

*The Future of Adult Education: Learning  
Towards a New Democracy*

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Adult educators have given a considerable amount of time and energy over the past five years to preparing for the White Paper, Charting our Education Future. The State has this ability to set the agenda for our discussions and deliberations but as a major statement of policy and a framework for the future development of adult education the paper deserves a considered response.

What I would like to do is explore one or two ideas that I think are central to this task. These thoughts are meant neither as the only ones worth considering nor as a definitive and final position but rather as thoughts in search of dialogue.

There will be three parts to this task:

1. A critique of the white paper, the negative
2. A closer look at what is implied by this critique, the positive
3. Adult education: A future role in a democracy of free citizens

## 1. A Critique of the White Paper

The White Paper will be looked at from four different and critical perspectives. Firstly, the illustrations/photographs deserve attention. The way the document was launched also needs to be analysed because embedded in the process is the deeply held anti-democratic stance of politics and bureaucracy. The philosophy of the document and its adequacy as a foundation for adult education is briefly examined. Finally, the Enterprise Culture, which was so central to the thinking of the Green Paper<sup>2</sup> will be identified as even more central to the thinking of this document. But it is now not called the enterprise culture. The language used always hides more than it reveals!

### 1. The Photographs

The Minister for Education, Niamh Breathnach, in launching this White Paper spoke about how the philosophy of education was "clearly outlined at the beginning of the document" and everything else followed. But its philosophy is embedded in more subtle ways in the photographs chosen to illustrate the publication.

The document is well illustrated. There are pictures in every chapter, all related to the subject matter of that chapter. A picture of a primary school class in the section in primary education, etc.

The picture illustrating the chapter on The Teaching Profession (p.120) is a teacher doing her teaching in the library!

The picture in the chapter on The Role of Parents (p. 142) has the same child, the same book just a different track suit!

The adult education photograph (p. 84) has the same teacher, in the same library, with the same parent, with the same books in the back-

ground. This is not a parent teacher meeting. This is the adult education photograph!

Irrespective of the Government's philosophy of education outlined in the first chapter of the report these pictures are carriers of philosophy too. Note how the teacher sits on a higher chair. So much for equality! The books being read by the adult learner and those on the shelves are children's books. This is not adult education as it is thought about or practiced. It is in fact a fundamental misunderstanding of both the theory and the practice of adult education. Adult literacy, adult basic education, creative writing, second chance and daytime provision are not places where adults learn to read children's books.

Maybe this is just a mistake. Some public relations firm just got the pictures wrong. It is clear that the pictures undermine the text.

But there is more than this to the pictures. There is only one photograph in the body of the report without people. It is a beautifully taken night-time shot of the historic building in which the Department of Education is located in Marlborough St. (p.182). It illustrates the section on The Inspectorate of the Department. Bureaucracy is the only part of the educational system which does not portray itself with a human face.

All the photographs of people are of people doing something. Teachers are teaching, parents are parenting and even teaching, children are learning or playing, lecturers are lecturing, etc. There is only one photograph where the people in it are not doing anything at all. The ten men representing the Department of Education are just there. (p 190) More questions surface here about equality, about gender and what do these men do? When bureaucracy does have a human face this is it. One student in a class remarked that even the grandfather clock is masculine!

Pictures are our symbolic representations of ourselves and an organisation that presents itself in such an unreflective way is obviously in a weak position to articulate a vision of education.

### 2. The Launch

Charting our Education Future was launched on April 12, 1995 and the next day a Government Notice in The Irish Times announced that

1. A limited number of typescript copies are available
2. The printed version will be widely distributed after Easter (April 16) and
3. The White Paper will be published soon!<sup>3</sup>

So the message for the nation was that the Government's proposals would be

1. Out in time for the teachers conferences. (Easter was April 16)
2. With just typed copies (advance copies/pre-publication copies) for journalists and other special people.

<sup>3</sup> The Irish Times April 13, 1995

<sup>2</sup> Education for a Changing World (Dublin Stationary Office, 1992).

So for almost a month you could get a copy if you were one of the special people! The procedure was to do the P.R. first, get the correct spin on the story and only then have the full version in circulation.

What precisely is the problem with this?

Special people pose a problem in a democracy. There are not supposed to be special people in a democracy. Surely this was similar to how the Beef Tribunal Report was leaked, launched, interpreted, distributed and published? We do need to take a closer look at how we operate a democracy!

Maybe I'm going too far again but I'm stuck on the idea that it was something to do with the existence of special people which sparked off the Beef Tribunal in the first place. Some of the special people were there defending their interests. Who would represent the Common Good? The inability of the Attorney General to do this was a symptom of the demise of the common good as defined in our current version of democracy.

So in the existence of special people whose interests are paramount serious questions are posed for our democracy in way the White Paper was launched.

