to be myself. I found in taking this approach the interviews flowed and the richness of the stories that I heard was incredible. I recorded the interviews with the participants and afterwards I transcribed the interviews in full. From these transcriptions I began a process of coding and organising the main themes that emerged. Alas there was far too much to incorporate into the findings, as you will see detailed in the findings chapter, so I have focused on the findings that pertain directly to my research question, namely on the topic of accreditation. I document in the findings chapter the other themes that emerged and point out further areas of research that could incorporate these. After grouping and coding my findings together in a manner that addressed the research

topic I analysed in detail each of the findings and their implications in the on-going accreditation debate.

My aspiration was to return to the centre and work with the same group of participants but in a small focus group situation. I thought by coming back to the students in this way I could bring back my findings and conclusions and they could critically evaluate what has been written. Due to time constraints and the scope of this thesis, it was not possible to complete this step, but it is certainly one I would consider for use in further research. Importantly though I will present the findings of my research to the ALO, for I feel that the centre will benefit from the valuable information the students have provided. In this way the research is meaningful not just for me as the researcher but also for the literacy centre involved.

3.4 Ethical considerations

It is imperative to take into account many ethical considerations in the research process.²³ One of the most important of these is participant confidentiality. At the outset of each interview I outlined the consent form the participants were about to sign and highlighted the aspects of confidentiality and right of withdrawal. Due to the nature and vulnerability of the participants I was cognisant of the fact that the research process may cause them distress or discomfort. This had a bearing on the manner in which I questioned participants. I also acknowledged this fact while gaining their consent and pointed them towards a suitable person if they felt any stress or discomfort as a result of the interview process. Acknowledging the power dynamics between the tutor/researcher and the participants is also very important. I

²³ See British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines on <http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications>

feel that this power dynamic can be minimised by putting the participants at ease and creating an environment where they feel relaxed. This was a key objective of my interview process.

3.5 Validity and reliability of results

Cohen et al (2007) speak of the importance of validity in effective research. (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 179) They also note the impossibility of any type of research being 100 per cent valid and in terms of qualitative methods 'the subjectivity of respondents, their opinions, attitudes and perspectives together contribute to a degree of bias'. (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 179) In endeavouring to make the process as valid as possible I have explored my ontological and epistemological stances through which I acknowledge the subjectivity that I bring to the process. I have aimed to use as much of the participant's voices as is possible within the scope of this thesis and that is reflected in the findings chapter. In doing this I also acknowledge the subjectivity of the participants.

In interviewing only four participants I acknowledge the limits of the research. I do not claim that my findings speak for all adult literacy students, either within the chosen centre or in others. Instead this research aims to add four student voices to the debate on accreditation. In doing this I intend for this research to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and provoke thought and further research in this area.

3.6 Conclusion

In this Chapter I have aimed to set out the methodologies behind my research process. In doing this I have examined my ontological and epistemological stances and acknowledged how they are inextricably interwoven through the research process. I also identified my approach within the social constructionist and feminist paradigms and thus explaining my reasons for employing qualitative methods. Using the method of one to one interviews I aimed to let participants tell their own story while I as the researcher was cognisant of important ethical issues. Finally I addressed the issue of validity and reliability of the methods of analysis that I employed. I hope this process has laid out clearly the background for the following Findings and Analysis Chapter.

Chapter 4 Findings, Analysis and Conclusions

4.1 Introduction

In carrying out one to one interviews with four adult literacy students, the main aim of this research was to document the students' experiences with accreditation. The impetus behind this research stems from my own experience of massive changes within the field of adult literacy and specifically in relation to accreditation. Accreditation has become a major part of the discourse within adult literacy and the literature review endeavoured to look at the root and development of this discourse.

I firmly believe that accreditation is seen from a systematic point of view, mainly, as a source of accountability and proof of productivity. It maps each student who undertakes an accredited course onto a much revered and promoted European framework of qualifications. Benefits that accreditation has for students, their lives and that of their communities come a distant second. These findings give a voice to the students and document their experiences and appraisals of accreditation.

This chapter is an amalgamation of my research findings and a detailed analysis on those findings. I am going to look in detail at the findings on the topic of accreditation as that is the main purpose of this thesis. During the course of the interviews I asked students various questions (for a full list see Appendix 2) in order to hear their experiences and opinions on accreditation. As described in the previous chapter, this revealed a wealth of experience and insights which were subsequently analysed to identify the key findings on accreditation that are explored in the following sections.

To begin, I am going to look at the value students put on accreditation and how much worth they feel it holds in their lives. I will continue by looking at what the students perceive to be positive aspects of accreditation. The dominant sub-themes that came up under this theme were sense of achievement, course structure and motivation, method of assessment and manner in which the specific centre handles accreditation. I also document findings on the life application of the accredited courses. Continuing on from that I will document the findings on any negative aspects of accreditation for students, sub-themes that arose here were time factors and a questioning of the rigour of the assessment process. After each main theme I will analyse and make sense of each of the sub-themes. At the end of the chapter I will draw all my findings and analysis together in a conclusion.

The interviews yielded much rich data and many other dominant themes aside from accreditation arose from the interviews. The dominant themes that arose across the interviews generally concerned the role of the tutor, the centre's annual book of writings, confidence, making decisions, democracy and social aspect. Other themes that also arose were - reasons for coming to the service, the best thing about returning to education, difference between this experience and previous educational experience, working in a group and previous courses undertaken as an adult. It is outside the scope of this study to go into detail about these findings but I do note that they could form the basis of further studies on students' experiences in adult literacy.

I have decided to lay out my findings and analysis in the following manner as I believe it paves the way to answering my research question and thus determining the place accreditation has in adult literacy, from a student's perspective.

4.2 Value of accreditation

Modern society increasingly values qualifications. The emphasis on up-skilling from an economic perspective is evident from recent adult education policy as noted in the literature review. The Green Paper for Adult Education 1998 sums up this ideology.

The process of globalisation and increasingly rapid technological change creates an economic imperative to continually upgrade skills if competitiveness is to be maintained.

(Department of Education and Science, 1998, p. 13)

Bourdieu (1975) correlates cultural and academic capital with economic capital.

...it makes possible to establish conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital by guaranteeing the monetary value of a given academic capital. This product of the conversion of economic capital into cultural capital establishes the value, in terms of cultural capital, of the holder of a given qualification relative to other qualification holders and, by the same token, the monetary value for which it can be exchanged on the labour market.....

(Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51)

Bourdieu also notes one of the benefits of bestowing academic recognition on students is that it is easier to compare and exchange qualification holders. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51) This is in-keeping with the European driven harmonisation of educational qualifications (as described in the literature review) by the creation of a framework, to provide ease of comparison and exchange. Therefore I felt that it was important to ask the participants during the interview what value they put on gaining a qualification as a result of the course they participated in.

Participant 1 referred to gaining a qualification very early on in the interview, indicating that the fact he had no “paperwork” meant that he was finding it hard to get work. He also indicated how as a result of loss of social employment networks, the recognition of his work had diminished.

I done everything from weld with metal fabrication to plumbing, industrial plumbing all that, timber framing, (pauses) em, but like I never actually served me time at any one thing.....I can do it but like I don't have papers to do it..... if I go down and have a look at a job down in the FAS or that.....everything is you know time served, must have papers, you know but I don't. See for years like you could walk from one place it was all word of mouth..... They, they, they knew your strengths, but all the companies I worked for they are all gone.....

