

# Learning for Life – The White Paper: A Discussion

ted fleming

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The Irish Government's White Paper on adult education, *Learning for Life* (Department of Education and Science, 2000), outlines the Government's policies and proposals for adult education. Lifelong learning has become the taken for granted context in which adult education perceives its development for the future and has the advantage of giving adult education a credibility that it rarely gets without such a context. This White Paper is welcome and timely and is the result of a lengthy consultation process that preceded publication. The consultation process extended far beyond the Green Paper (DES, 1998), in fact back to the Education White Paper (DES, 1995) and Green Paper (DES, 1992). It has been a year since the publication of the White Paper and people have had an opportunity to assess the position after the widespread welcome for its publication.

This discussion took place at the annual Adult Education Conference organised by the Adult Education Organisers, Chief Executive Officers and Adult Literacy Organisers in Newbridge, May 2001. The participants were Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS, the National Adult Education Association, Inez Bailey, Director of NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency and Sean Conlon, Chairperson of the AEOA, the Adult Education Organisers' Association.

In this discussion we look at the strengths and weaknesses of the White Paper and at some of the issues that concern practitioners. So, what are the strengths of the White Paper?

**inez bailey:** It is hugely important and a welcome development that we have a White Paper on adult education (DES, 2000). Its main strength is that there was a reasonable consultation process after the publication of the Green Paper (DES, 1998) and people did have a reasonable opportunity to influence the proposals of this White Paper. From the point of view of NALA, the National Literacy Programme was already designed and outlined in a submission made to government for the Green Paper (DES, 1998). This was subsequently included in the White Paper. The White Paper contains a number of proposals that had already been mentioned in the Green Paper and made in submissions as far back as 1997. There was a time lag before these proposals were realised in the White Paper.

The White Paper is also welcome because it gives priority to adult literacy. This made a huge impact on literacy projects because until then literacy tended to be the Cinderella of the system and the White Paper brings it to the fore.

**berni brady:** I agree with Inez about the White Paper - that it is there at all is important. It took a long time to lobby for it. It is an improvement on the Green Paper, in that it actually adopts a broader philosophical base. One of the concerns we had about the Green Paper was its focus on the economic. The Green Paper saw the purpose of adult education almost exclusively in economic terms. I think the feedback from the consultation process, that there was more to adult education than its economic potential got heard, and the White Paper, as a result, is an improvement.

In the White Paper the focus is on the most disadvantaged and I understand why this is so. This is both a strength and a weakness in that the economic climate has changed dramatically since the Paper was written and now people who are low waged are the new disadvantaged. There are other weaknesses too and I hope we can return to these later.

A major source of satisfaction to AONTAS, as the national body for Adult and Community Education in Ireland, is the inclusion of a chapter on Community Education (DES, 2000, pp. 109-120). Community Education is a very invisible part of the adult education field and it is important that such a section was included. AONTAS lobbied very hard for the inclusion of the proposal on community education facilitators (DES, 2000, p. 114).

Finally, the consultation processes run by other bodies besides the Department of Education was far more productive and participative than the official one. The process used by the Department of Education could have been better organised. However the consultation process survived because there were lots of other means of participating which were organised by groups all over the country.

**sean conlon:** The Adult Education Organisers' Association unreservedly welcomes the White Paper. We were there on the day it was launched and there was a good feeling realising that finally the White Paper had arrived. It had been through a process of consultation and on that day the White Paper was seen to acknowledge the work that had been done for many years in adult education and furthermore highlighted certain things that needed to be done. By and large, I think, there was, at the launch, a buzz and it acknowledged the energy and even some of the frustrations of working in adult education. The White Paper highlights adult education in some important ways. The AEOA is very positive about it.

When I try to identify the part of the White Paper with which I am most pleased, I

think the core principles of equality, interculturalism and the systemic approach are of central importance (DES, 2000, p. 30). The notion that adult education has these key principles gives us an important framework in which to work.