### 3. The Philosophy

The first chapter of the White Paper on philosophy has some interesting things to say about equality, pluralism, tolerance, civil rights and about the role of education in the economy.

But to assume that a philosophy of education outlined for children is also appropriate for adults is to again fundamentally misunderstand adult education as a field of theory and practice. It is neither compatible with the theory nor the practice.

It may be appropriate, as this report says, [pg.10], to teach children respect for and appreciation of the values which have traditionally shaped our society and culture. Indeed we must, in order to survive, hand on our values, stories, history, knowledge, culture and technologies but the key role for the learning adult is to take a less respectful and more critical look at what we have been taught. It is appropriate for adults to be critical and active remakers of culture and society.

Having a critical look at the frames of reference which we were taught and in which we think, feel, interpret and act is the most important kind of adult learning. Being able to identify from where we got these frames of reference, being able to critique them, adjust them, find new and more adequate ones if necessary, and act out of them is the most significant kind of adult learning.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jack Mezirow, Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning (London Jossey-Bass, 1991)

To outline a philosophy of education without making reference to this unique adult dimension is to misunderstand not only adult education but the nature of adulthood and adult learning. If it's all as the Minister said, built on getting the philosophy right, then what happens when it gets it wrong?

If there is this lack of clarity about what adult education is then how does this surface in public policy and practice? There are two examples of this that come to mind, and probably many more that could be added to this list.

1. The qualification required to become a recognised adult educator, e.g. Adult Education Organiser, is the same qualification required to become a secondary school teacher. Adult education wants rid of this confused policy of Memorandum V7. All attempts to put in place an effective second chance provision such as VTOS will inevitably be undermined if it is seen that the only qualified adult educators are those who are trained to teach children.
2. Without this vision of what adult learning really involves adult education becomes a sort of remedy for what was missed the first time on the educational merry-go-round. The implication of the White Paper is that anything that is not remedial is a luxury and not essential. There has to be an acceptance that lifelong learning is not just a catch-up on lost or missed opportunities and not only justifiable as good for getting a job. It is the essential precondition for the health of our culture, the development of citizenship and the survival of democracy.

### 4 The Enterprise Culture

Let me briefly revisit the Green Paper which was preoccupied with the Enterprise Culture. All education was for enterprise. There is now no mention of enterprise culture in the White Paper. But it is everywhere. In six of the nine policy points made in the adult education section reference is made to jobs, skills, training, competencies, economic growth, vocational training. The word enterprise is gone only to surface everywhere.

Adult education is of course for jobs, competence and training but this appallingly narrow vision of its possibilities leads one to wonder how can we get the point across that there is more. The remainder of this paper will focus on one aspect of what is missing.

The reason I have spent so much time critiquing the document is because my thesis is implied in this critique. In the remainder of this paper I want to talk about the concept of democracy which I identified earlier as problematic. By outlining a concept of democracy I will be in a position to return to adult education with an agenda which includes education for participatory citizenship in a strong democracy. This is part of what is missing in the White Paper.

## Dialogic Participatory Democracy

In the past decade socialism has been in retreat and not just in Eastern Europe. Radicals of the Left are in retreat. The Right has become triumphant, proclaiming, in Fukuyama's words 'the end of history.' It's all over. The West has won and liberal democracy has lasted the pace and run out of competitors. Now the Right is radical and rampantly changing the economic and political landscape. The Left is without a mission.

But the triumphalism of the Right and of liberal democracy is not well founded.<sup>5</sup> I believe that liberal democracy too is in trouble and is far from being secure and justified in its triumphalism. The representative democracy, the version of democracy we have, has become a vehicle for representing special interest groups. We have a politics of special interests. You have only to name the social partners to see this. In order to be a social partner and have a say in economic policy one must have a job. Women in the home are not social partners. Neither are the unemployed, older people, adolescents, students, and so on. They get representation but not participation. For these groups representative democracy prevents participation.

Politics is not supposed to be the conduct of public affairs for private or sectarian advantage. It is not supposed to promote individual liberty more than it secures public justice.

What am I proposing then as an alternative to this problematic representative democracy?

I am proposing a form of politics which is dialogic and participatory. I'm not suggesting just discussion and consultations as these usually leave power structures unchanged. The Church in the reforms of Vatican II proposed more participation. Sing louder, shake hands, make the responses in English. But the exercise of power became even more centralised and authoritarian. Participation is something more than singing louder, or voting more often, or even being asked your opinion. Politics has become what politicians do; what citizens do is vote for the politicians. In a dialogic participatory democracy politics is what citizens do.

Instead of taking people to Dublin Castle for consultations which do not change the representative nature of the process of writing this White Paper, how interesting it would be if we could, with the Government, write this chapter on adult education together. How exciting! At least we would have got the pictures right. This is a good time to begin outlining an Adult Education Bill.