It is evident that now educational qualifications are perceived as an alternative way of acknowledging existing skills rather than teaching new skills in these specific areas. When asked if he would view what he was doing differently if it was a non-accredited course, Participant 1 acknowledged the benefits of literacy development for him even without accreditation.

I wouldn't no eh from the point of view once my reading and writing improve I would be very, very happy and I mean that sincerely, now like I do see people, it's great to see people like pick up a pen and they just write away you know but where I'd have to think very strongly about even doin' that.....and like to do it in public like its hard....

This demonstrates his deep desire to be able to confidently read and write in public, something which accreditation generally does not measure. Participant 2 also recognises that there is far more to education than just the marks or piece of paper

I think education is more about learning than about marks or what you get out of it. It's what you get for yourself out of it to me.

She goes on to say that

Well I feel for myself it's like, ok if you get Level 4 or Level 3 it's a great achievement in itself but for me personally I feel it's what you got out of it what you learned out of it, what life skills you learnt out of it whether you can go home and help somebody else, whether, you know you can sit down and write that card again would be more important to me than the certificate or than a state certificate or anything else.....

This is an excellent insight into the participant's desire for literacy as social practice. It also highlights the desire for deep meaningful learning that can be transferred from the classroom to home and life, not the 'mechanical memorisation' to gain accreditation that Freire speaks of. "Mechanically memorizing the description of an object does not constitute knowing it." (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 33) My own experience has seen in many cases, due to time constraints and pressures, learners regurgitating and memorizing information without deep internalisation, understanding or ability to transfer it to their own lives.

Deep and meaningful development of literacy as a social practice contributes not only to the lives of the students but that of their immediate community. There are many social benefits from students sharing and disseminating their knowledge with others, thereby contributing to the community's stock of knowledge and learning. Participant 2 also points out that even though she is proud of her Level 3 FETAC accreditation she doesn't display it or tell everyone what she has achieved.

I don't think, I mean if you asked me now where's my FETAC certificate for last year it's in the back of my folder in a bag and that's where it will stay it won't be, it certainly won't be going up on the wall, but em, but yeah I was proud of it. I was proud of it....but yet it's not something that I would like my friends, my family would know that I came back to college but like friends out of [names daughter] dancing, their mammy's like say 'oh are you going down to [names education centre]' I say 'ah yeah I'm doing a computer course', they must think I'm a genius on the computer. I don't tell them I come back into this partso...but that's I do think the certificate means stuff to some people but personally its more the learning.....

It is evident that though proud of her accreditation, this participant does not need public recognition of her achievements. This is in contrast to Participant 1 who, in order to gain employment, needed public recognition of his achievements. This demonstrates the various different motives that students have for engaging in literacy classes.

Participant 3 notes how achieving a certificate is important for him from a work point of view but he would still be happy if he didn't get a cert. His response to being asked if accreditation was important to him was

No it wouldn't be, it's to get to work I'm doing this project and I'm able to do it, if I get a certificate at the end of the day well and good if I don't I'll still be happy. I'm after coming in and learning like to me I'm doing the Junior Cert in English, to me that's great, if I don't get a certificate I won't be disappointed to a certain extent but I've had the enjoyment, I'm after being in that room with a group of people starting to do something on paper and I'd be happy. I'll be delighted if I get the certificate but it won't bother me if I don't.

The social aspect to literacy classes is evident in this participants answer. The participant has clearly taken a lot from working within a group. This demonstrates the vital importance of the social interaction that group work offers to literacy students, bringing many of them out of their shell. It is also evident that participant 3 has gained confidence to put 'something on paper'. This is a huge step in literacy development as noted by Participant 1,

... it's great to see people like pick up a pen and they just write away you know but where I'd have to think very strongly about even doin' that.....

Participant 4 values accreditation immensely. She believes achieving accreditation and having work validated by a third party is of huge importance. She describes the pride in students at the accreditation awards ceremony that the centre holds.

Ah yeah very important, if you seen, I dunno if you've ever been to the evening when they collect the certs, and you know the pride of going up there to collect the cert and you're sorta saying to yourself never in me wildest dreams did I ever think I'd ever get a cert for English, you know what I mean, at any level.....

For her, getting some sort of recognition for the work she is doing is vital. Validation by somebody that her work is good enough gives her a sense of pride.

....that it's not just how you feel in yourself that it's someone else is after going through your folder - yes this is good enough.... (Participant 4)

4.3 Analysis of the value of accreditation

Qualifications in modern society hold great currency. As referred to in the literature review there is a sense in today's world of 'an academic inflation' with the increased value put on educational attainment. Third-party authentication of academic ability plays a huge part in many people's lives. The remarks of Participant 1 in relation to the need for 'the piece of paper' sum up the changes that an accountable, neo-liberal society has brought about. No longer are skills valued on pure demonstration or word alone but rather on the piece of paper issued from a third party authenticator. The despair was audible in this man's resignation to the fact that, even though he had many refined and unique skills, he had no piece of paper to go with them. This sense of loss is part of the breakdown in his social network and in this case connected to the collapse of the construction industry in Ireland. Bourdieu describes social capital as

....the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words

to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in various senses of the word.

(Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51)

No longer has this participant got ‘credit’ as his employment social network has dissipated. Instead he finds himself now looking for credit in the form of qualifications in order to get work. I feel therefore that he has no choice but to put immense value on accreditation and certification as it is directly correlates to his ability to gain employment. In fact it is society that is telling him, you need the piece of paper to prove you’re good enough and you need the piece of paper to get a job. Baker et al note this dominant, liberal egalitarian notion of recognition and social esteem.

Everyone has a right to the status of citizen, but social esteem has to be earned by achievement and is therefore inevitably unequal.

(Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2009, p. 27)

The experience of this participant is also in keeping with the dominant strategies employed by international, European and national agendas. As laid out in the literature review, the shift for individuals to up-skill and move up the ladder in order maintain global competitiveness forms the backbone of current Irish Government policy. This can be effected by, employers increasing and changing their criteria for employment and the general scarcity of employment, thus forcing workers with lower educational attainments to return to education in order to move up the framework. As noted previously Bourdieu equates cultural and academic capital to economic capital. Thus those with greater cultural and academic capital have greater currency in this economically driven society

Gaining employment through word of mouth and a social network proved fruitful for this participant in the past. Alas no longer is an oral reference sufficient for this man

to acquire employment. This demonstrates the massive change that society has seen in relation to valuing paper work over oral references and visible ability. Ironically now, the piece of paper might be in hand but the ability to apply these newly accredited skills in practice may not. Accreditation has its limitations and theoretical knowledge does not always correlate directly to experiential knowledge and practice. This is evident from Participant 1 who clearly had great practical skills along with experience but this has not been formally recognised through accreditation. This clearly points to a problematic issue of lower educational status and the recognition of experiential knowledge in our education system and society. It is also compounded by the fact that the old 'credit' that held worth in the social network that this man was part of, now has little value due to the collapse of the construction network. (Bourdieu, 1986)

On the other hand, it was unemployment and the quest for "the qualifications" that lead two of the participants to the literacy service. I cannot argue that this is not a good thing. If unemployment, due to lack of qualifications, provides the impetus for adults to return to education, which in turn provides them with an opportunity to enhance their lives above and beyond "the piece of paper", then maybe all is not lost. It is evident from the varying answers the participants gave in relation to this topic that not all student motivation is the same and it is important to be cognisant that these varying motivations, learning styles and previous experiences and dispositions that students bring with them into adult education will impact on their learning experience. This is what makes adult education unique from other types of education as noted by Knowles', (1984) theory of andragogy versus pedagogy. Dirkx also notes the uniqueness of adult education experience as "the profoundly emotional, affect-laden context in which adult learning occurs." (Dirkx, 2008, p. 10)

It is also interesting that the two participants who noted that they were undertaking the literacy courses in an effort to improve their employability chances were male. Low numbers of male participants on literacy courses and adult education in general has been widely documented in recent years. (Corridan, 2002, King & O'Driscoll, 2000, McGivney, 1999 and 2004, McKeown & al, 1998, Owens, 2000)

At the same time, it is evident from most of the participants that, for them, the most important thing is to learn to read and write and in turn make their lives better. While they acknowledge that getting the piece of paper reinforces the sense of achievement it is, according to the participants, the taking part in the process and the gaining of knowledge and skills for themselves that really holds worth. This ties in completely with the Freirean and New Literacy Studies approach to literacy as laid out in the literature review.