The White Paper (DES 2000, p. 28) also identifies six priority areas underpinning its proposals for adult education. The first is consciousness raising. For someone like me, coming out of the liberal 1960s, 1970s when I first read Paulo Freire, I now find that consciousness raising written in a State White Paper is very positive. It has other priorities too: citizenship; cohesion; competitiveness; cultural development and community building (p. 28). This fundamentally sets down core principles from which we can move forward.

**ted fleming:** In addition, the emphasis on the training of adult educators, the qualifications framework, structures for the development of the field and the higher education section are also strengths. These are parts of the adult education project that now have a policy framework for their development. Someone has at least thought about these important issues and the Government has put this forward as a project.

**sean conlon:** I also think the national and local structures outlined in the White Paper (DES, 2000, p. 185-200) are important. People on the ground look to structures to deliver services and now there are proposals to regularise the structures. For example if one looks at the success of the Institutes of Technology, formerly the Regional Technical Colleges, that started as sub-committees of the VECs, we can see what is possible within these kinds of structures. As a result, we now look at this model and wonder whether the adult education sector might develop in a similar way.

**berni brady:** It is very important to have an infrastructure within which adult education can develop. A National Adult Learning Council is proposed that will take responsibility for policy making, for looking after adult education. This has never happened before. I just wonder where it is at the moment, as it is a very positive proposal. The proposed technical support services of the Council are also very welcome (DES, 2000 pp.149-175).

In the consultation process, AONTAS thought that the crucial issue would be structures. In fact a far more interesting debate developed on the issue of the professionalisation of the sector. The proposals created great anxiety as there was a fear that professionals would take over the work which was already being done very well by people working in the community.

I realise that we are being selective in the strengths we have highlighted.

**ted fleming:** What are the weaknesses as you see them?

**inez bailey:** It might be worth looking at what happened with the literacy programme and see how that experience is mirrored in the remainder of the White Paper. When it was published, funding for literacy was already on stream. It had actually begun implementation prior to the publication of the White Paper. There was clearly a political decision made to address the funding of proposals within the White Paper for other reasons. For example, the OECD survey (Morgan, et al., 1997) was published before the White Paper. The adult literacy proposals had funding earmarked under the National Development Plan (Government of Ireland, 1999) and were then included in the White Paper. I remember, like Sean, flicking through the document when it was published as quickly as I could to see if certain things were in it. The first thing that struck me was that literacy was one of the few areas where funding was actually earmarked. It was funded under the NDP and that funding was already in place before the White Paper. This indicated to us that we were certainly getting money. We were not however getting funding because of the White Paper but only because of other policy considerations. We believed that the adult literacy service would benefit and we were very happy to see funding there. But it was clear that there was not the political will to fund proposals unless the momentum came from somewhere else. There was no clear willingness to implement proposals that were only in the White Paper even though it had taken a great deal of energy over two years to draw up the programme. This was a great opportunity to sort out funding but there was not the political will to actually give the funding to implement the many proposals within the Literacy Programme.

**ted fleming:** There is probably a perception across the country that literacy has got significant funding. Is that a misconception then?

**inez bailey:** There was the political will to increase the adult literacy budget but it was raised from such a low base that it appears to be a significant increase. When the budget is increased from £1m to £10 million that is perceived as a colossal jump but that increase has not resulted in the adult literacy programme being appropriately funded. It still remains a tokenistic response because so much needs to be done with a limited amount of money. In the context of the total education budget, we know that we have less than £3 to spend on adult literacy compared to the thousands of pounds spent in the mainstream education system. Unfortunately, what happens in adult education is that we tend to compare budgets with each other within the sector. We look at what the person or project nearest to us has got, as opposed to looking at the bigger picture.

**berni brady:** I think the White Paper started off brilliantly with the core principles and the subsequent discussion of those. Then it started to address various areas such as literacy and community education and what should be done. The most disappointing aspect for AONTAS is the issue of financial supports for students which

we see as an access issue for students whether in adult literacy or higher education. The White Paper is trying to broaden the categories of people who are eligible for free adult education but in doing so they have inadvertently excluded people on low wages. There ought to be an entitlement for all people to at least an upper second level education free of charge.

