

Community Educators and the Struggle for Recognition

*Theorising meaning, educator and institution in Ireland's
community education field using a generative grounded
theory approach.*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores community education in Ireland in a threefold enquiry examining;

- (a) the core meaning which community education holds for practitioners in the field,
- (b) how the role of community educators shares a connectedness with liberatory struggle for social justice, and
- (c) what space community education and its educators occupy within its institutional provider, the Vocational Education Committees (VECs).

Community education in Ireland is a vibrant field of practice operating on the fringes of mainstream education. Its origins can be traced to the early instructors of the Vocational Education Committees in the early part of the last century. Women's community education has shaped the practice in Ireland since the 1970s. The year 2000 marked a significant step forward in terms of recognition for community education with the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education.

In this thesis the author draws on his experience working in the community education sector to engage with other community educators to reflect on the generative themes of *meaning, educator role and institution* in this field of practice.

The first aspect of the research explores the meaning of community education from the practitioner perspective, and finds a clear preference for an empowerment meaning. However, the findings suggest there is no clear settlement on the meaning of empowerment, and concludes there is a need to articulate an understanding of empowerment in the context of a critical analysis of power.

The second aspect of the research concerns the role of the community educator and the connectedness of this role to a broader liberatory struggle for social justice. Using Honneth's concept of a struggle for recognition, the findings point to a critical role which is poorly recognized within the education field in Ireland. A key purpose of the research is to rediscover the roots of this role in Gramsci's organic intellectuals and Freire's radicals and reclaim the critical role of the community educator within the Irish education site.

The third aspect of this research examines the space which community education occupies within its institutional provider, the Vocational Education Committees in Ireland. The research presents an assessment of the institutional culture of the VECs. The findings recall

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the VEC's radical origins, and its later immersion within the mainstream educational apparatus. Findings point to the tensions between a dominant school ethos and subordinate community education ethos in the VEC and proposes a critical coalition for the future. The findings suggest that community education facilitators have a role to play in occupying a critical space within the VECs.

The unique contribution of this research is that it presents a theorized community education from the perspective of its workers, the community educators. The research methodology combines Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory with Freirean liberatory pedagogy. The result is a unique contribution to a generative grounded theorization of community education in Ireland today.

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*Liam McGlynn
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

VEC	Vocational Education Committee
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association
<u>VEC Roles</u>	
AEO	Adult Education Officer
AEOA	Adult Education Officers Association
CEF	Community Education Facilitator
CEFA	Community Education Facilitators Association
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CEEEOA	Chief Executive and Education Officers Association

VEC Programmes

BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Science (Skills as of 2010)
DF	Department of Finance

Other

AONTAS	The National Adult Learning Organisation
CEN	Community Education Network (Research Participant)
CDP	Community Development Project
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council

**WORTH THE STRUGGLE: REFLECTING ON COMMUNITY EDUCATION IN A
DECADE OF CHANGE 2000-2010**

Three years ago, when I embarked on this research thesis process, two questions were posed which I keep coming back to time and again. In a way they are like touchstones. The first, concerns what it is I am passionate about in education. The second concerns what sustains me in that endeavour. These questions have helped to inspire me, to focus my research and to ground me throughout the research process. My passion is for adult and community education, for fifteen to twenty years now at least. What sustains me is the hope, creativity and possibility of this pedagogy which I have come to love.

2010 marked ten years since the publication of *Learning for Life*, the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000). For adult and community educators in Ireland, this was a momentous event. It marked recognition at last for adult and community education as a field of practice in the broader further education sector and ‘a new departure by the State in shaping its educational thinking and policies’ (2000, p. 24). It was a time of excitement, possibility, a new Minister responsible for adult education, the years of fledgling status seemed at an end as the White Paper brought the promise of recognition, resources and a coherent framework for the sector to grow. Community education, my own field of practice, was accorded a full chapter in the White Paper.

In many ways the themes and discourses of the past decade in community education match my own epistemological and professional journey in those years. These concern three broad categories or themes which shape my research interest in this study; firstly, my search for a community education with clear meaning and purpose, secondly, to develop my pedagogical role in relevant and effective ways, and thirdly, to be part of an institutional culture which embraces my epistemological commitments. I expand on these below.

Firstly, the clear meaning and purpose of community education for me involves a number of crucial principles. Community education is rooted in a critical, empowering and transformative meaning. This involves the educator working with people affected by poverty, inequality and exclusion, raising ‘critical consciousness’ (Freire, 1969) about these

issues. This process of reflection and action, what Freire calls 'praxis' (1970, p. 33), both leads and supports action for change on the issues affecting people's lives. This radical meaning of community education implies structural change at the social, economic, cultural and political levels. Applying this meaning and purpose in my professional journey has led me to a variety of settings including community development, community-based access to higher education, men's community education and currently in community and social development in a third level institution, all different and all enriching. The common theme in all these settings which continues to motivate me is being part of change in people's lives, displayed in gains in confidence, critical thinking and creativity. It is this enthusiasm for change generated in community education which sustains me in the work and makes it worth researching as a field of practice.

Secondly, I identify as a community educator. I am inspired by the potential of this pedagogical role as part of a wider struggle for social justice, whilst at the same time conscious of the subordinated status of the role within mainstream education (DES, 2000, pp. 150-154). In the early days of this research, the theme of struggle emerged in my reading of Foucault (1976a). I found it a useful concept to translate my experience as a community educator. Foucault referred to struggle as an 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (1976a, p. 81) against the hierarchically dominant 'scientific' knowledge. He described a 'buried...historical knowledge of struggles' (p. 83) which were oppositional to the 'centralising powers linked to the institution' (p. 84). Similarly, the pedagogical role of community educators is about enabling 'knowers' (Antonesa et al., 2006, p. 15) to become critical of dominant and oppressive knowledge and institutions. As a community educator, I work with 'knowledge' as a potter would work with clay. I identify with a struggle to assert a subjugated knowledge of liberation in community education.

I come to this research from a position which sees community education as part of a broader tradition of struggle for liberation:

Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever stage of their struggle for liberation.

(Freire, 1970, p. 47)

In this research, I am interested in knowing whether and how community educators identify with the concept of struggle. Struggle is a foundational theme in the thesis from the outset.

Thirdly, I am enthralled by institutions, particularly the culture of institutions and how they work. In my experience of community education in various settings, I seem to thrive in the work with participants on the margins out in the community, where change is more visible as groups gain their voice. Yet it is within the institution, at the centre, where I encounter different challenges, in the form of institutional culture and power dynamics. I find myself in the position of outsider in institutions, the cultures of which are informed more by 'reproduction' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), than by 'liberation' (Freire, 1970). I identify with Ryan who similarly recalls the experience of 'marginalisation' as a result of trying to 'operate in a different discourse' (2001, p. 17). I find myself opposed to a 'deficit' discourse in formal education which views community education as 'compensatory' (Connell, 1993, p. 20) and locates the deficit in the learner not the mainstream educational system and its institutions. I am also curious how community educators linked to a traditionally radical oppositional movement in the non-governmental sector, can now function effectively in an established educational institution of the governmental sector. In a sense this research explores how the radical outsider negotiates the institutional space as radical insider.

The three themes introduced above, evolved in the course of this research process. This thesis explores community education in Ireland in a threefold enquiry examining;

- (d) the core meaning which community education holds for practitioners in the field,
- (e) how the role of community educators shares a connectedness with liberatory struggle for social justice, and
- (f) what space community education and its educators occupy within its institutional provider, the Vocational Education Committees (VECs).

Ten years on from the White Paper, the lack of recognition, resources and framework for adult and community education in Ireland remains to be fulfilled, as this research will demonstrate. I believe this research will draw attention to a group of educators poorly recognised in the education system. Community education is a field which is busy with an abundance of activity and energy, but relatively unrecognised in mainstream education.

The purpose of the research is to contribute to greater focus on the meaning, practices and institutional structures of community education and its practitioners, an educational field with powerful potential. This study also suggests it is a practice under siege, at risk of being undermined, firstly, by a proliferation of approaches and secondly, through a lack of recognition by educational authorities in Ireland.

This research will make a unique contribution in drawing out the perspectives of community educators whose work combines both grassroots level engagement in marginalised communities and institutional engagement within the mainstream provider, the VEC. It will present community education from the practitioner perspective which places the practitioner voice centre stage. However, this is not done from an entirely blank canvas. The discursive themes emerging in the literature on community education serve as the platform for dialogue with community educators in the research focus groups. The practitioners who participated in this research and myself as researcher have long-term experience of working in community education. The majority of participants have been working as community education facilitators (CEFs) in the VEC for several years. This depth of experience among all participants contributes to a rich dialogue about the radical change focus of community education at the margins and its impact at the centre, in a mainstream educational institution.

A key feature of the research is the methodological approach which utilises Freirean dialogue on generative themes (described below) combined with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), which ‘constructs theories grounded in the data’ (p. 2). In this sense my aim is to develop a generative grounded study marrying a dialogic pedagogy with the research methodology. The research aims to be part and parcel of the change which drives the pedagogy.

It is hoped this study on community education in Ireland will attract the attention of adult and community educators, educational researchers and practitioners in other education fields, turning the spotlight on a critical educational role now and for the future. For me, this research is also about rekindling a passion for community education. It is a research undertaking which I aim to do in a reflective, rigorous and critical way. It is an adventure which will no doubt sustain me.

Crystallizing the enquiry

The three themes, *meaning, educator role and institution* frame the dialogue involving myself as researcher/practitioner with other community educators. The dialogue in focus groups will therefore centre on these themes; the meaning of community education, how community educators view their role and its connectedness to struggle, and what space community education and educators occupy in the institution, the VEC.

Community education today remains a phenomenon which appears contested as to its meaning and distinctive ethos, elastic in its remit and variable in its practice across VECs and the sector in Ireland. The research question, set out below, addresses the three framing themes which scaffold this study:

How do community educators in Ireland (a) interpret the meaning of their practice, (b) understand their role and its connectedness to liberatory struggle, and (c) negotiate their space in the institutional provider, the vocational education committee?

The study tunes into the conversation which is going on about community education, the generative themes emerging from literature and focus group dialogue among practitioners, for later analysis of the ‘implicit, unstated and condensed meanings’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.83). The study is contextualised as a snapshot in time; ten years post the euphoria of community education’s recognition in the White Paper, in the midst of a recession. It is therefore a timely study of an educational site which receives comparatively less recognition and research focus than other education sites. It is hoped this study will contribute to knowledge about community education’s core meaning/ethos, its educators, and its institution.

The Generative Themes of the Study

The threefold thematic structure of the thesis exploring *meaning, educator role and institution* in community education in Ireland, took shape initially from my own reflections on these themes as outlined earlier. They gained greater clarity and form through ongoing engagement with the literature in the field. Community educators use collective and participatory approaches in their work and therefore I wished to couple my own reflections on these themes with the reflections of other community educators, to explore as it were,

thematic presence, relevance and significance in the discourses of community education. The three themes form an overall framework to explore the ‘generative themes’ within this broad canvas (Freire, 1970, p. 77).

Generative theme is a pivotal Freirean concept, which I make use of throughout the study. They refer to the significant issues relevant to the lives of people in a community. Freire describes generative themes thus:

The investigation of what I have termed the people’s “thematic universe”, the complex of their “generative themes” – inaugurates the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom. The methodology of that investigation must likewise be dialogical, affording the opportunity both to discover the generative themes and to stimulate people’s awareness in regard to these themes.

(Freire, 1970, pp. 77-78)

Generative themes can be located in concentric circles, moving from the general to the particular

(Freire, 1970, p. 84)

In practical terms, Freire described ‘researching’ the vocabular universe of the community for ‘generative words’, those ‘weighted with existential meaning and thus the greatest emotional content’ (1973, p. 49). Hope and Timmel (1995a) who applied Freire’s ideas in an African context, refer to generative themes as the issues about which people have ‘strong feelings’ (1995a, p. 17). Freire considered ‘the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of domination – which implies its opposite, the theme of liberation, as the objective to be achieved’ (1970, p.84). Freire is basing this claim on his Latin American context. He refers to ‘dehumanisation’ between the wealthy ‘oppressor’ minority and the impoverished ‘oppressed’ majority. Drawing on Marx, he describes ‘the historic task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well’ (1970, p. 26). Using generative themes as the stimulus for dialogue, Freire’s pedagogy of liberation is integral to this task.

The generative themes of the community are represented back to them in the form of a codification, in pictorial, poetic or dramatic form. It is sufficiently distant, yet familiar as a relevant theme for the community to comprehend in an abstract way. Themes may relate to lack of jobs, poverty, or land rights. Reflecting on the codification in a dialogue facilitated by a cultural worker/educator, the community members share their experience of the theme

in their lives. Feelings are ventilated in dialogue, and the theme is problematised in the decodification. This dialogue leads to action planning, shaping the programme content of a liberatory learning process which incorporates action to transform the theme and its impact on people's lives (Freire, 1970, pp. 91-105).