Participant 2 acknowledges the achievement in attaining a certificate but emphasises the importance of acquiring life skills and being able to go home and reproduce what you learned in class, like helping children with homework or writing a card. This attitude is very much in keeping with the ethos of literacy for empowerment and as a social practice with benefits for both the individual and their community. As outlined in the literature review, the philosophy behind this approach advocates

...grounding literacies in a social and ecological context. They are no longer disembodied skills but aspects of real people's lives in everyday situations.

(Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001, p. 2)

Participant 4 holds a slightly different view in that she put immense value on gaining accreditation. She appears to have a deep-rooted belief in having work validated by a third party and having the work assessed no matter what the level. I believe this

desire is entrenched in the childhood school experience. Lack of validation or affirmation, from a teacher in school or a parent at home, can lead to huge lack of self-worth and self-belief. As Baker et al points out 'recognition and social esteem in modern society have to be earned by achievement'. (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2009, p. 27) The lack of achievement of educational qualifications thus compounds the participant's lack of social esteem. Consequently the personal value put on qualifications and education goes up.

4.4 Positives of accreditation

During the course of the interviews all of the participants spoke of their very positive experiences with accreditation. I have divided the findings into five dominant sub-themes in order that reflect the voice of the students.

4.4.1 Sense of achievement

A sense of achievement to a student who has never achieved before is an important and very positive aspect of accreditation in adult literacy. This sense of achievement I believe ties in with the emphasis society puts on recognition and achievement as noted by Baker et al (2009). (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2009, p. 27) In her discussion on oppression Young (1990) describes the powerlessness felt by 'non-professionals' - those lacking educational qualifications as distinct from 'professionals' - those with academic achievements. Young describes 'non-professionals' as 'lacking authority, status and sense of self that professionals tend to have'. This demonstrates the major effect that academic achievement and attainment can have on people. (Young, 1990, p. 57) I believe the sense of recognition that

accreditation bestows on adult literacy students can be a step in dissipating this sense of powerlessness.

Participant 2 highlights this sense of achievement that accreditation can bring to not only adult literacy students but also their families.

....but yeah it's a great feeling and it's a great feeling to turn around to them [my family] and say ah yeah I got it..... like when I got my yolk [accreditation certificate] they were all like so proud of me....

She also mentions the collective recognition that the centre's awards ceremony gives to students. This shows a great sense of togetherness and community.

.....it was a great feeling the night of the ceremony. It was a great to see everyone getting theirs. They were all so happy and everything else...

Participant 4 describes her immense pride in putting a folder together, giving a huge insight into her sense of achievement. She also describes how the accreditation process has provided her with a way of viewing her incremental progress in that she is able to look back through her folders and see her progress over the years. The ability to recognise and reflect on her progress, her consciousness of her development and growing sense of self-confidence are evident, and all point towards her increasing empowerment.

.....I have like I have all my accreditations like sort of in a folder ... and I have actually all my work from all the years, all the different sections and I have them all in a box in the attic and I'd often go back through them and I'd go back to level 3. This is the great thing about the accreditations right, when you get you folder back at the end of the year, and as you build them up, the portfolios and if you flip back through them and you go back to the first or second one and you go to the next one then you realise how well you've done over the years where you were when you started and you look and you say to yourself "the language that I use now compared to when I started", the little sentences

like you know and you look and you say to yourself “this is what I'm writing now you know you can see your improvement along the way and that's how them accreditations mean an awful lot and you realise, you mightn't think you're working that hard which you don't.....you look back and you look at the little sentence and you sorta say to yourself, I went to the shops like sorta like that might be one of the sentences and when you look at them and the next as you go up along and you say to yourself “I could write a paragraph on going shopping”.....and it's such a great feeling when you go back over them and you realise where you are now.....

Participant 4 equates the sense of achievement on a par with college and third level achievements. It is the first step for this lady along the route that ‘professionals’ take and what she is experiencing a heightened sense of achievement, something that she never felt before. For her, the accreditation that she has attained to date has been as important to her as the college qualification to the young relation she describes below. This is in keeping with Young's theory of the increased sense of self that ‘professionals’ have.

.....you've no idea, it's just..... my nephew has a daughter and she's in college at the moment and she's after doing her exams and she got them very wellshe's thrilled with herself and I said to myself in my own mind right even though I never went to college and I haven't got that experience but I know the feeling, do you know what I mean, of achieving something like that it's just great when you actually achieve it, it's absolutely brilliant.

4.3.2 Accreditation - structure and motivation

Another positive theme that emerged from the interviews was the fact that two of the participants interviewed felt that accreditation provided both course structure and

motivation. Participant 2 feels that when doing an accredited course she is more motivated to go to every class.

.....I do think if its accreditation it makes you get here.....eh it would give ye it gives ye the incentive that you have to come because you feel that you're letting you're letting yourself down by not coming if you give up one week if you don't go one week it kinda leads to 2 weeks or 3 weeksem I feel that if it is a certificate thing em that you will try and get there so you're not letting everyone down you know that everyone is on the same thing every week

As laid out in the Literature review, a course that is run to a pre-set curriculum provides a sense of rigour and structure. I then put it to Participant 2 that accreditation gives a bit of structure to a course. She answered with the following

Yeah, yeah, because everyone would be on the same thing so you're not being, I have this fear of being left behind and you're never gonna catch back up

This I believe shows the understanding of learning as a constant progressive process, moving onwards and upwards. It also shows an interpretation of literacy as a ladder that needs to be climbed and Participant 2 is fearful of been left behind if she misses class. This is in keeping with the dominant deficit discourse of moving up the literacy ladder by progressive academic achievement.

Participant 4 also noted the structure of an accredited course as being a positive experience and a motivating factor.

..... yeah I found it was great because you had something that was structured, that you kinda done something section by section you knowand I find that it gave you something to work towards and it also, I have to be honest with you, I'm probably lazy in a way that if I kept coming to the classes and I didn't have something to work towards I probably wouldn't have done as well, you know.....

Freire and Shor (1987) note the limiting effect a curriculum can have on a liberating educational experience. The description here of working ‘section by section’ evokes a very mechanistic approach to learning.

4.3.4 Assessment process – compiling folders

As the FETAC assessment process for the lower levels of the framework is unlike its state exam counterpart²⁴, I felt it was important to ask the participants their opinion on the assessment process. As outlined in the Chapter 1, much of the lower FETAC levels consist of a portfolio style assessment which involves the students collecting their work over a period of time. I wanted to find out how the participants rated this method of assessment.