AONTAS has lobbied for a long time against the discrimination that is made in third level education in relation to fees for part-time and full-time students. We were extremely disappointed that this issue was not fully dealt with and we will continue to lobby for free fees for part-time students.

As the White paper goes on to discuss other issues such as professionalization and qualifications it becomes aspirational. The specifics of how the proposals are going to be implemented are not spelt out in the White Paper. There are also issues that are not really addressed at all, for instance North-South co-operation and interculturalism.

The proposal for Local Adult Learning Boards is problematic. I believe the number of members is too big. Smaller boards with emphasis on the role of the board instead of the representational element of it might have been better. Putting learner representatives on the Boards implies a process of capacity building for that work. Also the issue of how the community and voluntary places will be filled is not clear. AONTAS supports the development of community fora and networks as a mechanism for representation. The autonomy of the Boards is not made entirely clear nor is the role of the VEC in relation to their operation.

**ted fleming:** This may be a good time to address some of the issues about the implementation of the proposals?

**berni brady:** The proposals which are being implemented are already part of the National Development Plan. The proposals for access to free fees under the Back To Education Initiative has not yet been implemented and there are now people on low wages who cannot access education but who, prior to this, may have been treated favourably by their local VEC. .

There is no indication as to how the Government is going to implement the decision to allocate 10% of the annual increase under the BTEI which is to be allocated exclusively for the development of community education (DES, 2000, p. 116).

The Community Education Facilitators are funded, but not yet appointed. Job descriptions are being drawn up but we do not yet know what they are going to be. Nothing is happening on professionalisation. There is no Inter-Agency Working Group, no Forum for Practitioners. The national qualification authority has been set

up but no local or national structures and no sign of them in the budget this year. AONTAS is extremely concerned about this and we are going to use the time before the next election to raise these issues. With a possible change of government we could lose a lot of ground if this is put on the back burner like the Kenny Report (Kenny, 1983) was. The absence of implementation is worrying.

**ted fleming:** From the point of view of AEOA what are the weaknesses?

**sean conlon:** The major weakness is that it is high on aspiration and low on specifics about how it should be implemented. Without repeating other weaknesses already mentioned, the proposed Local Adult Learning Boards are not well thought out. These boards are a way of putting the current ad hoc Boards on a legal footing. AEOs looked at these proposals and do not see them as viable. Some of the existing boards work reasonably well, more of them are virtually non-existent.

**ted fleming:** Is there any work done on how the Boards have worked, an evaluation or review?

**sean conlon:** I cannot recall anyone having looked at these Boards. They came out of the Kenny Report (Kenny, 1983), were always ad hoc and have operated for fifteen years in that manner. There is also the notion of the 'administrative hosting' (DES, 2000, p. 195) of these boards by VECs which is not spelled out in the White Paper. This is going to be a source of real tension in the future, if the Boards are ever set up.

Additional AEOs have been promised and this is welcomed by the AEOA. The workload of each AEO has increased dramatically since the arrival of extra projects and along with the proposal for Community Education Facilitators, this means there are many proposals now awaiting implementation.

**ted fleming:** Implementation is crucial. There are clearly a number of proposals in the document that people like or that they can work with, but there seems to be a gap between aspiration, policy and structures and what is going to happen. People are identifying the issue of implementation as the key question. You are asking how is this going to happen?

**inez bailey:** When we went to our members after the White Paper was published to check their reaction to it, there was an awareness that, even if there was movement in adult literacy, there was no movement in other areas of adult education. That has affected morale on the ground. Our members had put huge energy into the consultation process for the White Paper and suddenly they were almost being conned. The sense of being conned was the reaction we got.

In adult literacy with modest funding, the absence of progress in other areas of adult education prevents a more effective roll-out of the adult literacy programme.