The investigation of generative themes in this research involves a community of practitioners in community education. These included practitioners working as community education facilitators (CEFs) in the VECs and member practitioners of the community education network (CEN) supported by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Association. As frontline workers engaged with disadvantaged communities in Ireland, they would see and hear the generative themes of their communities, but this research focuses on the generative themes of the practitioner, their practice, role and institution. Community educators are 'border crossers' (Giroux, 1992) or 'boundary workers' (Kavanagh, 2006), working for change at both grassroots and systems level. It is argued here, that there is comparatively less research focus on community educators compared to community education participants, the latter populating much of the existing research output in the field (Bailey, Breen & Ward, 2011; Fennell, McCann-James, McDermott & Nyland, 2003; Inglis, Bailey & Murray, 1993). As a practitioner myself, the role and practice of community educators is a particular research interest of mine.

The investigation of generative themes in this research departs from the Freirean approach outlined above to the extent that this research is not a learning process per se, leading community educators to transformative action. It is rather an adaption of the reflective process on generative themes to contribute to our learning about both the research process of community education itself, and the pedagogical approach of community education and the role of its practitioners. I now wish to explain further the significance of the three overarching themes, *meaning, educator role and institution* for the field of community education.

Why meaning?

The White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) referred to the earlier Green Paper (DES, 1998) where a 'variety of definitions and perceptions' were attributed to the concept of community education, ranging from 'off-campus', 'outreach' and school community

provision to defining it as ‘community-based’, an ‘empowering process’, an ‘agent of social change’ involving ‘active participation and inclusive decision-making’ (1998, pp. 88-89). Recent research on community education in the Irish context, describes a diversity of courses in the field ranging from ‘arts and hobbies’, ‘basic computers’, ‘health and fitness’ to ‘social and personal development’ (Bailey et al., 2011, p. 69). This is further evidence of the broad and variegated meaning of community education in the Irish context. That said, the research also attests to a common feature of community education practice:

it is about bringing learning to people in their local areas as a response to the area’s needs. It is less about, as described in an action model, learners engaging in local or social action to address structural disadvantage.

(Bailey et al., 2011, p. 65)

The latter finding is a cause for concern from the perspective of radical adult education, a central tenet of which is the transformation of unjust structures in society (Giroux, 1983, p. 35). In this thesis, the diversity of meaning evident in community education practice in Ireland is explored with practitioners in the field. The impact of this variety of definition is problematised in the thesis, with a view to examining the core ethos, values and pedagogical purpose of community education from the perspective of community educators.

Given my own commitment to a particular set of epistemologies associated with community education (which I set out below) and my work in the sector, I am interested in knowing if there is consensus or contestation as to the meaning and purpose of community education among practitioners in the sector, particularly concerning its radical origins in struggle, its critical role in society, its social change and empowering purpose. Does community education do ‘what it says on the tin’, or is there consensus or clarity about what is said on the tin? In terms of my own narrative, the theme of meaning also forms part of a quest for authenticity, to bring to bear a core set of values in my own practice of community education.

Why educator?

At the outset I identified my professional role as a community educator. Community educators are the practitioners in the field, working with adults in a variety of settings, most commonly, the community halls and resource centres across the country, generally in the

evening time. As indicated earlier, it is an important role, though poorly recognised by the mainstream education establishment. I was also aware of the inspiration, support and guidance I received from a key mentor in the field, who modelled good practice in community education work for me. This thesis aims to fill a research gap focusing on the community educator's role and its radical roots in struggle against oppression.

The historical literature in the Irish context describes the early 'instructors' who were the pioneers of outreach community education in Ireland through the local technical committees in the early part of the twentieth century (Buchanan, 2005; Byrne, 1980; Ryan, 2004). The commitment to community outreach was impressive:

many outlying areas of the county were catered for by the provision of "Itinerant Instructors" who cycled to almost every parish in the county holding night classes.
(Ryan, 2004, p. 6)

There is a historical connection here to the modern community educator in the VEC. Community educators may also find role models in Gramsci's description of the 'organic intellectual' (1971, pp. 134-142) and Freire's idea of the 'radical' (1970, p. 21) and 'revolutionary educator' (p. 56). These radical conceptions of the educator place the modern role of community educators in the historic context of a wider struggle for equality and social justice. This struggle remains relevant today and the role of critical educators is crucial to transformation.

Whilst the White Paper does define the role of the community education facilitators (CEFs), the generative theme most relevant to community educators which seems to emerge from the White Paper is that of recognition, in terms of practitioner qualifications and volunteer recognition (DES, 2000, p. 151). Therefore the role of the community educator is taken up in this thesis to explore both the status and recognition of the role and to claim its place as a critical role in education.

Why institution?

The process of transformation, of building a just society, involves what Marcuse called "the long march through the institutions".

(Hope & Timmel, 1995a, p. 5)

Marcuse's idea of institutions as sites for transformation, suggested by Hope and Timmel, spreads the responsibility for transformation beyond its more familiar location as 'the

historical task of the oppressed' (Freire, 1970, p. 26). Liberation involves transforming centres as much as transforming the oppressed at the margins. This is a concept which resonates with me, not simply because I struggle with institutions, as stated earlier, but because of 'the centralising powers which are linked to the institution' (Foucault, 1976a, p. 84) and through their reproductive role in the 'field of power' (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 264-265). The vocational education committee (VEC) is the institutional provider with responsibility in the area of community education in Ireland. As part of the statutory educational apparatus, the VEC is an interesting institution on the educational landscape of Ireland. Formally established eighty years ago as a radical departure from Church-dominated education, they are viewed in modern times as part of the educational establishment (Drudy & Lynch, 1993). Given the VEC's pivotal position in the field of educational power, it merits research how a traditionally 'oppositional' and 'critical' movement like community education and community educators engage in the "long march" to negotiate their space in the VEC, an institutional actor in the mainstream educational system.

The VEC as research site

The VEC is the institutional research site of interest to this study. As the VEC will feature throughout the study, it is useful at this point to describe its development as an institution within the Irish education system generally, but particularly in adult and community education. There are thirty three VECs in Ireland, one for each county or local authority area. Each VEC has a number of recognisable core sections, Vocational and Community Schools (catering for 24% of the 12-18 year old population¹). VECs therefore play a significant role in formal post-primary education in Ireland. The VEC is also the key provider of Adult Education in Ireland. Each VEC has an Adult Education Service incorporating Community Education, Adult Literacy Service, Adult Educational Guidance Service, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach, Centres for Education & Development (formerly Senior Traveller Training Centres), and the Back to

¹ Second Level Pupil enrolments by school type. Vocational School enrolment of 75,218 students out of total of 315,707 second level pupils represents 24% in VEC Schools. This excludes PLC community schools many which are VEC managed and comprehensive schools 53,015 if included would be 41%. TABLE 1.1 — NUMBER OF PERSONS RECEIVING FULL-TIME EDUCATION BY GENDER AND TYPE OF INSTITUTION ATTENDED (2009/2010) Retrieved on Aug 25th, 2011, from http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/stats_statistical_report_2009_2010.xls#Table 1.1!!A1

Education Initiative (BTEI). The VEC has been nominated to administer additional programmes on behalf of the State e.g. Youth Work under the Youth Work Act (2001).

In chapter one, I consider the VEC in terms of Bourdieu's theoretical construct 'the field of power' (1996, p. 263). The functions of a VEC are either executive or reserved (Vocational Education Amendment Act, 2001), the former carried out by the committee's Chief Executive Officer and the latter by the committee itself. Executive functions are of more significance in the field of power. In recent times, some VECs have been invited by the State to manage primary schools under a new multi-denominational patronage model of primary education. At the start of the 2008/09 academic year two new primary schools under the patronage of the VEC have been opened (Flynn, 2008a). This may herald the emergence of a new state-run community school model, called for by the Irish Vocation Education Association (IVEA), the umbrella organisation representing VECs in the State (Flynn, 2008b & IVEA, 2008). The VEC's role in second level education provision as the favoured community college model by government is also evident. There has been a reluctance to let the Educate Together² movement operate in this sector (Faller, 2010; Flynn, 2010). This is because of an 'unofficial Department policy that over the past number of years has recognised the VECs as the sole patron of second-level schools' (Faller, 2010, p. 17). These examples illustrate the strong position held by the VEC in the field of educational power in Ireland, attributable to its local political power base in each county, giving it 'an aura of democratic representativeness' (Drudy & Lynch, 1993, p. 126).

Having mapped the terrain of the study, it is now time to consider the epistemological standpoint I adopt as researcher in this thesis.

Epistemology and Valued Ways of Knowing

We are familiar with the phrase 'doctor knows best' or in the context of education 'listen to your teacher'. These words of advice convey a particular view of knowledge in each case.

² Educate Together is a multi-denominational patron body to 60 of the 3,165 (DES, Statistics 2009/10) mainstream national schools funded by the State. The Catholic Church is the patron of the majority of primary schools. 'Educate Together guarantees children and parents of all faiths and none equal respect in the operation and governing of education'. Educate Together is being urged to promote its philosophy in secondary and pre-school provision. (<http://www.educatetogether.ie/about-2/>)

They convey the idea of trustworthy knowledge from respected professionals. These admonishments suggest that knowledge is something which is preserved, contained and transmitted. Freire conceived of this view of knowledge as ‘banking education’ (1970, p. 53):

The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.

(Freire, 1970, p. 54)

Whilst such a view of knowledge has served to maintain certainty in the positivist sense and provide a secure or good education from one generation to the next, there is a downside. This view of knowledge lacks a critical dimension, in the post-positivist sense. Staying with the education example, this view serves to cement a concept of knowledge as ‘deposits’ of knowing which remain intact and highly-prized, which some attain and others cannot attain. In Ireland, for example, Honours Mathematics is amongst the most prestigious knowledge in our formal education system. The content of the Leaving Certificate paper attracts considerable media comment every year without fail, ‘the reputation of honours maths as the boot-camp subject of the Leaving Certificate was apparent from reaction to Paper 1’, (McGreevy, Irish Times, 2010). Poor results in Leaving Certificate Maths can hamper one’s chances of attaining requisite points, and access to prestigious courses and professions, in short, access to life chances (Lyons, 2003).

On valuing knowledge

What have Maths results got to do with a researcher’s epistemology, ways of knowing, or community education? It is relevant because the way knowledge is viewed and how it is valued, and what counts as ‘really useful knowledge’ (Thompson, 1996) is very important. Everyone is a knower. The formation and development of people as ‘knowers’ is profoundly influenced by their time in formal primary and post-primary education. Every summer when terminal examination results are issued, adult knowers are reminded as it were, of their own results, in the same way that their own sons, daughters, nieces, nephews or grandchildren now receive their ‘academic sanctions’ (Bourdieu, 1996, p.102). There is ample evidence of the reproductive power of the Leaving Certificate, demonstrating the pattern of privilege for higher socio-economic groups who enter college in greater numbers than lower-socio economic groups year on year (Clancy, 2001; Clancy & Wall, 2000).

The adult participants who enter the community centres and resource centres to take part in community education are influenced by this dominant view of knowledge and what it is to be an educated person. The majority would like their children to get better chances than they did themselves and this alone can be a significant benefit for taking part in community education (Barry et al., 2001, p. 16, p. 59; Borg & Mayo, 2001). In one setting where I worked, mothers took evening classes in Irish in order to help their children with their homework.

The dominant view of knowledge and what it is to be a knower permeates the cultural life in Ireland and can be a barrier to people without academic credentials taking part in community education. They may fear because they did not do well in school, that the experience may be repeated. Gardner explains this hegemony:

The kinds of intelligence that are highly valued differ markedly...in modern secular educational settings, logical-mathematical knowledge is at a premium, and certain forms of linguistic competence are also of value.

(Gardner, 1983, p. 337).

The valorising of these ways of knowing is deeply ingrained in Irish education (Lynch, 1999, pp. 260-262). It is in the context of these dominant ways of knowing that community education has sought to gain a foothold. In Ireland, this has been predominantly among those who are on the margins of Irish society and who have derived least benefit from the mainstream education system. Community education draws on a rich tradition of knowledge ranging from critical theory, radical adult education, feminist pedagogies and liberatory pedagogies to which we turn next to understand its knowledge base.