Participant 1 responded to being asked about the compilation of a folder as a ‘very good’ way of being assessed. He continues by explaining what compiling a folder entails.

....like we have to now you hold on to everything you know like where we write something and then when it’s, when the tutors gone through it with us and she’s corrected anything any mistakes on it or whatever or explain to you that there are mistakes on it and you figure them out and will check for things,and em like eh they're checked but we hold onto the draft as well and they'll go with it as she said it's just to show that you understood your mistakes and you corrected them to let them see that you done this you know.....

This description of the process of drafting and redrafting demonstrates an ability to reflect on work done, an important facet of adult literacy.

²⁴ Irish State Exams – Junior and Leaving Certificate are exam based assessment at the end of a programme of learning. Assessment is not continuous as with much of the FETAC based assessment.

When he was asked how he found putting together the collection of work in comparison to exams he explained how the process is one that is un-pressurised and very much supported and guided by the tutor. He feels that this method of portfolio compilation means that he works better and not knowing that a piece of work is necessarily going to be assessed relieves the pressure.

But you see you don't find it hard at all, because it basically we're given the paper and we work on it and then the tutor will say one the first copy into draft, this copy then goes into your folder for your maths or whatever you are doing your English or for your computer and from that point of view it's not on your mind that your actually doing something for it, 'cos we do things and she'll, she'll, say no we're not putting that in there, that's just going into your standard reading and writing so there's only certain things she puts in so we don't actually know until the end of it like after we finish so you're not under pressurelike to eh it's not like an exam, so you're not under pressure.....so from that point of view it, it, it, it, would it probably means you'll probably do the job a little bit better. Sometimes if you're under pressure you have a tendency to rush.

I then clarified with him

So in a way I suppose you're doing it without even realising that you're that it would be assessed?

That it would be assessed yeah.....

I then asked him

And you think that's a good thing?

.....I do I do think it's a good thing. Like I said it doesn't put pressure on you and that's the whole thing.

Participant 2's views on the method of assessment that she has experienced with FETAC were also very positive. Like Participant 1 she notes the reflective and

problem solving approach that it brings with it. It is also worthy to note the transformation in this Participant's attitude towards rewriting.

I think it's good because if you're not happy with it you, you, can change it.....here like if you make a mistake or anything else its grand don't worry about it you can rewrite it again if you want, if you don't want that's OK, you know and I would find myself probably before I came here I'd go ah rewrite no em I'm rebellious I'm not rewriting but now I actually enjoy it, I enjoy finding out what my mistakes are and where I can improve them I enjoy that part of it

Participant 2 also compares the continuous collection of portfolio work method of FETAC to a one chance one day exam. She notes how one bad day could result in a wasted year.

I was very sceptical about going in a doing and sitting an exam one day, I think with the FETAC 'cos it's done over the year you've plenty of chances to make mistakes or something if you go in on one day and you're having a bad day you could have just wasted a year that's the way I feel about it that's the way I feel about exams full stop.

She re-iterates this again during the interview saying

...then again I think the FETAC is a hell of a lot better than the state one because you don't have to go in and sit an exam....

Freire speaks of the 'banking approach' to education. Teaching to the exam with all focus being on one day can result in such an approach. The continuous assessment approach gives a much greater scope for deep and meaningful learning and not the mechanical memorization Freire speaks of. Freire disagrees with the notion of covering huge quantities of material without any internalisation of the text. He states "Mechanically memorizing the description of an object does not constitute knowing it." (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 33)

Participant 3 concurs with much of what the previous two participants said, describing how he felt that there was no pressure in compiling a portfolio for

assessment. He relates how there is no problem in making a mistake during this process as there is time and space to correct it.

It's [method of assessment] fair, it's fair enough, I'm not under pressure when I'm doing it either, if like I make a mistake I can change it.....

Participant 4 describes how for her the FETAC portfolio method of assessment worked well for her and meant she felt relaxed and at ease through the process. She also highlights the difference in doing a portfolio style assessment and doing an exam. For her the reduced time pressure and building of section by section was much more useful.

.....I'm inclined to panic once I think I have to have something done again a certain time and someone is going to assess it now you know now even the day when I done the Junior Cert I was very, very, nervous and I sat with the paper for it must have been a half an hour and nothing would sink in to me head do you know what I mean, once I knew what I had to do, once I knew I had to sit there and I was doing an exam, panic just I just panicked whereas putting together the portfolio was much better. For me it was much better, a much better method because it was just section by section and I didn't feel I had the pressure of time.

Returning to the issue of recognition, Participant 4 outlined what she thought to be a difference in the assessment process within the FETAC system itself, namely between Level 3 and 4. The method of marking the portfolio is such that, instead of just being successful as it stands in Level 3, you are given a grade of a Pass, Merit or Distinction.²⁵

....and I know in the earlier ones [Level 1,2 and 3] you just get a thing to say that you've done the levels and in Level 4 you get what you've, you

²⁵ At FETAC Level 3, learners are either Successful or Referred (further work necessary to achieve standard). At Level 4, Grades are given Pass 50 - 64%, Merit 65 - 79% and Distinction 80 - 100%

get a merit or a distinction, or whatever you know what I mean and when you look at it I think Level 4 I got a distinction and I'm saying to myself "I gotta distinction" you know what I mean it's just so, I feel so you know, I really feel a different person, a different person.

The increased recognition of Level 4 clearly means a lot to this participant and to get a high grade in her Level 4 increased her sense of self –worth. The pride in her voice was audible as she recounted this.

4.3.5 Introducing the accreditation system

The manner in which accreditation is introduced to students is one of immense importance. Adult literacy students are very vulnerable in this regard as in the past they may have had negative education and accreditation experiences. It is for this reason that I felt it was important to get a sense of how the introduction of accreditation was achieved in the centre.

Participant 2 explained how the process worked for her when I asked her about hearing about accreditation for the first time.

Probably in the September and I was kinda going I'm not going to stick at this for a year.....

I then asked her; did it put her off when she heard it being mentioned?

No, no because it was put down as em if you have the folder ready in time em it will be sent off, didn't say oh it's going to be examined by somebody, it'll be sent off to see how you did and you know you could get a FETAC Level 3 and that's equivalent to, and I was kinda going yeah maybe in 3 years' time, I'll be sending one off to meself you know, never knowin' not how easy it is but how achievable it is

This clearly describes an unobtrusive and optional way that accreditation is introduced, echoing NALA's philosophy. Participant 2 elaborates further on her own

experience, highlighting the incremental way in which the portfolios are compiled and the learning broken down in to small manageable pieces.

I think it's just a progression but it's a slow progression it's not like a huge step that you'd be scared of where at the start of the year they read out what has to be done your kinda sitting there oh god am I going to be able but when its broke down into little pieces you know you're quite capable and quite able....

Participant 4 very much was in accordance with this experience outlining the need to gently ease into certified courses in order to eliminate pressure and risk of dropping out. She also noted the need for a certain level of capacity to be able to achieve learning objectives.

I think that the accreditation, I think that you have to go so far before you can kinda work into certs, do you know what I mean. You have to learn so much because I think sometimes depending on where you're coming from if you start and you don't know an awful lot of spellin' and eh writin' and readin' and all that that if you start off with accreditations I think sometimes that puts pressure on people and they leave.

Participant 4 continued by telling me she spent roughly 3 years in the centre before she put forward a portfolio for FETAC accreditation. She explained that though she got a little nudge from her tutor the manner in which it was done was coaxing and gentle.