The strong democracy that I am proposing addresses the fundamental question of politics. What shall we do when something has to be done that affects us all, we wish to be reasonable, yet we disagree on what we want to achieve and how to achieve it and are without ready-made solu-

tions apart from our own attempts to be reasonable? Could this also be a useful way of looking at community development?

Strong democracy is :

politics in the participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interests into public goods.<sup>6</sup>

This kind of democracy creates a public capable of reasonable public deliberation and decision, a public capable of transforming the actions of individuals so they will be animated by regard for common ends.

Rather than vote for this constitutional amendment or against it, this political party or another, this presidential candidate or someone else, this model of democracy attempts to define voting and decision making in a different way.

Voting suggests a group in a cafeteria bargaining about what they can buy as a group that will suit their individual tastes. Strong democratic politics

suggests a group of men in a cafeteria contriving new menus, inventing new recipes, and experimenting with new diets in an effort to create a public taste that they can all share and that will supersede the conflicting private tastes about which they once tried to strike bargains.<sup>7</sup>

Dialogic participatory democracy is how I would define community. John Dewey said something similar when he wrote:

Democracy is more than a form of Government; it is primarily a mode of Democracy is not an alternative form to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community itself<sup>8</sup>...

[It is] a name for a life of free and enriching communion.<sup>9</sup>

In a representative democracy to exercise the franchise is unfortunately to renounce it. The representative principle steals from individuals the ultimate responsibility for their values, beliefs and actions. Surely, the Area Based Partnerships would be totally different if they were participatory rather than representative?

My critique of the White Paper is really a critique of the form of representative democracy we have. In its place I have suggested a change in the way we make political decisions in our society.

5. Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994)

6 Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (London: University of California Press, 1984)

7 Barber, p. 137.

8 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (London: Macmillan, 1916), p.87.

9 John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1927), p.148.

You could object to this proposal saying:

Representative democracy is the best we've got, it may not be perfect, it does work and in any case all this participation and dialogue is not practical.

Show me somewhere in the world where it has been tried and working

Anyway, what has all this got to do with adult education?

So it's not practical. Let me quote Thomas Jefferson:

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate power of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

## Adult Education: For Dialogic Participatory Learning

The two objections, which ask if there are any examples of where this form of democracy is in operation and whether this form of democracy has anything to do with adult education, I will address together.

Some people wonder if adult education has a vision. It has. And it is linked to the concept of democracy I have been outlining. Adult learning is participatory, critically reflexive, open to new ideas and changing frames of reference. It has a vision of learners engaged in dialogic participatory discourse, collectively seeking ways of changing themselves and society so that all systems, organisations and individuals respond to the needs of others.

The ideas I am proposing here are not new. If you use different language you can very quickly hear the connections with Jack Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning. He says the most significant kind of learning takes place through a process of collaborative discourse. Echoes of dialogic participation.

Paulo Freire says teachers of adults "must be revolutionary - that is to say, dialogical....Where the teacher and student teach and learn."<sup>10</sup>

The experience of many who have been involved in adult education is close if not the same as the dialogic participatory democracy that I have been describing. Let me just give two examples. The first is the self-help tradition and the other is adult education for personal development.

<sup>10</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1972) p. 74.

## The Self-help Movement

The self-help movement comprises all those groups which have met for the purpose of mutual support in the face of a particular social problem. Alcoholics anonymous is an example, but so too are mother and toddler groups, ecological pressure groups, womens' groups and daytime education, including NOW and Horizon programmes. Today more people belong to self-help groups than to political parties. These groups are about dialogue and participation. They are democratic. They open up spaces for public dialogue about issues which would not previously be discussed. They force into the discursive domain aspects of social conduct that previously went undiscussed or were settled by traditional solutions - representative politics or the church. They help contest official definitions of things and see the creative possibility of conflict.

Many of these self-help groups therefore have an intrinsic connection with the strong democracy I have been talking about. The feminist movement problematised female and male sexual identity through making them matters of public debate. They sustain alternative models of democracy to the representative democracy of the state. Many inhibit fixed hierarchies and set out to create the maximum of non-hierarchical discursive space for their members. They are the model at community level a model of the strong democracy I am proposing should exist at a social level.

The democratic system in which we live has no way of taking on board the experience of these movements. The political parties of the vested interests and their lobbyists can find no way of including the alternative model of democracy found in these organisations. Mary Robinson was voted into office by many of these groups and movements. They find a voice in her egalitarian and symbolic way of constantly linking with them. Her Presidency is in fact the only political institution in the state which systematically represents and validates this alternative dialogic participatory democracy.

So the self-help movement in all its forms is a counter experience to the representative democracy of the state.