Researcher epistemology: Critical and reflexive ways of knowing

One of my tasks as a post-positivist researcher in community education is to name my epistemology. Epistemology is concerned with 'the nature of knowledge, what constitutes valid knowledge, what can be known and who can be a knower' (Antonesa et al., 2006, p. 15). As Ryan highlights, there are 'always personal, biographical affinities in theory' (2001, p. 18). In this section, I wish to acknowledge these contributions to my own growth and development as a knower. Similar to the epistemological influences associated with community education, there are traces of these critical influences in my own epistemological formation. As a young person growing up in rural Ireland in the 1970s, I

was idealistic and probably wanted to escape, to see and experience a wider world. I and a school friend had a common interest, overseas missionary work. Though this did not become my chosen career, the experience was positively formative. Two impacts shaped my epistemology from that time. The first was my experience in Africa and learning from missionaries and development workers who showed a deep commitment to their communities through an 'option for the poor' (Gutierrez, 1972). The second, my encounter with liberation theology, but more particularly Hope and Timmel's *Training for Transformation* (1995, 1984), based on the work of Freire. These have shaped my epistemological interests and commitments since and were formalised through my engagement with critical theory since 1995 in studies of adult critical education.

Brookfield broadly defines critical theory as follows:

Critical theory views thinking critically as being able to identify, and then to challenge and change, the process by which a grossly iniquitous society uses the dominant ideology to convince people this is a normal state of affairs.

(Brookfield, 2005, p.viii)

Elements of what I could later name as critical theory were present in liberation theology. Initially, this way of interpreting the world and institutionalised religion was quite destabilising for me. It was destabilising because, I felt a little guilty that 'I was in the know', I had a type of 'privileged knowledge', which meant I could be critical of accepted dogmas, I could see through fallacies, unlike people of ordinary faith. Critical theory, whether it be Habermas's concept of the 'colonization of the lifeworld' (1989, p. 325), or Freire's idea of critical conscientisation (1970, p. 17), assists in unmasking the 'false consciousness' (Craib, 1997, p. 109) of which we are unaware. Critical theories unmask dominant ideology in the economic, cultural including educational, social, and political spheres. It asks critical questions of capitalist neo-liberal economics for example, how it enriches the few, impoverishes the many and endangers the planet. Engaging with critical theory allows me to be critical in making sense of that world.

Having identified critical theory as a central component of my epistemology, I would also identify and value reflexivity. Being critically reflexive allows me to be open to having my own epistemological blind spots revealed. Reflection at the personal level can lead to choices at the interpersonal, community, social and political levels. There has been a

tendency in elements of both positivist and post-positivist epistemologies, including critical theory, and radical adult education to downplay the personal (Ryan, 2001) and emphasise the social and political dimensions of change, where it is deemed to really matter (Mulvey, 1995; Inglis, 1994). In the Irish context, the personal dimension of women's life experience became the catalyst for the development of community education as a politically engaged feminist pedagogy (Barry et al., 2001; McMinn, 2000; Healy, 1996). A landmark text which defined the mood of the time was *From the personal to the political* (AONTAS Women's Education Group, 1991). Women's community education in Ireland has led the way in claiming a critically reflexive and feminist pedagogy which is empowering at personal and collective levels (Barry et al., 2001).

In the course of this research, I have come to appreciate, feminist critique of predominantly masculinist epistemologies. Feminist theorists have problematised aspects of Marxist-inspired critical theory, for example, Young's critique of Marx's theory of exploitation (1990) finds it 'too narrow to encompass all forms of domination and oppression' (p. 50). I explore feminist critique of critical pedagogy in greater detail in chapter one. However, at a practical level, as a male community educator, I feel there is much we can learn from feminism to develop community education in similarly relevant ways for men. This work has been pioneered in Ireland in recent years by the Men's Development Network (2011), with which I have been engaged.

Another epistemological influence I wish to acknowledge is egalitarianism. In my previous study (McGlynn, 2006), egalitarian theory proved potent as a lens of interpretation and explanation for educational inequality in Ireland. In this thesis, egalitarian approaches to research enable the researcher to adopt a more equal and inclusive research relationship with research participants (Baker et al., pp. 169-190). This involved ongoing engagement between researcher and researched throughout the study, including the data analysis and findings stages.

The critical adult acts 'to create more democratic, collectivist economic and social forms' (Brookfield, 2005, p. viii). Whilst this may be a tall order, it is nonetheless reflective of the agentic imperative of critical theory. Not only does critical theory shape my ways of knowing and making sense of the world, it also shapes my actions to try to change the

world. It inspires my ways of practicing as a community educator and researcher, the subject of the next section.

Researcher practice: Liberatory pedagogies

The particular strand in the tradition of critical theory which has distinctively shaped my own practice as a community educator is critical pedagogy or liberatory pedagogy as developed by the Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire, and described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Hope and Timmel's landmark application of Freire's ideas in *Training for Transformation* (1984) for an African context, has been a significant source for my own community education practice, and indeed for community development workers in other contexts. Training for Transformation has been applied in the Irish context, (Sheehy, 2001) and indeed one of the earliest adaptations of Freire's pedagogy in a first world context was in Scotland (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1989).

Much education has tried to ignore human feelings and concentrated only on reason and actions. But Freire recognises that emotions play a crucial role in transformation. Feelings are facts. Only by starting with the issues on which the community have strong feelings – hope, fear, worry, anger, joy, sorrow – and bringing these to the surface, will we break through the deadening sense of apathy and powerlessness which paralyses the poor in many places.

(Hope and Timmel, 1995a, p. 17)

Hope and Timmel describe five key principles of Freire's work. Firstly, 'the aim of education is radical transformation' (1995a, p. 16), meaning that change to a more just and equal world must start at the roots of the problem. As outlined above, critical theory asks questions of dominant ideologies and accepted truths in a radical way to both challenge and change them. Secondly, education must be 'relevant' (p.16) and must engage with the lived experience of people in community. Such an education responds to the generative themes (pp. 53-62), discussed earlier, the burning issues in people's lives about which they become most exercised. This thesis explores these generative themes in the life and work of community educators today. Thirdly, 'dialogue' is central to 'participatory learning' and the entire process of 'transformation' (p. 17), which means that the adult learner has something of value to contribute to the educational process, their lived experience. Fourthly, Freire contrasted 'banking education', referred to earlier, with the idea of 'problem-posing education'. Practically applied, this approach involves representing back to the community education group, the generative themes which have emerged in that

community. This is done through the use of ‘codes’ (p.19) or problem-posing materials. These can include role play, photographs, poems or songs, materials which help people identify with the theme and enable a dialogue to begin about understanding the issue. The code (codification) problematises the issue. For example, a photograph of a dole queue may generate feelings of shame, embarrassment, frustration and anger. This process can lead to taking action to enable people gain personal and collective support, to view unemployment in constructivist terms, as a social justice issue, the problem of adhering to a competitive economic model.

In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his (sic) reflections in the reflection of the students. The students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher.

(Freire, 1970, pp.61-62)

Fifthly, ‘the cycle of reflection and action’ (Hope & Timmel, 1995a, p.20) or what Freire termed praxis, plays a significant role in the process of transformation. Hope and Timmel describe it thus;

By setting a regular cycle of reflection and action in which a group are constantly celebrating their successes and analysing critically the causes of mistakes and failures, they can become more and more capable of effectively transforming daily life.

(Hope and Timmel, 1995a, p.21)

These five elements are central to my own epistemology and commitments in education, most especially in my work as a community educator. I will be dealing in further detail with Freire’s work in chapter one. As researcher in the current study, I have also adapted aspects of this pedagogy, particularly dialogue on generative themes, as part of the constructivist grounded theory methodology of the research which I discuss in chapter three.

Thesis Structure

The triple thematic structure of *meaning, educator and institution* in community education is maintained throughout the thesis as consistent threads linking the chapters. Chapter one sets out the conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning the thesis. The literature review engages with a range of theoretical perspectives, including critical theory, liberatory pedagogy and feminist critique relevant to the field of community education. The purpose

will be to prepare theoretical tools for later analysis of data from focus group discussion. Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and organic intellectuals, Honneth's recognition theory, Freire's liberatory pedagogy, Gore and Ellsworth's feminist critique of critical pedagogy, and Bourdieu's educational reproduction, and others, all shine some early light on the inherited conversation about community education and enable the researcher to approach the investigation with 'theoretical sensitivity' (Charmaz, 1996; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glasser, 1978).

In chapter two a review of discourses in community education studies is presented, based in the main, but not exclusively in an Irish context. This chapter sets the scene for the present study by identifying the discourses present in this educational site. Drawing on a Foucaultian discourse analysis approach, the studies are reviewed within the thematic framework of meaning/policy, practice/pedagogy, and institution/structure. These studies are drawn from three main sources; official and statutory sources, the Government's Green and White Papers on Adult Education (DES, 2000, 1998), academic studies, and studies from the non-governmental organisation sector.

Chapter three describes the chosen research methodology, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and the research method of focus group dialogue. There are two reasons for choosing this research strategy. Firstly, community education and grounded theory emphasise a grassroots approach to education and research respectively. Both value the input of participants in their respective processes, from the grassroots or ground up. Secondly, I was anxious to engage the pedagogy or process of learning in the research methodology itself. Focus group dialogue allows me to do this. The rationale for this is the belief that the collective, or group, is a 'natural environment' or normal 'habitus' of community educators (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 141). Constructivist grounded theory involves 'collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). This research strategy enables community educators themselves to explore through dialogue how they interpret the meaning of community education, how they understand their role and the space they occupy in the institution. Prior to engagement with community educators in the focus groups, I undertook the initial literature review introduced in chapters one (conceptual framework) and two (review of

other studies in community education). This provided an initial textual analysis of the emerging themes in the conversation about community education documented to date.

Chapters four, five and six set out the analysis of focus group discussion to produce the findings under the three research categories in this thesis. In these chapters, the most significant generative themes emerging from the data of focus group discussion are named and analysed, drawing out the significant thematic findings. The analysis process follows what Charmaz describes as the ‘constant comparative method’, using the ‘literature review and theoretical framework’ as tools of comparison and analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 165). This process produces the findings for the study. As these chapters integrate analysis, findings and discussion, discourse analysis will also feature as a tool of theorisation in these chapters (Fairclough, 2003; Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Foucault, 1972).

In conclusion, chapter seven draws the strands of the study together, generating a theorised community education grounded in the experience of practitioners. This chapter draws on the findings to make conclusions in respect of the three aspects of this study on community education, *meaning, educator role and institution*. Firstly, the impact and implications of diverse meaning in community education are considered, in particular the potency of empowerment, secondly, the evidence and implications for a struggle for recognition of community education and its educators is assessed, and thirdly, the space for community education as a critical voice in and of the VEC institutional structures is explored, and how this informs community education’s future engagement with institutions in the education field. Apart from the new methodological ground broken in the thesis combining Freirean pedagogy with grounded theory, it is asserted that the unique contribution of the study is its excavation of the radical roots of the community educator and the foregrounding of this role in the future of education, no longer subordinated or misrecognised, but critically active. In so doing, this thesis also rethinks what is known about the VEC in Ireland, and the space which community education occupies in the institution.

CHAPTER 1 THE LENSES OF THEORY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY EDUCATION

My engagement with theoretical perspectives and inspiring thinkers in adult and community education over the past fifteen years is a contributing factor to the focus of this research enquiry. Theory acts as ‘a lens through which you view your particular topic’ (Antonesa et al., 2008, p.40). As a community educator from my earliest encounters with theory I have sought to make it real and meaningful in the practice of my work. Thomas (1997) asks ‘what’s the use of theory?’ In this chapter I address this question in the context of explaining my conceptual framework drawn from theoretical literature in the community education field. In the introduction to this thesis, I named my epistemological stance as critical and liberatory and how these theoretical influences have shaped me as a knower. Here, I interrogate this knowledge to explore its usefulness in explaining community educators’ understandings of meaning, role and institution in their practice.

In keeping with the triple thematic framework of the thesis, this chapter establishes a theoretical springboard for the enquiry with practitioners. The ideas of key thinkers who stand out in the field and who have inspired my own practice are assembled here. This theoretical spectrum ranges from critical pedagogy, feminism, to sociology of education.

Meaning and Critical Theory

In this research, critical theory enables me to interpret meaning, reflect on practice and analyse the institution. It engenders critical thinking, and this for me is crucial to my work as a reflexive practitioner. Critical theory is one of the tools I use to manage the interface between structure (institution) and agency (my actions) in my work.