I'd say I done about 3 years before I decided to put forward the portfolio I'd say about 3 years in all 3/4 years before I decided on that you know.....Yeah the tutor said to me, I was doing a one to one and she said to me would you like to go in with a group and I said yeah I'll go yeah so once I started in the group the girl that was over the....that was looking after us said to me would you like to get an accreditation for that and of course first thing was no, no, I'm fine the way I am. I kinda had to have a little bit of a push towards it and she said look we'll just take it section by section and we'll see how you to and if you don't want to you don't have to. So before I knew where I was I was putting the portfolio

together and she said to me look you've got all the work done you might as well put it in you know and that's really how I kinda, I was kind of coaxed in to it you know.

I was also interested to find out if the students were fully aware at all times that they were doing pieces of work that would be assessed by somebody other than their tutor. Participant 4 explains that at the beginning it was all very gentle and a choice made by the student rather than them being forced into doing it. This portrays the gentle, understanding and supportive nature of the role tutor.

.....Not in the beginning because as I said to you, she said to me you don't have to, we'll just do some of the work and we'll see how you feel as you go along so when she said to me "that piece is fine there's nothing wrong with that", you know, "we'll do the next step and see how you go and at any stage like that you can pull it you don't have to put it forward".....

I clarified by asking her 'So you didn't come in on day one and this was a FETAC course and you had to have it done in a certain amount of time?'

No there was no date put on it we'd just go through it section by section and we'd, like I'd go home and do the homework and I'd come back and she'd say to me well that's fine I think we'll put that into your portfolio.....(Participant 4)

This gentle approach of taking time and no pressure seems to have worked extremely well for these students and is in keeping with a learner-centred ethos.

Participant 4 then added her own thoughts on how accreditation should be offered to adult literacy students, based on her own good experience. She noted the incremental way of doing 'bits and pieces', which the FETAC system facilitates. The importance of recognition of some sort for this participant and the motivating effect that this has is also very evident.

I do think the accreditation is very important. I know people are at different level and different abilities but even if they don't even realise it if they do bits and pieces you know and they're getting some sort of recognition at the end of it for what they're doing, it's very important 'cos it keeps you going you know. If I met somebody coming in that wasn't even able to write anything or even like letters or that you know, I would say to them "do a little bit" and sorta "we'll have a look at it at the end of it and see how that's working for you and we'll go back over anything you don't know", you know what I'm trying to say is I think accreditation from the very beginning without putting pressure on people and saying now "we're going to put this into a portfolio", the fact that someone is assessing it, is great for that person that they can see how well they've come on, put it all together, to have something at the end of the year that you can look back on and say I've come from there to there, is important.

4.5 Analysis of Positives of Accreditation

Through the course of the interviews the positive experience that each student has had with accreditation was clearly evident. I have endeavoured to portray this as much as possible through using as much of the students voice in the previous findings section. In the context of the debate on accreditation and to whose end it really benefits, I believe these findings are of immense importance. An experience of accreditation on the students own terms, in their own time and also benefiting their immediate communities is one that needs to be noted.

4.5.1 Sense of achievement

A hugely positive factor associated with gaining accreditation is the internal sense of achievement that the student feels. It is evident from the findings that the pride and satisfaction earned from the success and achievement of a certificate is significant for adult literacy students. Baker et al (2009) and Young (1990) speak of the

increased self and social esteem that accompanies recognition and achievement. (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2009, p. 35) (Young, 1990, p. 57)

Participant 4 illustrates that even long after the certificates have been presented, she takes great pride in perusing her old portfolios. I believe this process of reflection reinforces the sense of achievement for the student and is tangible evidence of their progress and development. I consider that this is of huge importance to adult literacy students. It is a key factor in the process of self and critical reflection. As outlined in the Literature review, a central component of NALA's definition of literacy is

.....Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.....

(National Adult Literacy Agency, 2005, p. 12)

This process of review and reflection on work completed is part of the overall development of the student. Henry Giroux describes literacy for Freire as

...part of the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one's experience. To be able to name one's experience is part of what it meant to "read" the world and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities that make up larger society.

(Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 7)

I consider the process of students reviewing past work and visibly seeing the journey travelled as part of the process of 'naming one's experience' and thus opening out the possibility of reflection and 'reading of the world' on a larger scale.

Previously adult literacy students believed they would never have the skills to put together such work and yet now they hold it in their hand. Deep-rooted beliefs about themselves that formed much of their being from childhood are now challenged and confronted. I believe this forms part of a transformative learning experience,

whereby their frames of reference constructed on their childhood experience are now challenged and changed. Mezirow talks about

....“subjective reframing”--focusing critical reflection (sometimes with the help of a text) on our own assumptions and critically examining the reasons for our limited or dysfunctional frame of reference.

(Mezirow, 1996, p. 5)

4.5.2 Accreditation – structure and motivation

Accredited courses are generally thought of as having rigid curricula with only measurable and tangible outcomes valued. This is particularly the case in mainstream education and state exams. Hamilton (2012) notes how increasingly today

Formal learning is privileged over informal learning; standardised and measurable outcomes are preferred for demonstrating achievement

(Hamilton, 2012, p. 177)

Adult education and in particular adult literacy in Ireland has long prided itself on the learner centeredness of its provision and assessment. This generally means that the learner and their learning needs are at the centre of the provision and in fact it is the learner who directs the curriculum. With the advent of increased accountability and measurement of progress in adult literacy, accredited courses are becoming increasingly important. In addition to satisfying funders and other stakeholders, students also benefit with a huge sense of personal achievement as these findings demonstrate.

In the case in adult literacy FETAC prescribe the curriculum and specifications for each programme, with individual providers writing up their own programme

descriptors²⁶. Adopting the route of accredited courses means that adult literacy providers run the risk of losing the learner-centeredness, instead teaching rigidly to the curriculum, in order to tick boxes, in other words teaching to the portfolio or the exam.

Interestingly two of the participants found the structure and ‘rigidness’ of the accredited courses as a positive experience. They indicated how they went through the work section by section and that for them this was a good experience. I believe this portrays how the majority of society has bought into the tutor/teacher directing the experience and providing a structure for the students to follow. Freire and Shor note the reluctance of students to break from the traditional tutor/teacher directed mode stating that ‘students often have traditional expectations’. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 67) It is possible therefore that, adult literacy students are buying into the hegemonic discourse of accreditation which in turn provides structure and rigour because it is what they expect? It is society that puts the value on accreditation that demonstrates ‘rigour and structure’. Freire and Shor (1987) believe that the sense of rigour that society as a whole expects is

...the authoritarian, traditional one, which mechanically structures education, and discourages us from the responsibility of recreating ourselves in society.

(Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 77)

I wonder should students not be a little more self-directed. Motivation for some students on the one hand is intrinsic to come to the service. They are desperate to improve their lives, so why would they need accreditation to motivate and structure to stay? I believe that for adult learners, the motivation to learn and develop must come from within. Rogers (1961) and Maslow (1943) believe in ‘self-actualisation’,

²⁶ Refer to Chapter 1 Section 1.5 for details of the FETAC system

a state that all individuals innately wish to reach. Rogers explains self-actualisation as

...the urge which is evident in all organic and human life – to expand, extend, become autonomous, develop, mature – the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism, to the extent that such activation enhances the organism or the self.