## Personal Development

Dialogic participatory democracy is also modelled in personal development courses. This is the single biggest area in the field of adult education. Maynooth extra mural programme with 2,500 students provides personal development or counselling courses for the most of these. Many providers throughout the country provide similar courses. I believe that on these courses participants learn how to change their personal relationships. They become more egalitarian, more participatory, more democratic. It is difficult to do a personal development course without changing the way one relates to others and the change is one where things are more equal, more people are considered in decision making and all members of a family have more say and control over the outcome.

It is not possible to have so many people doing these courses, reconstituting their personal relationships in a more dialogic and participatory mode without this having a profound impact on a community, a society and a political system which is the contradiction of this new mode! Personal development does help people seek more dialogic and participatory ways of working and of organising their family life. Why should politics be immune. Adult education has known this for some time. Feminism has known this too when it says "the personal is political"

It is no wonder then that the state will have difficulty understanding what we are about. It has a vested interest in not knowing. What we are about is the redefining of democracy. Those who set themselves up as guardians of the educational system will have a vested interest in not looking too closely at what we are doing because the price to be paid is to take a close look at their own non-dialogical and non-participatory practices.

### The Future

Because adult education is a critique of the educational system in general this does not mean that we are less interested in involving ourselves in policy decisions or institutionalising worthwhile ideas. Because we frequently take this critical stance we could be accused, and maybe found guilty, of being unwilling to get our hands dirty in the nitty gritty task of forming public policy and supporting organisational reform.

We are not ourselves above critique and maybe this is a good opportunity to name at least one area where we do not act decisively and coherently. There will be reform of the VECs. There will be new Education Boards. There will be a Further Education Authority. What part do we want to play in these? Do we want them to become statutory providers of adult education? How would we like to relate to these new structures? The teachers' unions, parents' councils, youth organisations and the bishops will have well worked out positions. What will ours be? I would like to be part of the discussions concerning the question of structures which the White Paper says is in need of urgent examination.

In the interest of provoking a discussion [Oh! I forgot - a dialogic participatory discourse] let me conclude with a number of concrete suggestions as a starting point for a chapter on the White Paper.

I suggest a Charter of Learners' Rights as a starting point for drawing up an Adult Education Bill which might say some of the following.

1. Lifelong adult learning is a precondition for the strength and survival of democracy.
2. All adults have a lifelong right to learn.
3. These two principles will guide all provision. [Rather than the narrow vision of education being remedial, for literacy or job skills training]

4. 1% of the education budget will be allocated for adult education. Funding will cease to be small, sudden, sharp and become more predictable and accessible especially to small local providers.
5. Education Boards and VECs will be statutory providers of adult education.
6. All learners will be accommodated in adult-appropriate and adult-controlled buildings with security of tenure.
7. Priority will be given to the learning needs of the disadvantaged.
8. All discriminations against women's participation will be eliminated.
9. Adult educators will be qualified and trained appropriately, i.e. as adult educators.
10. A progression in training will be available to adults who wish to move either into course organisation and provision or who wish to study for academic qualifications. All learning will be capable of being certified, if required, and be part of an integrated provision of accreditation. [There is not a great deal to say for an adult education provision which helps people to think differently if it does not also help them to learn how to act, organise and implement their new ideas and change society.]
11. Adult education will have in the Department of Education a section of its own and not be seen as part of Further Education or an add on to the FAS provision.

The Aontas Report For Adults Only<sup>11</sup> and the report by Chris Mulvey<sup>12</sup>, on Daytime Education have many ideas about what should be included in public policy. Chris Mulvey rightly sees daytime programmes as "serious and real providers of educational opportunities....[with the] potential to mobilise Irish people for active citizenship and generate creative solutions to social problems." There is more vision in this one sentence than in the chapter on adult education.

Søren Ehlers, talking about the Danish experience, at this Aontas conference says:

Democracy can never be guaranteed. It is not a system to be implemented, but a way of life that can be learned. It is a mindset which each new generation must be taught. Therefore, adult general education constitutes the backbone of a democracy....

Who then dare suggest that funds for adult general education be cut or removed? That would be tantamount to stating a preference for undermining democracy.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever our way of critiquing the White Paper and there are many ways of doing this the onus is, I believe, on us to again and again clearly outline a vision of what we mean by adult learning and adult education. And also to say clearly what we want to see incorporated into a statement of public policy. Because, like it or not, the endpoint of all this discussion will be a legislative framework within which we will operate as adult educators for some time.

<sup>11</sup> Bassett, Brady, Fleming & Inglis, For Adults Only: A Case for Adult Education in Ireland (Dublin: Aontas, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Chris Mulvey, The Support and Development of Voluntary Daytime Education Groups in Ireland (Dublin: Aontas, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Søren Ehlers, "Examples of Innovation in Danish Adult and Continuing Education: Six Case Studies" (Copenhagen: Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, 1995).

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## *Participation and Rural Voluntary Organisations in Ireland: a Case Study*

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