Like ‘really useful knowledge’ (Thompson, 1996, p.21), I too am interested in the usefulness of theory. Brookfield describes critical theory as concerned ‘to provide people with knowledge and understanding intended to free them from oppression’, but he goes further in suggesting that ‘not only does the theory criticise current society, it also envisages a fairer, less alienated, more democratic world’ (2005, pp. 25-27). Critical theory therefore shares the praxis orientation of critical pedagogy and egalitarian theory, the purpose of which is not only to ‘explain the world but also to change the world’ (Baker

et al., 2004, p.18). A daunting challenge, it is nonetheless a sustaining ideal for the community educator. Critical theory therefore has a strategic aim which I share. Its purpose is to create the possibilities for change, and this is a most inspiring project.

In the Introductory chapter I identified critical theory as the broad canvas framing my epistemology. Its thinkers are both inspirational in their theories and in the biographies of their lives. Critical theory is however not beyond criticism, some of its thinkers being accused of constructing a 'grand theory', to replace the theories they reject (Thomas, 1997, p. 78). I share Thomas's concern about the 'ambiguity that arises from the lack of definition', leading theory to 'being too open-ended to be of value' (p.81). This has also been a concern regarding the dual-definition of community education in the White Paper which will be discussed further in chapter two (DES, 2000 p. 110). I am interested here in the usefulness of critical theory as a device for exploring meaning in community education.

The sources of critical theory

The origins of critical theory give some clue as to its foundational importance in offering a rationale for resistance, struggle and countering injustice. The Institute of Social Research was established in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923. Scholars associated with the Frankfurt school include Horkheimer (Director in 1930), Fromm, Marcuse and Adorno. Brookfield recalls the initial role of the Frankfurt school to 'interpret, critique, and reframe the relevance of Marxist thought for contemporary industrial society', (2005, p.23). The institute was 'threatened by the Nazis because of the avowedly Marxist orientation of its work and the fact that most of its members were Jews' (Giroux, 1983, pp. 7-14). As a result the institute worked in exile in Geneva and New York before returning to Frankfurt in 1953 (Brookfield, 2005, p. 23). This uprooting as a consequence of the intellectual positioning of the school's theorists, on the one hand, and their ethnicity on the other, may explain the attraction of critical theory to radical adult educators who identify with struggles for justice and liberation. However, I would argue, that critical theory has failed to adequately embrace ethnicity along with gender and other categories as loci for struggle or resistance. However, before examining critique of critical theory, it is to Marx that we turn as 'the towering intellectual figure' inspiring critical theory (Brookfield, p. 18).

Marxist inspired meaning

The question why Marx would be relevant to community education in Ireland today could be answered in some way by the themes of common concern to Marx and community education. Exploitation, alienation, class struggle, capitalism and revolution are popular Marxist themes which relate to modern equivalents which concern community education, namely; marginalization, exclusion, equality/inequality, neo-liberalism, social justice and transformation. In chapter two, the economic purpose and social purpose debate will be considered and how it impinges on the meaning and purpose of community education. The primary role of an economic paradigm in shaping relations in other spheres of life including social, cultural and political spheres is fundamental to Marx. Marx focused on the distribution of resources and control of 'the means of production' as the determinant in 'class struggle' (1848, p. 3).

In some ways, Marx was one of the first grounded theorists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). His materialism and search for root causes of societal problems focused on material conditions, the creativity of human beings intervening in the world, crafting the world. In contrast to Hegel (1977), whose idealism viewed the world as the product of ideas and thinking, Marx understood that practical creative activity in the world gave rise to ideas:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men(sic), the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men(sic), appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour.

(Marx, 1846. p.68)

Marx took the opposite view to German philosophy 'which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven' (1846, p. 68). Craib (1997) interprets Marx's economic determinism as 'the idea that the economic organization of society is the most important level of social organization' (p. 13). The primacy of material conditions and economic determinism in Marx, is similarly corroborated by Giroux, who suggests that the cultural sphere in orthodox Marxist theory is considered 'a mere reflex of the economic realm' (1992, p. 22). It is this 'focus on the distribution of material goods and resources' which Young criticises in Marxism, because it 'restricts the scope of justice, because it fails to bring social structures and institutional contexts under evaluation' (1990, p. 20). In this

thesis the institutional context of community education is one aspect of the research. Marx's view of inequality deriving from a 'class struggle' (1848, p 15) over control of the economic means of production, is according to Young 'too narrow and too general' (1990, p. 21). Community education employs a multifaceted analysis of inequality, based on resource distribution, yes, but on other grounds also, including, gender, age, race and ethnicity, creed and sexual orientation.

This fundamental position of Marx, which has pivotal influence on critical theory, conceives people as creative rather than passive, 'productively active', shapers of the 'social structure and State' rather than being shaped by it (1846, p. 68). Marx was also a constructivist thinker to the extent that people had agentic power to change history. This is a central idea which has influenced the thinking of critical theorists, and in turn, adult critical educators alike. Much of the conversation among adult and community educators has been about attending to the structures of society and bringing about change at that level as a means to creating a more just and equal society.

it is a mark of Marx's greatness as a thinker that he was able to work with both sides of a dualism which still haunts and I think inevitably must haunt social theory – that between action and structure. As many have done since, he begins by talking about human action and moves into an analysis of the structure created by human action, and which in turn determines human action;

(Craib, 1997, p. 38)

The themes of structure and agency (action) are central themes in this thesis, in particular in relation to institution and worker, the VEC as an educational structure, and the community educator as agent of change or 'change worker' which is explored in later chapters.

Critical theorists draw upon and advance Marxist analysis of injustice and the structural dimensions of that injustice. Whilst Marx may have concentrated on material conditions and unequal control of resources to explain alienation, other critical theorists focused on sites and dynamics of oppression in the political, cultural, educational and institutional spheres as we see throughout this chapter.

Understanding critical theory

Brookfield offers a framework for using the tool of critical theory in adult learning (2005, pp. 2-56). Critical theory ‘draws on Marxist scholarship’ (p. 2) to explain why a blatantly unjust world order involving global inequality and the exploitation of the many by the few, is tolerated as normal. The role of adult and community education in terms of critical theory is to raise awareness of this unjust order, to challenge it and ultimately change it.

Three of Brookfield’s tasks for critical theory are relevant in this research. Firstly, ideological discourses which have power to shape the context within which community education operates are uncovered using Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’. In chapter two, we will see how the economic discourse impacts on the meaning and purpose of community education in official text. Secondly, the pursuit of liberation in modern struggles, can be considered in the light of Gramsci’s ideas about the role of ‘organic intellectuals’ (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 131-153). There are useful similarities between Gramsci’s organic intellectuals and today’s community educators and indeed Freire’s ‘radicals’ (1973, pp. 10-12; 1970, p. 21). Freire’s elaboration of liberatory pedagogy and praxis, has global influence on the pedagogical practice in adult and community education, along with feminist pedagogies. Thirdly, Bourdieu’s analysis of educational reproduction and its impact in the field of power is useful for interpreting the community educator’s position in the institution.

What stands out for me in terms of ‘really useful knowledge’ is the analysis which critical theory offers, the disposition of ‘self-criticality’ inherent to critical theory (Giroux, 1983, pp. 15-20; Brookfield, 2005, p. 33). It offers possibility, a vision of a more just world order, and the commitment to praxis (reflection and action) to bring about this change. As a community educator I am challenged to ‘getting my hands dirty’ (as Brookfield suggests below) to concretise theory, to ground it in lived experience, to make theory really useful for people in community.

To turn one’s back on matters of practice and separate these from theoretical analysis is a denial of the idea of praxis – the constant intersection of opposites such as analysis and action – that is so central to the critical theory tradition. A refusal of theorists to dirty their hands with the specifics of practice is epistemologically untenable.

(Brookfield, 2005, p.10)

Critical theory is not a grand theory, but a community of critical thinkers, with particular perspectives speaking to particular realities, sharing the common strand of criticality. I would argue that its theoretical usefulness resides in its grounding. It allows for reshaping, rethinking in light of new realities, through engagement with the messy situations of real people and the generative themes affecting their lives, but always with the thread of criticality.

Gramsci, hegemony and education

Why Gramsci and why are his ideas useful in community education? In this thesis I argue that a plethora of meanings attributed to community education may render it meaningless (DES, 2000, p. 110). I am interested in asserting a clear meaning and purpose for community education work and exploring this with practitioners in the research. Antonio Gramsci, the early 20th Century Italian socialist, trade unionist and political activist may lend some help in this project. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is really useful knowledge here in explaining how meaning can become subjugated, subsumed or rendered invisible in the shadow of a dominant ideology.

According to Gramsci, hegemony refers to the means by which a consensus around a particular ideology is maintained, for example, capitalism, and how, even those who benefit least from its policies, will blindly support it: It is 'the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 145).

Brookfield highlights how hegemony is deeply linked to education (2005, p. 97); reminding us of Gramsci's contention that:

the educational relationship should not be restricted to the field of strictly "scholastic" relationships...Every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship.

(Gramsci, 1971, p. 665)

This thesis explores how the hegemony of ‘neo-liberalism’ and ‘new managerialism’ in the education sphere impacts on the meaning we attribute to community education³. This aspect of the research will focus on the relative priorities in education between vocational, technical training and upskilling on the one hand, and critical social analysis, political activism and community development on the other, and how this dichotomy impacts on community education.

Brookfield describes hegemony as ‘powerful yet adaptable, able to reconfigure itself, skilfully incorporate resistance’ (2005, p. 45). Neo-liberalism is gaining hegemonic power in education and this is discussed in detail in chapter two. Education is becoming commodified as evidenced in ‘current trends in higher education policy, theory and practice’ which ‘frequently leads to narrow conceived and economistic forms of vocationalism and competence’ (Thompson, 2000). Adult critical and community education plays a crucial role in asserting this ‘counter-hegemony’ of social purpose meaning in education (Williams, 1977, pp. 112-113).

In Ireland, the hegemony of an economic paradigm is evident in public policy-making despite a hard lesson in economic recession in recent times. This policy shapes the discourse in education:

It is essential that the education and training system is aligned with future skills needs... It is now widely accepted that the return to economic growth will be export-led and based on improvements in productivity...
Current high unemployment...highlights the imperative to upskill and re-skill large numbers of people to other sectors of the economy that will drive economic growth.
(Halligan, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, April 2011, p. 1)

The economy and economic growth are seen as ends in themselves in public discourse channelled through the media. There is no doubt that economic growth is good to the extent it also contributes to social solidarity objectives in a fair society, where fruits of growth are fairly distributed. Some critical economists observe that this rarely happens and actually question the pursuit of economic growth (Korten, 2009; Douthwaite, 1992). Fleming (2010) argues the case for interrogating neo-liberalism, stating that ‘what is happening in

³ New Managerialism refers to the arrival of the competitive business style into the education system. The world of business in neo-liberalism is associated with market-share, competition, leading the field in product, quality assurance, which translates to CEO style university presidents, research and development on behalf of the world of business, prestige and university league tables e.g. top 100 universities.

the economy is indeed very important but in Irish adult education circles it is under-discussed and under-studied' (p. 1). Spring (1998) observes:

OECD experts want knowledge to be measured according to its contribution to economic growth. In contrast, Confucius and Plato were interested in determining the ability of individuals to create moral and just societies.

(Spring, 1998, p. 168)

Neo-liberalism and similar orthodoxies, new public management and new managerialism in its wake, represent the 'infiltration of capital' into the 'lifeworld' shaping political, administrative and public organisations (Habermas, 1992, p. 66). These gain traction through 'hegemony', the 'process by which people learn to live and love the dominant system of beliefs' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 96) posing a challenge to the social purpose meaning of community education. Conflicted meaning between economic and social purposes were discussed in the focus groups and are outlined in chapter four.

Foucault and the meaning of struggle

Community education in the present is viewed with an eye to its past history in popular struggle. The evolution of community education, it is argued here, is closely bound up with struggle, connected in particular to movements for democratic choice, civil rights, equality, liberation and social justice. In the Irish context, women's community education was part of a wider women's liberation struggle, 'a quiet revolution' (Connolly, L., 2003, p. 196). One of the objectives of this study is to trace the impact of community education's roots in 'struggle' on the practice of community education in Ireland today, to enquire into the history of the present (Foucault, 1972) in community education.

The issues confronting community educators aren't dissimilar to the issues which Foucault's writings confront from an intellectual position; for example marginalisation and exclusion. Foucault (1976) highlights how people deemed outcast, such as those with mental ill health were treated in society. These systems of control and surveillance in prisons and mental hospitals, identified by Foucault, bear resemblance to the patterns of control in modern institutions, including the education system. It is within a tightly controlled education system in terms of accepted knowledge and academic achievement that community education struggles for recognition.

In the introduction, I described how the notion of struggle first surfaced for me in the study. In a lecture delivered on 7th January 1976, Foucault identifies ‘a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts’ for the purpose of establishing ‘a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today.’ (1976a, p. 83).