(Rogers, 1961, p. 35)

I do believe that after years of suffering and worry all of the students I spoke with had an internal drive to make changes in their lives. It would be unfortunate to think that participating in an accredited programme would result in feelings of guilt or obligation, due to beliefs of expectation, or feelings that they were letting themselves and others down. From speaking with them at length, I strongly believe that these students would be as motivated to learn and participate if there was no certificate at the end. Their enthusiasm and eagerness to learn and improve their lives was palpable during the interviews.

4.5.3 Assessment process: portfolio of work

FETAC accreditation employs a unique method of assessment in many of its programmes. Particularly at the lower levels of the NFQ (Levels 1-4), the collection of work in a portfolio is the common method of assessment. As indicated previously in this chapter, the portfolio method is in direct contrast to the state exam, whereby course work is assessed based on one exam at the end of the programme. Compilation of a portfolio of work is done over the course of the programme with pieces of work being assessed primarily by the tutor and finally, after an in-house process of internal verification, by an external examiner appointed by FETAC.

Admittedly this alternative assessment process fills a gap for students who find they do not perform well or even like exams. It is ideal for adult literacy students for

whom an exam would evoke bad memories of school. Therefore it is not surprising to find that each of the participants have positive regard for this method of assessment. Lack of pressure and space to make, correct and learn from mistakes are very positive aspects of compiling a portfolio and are in keeping with the ethos of critical literacy as espoused by NALA. Participant 1 notes how he doesn't even realise he is being assessed on a piece of work until it is completed and so this results in a more natural and less pressurised outcome.

Ironically this approach contravenes the Quality Assurance Guidelines²⁷ as set out by FETAC whereby the process of assessment should be transparent with the student informed at every step of the assessment process. In an audit situation, if a FETAC official visits a class, the students should be able to tell him/her what programme they are working on and at what level, what their assessment plan and dates are and in addition a brief of what pieces of work they will be including in the portfolio. These Quality Assurance Guidelines are written in the spirit of the bureaucratic discourse so dominant today but alas this bureaucracy is extremely off putting to students who are vulnerable and lack confidence.

Other participants remarked on the lack of pressure in compiling a portfolio and made direct comparisons with doing a once off exam. This evidence firmly supports the portfolio assessment process as being effective and meeting the student's needs and is indeed I believe a hugely positive aspect to the mode accreditation in adult literacy. This marks a key departure from the banking mode of education and learning deposits to a more reflective and on-going mode of learning and assessment.

One participant highlighted the slightly different method of assessing and marking between Levels 3 and 4. Though the Level 4 programme she was referring to was portfolio based, marks were awarded for each piece of work, something that doesn't

²⁷ See FETAC Information for Learners- Guidelines for Providers at www.fetac.ie

happen at the lower levels. Instead of just being successful at the end, the student got an overall grade for their work. For this participant, the receiving of a grade was enormous, particularly since she received the highest grade of distinction. Going back to my earlier analysis on the value of accreditation, this concurs with the need for third party validation. In receiving an actual grade this participant's self-worth and self-esteem have soared. This would be in keeping with the assertions of Baker et al (2009) and Young (1990) who believe that recognition brings with it social and self – esteem.

4.5.4 Introducing and handling of the accreditation system

Through the course of the interviews, I got a sense of how the topic of accreditation was first introduced and subsequently dealt with in this centre. The overall consensus was that the centre carried out this process in a gentle and coaxing manner. From the findings it is evident that at no stage did any of the participants feel that accreditation was being imposed upon them. It appears the ethos is to offer the possibility of accreditation within the service with the clear intention of it being optional for all students. This is an approach advocated by NALA and also included in the White Paper (2000).

The participants describe the non-threatening way in which the subject of accreditation was introduced to them and how the process of building a folder was done in small, manageable pieces. In addition, the topic of accreditation was only introduced when the student was ready, maintaining the learner-centred approach.

The process of compiling the folders was noted by the students as been done in a very discreet manner, in that they were not always aware of the fact that a certain piece of work may be put into their portfolio. For me, this rings true of the old approach to accreditation I had experienced within adult literacy, which involved the

accumulation of the students work in a gentle and subtle way that did not frighten or worry them. It may sound covert and underhand but adult literacy students are people for whom the system didn't work first time around and it is imperative that this would not happen again. Assessment and accreditation evoke great fear in many adult literacy students. In gently introducing the students to the notion of accreditation and subtly and unobtrusively building up their portfolio of work, they in a sense achieve without the pressure of assessment hanging over their shoulders. I found in the past that this approach was one which worked extremely well. Students were not introduced to the notion of accreditation until the tutor and ALO felt they were ready. Even at that point, accreditation was handled very discretely and gently and it was not prescribed. Certainly some students needed a little coaxing, but again this was done in a tactful manner.

Alas this 'kid glove' approach has been dispensed with in a lot of instances due to the constraints of a neo-liberal economic agenda. In all adult literacy centres ALOs are under severe pressure to account for funding and progression. This means that for them their once caring approach is difficult to maintain due to time constraints, accounting for numbers and all the other administrative tasks that an economic agenda has brought about. Centres are now required to account and fight for every cent of funding and in addition account for the numbers progressing through the system. Regulations have set specific time constraints within which students should complete levels and move onto the next. These bureaucratic and constraints are mainly as a result of the joint international and national agenda to move people up the NFQ, in order to increase economic productivity. This vision of performativity is articulated in the National Skills Strategy²⁸ which states that 'by 2020 Ireland will have a well-educated and highly skilled population which contributes to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive

²⁸ See www.skillsireland.ie

economy.’ Skills Ireland also notes the aspirations to have 48 per cent of the labour force with NFQ qualifications at Levels 6 to 10²⁹; 45 per cent of the population with qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5³⁰ and the remaining seven per cent are likely to have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3³¹ while aiming to progress to higher levels.

It is not surprising that consequently the human side of things has taken a back seat and students now regularly experience being put in an unsuitable class just to make up the numbers and to demonstrate progression up the framework.

Traditionally, literacy classes were named as such and within the class it was decided what programme would be worked on. At the outset, all literacy programmes are now labelled with a FETAC module and mapped onto the NFQ rainbow. In addition the subtle nature of dealing with accreditation has dissipated, in that all FETAC providers are required to inform their students of the whole process from start to finish.

I glean from the findings that this centre has done its utmost to deal with the tensions between being transparent to fulfil the bureaucratic requirements and responsive for the students’ benefit. These findings have in fact given me great hope that there is a way around the red tape and that protection of learners is possible while fulfilling quality assurance standards. I truly believe this boils down to the will of the management and tutors within the centre. If the practitioners are passionate and courageous enough to care to keep the students at the centre of the process and all the time have the student’s needs at the forefront of what they do, then these tensions can be addressed. Regrettably if the will or valour is not there then subsequently the system and bureaucracy will win over and the students suffer.

²⁹ Higher Certificate to PhD level

³⁰ Awards equivalent to Leaving Certificate Examination

³¹ Junior Certificate and below

It is important to note that navigating the system and dealing with these tensions can have an immense toll on centre managers and tutors. Grummell et al (2009) note this toll on management in higher education, stating that ‘senior managerial posts in higher education were defined as care-free zones’. (Grummell, Devine, & Lynch, 2009, p. 14) I believe that this is key area for future research in adult literacy.

4.6 Life application of accredited course

Participants were asked about the content of the accredited courses and whether they were applicable to their daily lives.