I looked at your copy, Ted, of the White Paper which is new and clean and my one is tattered. It fell apart the first day. That for me is a metaphor for adult education. In the rush to get something done the quality of what is actually produced is suffering. I don't think that is intentional but right through the system there is not the level of resourcing and support that is required. Adult education is still marginalised.

We may be expecting too much from a policy paper if we also expect it to deliver on the implementation side. The community platform has seen, through their involvement in the partnership process, that it took huge amounts of work to get policy proposals into the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (Government of Ireland, 2000) and even then there has not been a sense that the proposals have been implemented. There was a sense of being conned in that too.

**berni brady:** There is also the Action Group for Access for Disadvantaged in Higher Education where we rushed to complete a report in three months and AON-TAS put a great deal of work into it. The same issues emerged as were to the fore twenty years ago, ten years ago, last year, this year. We also worked on the subgroup which examined barriers to access on the Task Force for Lifelong Learning. These groups were set up as part of the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (Government of Ireland, 2000) and the National Development Plan (Government of Ireland, 1999). Following this we had the White Paper. There is always the feeling that there is no difficulty in setting up a committee or doing a paper on different issues but getting proposals implemented is quite a different thing. There is indeed more funding for literacy and adult education but it is important to remember that adult education was starting from such a low base, it will require a further substantial injection of resources.

**ted fleming:** What you seem to be saying is that the adult education sector has been engaged in a process, that you are not only disappointed but...

**inez bailey:** What is actually happening is that the more time that is taken up in committees and reports and task forces, the less time you actually have to put into political lobbying and the outcome is going to be a sense that this is not good enough.

**berni brady:** The problem is the political thinking of the day which has a very economic, functional, work based focus. The difficulty is in getting past the narrowness of this approach. Lifelong Learning needs to be understood in the broader perspective of civil society and not just as a means to an economic end and that is where the

problem lies. The question is how to get past that and what can an organisation like AONTAS do to achieve that?

Most people in adult education are so busy working locally there is little time left over to look at the bigger picture. They are not going to have time to be strategic.

**Ted Fleming:** This discussion clearly identifies some deep fault lines in the way the various sectors in society relate to one another. The White Paper is the state restructuring and identifying priorities for its adult education programme. The close connection between the state and the economy is troubling to those who see adult education with an important agenda over and above supporting economic development.

What is there over and above the economic? Firstly, the legitimate concerns that the state itself ought to have, i.e. the common good, justice, care, and the exercise of power in the interests of all its citizens. Secondly, there is civil society or that sector of society that concerns itself with family, community, voluntary organisations and is the locus for the potential expansion of democracy (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. vii). Adult education can concern itself with the state by encouraging second chance, citizen education and equality of access. Adult education can also concern itself with the economy by teaching job skills, upskilling and indeed functional literacy. However, adult education in civil society concerns itself with learning for family, community and social involvements. Above all it concerns itself with increasing the potential for democratic interactions and making the system world more democratically accountable. Unfortunately, there is conflict between the system world (state and economy) and civil society. Any sector that is concerned with making the system more democratically accountable is not going to be happy with the ways the system world reorganises itself, as the system is so often counter democratic. The concerns and discomforts of adult educators are in part about these tensions. These tensions also underpin a number of new social movements and their relentless anti-capitalist protests.

These issues are coming to the fore in the literature on adult education (Murphy, 2001) and the task for leaders in the field is to navigate the complex journey between the system and civil society where the danger is colonization by the system. The task is to decolonise or infuse the system with democratic imperatives (Fleming, 2000). Instead of the traditional Marxist conflict between capital and workers, the contemporary conflict is between the system (state and economy) and the lifeworld, between the system and civil society. That Aontas, NALA and many AEOs have clearly and rightly allied themselves with the disadvantaged and with communities is an indication that they will always be disappointed with the system world's bureaucratic and functionalist discourse in a White Paper.



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