In chapter two Foucault’s concepts of archaeology, discourse (1972) and genealogy are deployed in exploring community education studies or texts as ‘tools’ used ‘to give some order to history’ (Kendall & Wickham, 1999, p. 22). Archaeology unearths the discourses of struggle in community education, describing the causal conditions which bring these about, the interactions that it engenders and the change that it envisages and sometimes realises. In the context of Ireland, community education is closely linked to the women’s movement and women’s struggle for recognition and equality in a patriarchal and clerical state. Genealogy goes further than a description of struggle to introduce the workings of power into the mix, viewing the struggle in terms of a dynamic of power relations. Much of the discourse of community education in its past and present concerns the centrality of empowerment of the disempowered.

If we were to characterise it in two terms, then ‘archaeology’ would be the appropriate methodology of this analysis of local discursivities, and ‘genealogy’ would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play.

(Foucault, 1976a, p. 85)

Some of the local discursivities which have circulated in the subjugated educational space of community education in Ireland are about struggle for ‘recognition, resources and a representative structure’ (AONTAS, 2004, p. 7). Some discursivities in common with adult education include the ‘Cinderella’ and ‘wilderness’ status of community education (Murtagh, 2009, p. 107; Barry et al., 2001, p. 26; Brady, 2003, p. 71) and the relationship of community education to mainstream education. The efforts of campaigners (including AONTAS and Community Groups) to achieve these successes form part of this genealogy. It uncovers some of the interactions and tactics which brought the subjugated knowledge of community education to gain greater status and recognition. The genealogical enquiry asks if the State’s door has been opened wider to community education? It asks whether the

glass fence, which created a distinct boundary between mainstream education and adult and community education, has been removed to any extent? (Connolly, 2001, p. 7).

The Community Educator and Critical Pedagogy

In this section, I explore the theoretical framework underpinning the practice and role of community educators. Critical pedagogy is particularly significant here, especially with reference to Freire. In the introduction chapter, I highlighted the significance of Freire's ideas of 'generative theme' and 'banking' versus 'problem-posing' education, and how Freire's central ideas have been grounded in the work of Hope and Timmel in an African context (1995). In this section, I consider the role Freire's critical pedagogy plays in community education, how feminist critique of critical pedagogy has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the practice, and how Gramsci's idea of the 'organic intellectual' is a useful model for understanding and researching the role of the community educator.

Freire's liberatory pedagogy in the toolkit of community education

As already discussed, Freire's theoretical ideas regarding problem-posing education (1970, p. 60), the dialectical process of reflection and action on a 'generative theme' (p. 77) affecting a community, leading to action for change, have proved effective tools in community education work. Freire uses the concept of praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (1970, p. 33).

In my own practice, critical pedagogy has been the basis for working with adults in community development and community education. Freire's work is viewed variously as theoretical, political, and revolutionary. Globally renowned, Freire's praxis is now widely applied (Sheehy, 2001; Hope & Timmel, 1995; Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989; Freire & Macedo, 1987) but has fallen foul of a tendency in some academic circles to co-opt the work as a stand-alone method:

critical pragmatism has encouraged a scepticism regarding any attempt to plunder methods and approaches that are apparently successful in one political context (such as Freire's approach to conscientisation and problem-posing education developed in rural northeast Brazil) and then to parachute them into quite different settings (such as American colleges and universities).

(Brookfield, 2005, p. 38)

In Freire's writings, the background of oppression experienced by the majority of the population in his native Brazil and throughout South America is analysed and explained in Marxist terms. It is a milieu of 'dehumanization which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also those who have stolen it' (1970, p. 26). The 'oppressed' and the 'oppressor' share in this dehumanisation. Freire's work was aimed at transforming the reality of lost humanity, injustice and oppression.

To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognise its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.

(Freire, 1970, p. 29)

Education is at the centre of this transformative work. Freire distinguished between 'banking education' (1970, p.54) and 'problem-posing' education (p. 60). The former treats students as receptacles for pre-packaged deposits of knowledge, whilst the latter engenders criticality in students, raising consciousness through reflection on the reality of their lives. In the problem-posing approach to education, students become agents of their own transformation, realising social change in their communities and the wider society. Problem-posing education turns the banking method of education on its head. No longer objects playing a passive role in the world, students become active participants, 'critical co-investigators' (Freire, 1970, p. 87), subjects transforming their world.

In my own practice, Freirean-inspired pedagogies have enabled me as a facilitator to problematise human experience, to search for root causes of surface problems, poverty, discrimination and power. Freire's problem-posing education is liberatory. It poses the unequal distribution of wealth and power as problems to do with the structures in society. It involves a process of dialogue engaging educator and educatee in a co-investigation of generative themes which will 'be most educational when it is most critical' (Freire, 1970, p. 89).

Feminist critique of critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy has been the subject of feminist critique and this is a welcome contribution. My argument here draws on a refreshing and challenging collection of writings by feminist educators working with critical pedagogy (Gore, 1992; Ellsworth, 1992 & Lather, 1991). Critical pedagogy has been challenged for presenting as a 'one-size-

fits-all' or as Ellsworth points out, a 'master discourse' (1992, p. 112), a panacea for all oppressions. Freire's pedagogy has been criticized for its over-reliance on class oppression, whilst ignoring 'gender, race and sexuality' (Mayo, 1999, p. 113). The relevance of this critique for the role of the community educator in this research points to our need to practice critical reflexivity. It also reminds us to continually rethink our practice and its relevance in grounded experiences and particularities, rather than accepting a 'uniform' concept of oppression (Ryan, 2001, p. 67).

Feminist education has a strong commitment to 'theorising of self' (Gore & Luke, p. 6). Feminist critique of critical pedagogy expresses a commitment to theorising from lived experience of oppressive situations, and reminds us of the variation of situations, as opposed to a totalising of oppression.

To assert multiple perspectives in this way is not to draw attention away from the distinctive realities and effects of the oppression by simply claiming, "we are all oppressed." Rather, it is to clarify oppression by preventing "oppressive simplifications," and insisting that it be understood and struggled against contextually.

(Ellsworth, 1992, p. 114)

Ellsworth's contribution (1992) is particularly significant. She writes from her experience as a campus course co-ordinator, handling an incident of racial harassment against one of her students. Having drawn up a course in response to institutional racism, Ellsworth turned to critical pedagogy for direction. She identified a number of significant limitations in critical pedagogy up to the late 1980s. Critical pedagogy, as presented in academic articles conveyed a disconnect between the practice in specific struggles and the theory underpinning it (1992, p. 92). Ellsworth problematises the universalizing of the language of critical pedagogy, as though it will act as means for challenging all sites of struggle such as sexism, racism, ageism, and ableism.

Ellsworth expresses three specific criticisms of critical pedagogy which have particular relevance in the present study. These concern the themes of educator role, empowerment and male privilege in critical pedagogy, the latter having particular relevance to men and community education.

Firstly, Ellsworth identifies McLaren and Giroux among the ‘critical pedagogues’ who fail to interrogate their own practice and role as educators in critically reflexive ways. She argues that critical pedagogues ‘place teachers/professors at the centre of the consciousness-raising activity’ (Ellsworth, 1992, p. 103). She challenges McLaren’s view that because teachers lack a critical pedagogy then it follows students won’t think critically as well (McLaren, 1992).

Secondly, Ellsworth argues that critical pedagogues present an understanding of empowerment which is unspecific and somewhat shallow:

...critical pedagogues consistently answer the question of “empowerment for what?” in ahistorical and depoliticized abstractions....As a result, student empowerment has been defined in the broadest possible humanistic terms, and becomes a “capacity to act effectively” in a way that fails to challenge any identifiable social or political position, institution or group.

(Ellsworth, 1992, p.99)

Thirdly, Ellsworth reaffirms that ‘feminists have pointed to the necessity for men to “do their own work” at unlearning sexism and male privilege, rather than looking to women for the answers’ (p.104). This final criticism is particularly relevant to an important issue of the position of men in community education. Whilst the literature of critical pedagogy is predominantly male-authored, it is ironic that men have been less engaged as participants in the classrooms and community halls of critical pedagogy. As we will see, this is particularly evident in community education in Ireland. Men could be considered the ‘final frontier’ of community education work. Ellsworth’s call on behalf of feminists, is finally being heeded by a small but significant minority of men working in the sector of men’s development work (The Men’s Development Network, 2011).

Therefore, the contribution of feminist critique to critical pedagogy and our understanding of the role of the community educator is to emphasise the need for critical reflexivity and adaptability in the role and practice of community education.

Critical pedagogy around the world

Freire was deeply influenced by the theology of liberation (Gutierrez, 1977) which was a powerful intellectual force for critical thinking, consciousness raising and political revolution in Latin America at the time. The moral argument for making an ‘option for the

poor' (Gutierrez, 1977) was very strong in liberation theology at the time and this is reflected in Freire's thinking concerning the 'radical' worker:

...the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it...This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history to fight at their side...The pedagogy of the oppressed is a task for radicals.

(Freire, 1970, p. 21)

Freire worked in a context where many radicals were making this option of taking up the struggle of the disempowered, living and working alongside them in the *favelas* of the Brazilian cities. The biographies of Freire and Gramsci and other thinkers in the critical tradition, tell of similar choices leading to collisions with the establishment. These obviously influenced their political stances in telling ways. Freire's arrest following the 1964 coup in Brazil (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 31) and subsequent exile, and Gramsci's lifetime incarceration, turned out to be moments of creative transformation rather than despair. The experiences may have inculcated empathy for others unjustly treated as well as driving their quest for change. In this section, a number of educators who broadly share the sense of commitment evident in Freire's liberatory pedagogy, are reviewed with the intention of identifying the practical features of community education work and its further theoretical iterations globally.

The contrasts between themes experienced in first world countries and third world countries are stark in terms of scale, yet Freire's problem-posing education, or approaches closely related to it are to be found across the globe.

Hope and Timmel have pioneered an application of Freirean critical pedagogy in an African context. The thesis methodology incorporates their models for analysis of generative themes. Their classic handbook for community workers *Training for Transformation* (Hope & Timmel, 1995) has been a significant resource for a generation of

development workers and community educators in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Ireland⁴.

The praxis methodology of reflection and action on a generative themes is illustrated in the *Training for Transformation* handbook. As outlined in the introduction, this involves the use of codifications such as picture, role play, story or symbol to represent the generative themes back to the community (1995a, pp. 53-119). These form the basis for consciousness-raising in the community. Freire used the concept of ‘conscientisation’ (1970, p. 85) to refer to this process. Following codification and decodification, the investigation of themes proceeds through dialogue and analysis of root causes, leading ultimately to possible solutions to the issue and concrete action for change. This dialogic process is used in the focus groups of this enquiry as a research tool rather than a specific learning tool.

Connell’s account in an Australian context of an education from the ‘standpoint’ of ‘subordinated’ groups (1993, pp. 39-40) shares much of Freirean epistemology, though he may not have been a direct influence. Connell’s account of the work of the Disadvantaged Schools Programme in Australia regarding ‘compensatory education’ (1993, p. 21) has, I believe, relevance to adult and community education. Compensatory education is a response in support of those for whom education has been a lost opportunity, in particular young people who are disengaged from mainstream education. He called for a change in the ‘kind of education being provided’ (1993, p.18), what he termed the ‘hegemonic curriculum’:

In *Making the Difference* we called this the ‘hegemonic curriculum’ in Western school systems not only because it holds a dominant position within the schools, but also because it helps to generate and reinforce class hierarchy in the society as a whole. (Connell, 1993, p. 34)

The potential links between Connell’s ideas and the relationship of formal and informal community education in Ireland suggest a number of paths. Firstly, Connell is speaking here about schools, which is the main business of the VECs in the Irish context. Secondly, Connell speaks about compensatory education which describes similar programmes

⁴ Partners, Training for Transformation is a facilitation and training resource organization which has worked in the community development and voluntary sector in Ireland and the UK using the TTF approach developed by Hope and Timmel. (www.trainingfortransformation.ie).

delivered through VECs in Ireland through Youthreach, VTOS and BTEI. Thirdly, Connell is concerned with students who have derived less benefit from education due to a failure of the system to accommodate the needs of students from less privileged backgrounds and different cultures. These are similar to the communities of students with whom VECs work.

Connell charts a course which could lead to a changed curriculum. It involves constructing knowledge from 'the standpoint' of 'subordinated' groups in society (1993, pp.39-40). The issues affecting students (similar to Freire's generative themes) become the starting point of the curriculum. Similarly, through engagement with people in communities affected by disadvantage, and supporting the telling of their story, community education can move beyond adaptive responses or compensatory education, toward an education based on social justice. Such an education valorises 'the interests of the least advantaged', promotes inclusive 'participation and common schooling' and recognises the 'historical production of inequality' (Connell, 1993, p. 47). Connell claims that an education system which creates unequal outcomes actually diminishes everyone. Such education is 'a corrupted education' (1993, p. 15).