Oh yeah because I’m reading the paper more now.... (Participant 1)

yeah letters I would have written I would have written to my sister and eh stories that we write for the thing would be personal stories ‘cos I think that’s easier to write something that has passed rather than making up stuff yeah they were personal (Participant 2)

Interesting comments came from two of the participants who had either completed or were in the process of completing FETAC Level 4 Communications (or English, as they described it). Both participants noted that they had covered material in the accredited course on making complaints to service providers, consumer rights and data protection issues. This has appeared to have had application in their lives as during the interviews, both noted how now they were able to deal with issues like making a complaint to a phone provider or knowing their rights in relation to the dissemination of their data.

..... questioning phone bills and stuff like that I would never, I would just pay it, pay it, pay it, where now I would actually ring up because I would be able to say well look I know I didn’t ask for that package I don’t know why you’s gave it to me, whereas before I would have been like ah I don’t know just pay it kind of a thing..... (Participant 2)

Participant 4 echoed these points, describing how the coursework she participated in applied very much to her everyday life.

....oh yes, very much so, say you had a problem, you purchased something and you had a problem with it, it was how to put a letter together, how to say well right well I wasn't happy with this, I wasn't happy with the service I got and you know it was very, very, structured and it might be to do with labels on clothes, on washing instructions or how to say you had children and they had to get medicine, cough bottles and how to read the labels on things which was very much applied very much to your everyday life. And even if there was a hobby or something you could bring your hobby it to it or something you liked.....

Participant 4 continued on by describing how she was much more aware of her rights in relation to the Data Protection Act. Due to a recent breach of this Act in relation to her details she describes how before she would not have been aware of the significance of companies or organisations sharing her data without her permission. For confidentiality reasons and so as not to identify the location of the centre, I won't describe in detail the situation that the participant outlined to me.

.....now I have an understanding whereas before that would have been all over my head, I haven't a clue what they're talking about. But now I know that Data Protection is very important and that people protect your data and that is a problem, they should never have given over people's personal information.

She outlines how she was able to speak to her local politicians about the situation, something she noted that she would not have done before coming back to education.

I can actually get into a conversation about it and say what I think about it whereas before I'd be saying I don't understand what they're talking about, I haven't a clue.....Councillors knocked at the door and I said to them about it, I said em do you see this [indicating a letter], so they're fighting on behalf of

Participant 4 described how life had changed for her as a result of returning to education

I mean I wouldn't be able to even hold a conversation with you if you'd a met me a few years ago. Absolutely the way your confidence builds up you know and I do say to myself when they're talking about like eh cutting funds for education and all the rest of it and I do say to myself do they know what they're doing? Because people don't have an educated way of voting or anything if they don't have the education, do they realise like how far they're going to put people to put things back, you know

4.7 Analysis of Life application of accredited programmes

The findings above demonstrate the massive learning that can change an adult literacy student's life. Coming from the discourse of literacy as a social practice the primary aim of literacy provision is that it is 'no longer disembodied skills but [presents] aspects of real people's lives in everyday situations.' (Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001, p. 2) Introducing accredited programmes with pre-determined curricula I feel puts this ideology in jeopardy. It is therefore interesting to note the consensus of all the participants that the coursework they undertook pertained to their own lives.

All of the participants spoke of reading the newspaper now, something they would have not done before and some mentioned the fact they now read books also. Participant 2 referred to the fact that the writing she did was about events in her own life, something that was personal to her. Participant 4 mentioned also about writing about interests and hobbies. The connecting of literacy with life experience and social practices is the essence of Freire's philosophy. Writing about life events and

interests also can act as the vehicle for self and critical reflection on life and the world.

It is extremely worthy to note the comments made by two of the participants, who completed coursework at Level 4 that appear to have made significant differences in their lives. Two pieces of work they did stand out, the first, making a complaint and the second, learning about their rights as an individual under the Data Protection Act.

The personal development in both of these participants is visible through their tales of now being able to confidently and assertively make a complaint and knowing their rights as a consumer and individual citizen. Freire believes in unveiling the hidden and empowering students to question their world. I believe this is a fantastic example of empowerment in action. It also reinforces the very political nature of literacy and how through literacy, a more democratic society can be realised.

4.8 Negative aspects of accreditation

When participants were asked about any aspects that they found negative in the accredited courses they were partaking in, answers were varied. In general the four participants gave the sense of having a very positive accreditation experience. Among the few negative aspects mentioned were time constraints and pressure and one of the participants very interestingly had questions about the rigor of the assessment process. These responses are outlined below.

4.8.1 *Time constraints*

Participant 1 was slightly concerned about time; in fact he mentioned this concern prior to me asking this question. Early on in the interview he said that he would like more time particularly with computers.

.....and I like the computer but I just don't seem, we don't get enough time. I had a talk with them there last week and they were saying like I need a100 hours on a computer in order to do a certain level, a level 2 I think it is and there's no way I'll get a 100, we're only doing like say an hour and a half a week on the computer like all we do is four hours.....

In answer to a question about any negative aspects to doing an accredited course he replied 'just a little bit more time you know'.

Participant 2 maintained that accreditation didn't have any negative aspects; instead it was a good motivator to move on and progress.

..No if it gives you a will to go on, if it gives you that push to go on it's a good thing.....It gives you encouragement to go on but I also think it has a lot to do with the tutors and they give you the encouragement to go on too.....

Participant 3 mentioned how he envisaged that he could come under pressure coming towards the end of the year, while Participant 4 felt there were no negative aspects to accreditation.

4.5.2 *Questioning of FETAC system*

During the course of the interview Participant 2 questioned the rigor of the FETAC system. I am including this portion of the interview transcript to show exactly what the student thoughts and questions were.

- P: I think that if you put the hard work in and you deserve your credit well and good but if you know you just come down and you know write down anything do you still get the credit, you know what I mean do you understand what I'm saying?
- I: Yeah, no, say that again
- P: I feel that I put enough work in to get a Level 3 or a Level 4, but can other people come in and just write down anything and get it? Like do the same.... like do your letter do this do this do this can they come in and do that in 6 weeks and do accreditation?
- I: I don't know do you think they can?
- P: Well I know here they don't I know here its a year -long course ...ehh because I mean some people are better than others and would get it done in that and yet I would say they didn't put in enough work 'cos it's not just for your folder there is a lot of work that you do that's just for yourself, like whatever you know, like filling in forms and stuff like that that don't actually have to go into your folder. Like you could probably get your work if you were any way good, you could probably get it done in half the time but you only get half the experience as well 'cos you're only getting half discussions, you know,but em I just feel like I don't know how hard other people work like I know everyone in my class works hard but they are the only people I know
- I: Why do you have that question? Where does that come from?
- P: I don't know just did that [names sister] one get it really quick, my sister, because she's just good?
- I: And did she do it quickly?
- P: Yeah
- I: And where did she do it?
- P: Emmmm well she did it a good few years ago now em I'd say, I'm not sure

- I: In a different centre?
- P: ah yeah, yeah, yeah
- I: Within a like eh literacy scheme?
- P: Ah yeah, yeah

This questioning of the FETAC system clearly portrays the contradictions and differences that this student has encountered through her experience. Through this questioning I felt the participant was querying the rigor and standard of the system, points that I will discuss in the analysis section below

4.9 Analysis of negative aspects of accreditation

4.9.1 Time constraints

The interviews yielded very little negative commentary from the participants on the issue of accreditation. Time was of concern to only one participant. He felt he would like more time working on the computer. This demonstrates a current difficulty that services face; providing students with exactly what they want at a certain time. This I believe is a result of increased pressure on services to provide what is dictated from above. Current pre-set curricula have inbuilt self-directed learning.³² It may be that this participant is expected to make up this learning in his own time but lack of resources at home and in the community may not make this possible.

³² FETAC advise that 100 hours should be given to each New Level 3 programme, with these hours being divided into tutor contact and self-directed learning. See www.fetac.ie for more details

4.9.2 Questioning of rigor of assessment process

One of the most interesting aspects of this research emerged when without prompting or directing Participant 2 posed a question over the rigor of FETAC accreditation and its assessment processes. Her view was that not everybody who gets a FETAC qualification necessarily puts in the same amount of time or effort as the next person. This questioning of the system seemed to stem from the participant comparing her own experience with that of another family member who had completed a comparable qualification. The participant felt that she was putting in far more time in class and far more effort than her sister had. I believe this highlights the distinct difference in the approach of this centre to other providers.

Earlier in the analysis I spoke about the impact of performativity on service providers and in turn students. The process of learning has become conveyer-belt like, with performativity and progression driving the services. Thus I believe there can be discrepancies in FETAC experiences and though a standardised approach should be taken by all providers, this does not occur in many instances.

This questioning of the FETAC system and querying of its rigor I believe is an example of critical reflection and questioning. As outlined in my methodologies chapter it is also one of the aims that I had as a researcher. I hoped the process of interviews would be one in which students began to question and query and make sense of the issue of accreditation. I believe this is a concrete example of the participant analysing their own experience with that of another person, comparing both experiences and realising that the FETAC system of accreditation does not work in exactly the same way for everybody despite the surface appearance of an equitable system of meritocracy. I also believe that the process of research used in this thesis has allowed the participant to document this concern and give a voice to the questions and contradictions that have arisen for them.

4.10 Finding and Analysis Conclusion

The findings of this research clearly indicate students who have had a very positive experience with accreditation. It has been very refreshing and uplifting to hear these experiences as they differ significantly from my own recent experiences as a tutor.

The findings show experiences of empowerment, confidence building, questioning and reflecting. These outcomes portray an approach to literacy provision steeped in a critical literacy ethos. My conclusions from the findings and my analysis of the findings are that what the participants have experienced is as a result of a truly learner-centred ethos within their centre. The evidence of maintaining learner-centeredness is clear in the caring and non-obtrusive way in which accreditation was introduced and handled within the centre. It is heartening to see this in the midst of the demise of true learner-centeredness in favour of market-driven objectives in other adult literacy centres.

At the outset I had imagined that my research would yield results that mirrored my own negative experience. Instead it has been extremely encouraging to work with a centre which is very clearly balancing the tightrope between learner-centeredness and bureaucracy and ultimately protecting its learners.

4.11 Concluding Comments

At the outset this research thesis aimed to find out what place accreditation has in learner-centred adult literacy. The overall positive findings of this research provide a great example of what can be achieved through accreditation in adult literacy.

This research has reinforced to me the importance of the element of recognition in attaining accreditation. Our society puts great value on educational attainment and the increase in self and social worth that literacy students experience as a result of achieving accreditation is immense. Therefore accreditation for students is an option that should always be open and encouraged.

I believe this research highlights the empowering outcomes that can occur through accreditation in adult literacy, including increased self-esteem, increased awareness of issues and ability to transfer learning. Most importantly this research demonstrates that learner-centeredness and accreditation should and can work hand in hand. For this to occur, practitioners need to be passionate and courageous enough to care to maintain learner-centeredness. This takes courage and commitment on the part of learners, tutors and other educators, managers and policy-makers alike in the face of challenges from economic, employment, bureaucracy and performativity pressures. I believe that greater continuous professional development and education can provide a way to keep this learner-centred ethos alive. Organisations like NALA already provide a lot of support for individual students, educators and centres; I believe they are in the ideal position to provide greater support and options.

I also believe there is a great need for a dedicated national adult literacy tutor forum. Within a forum space I believe tutors could guide and support each other. As shown by the analysis of the findings, the will to maintain a learner-centred literacy for social practice ethos needs to exist in adult literacy management. A forum of this kind needs to work with the existing Adult Literacy Organisers Association (ALOA)

and the Adult Education Officers Association (AEOA). Regrettably if the will or valour is not there to maintain this ethos then subsequently the system and bureaucracy will win over and the students suffer. By engaging with management in this way I believe tutors will prove to be a powerful force in maintaining this ethos. I believe that this centre has the traits of a model of good practice and I feel that further research to demonstrate this should be carried out.

On a personal note in closing this thesis, I believe that the research process for me is not the end but rather the beginning of my own 'ontological vocation to become more fully human.' (Freire, 1970, p. 55) I implore other adult educators and in particular adult literacy practitioners to continue to put students at the centre of the process and to give students a voice. Together I believe that practitioners and students can challenge the dominant economic discourses and in doing so, ensure that literacy provision and accreditation is to the benefits and ends of the students, their communities and society as a whole. It is in this spirit that adult literacy should move forward.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Department of Education and Skills Adult Literacy Returns

Adult Literacy Total Participant Numbers												
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2010	2011
17,150	22,732	28,363	31,579	33,873	35,738	40,678	45,812	49,357	47,600	54,741	56,797	56,797

Literacy clients partaking of certificate courses											
	FETAC	FETAC	FETAC	FETAC	FETAC	FETAC	Junior	Leaving	BTEI	Other	Total
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Cert	Cert			
2005			-	-	-	-	551	206	-	456	1,213
2006			6,427	755	-	-	641	217	-	597	8,637
2007			7,662	704			492	180	-	1,164	10,202
2008	904	860	11,195	927	-	-	564	287	-	318	15,055
2009	945	1,009	10,263	1,799	-	-	451	178	-	954	15,599
2010	874	2,616	13,065	2,021	109	-	483	253	-	-	19,421
2011											-

Appendix 2 Questions used in interviews

After a chat to ease into the interview, explaining the consent form, purpose of interview, having the recorder on, research ethics and confidentiality etc. I hope to cover the following topics.

1. Tell me about your experience as an adult learner
 - a. When did you come back to education as an adult?
 - b. What was your reason(s) for coming back to education?
 - c. Why in particular did you come to this service?
 - d. How has your experience been?
 - e. What would you say has been the best thing about your learning experience?
 - f. Have you found anything in your learning experience has been less useful for you? Why?
 - g. Do you plan on continuing your learning? Why?
 - h. What would you say has been the most valuable thing you have gotten out of your learning experience?
 - i. Have you ever got a certificate for any of the courses you have done in this centre?
 - j. Has this accreditation been FETAC?
 - k. Can you tell me a bit about your experience of FETAC and the certificate that you got, modules done etc?
 - l. Would you say that the accreditation has changed your life in a positive way?
 - m. Is there anything about the accreditation that you found wasn't useful?

- n. Did you do any non-accredited courses at any stage? What did you find was the difference doing the accredited courses to doing the non-accredited ones?
- o. Did you find there were any time pressures while doing your accredited modules?
- p. Would you say that the coursework that you covered doing the accredited modules applied to your everyday life?
- q. Tell me what methods of assessment were used in the FETAC modules you did/are doing? How did you find the methods of assessment that were used for accreditation?
- r. How would you compare the experience of accreditation as an adult to experiences you might have had as a younger adult or child?
- s. Is there anything else that I haven't covered that you would like to mention?