If the school system is dealing unjustly with some of its pupils, they are not the only ones to suffer. The equality of education for all the others is degraded.

(Connell, 1993, p. 15)

What happens in schools is symptomatic of what can occur in other sectors of education including adult and community education. The Green Paper on Adult Education (DES, 1998) envisaged a role for community education in influencing the 'mainstream practice' (p. 88). Connell's work on social justice in schools is therefore instructive in this regard for adult and community education, not just formal schooling. Education which privileges the culture, lifestyle, and values of the better-off in society, the white middle class, tends to place their life experience and knowledge in a superior position to that of people classed as 'other' (Young, 1990, p. 59 & p. 88). A system which caters only for the needs of the already-privileged, diminishes the opportunity for learning about difference and limits the interaction among people from different cultural, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds (Reay, 2006; Ball, 1997).

Returning to the parallel links which Connell's work suggests for the Irish context, (in particular his concept of compensatory education), it is worth noting again, that the VEC is

uniquely positioned as an educational authority with a role and remit in almost every sector of education apart from pre-school and third level. The potential therefore for the institution to draw on this considerable reservoir of experience to take a lead in constructing a critical curriculum from the standpoint of subordinated communities participating in its programmes is enormous. The discourses of ‘formal school’ and ‘informal community’ within the VEC are considered later in chapter six.

Community educators as organic intellectuals

In this chapter I have been considering the source literature with a bearing on community education in terms of meaning, role and institution. As a concluding theme of this section, I would like to offer the idea of the ‘organic intellectual’ (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 134-147) as a bridge linking the worker and the institution, the practitioner and provider in community education. The organic intellectual is one of Gramsci’s most popular concepts and one which I believe, proves fertile ground for research.

Gramsci was aware of the ‘awe’ with which traditional intellectuals were regarded. These included predominantly “ecclesiastics” (1971, p.137) and “noblesse da robe” (p. 138) attached to the monarchy. These traditional intellectuals viewed themselves “as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group” (p.138). It was a source of honour for a family in Gramsci’s community to have a member become an intellectual:

The peasant always thinks that at least one of his sons could become an intellectual (especially a priest), thus becoming a gentleman and raising the social level of the family by facilitating its economic life through the connections which he is bound to acquire with the rest of the gentry.

(Gramsci, 1971, p.148)

Mayo (1999) describes Gramsci’s organic intellectuals as ‘either the thinking and organising functionaries of a dominant class attempting to maintain its hegemony, or alternatively, those of a subaltern class striving to create an alternative hegemony’ (p.85).

According to Brookfield, Gramsci viewed organic intellectuals as fulfilling a number of roles:

organisers, persuaders and opinion leaders who work either to reproduce dominant ideology and secure the status quo or to bring the masses to critical consciousness by organising their involvement in political struggle, primarily through the revolutionary party.

(Brookfield, 2005, p. 109).

Gramsci advocated the formation of intellectuals of the subaltern classes, and spelled this out to the extent that prison censorship allowed him.

One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing toward dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer “ideologically” the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals.

(Gramsci, 1971, p. 142)

In the opening chapters of the thesis, the role of early outreach instructors in the VECs in Ireland is recalled. There is an interesting confluence between the modern day role of the community educator and that of the outreach instructors in the early days of the VEC in Ireland. This confluence could be extended as a research line based on Gramsci’s ideas about organic intellectuals, to produce role models for community educators today. This research could draw upon the worker educators who were the organic intellectuals in the trade unions of Gramsci’s day.

Mayo finds an equivalent role to Gramsci’s organic intellectual in Freire’s work whom Mayo names ‘agents of change’ (1999, p. 68). As mentioned, Freire himself spoke of ‘radicals’ (1970, p. 21) working alongside the oppressed groups in communities. Giroux uses the term ‘border crosser’ (p. 66) and Mayo refers to the ‘transformative intellectual’ (Mayo, 1999, p. 68):

The task of the educator is to learn the culture and community which partly constitutes the social location of the learner....he or she would move across the border that demarcates one’s social location in order to understand and act in solidarity with learner(s)

(Mayo, 1999, p. 66)

Community education facilitators (CEFs) in the VEC are the majority of research participants in this study along with activists of the AONTAS community education network. Throughout the research I refer to them collectively as community educators, the modern equivalents of the organic intellectuals. It is a role which is of particular interest in the research. Freire cautioned against identifying with the role ‘facilitator’ in favour of ‘teacher’ in his dialogue with Macedo (1995, p. 377). It was a ‘laissez-faire pedagogy’ or

‘non-directive’ approach which Freire rejected (pp. 377-378). However, in the Irish context, facilitation is viewed more favourably:

a developmental educational method which encourages people to share ideas, resources, opinions and to think critically in order to identify needs and find effective ways of satisfying those needs.

(Prendiville, 2004, p. 13)

Whilst Freire always identified as a teacher, in the Irish context, the negative experience of teaching in the past, often associated with put-downs and cruelty, meant that groups on the margins of society welcomed a facilitative approach to teaching which valued their participation in education. Later, I will discuss Freire’s rejection of a neutral education, linked to a neutral approach to facilitation.

The common value in these variously described roles is a commitment to communities affected by poverty and inequality. Choosing an educator role in this tradition, can inevitably lead to oppositional stances with the established order. Freire describes ‘keeping one foot inside the system and the other foot outside’ (1985, p. 178) and it is this notion, negotiating a radical educator position within a mainstream educational institution, which is our third research interest in this thesis. It is now time to cross the bridge from worker to institution.

Institution, Recognition, Reproduction and Power

The rationale for focusing on institution as the third aspect of the research was set out in the introduction and points to my interest in the notion of the community worker as the radical insider or critical insider. There are many vantage points from which we can begin exploring this critical stance within the educational institution and in this section these theoretical standpoints are described and applied to the educational institution. The study focuses on the VEC, but it is hoped the research will reveal lessons for engagement with other institutions in the educational and other fields.

Honneth and the struggle for recognition

The role of the educational institution in ascribing recognition to different sectors and practices in education forms part of the third aspect of this enquiry. The VEC was

described in the introduction to the thesis in terms of its structures and its position as part of Ireland's educational establishment for the past one hundred years. In chapter two, it is argued that the early history of the VEC attests to its critical role in providing a recognised education for those who were marginalised in mainstream education, who could not afford post-primary education in the academic institutions run by the Catholic church. Recognition of community education is a key theme in this thesis and the relative currency of community education as a field of practice in education is considered in the research.

Honneth (1995) was concerned with the ways individuals experience different kinds of recognition and conversely how disrespect in social interaction is directly related to these kinds of recognition. It is the experience of disrespect which provides the impetus for what he terms a 'struggle for recognition'. Building on earlier 'philosophical reconstruction of ethical communities' (1995, p. 67), a project unfinished by Hegel and drawing on aspects of Mead's social psychology, Honneth identifies three forms of recognition, 'love, rights and esteem' (1995, p. 1) and these provide a useful framework for analysing institutional aspects of recognition particularly in relation to esteem, which for Honneth is sought by individuals 'over and above' love giving them self-confidence and rights giving them self-respect.

This social esteem is the degree to which 'abilities and achievements' (p. 122) of individuals are recognised among one another. Social esteem is sought and gained 'intersubjectively' (p. 122). Where individuals or particular groups on the margins of society experience disrespect in the form of denigration of their way of life and achievements, for example the Irish Traveller community or the working class; then this denial will lead to group and individual struggles for recognition to gain 'a measure of self-esteem, that can be found in the solidaristic acceptance and social regard of an individual's abilities and way of life' (Honneth, 2001, pp. 49-50). Social esteem generates solidarity:

The practical relation-to-self that such an experience of recognition allows individuals to attain is thus a feeling of group-pride or collective honour. In the internal relations of such groups, forms of interaction normally take on the character of relationships of solidarity.

(Honneth, 1995, p. 128)

The engagement with community educators in this research will explore solidarity as another sensitising concept (Charmaz, 2006, p. 16). Applied to community education, Honneth's framework may illuminate intersubjective relations among community educators in terms of how they assess the recognition value of their role and practice of community education. Put simply, the interest here is whether practitioners feel esteemed in their role, what place the practice occupies in the institution in comparison to other educational work, and how this is mediated in the policy approach of the Department of Education and the VEC toward community education.

Bourdieu: misrecognition and reproduction in education

Whilst Honneth devoted extensive philosophical enquiry and research to the concept of recognition, Bourdieu was concerned with misrecognition among other concepts. Bourdieu conceived of misrecognition in relation to symbolic capital, those forms of capital sometimes correlated with economic capital. Symbolic capital in the form of social capital, cultural capital (Grenfell, 2008, p. 103) and indeed academic capital (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 37) tended to be accumulated by those bearing economic advantage, but was misrecognised or concealed as though the bearers were more intelligent, talented or naturally gifted than others. In other words, advantage in these spheres due to greater shares of economic capital was concealed by misrecognition.

In the case of schooling, a field extensively researched by Bourdieu and the key educational activity of the VEC sector in Ireland, academic capital as it is distributed in schooling is a deeply relevant concept. The VEC's role in academic capital distribution at the level of the post-primary school in Ireland impacts on the conception of academic capital in other domains of education including adult and community education. The misrecognition of academic capital as something gained by those pupils deemed more intelligent as opposed to being more rich is an example of the 'symbolic violence' central to Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition (1996, p. 31).

Whilst there would be a consciousness in VECs of its student body coming from mainly working class communities affected by disadvantage, 'those with low basic literacy and numeracy skills and those seeking second-chance education' (IVEA, 2009, p. 3), there would seem to be less critical analysis within the institution of the wider structural

inequality in the Irish education system giving rise to this skewed distribution of academic capital. The extent to which this is due to misrecognition by the VEC of symbolic forms of capital among its learner communities is explored in chapter six using Bourdieu's concepts of field, power and capital and their relative distributions.

capital always owes part of its capacity to become recognized, in other words, to become misrecognized as capital through conversion into better concealed forms of capital, such as works of art or education.

(Bourdieu, 1996, p. 318)

Pierre Bourdieu's work on reproduction in education (1996, 1977) together with his core concepts of social and cultural capital and their influence in the field of power, is, I believe, a useful theoretical lens for this purpose. Bourdieu's theoretical position, is that elite institutions within the education system are implicated in reproductive processes, bestowing educational privilege on the already-privileged classes. Bourdieu compares the educational institution as a cognitive machine 'a simple machine that, receiving products hierarchised according to an implicit social classification, reproduces products hierarchised according to an explicit academic classification' (1996, p. 36). In this way, elite educational institutions are deeply implicated in reproducing the social order in the field of power, thus maintaining a status quo.

we must endeavor to apprehend the field of the 'grandes ecoles' as such, a field whose functioning as a structure contributes to the reproduction of the structure of social space and the structure of the field of power.

(1996, p. 139)

The institutional aspect of this research examines the position held by the VEC in the 'field of power' (Bourdieu, 1996, p.263). In what ways might the institution reproduce and/or disrupt educational inequality (Lynch, 1999; Baker et al., 2004)? VEC schools in Ireland would hardly compare to the elite institutions to which Bourdieu referred, the 'grande ecoles' (1996, p. 302). However, the application of Bourdieu's theoretical framework to an interrogation of the vocational education committee system in Ireland has some merit. The perception that the VEC is well positioned in the 'field of power' may be explained by the structural organisation and scope of the VEC, its legislative recognition and status, its executive and reserved functions and its position in the field of education in Ireland today.

The presence of locally-elected public representatives on the committees and a legislative power structure adds prestige to the body.

The State's recognition of the role of the VEC is reflected in the increasing 'homage' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 46) paid to the institution by the state, given its status as one of a few non-ecclesiastical providers of educational services. For example, at a time when the Catholic Church is under strain to meet the demands of school patronage, and when there is increasing opposition to church control of primary schools, the VEC and other organizations such as Educate Together, position themselves to provide these services should the State require. As described in the introduction chapter, the VEC has tended to find more favour with governments in recent times as a candidate for primary provision than Educate Together.

I would argue that the VEC is viewed by the state as a reliable, durable and representative player in education. The reputation of the VEC as a provider of adult and community education is also well established. The position of the VEC in the field of educational power is therefore expanding in terms of its growing remit and influence. It is uniquely the only locally-based educational institution in Ireland with an administrative role spanning the primary, post-primary, adult and community education sectors.

Bourdieu's extensive research documented in *The State Nobility* (1996) describes the elite higher educational institutions in France '...grandes ecoles... "elite schools", institutions entrusted with the education and consecration of those who are called to enter the field of power.' (p. 74). Bourdieu argues that the 'grandes ecoles' serve to reproduce the existing power structures in society. Dominant groups in society, the middle class, send their children to these elite institutions which are predisposed to receive them and inculcate in them the prescribed academic capital required to take up higher positions within the field of power (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In Bourdieu's theory, academic capital adds to the students' cultural and economic capital and has significant impact on future life choices and positioning in the field of power.

the structure of social space as observed in advanced societies is the product of two fundamental principles of differentiation – economic capital and cultural capital – the educational institution, which plays a critical role in the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital and thus in the reproduction of the structure of social

space, has become a central stake in the struggle for the monopoly on dominant positions.

(Bourdieu, 1996, p. 5)

As stated earlier, VEC schools hardly fit into the same category of elite schools referred to by Bourdieu. If anything, schools in the VEC sector in Ireland cater for students from poorer families and communities. This has been the case historically and is discussed further in the context of ‘college/tech’ and ‘church/state’ historical discourses in chapter two. Far from following the Christian ethic of the option for the poor, the Church looked after the needs of the more ‘academic’ students from better off backgrounds. In chapter six, the radical position of the VEC in meeting the educational needs of marginalised students is discussed further.

Bourdieu’s contribution has exposed the dynamics of reproduction which perpetuate inequality. He had little faith that the educational institution would disrupt this dynamic:

It was necessary to bury the myth of the “school as liberating force” ...in order to perceive the educational institution in the true light of its social uses, as one of the foundations of domination and of the legitimization of domination.

(Bourdieu, 1996, p. 5)

Bourdieu has been criticised for the ‘structural determinism’ in his work (McLeod, 2005, p.15). I would look beyond Bourdieu toward Freire for theoretical inspiration which offers a more transformative approach to resurrecting the school or educational institution as a liberating force.

The focus on the school is relevant here because the business of school is the business of the VEC, and I argue that the formal sector has an impact on the manner with which the VEC approaches the business of community education. I develop this theme in chapter six. The question posed at the outset concerning the VEC and whether it disrupts or reproduces the relative positions of the dominant and dominated groups in society, between middle and working classes in equality terms, is an area which has received little research focus. To address these themes of reproduction and power in social space, this research will interrogate the role of the VEC drawing on the perspective of community education facilitators CEFs who work in the VECs. The insights of community educators, the present

day organic intellectuals, and the space they occupy as educators in the VEC will provide a clearer picture of the institution and its relationship with community education.

Foucault: surveillance and power

Foucault's concepts of surveillance and power give depth and breadth to an analysis of institutions in the educational field. These concepts derived from Foucault's thought concerning the origins and workings of modern institutions such as the prison (Foucault, 1979) and the asylum (Foucault, 1976) are most relevant in this context. In both practical and deeply philosophical ways, Foucault offers insights into the thinking which explains architecture and construction of the 'military camp' (1979, p. 171), 'the hospital building' and 'the school building' (p. 172). He describes a system of hierarchical observation where an 'infinitely scrupulous concern with surveillance is expressed in the architecture by innumerable petty mechanisms.' (p. 173). Surveillance became supervision, an instrument of disciplinary power in education and the workplace.

There are resonances with Bourdieu's conception of power to be found in Foucault's work. Foucault's view that 'power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed as a thing' (1979, p. 177) but rather is 'exercised, and that it only exists by actions' (1976a, p. 89) suggests that power circulates in social space. Similar to Bourdieu, the idea of field appears in Foucault's description of the circulation of power in a 'permanent and continuous field' (1979, p. 177). In contrast to Bourdieu's more pessimistic view of power as a guarded possession acquired by those possessing abundant capital, the fluidity of power is an optimistic aspect of Foucault's thought, suggesting that power can be exercised by agents in strategic ways irrespective of their position in the field of power.

In chapter two, the discourse of control is one of the discourses considered in relation to the function of community education. Using discourse analysis that draws on Foucault's methods, it will be argued that this discourse operates at both community and state institutional and structural levels and concerns who ultimately controls the management and direction of community education in Ireland.

Surveillance and control are obviously connected and combine to maintain an order in social systems such as penal institutions, illness institutions and educational institutions. Caluya (2010) cautions against simply confining Foucault's contribution in surveillance

studies to his discussion of observatory architecture, particularly the panopticon, the all-seeing structure developed by Bentham (Foucault, 1979, p. 200). Caluya points to one of Foucault's key arguments which informs our understanding of power and would have some relevance to the role of the community educator negotiating their position in the educational institution. This is the notion that surveillance in its structural form has the effect of inducing 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (Foucault 1979, cited in Caluya, 2010, p. 624). In other words an external gaze becomes internalised so that it permeates and penetrates the social system and all who function within it.

The role of the community educator as we have seen may at times embrace elements of opposition and resistance to state authorities in education or industry with a role in influencing educational policy. This oppositional stance to the institutions is in keeping with the radical tradition of community education which challenges hegemonic paradigms which colonise education for capitalist purposes. Surveillance and working below the radar are therefore themes familiar to the radical adult and community educator. However, this stance does come with a price and radical community educators are influenced by the surveillance around them. Shor and Freire (1987) discussed the fear of teachers who question the system. 'If you're in the opposition instead of safely inside the establishment consensus (the official curriculum), you risk being fired' (p. 54). They described the loneliness and isolation of oppositional stances in education during the Reagan years in the US in the 1980s and the need to 'investigate this cloud of fear above the teacher's head' (p. 55). Could it be argued that community educators have experienced similar oppressive surveillance? Have they had to exercise self-surveillance to advance the agenda of social justice in established educational sites? These themes are taken up further with community educators in chapter six.

Conclusion

In this chapter the theoretical resources and conceptual framework of the thesis has been outlined providing a springboard to launch the study. It is argued that this amalgam of theorists and their theoretical positions speak more adequately than other epistemologies and theoretical frameworks to the experience of community educators. Community education with a clear meaning and purpose drawing on critical, feminist and egalitarian theories is inextricably linked to its workers, community educators and their pedagogical

practice, and implies a critical role in the institution. In the next chapter, contemporary studies in the Irish and international contexts of community education are reviewed and as such form another layer of literature adding to this theoretical and conceptual framework.

CHAPTER 2 AN EMPOWERING PRACTICE: REVIEW OF DISCOURSES IN COMMUNITY EDUCATION STUDIES & POLICY TEXTS

Researching Community Education: Ireland and Beyond

Ireland, for much of its history, was identified as a peripheral, subordinated and parochial state. Since the 1960s, Ireland's modernisation has aligned it with much of western thought, commerce and culture. In the meantime, we have discarded an inferior identity, adopted a superior 'IrelandInc' identity, leading to our present 'crisis of identity' precipitated by the economic crash of 2008. This crude description attempts to describe a backdrop to the modern discourses concerning education in Ireland. Amidst the 'din' of educational discourse, the strains of an interesting community education dialogue have been filtering through over the past decade or so. This can be found in the pages of academic and research studies, reports and policy documents concerning adult and community education.

At the outset, the relatively small research community in the sector of adult and community education in the Irish context must be acknowledged. Two commentators in the field in Ireland refer to this research gap. Fleming points to the important role of the 'Irish Research Association for Adult and Community Education'⁵ in advancing 'our understanding of teaching and learning' (Connolly, Fleming, McCormack & Ryan, 2007, p. 5). The impetus for the IRAACE is recalled in the association's information sheet:

Difficulties in locating existing research, identifying relevant data sources and accessing funding opportunities for research projects created an impetus to start building a network of researchers.

(AONTAS, 2010).

Brady refers to the 'rather sparse body of research in the area of community education in Ireland' (2009, p. 139).

In this chapter, a range of studies in the community education research field are selected for review. These are selected on the basis of their relevance to the three aspects of the research; meaning, educator and institution in community education. The majority of

⁵ At time of writing, the IRAACE is no longer functioning as an entity due to funding and organizational constraints. However, a core committee membership of nine academic researchers remains, along with many other active researchers in colleges, statutory agencies, NGOs, and community and voluntary sector organizations.

studies are from the Irish research community, but a number have been drawn from the international arena, in particular Scotland. In the Irish context, these studies are drawn from three sources; (i) official statutory sources, government policy statements, the Green Paper and White Papers on Adult Education, (ii) academic studies of the field, in particular the work of adult and community education and women's studies departments in higher education institutions and (iii) the wider research community of practitioners, adult educators and activists working in the field, the non-governmental organisations sector, in particular AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, and contributors to the *Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education*, a joint publication of AONTAS and the Adult Education Officers Association.

The purpose of this review of studies is to identify the discourses evident in the texts of community education, drawing out the significant themes in the Irish narrative. The range of studies include a variety of style; policy, report, narrative, evaluative, theoretical and reflective texts. The review proceeds according to the thematic lines of the thesis. Therefore one study may speak to several of the themes. Also, the criteria for selecting these texts reflect the three thematic lines of the thesis, namely, community education's meaning and ethos, the role of community educators and their connectedness to wider struggles for social justice, and the space community education occupies in the VEC, the educational institution charged with its provision.

A Foucaultian Review of Discourses in Text

The approach used in this review of texts draws on Foucault's theoretical framework of 'discourse' (1972, pp. 21-39), and the analysis of 'statements in the archive' (pp. 106-117). Foucault defines discourse as 'a group of statements...for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined' (p. 117). Foucault views discourse as something more than what is simply written or recorded in history, for example, in the book, or the 'oeuvre of an author' (p. 27), something more than the parameters of a discipline such as psychiatry or an institution such as prison. Discourse points to the context surrounding the formation of 'clinical discourse, economic discourse...psychiatric discourse' (p. 108). In analysing discourse, Foucault was more concerned with 'discerning the rules which govern bodies of texts and utterances' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 123).

In this review the ‘statements’ in the ‘archive’ of community education, texts are traced for discursive elements (Foucault, 1972, pp. 130-131). Statements in the archive of adult and community education such as its ‘marginal’ status and lack of ‘recognition’ frequently appear (O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 493; Bassett, Brady, Fleming & Inglis, 1989, p. 8). For example, authors refer to the ‘cinderella’ status of adult and further education, (Barry et al., 2001, p. 26; Brady & Randle, 1997). In this review, discourses such as these are excavated in the studies selected, with a view to tracing their genealogy in producing our present conceptual understanding of community education.

This review also draws on Foucault’s concept of history which departs from the traditional view of history as ‘periods’ (1972, p. 4) or ‘memory’ (p. 7):

history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorize’ the *monuments* of the past, transform them into documents...in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments.

(Foucault, 1972, p. 7)

Foucault’s approach has been described as a ‘history of the present’ in the sense that ‘the past is just as strange as the present’ (Rose, 1990 cited in Kendall & Wickham, 1999, p.4). His approach is to problematise history, to select a *problem* rather than an historical period for investigation. There are similarities here with Freire’s problem-posing approach to education. Accepted social arrangements are problematised or rendered ‘strange’ (1999, p. 8) such as the use of prison as a punitive institution. In this chapter, discourses which shape the context of community education’s growth and development are similarly problematised, discourses of social and economic purpose, accreditation, power and control.

Review of Discourses of Meaning

The landmark policy texts marking the official recognition of Irish community education by the State are *Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000) and *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning: Green Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 1998) Their development involved what Fleming described as a ‘lengthy consultation process’ (2001, p.27), reflective of the sector’s struggle for recognition dating back to the Murphy Report (DE, 1973). The White Paper represented the culmination of focused

lobbying by AONTAS and a number of women's community education groups for this official recognition.

Lifelong learning is also a policy area supported by the EU. Both policy texts, the Green and White papers make reference to the European Commission's policy papers on lifelong learning; *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* (1995) and *Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (1996). The latest mid-term review report of the European Commission on its lifelong learning programme recommends that more should be done to 'involve those who are outside the formal education and training sector' (2011, p. 8). Further consideration of lifelong learning policy is however beyond the scope of this thesis.

Meaning: Green & White Papers compared

In Ireland, a White Paper represents the state's official policy intent set out by the Government following an earlier Green Paper which serves as a discussion document, setting out broad policy parameters. A comparison of the chapters on community education in the White and Green Papers on Adult Education reveal some similarities and differences. The *Green Paper* (DES, 1998) was published for the purpose of initiating consultation on the future of adult education in Ireland. The *White Paper* (DES, 2000) set out specific proposals by the Government in response to that consultation, identifying the roles of all sectors in adult and community education, their funding arrangements, human resources and structures for the field. This part of the review focuses on the defining elements relevant to community education and the discourses surrounding these official statements. Whilst adult education and community education share similar theoretical and pedagogical characteristics, the distinction lies in community education's location within communities, both geographic and communities of interest.

The discourses of meaning of community education in these texts reveal a contested area, and these struggles of meaning come to the surface occasionally in texts. There is a tension evident in both documents concerning the 'economic purpose' and 'social purpose' (Thompson, 2000) of adult and community education. The Minister's foreword in the Green Paper makes reference to both:

As Ireland faces the challenges of addressing persisting unemployment and disadvantage within a climate of rapid growth, job creation and an increasing

concern with meeting labour shortages, the task of re-skilling and upskilling the workforce becomes an imperative within the framework of a national lifelong learning agenda.

...the demands of the economy will require that the task of renewing the labour force will rely increasingly on those already within it rather than on new entrants to it.

Adult education, however will always be concerned with issues of personal and social enrichment, with improving the democratic process in society and with tackling issues of equity and inclusion as well as with economic considerations.

(DES, 1998, pp.3-4)

The first two statements reflect the economic purpose of adult education. The words which leap out are 'rapid growth', 'job-creation' and 'upskilling'. These are deemed to be 'imperative', but imperative for whom or for what? The statements suggest it is imperative for the needs of the economy more than the needs of the learner. The last of the three statements is firmly rooted in a social purpose meaning of adult education, its equality and democratic role. Whilst the Green Paper 'recommends a balanced approach to adult education' it is considered 'crucial' that in this era of 'rapid economic growth' that 'education and skill deficiencies' should not be barriers to anyone seeking a livelihood (p. 7). Here, the economic discourse is given precedence over balance and frames the official meaning discourse of community education.

Two years later, the foreword to the White Paper repeats terms which ordinarily don't sit comfortably together; 'promoting competitiveness', 'increased competition', 'the need to upskill the workforce' are placed alongside 'promoting democracy and social cohesion', 'an emphasis on social and cultural development' in the text (DES, 2000, pp. 9-10). The parallel inclusion of both social and economic purposes of adult education is also evident in the chapters on community education in both documents.

The Green Paper places community education in the wider European context of 'empowering local communities' for 'political, social, cultural and economic development' of the individual and local community with a view to 'participation in the political and democratic process by all citizens' (DES, 1998 p. 88). Both social and economic purposes are placed side by side with political participation. The impression created is one of compatibility of these processes. They are largely unproblematised. The Green Paper

mentions the word 'empowering' three times in the first two pages of the chapter (DES, 1998, pp. 88-89). The concept conveyed is a practice of education that engages the 'most-excluded' and 'marginalised groups', focused on 'social purpose' and 'social change', emphasising an 'approach' as opposed to a 'system of provision' (pp. 88-89). An approach as opposed to a system recalls the agency(action) versus structure dialectic in social theory (Craib, 1997, p. 38). Community education in the Green Paper tends more to this agentic meaning, working within the existing systems for transformative purposes.

It is unclear what social change or indeed empowerment mean in the context of the Green Paper. There is no explicit mention of transforming structures of society which oppress, including education. Whilst a critical dimension is not specified in the text, the Green Paper strongly asserts the empowering or agentic role of community education in social change.

This is the view which essentially equates Community Education with community development, i.e. as a process of working in solidarity with marginalised groups towards objectives of empowerment.

(DES, 1998, p. 89)

The White Paper presents two definitions of community education (DES, 2000, p. 110). The first definition views community education as 'an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community', bringing formal education into the community (p. 110). The second definition, views community education 'in a more ideological sense' as 'a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and collective level' (p. 110). It is interesting here that the first definition is viewed as 'less ideological' by implication. The White Paper notes the common goal of 'collective empowerment' shared by community education and community development and expands on the impact of feminist critique in shaping the personal to political dimension which is core to community education. Among the key characteristics of community education identified in the White Paper, 'its non-statutory nature', 'rootedness in the community' and 'its collective social purpose and inherently political agenda – to promote critical reflection, challenge existing structures, and promote empowerment' (p. 113) are its most striking features.

The aspect of ‘challenging existing structures’ was not explicitly mentioned in the Green Paper. Whilst it is included here in the White Paper, there is no elaboration as to which structures it is intended to challenge. These absences point to what Foucault described as the ‘said’ and ‘unsaid’ (1972, p. 110) in discourse. According to Fairclough, ‘what is said in a text always rests upon ‘unsaid’ assumptions, so part of the analysis of texts is trying to identify what is assumed’ (2003, p. 11). Foucault refers to ‘documents...which say in silence something other than what they actually say’ (p. 7). The general statement in the White Paper ‘challenging existing structures’ would obviously include education structures which are not mentioned here. I argue that this ‘absent discourse’ in the Green and White papers reveals a general reluctance on the part of official agents to discuss either power or structures in any meaningful way.

Apart from the discursive phenomenon of the unsaid, there is also what I term ‘double speak’ in official text. It is argued in this research that adopting the dual definition approach as the White Paper allows, implies a neutral position, straddling both economic and social purposes. This leaves the door open for community education practice which may be all things to all people, lacking distinctiveness or authenticity and appear a-la-carte. The White Paper may signal a strong preference for the social purpose meaning, and a critical structural reform agenda, but is somewhat less definitive than the Green Paper. What is most noticeable from the texts of both documents is how the underlying ideological discourse of economic purpose is presented as compatible with the social purpose of community education. The economic purpose meaning remains unproblematised in the official texts, like an undisturbed ‘motionless base’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 3). It is to this discourse we turn to next.

The ideological discourse of neo-liberalism and community education

The ideological discourses of both economic and social purposes are accommodated in these policy documents. What seems to be lacking is a critical analysis of the compatibility of the economic purpose of ‘competitiveness’ with the social purpose of ‘consciousness raising, citizenship and community building’ (DES, 2000, p.12). The economic context in Ireland at the time of authorship of both documents in the 1998-2000 period, was marked by rapid economic growth (O’Reardon, 2001) and increased revenue availability for public services including education. Finnegan (2008) argues that neo-liberalism is the best

‘paradigm for understanding change in contemporary Ireland, both in the narrow sense as economic policy and in the broad sense of political hegemony’ (p. 61). Thompson defines ideology as ‘a set of ideas which are associated with a particular set of social arrangements...[it is] the power of ideas, operating in the interest of power relations’ (1993, p. 24). Finnegan’s study on neo-liberalism and Irish adult education describes the ‘public pedagogy of neo-liberalism’(p. 63) as not simply an economic ideology, but also a ‘powerful and complex form of cultural hegemony’ (p. 58). The incipient presence of neo-liberal language and ideology has been noted in the policy documents; the implications of which are explored below.

Neo-liberal economic policies are synonymous with free market rule, non-interference by the state, privatisation of public services, and cuts in public expenditure (including health and education). In short the ‘market ideas are now the determining and dominant ideas in society’ (Finnegan, p. 64). Neo-liberal ‘structural adjustment programmes’ (Green, 1995, p. 3) imposed on poor countries of the global south have had appalling consequences, enslaving countries to unpayable debt rather than liberate them⁶. Despite Ireland’s negative experience with neo-liberalism over the past decade and compelling evidence that neo-liberalism has failed as a model for sustainable balanced development, (Korten 2009, Douthwaite, 1992), the state and political establishment appear to remain dedicated to neo-liberal policies.

As an ideological discourse, neo-liberalism is relevant to community education because it is one of the last sectors of education which is ‘difficult to commodify’ (Finnegan, 2008, p. 65). Neo-liberalism demands a market-driven education system (Bok, 2003), prioritising the needs of the economy, and education is now a ‘tradeable service’ (Finnegan, 2008, p. 57). Finnegan warns of the impact on adult and community education work:

if elite decision making in Ireland is being determined within a neo-liberal paradigm and policy is implemented by a market state, then there is a strong likelihood that work within the sector may be co-opted.

(Finnegan, 2008, p. 66)

⁶ The work of the Debt and Development Coalition Ireland, has sought to raise awareness and campaign for the elimination of the crippling debt and interest payments which maintain the global south in the grip of poverty. Ironically, the debt crisis is now affecting the global north in recent years, Ireland being an example. <http://www.debtireland.org/>

The point here for community education is that the decision-makers, the funders, the state appear to have no critical understanding of the competing ideologies underpinning the practice or the educational implications of each. One of the purposes of this thesis is to explore the underpinning ideologies informing policy and practice in community education, and to explore ways in which these can become open to critical scrutiny, awareness raising, and how anti-democratic, unequal ideologies such as neo-liberalism can be exposed and challenged through community education.

Finnegan's study does not provides a detailed response to neo-liberalism in pedagogic terms, but does point to the direction adult and community education should take, which is 'to argue for, and help foster, a strong civil society separate from the market' (p. 68), orientated toward emancipation and critical citizenship. Fleming sees the role of adult education in bringing about 'a society that is more just, more fair and where the state and the economy are subject to democratic accountability' (Fleming, 2004, p. 16). I would argue that the present study builds on Finnegan's analysis, by going further in exploring the pedagogy, the practitioners and the institution with a view to challenging the 'market' ideology rather than remaining 'separate' from it. The purpose in exploring meaning with community educators will be to unmask, name and critique neo-liberalism in its many guises, and shape a pedagogy which will challenge and curb its hegemony.

Challenging the mainstream discourse

A central point of the Green Paper's chapter on community education is around the 'potential of this model to influence mainstream practice, particularly in reaching and engaging with those who are most excluded.' (1998, p. 88). In recent years, the mainstream education system would seem to be driven by a discourse of economic purpose conveyed in phrases such as 'an educated workforce' rather than an 'educated citizenry'. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013 (Department of Finance, 2011) emphasises 'science, technology and innovation' as keys to future economic success. The focus on science and maths in mainstream education by the media is now almost obsessive (Ahlstrom, 2011; Flynn, 2011; Faller, 2011).

Because community education has shown some success in reaching out to what the NDP describes as 'hard to reach' (DF, p. 249), the mainstreaming role of community education may be interpreted by government and decision makers as a means to using the expertise of

community education as a 'technique' to include the marginalised in an unproblematised mainstream education system, and market economy. For the crafters of the Green Paper, community education (DES, 1998, p. 88) was intended as a model informing mainstream educational practice about critical pedagogies and highlighting the need for transformation of the existing economic and social order (Murtagh, 2009, p. 120). Community education's role in influencing mainstream practice may be to challenge the subordination of education to economic policy. This subordination found expression in New Labour policy in Britain when Tony Blair declared "education is the best economic policy we have" (Ecclestone, 1999; cited by Thompson, 2000, p. 3). Such is the pervasiveness and political acquiescence with the economic discourse of education that the Green and White Papers on adult education in Ireland are not immune from this ideological discourse either.

Resisting mainstream discourse and asserting critical pedagogy

Reflecting on the growth of community education, particularly through women's groups, Connolly (2007) was concerned in the 1990s with the lack of a critical dimension in community development groups. Neo-liberal tendencies were reflected in a lot of the groups' action plans many of which were 'purely economic, demonstrating little concern for social issues.' (Connolly et al., 2007, p.110). In some respects, funding application templates of government departments and intermediary funding bodies at the time, reflected the priorities and targets agreed through social partnership, informed by a 'corporatist approach' (Geoghegan & Powell, 2004 p. 227).

The challenge as Connolly sees it now is to maintain the critical dimension in adult and community education and community development. She views 'critical pedagogy as the most essential component of praxis, the key route to transformation and consciousness raising' (2007, p.112). Connolly sets out a clear theoretical framework for community education practice. The role of community education is to engage the most marginalised and voiceless in the community, to respond creatively to their needs, empowering them to act individually and collectively for social change, bringing about a more just and equal society.

Connolly envisages a greater role for critical pedagogy which could be tapped into, taking on board the feminist critique of critical pedagogy, which had long been a patriarchal male-

dominated discipline. (Luke and Gore, 1992, cited in Connolly et al., 2007, p. 125). She advocates greater engagement between ‘new social movements’ and adult and community education, listing these movements as variously ‘workers groups, unemployment groups, community development groups, the Irish Traveller Movement, the women’s movement, and gay rights movement’ which are ‘underpinned by liberation ideology.’ (p. 120).

...critical theory and new social movements provide the most fertile ground for the development of the seeds for the community strand of the sector, while the women’s movement is the source for the radical learning dimensions.

(Connolly et al., 2007, p. 120)

If the complex web of neo-liberalism is to be made visible and knowable, in order to be challenged and replaced, then practical attempts to do this need to be found, to demonstrate how critical pedagogy can challenge hegemonic discourses such as neo-liberalism in everyday community education. In the section which follows, I reflect briefly on some of the difficulties in applying this pedagogy and making it meaningful in practice.

From neo-liberalism and critical pedagogy to tea and men’s groups

First of all, we should be clear that our work, our activities as an educator, will not be enough to change the world.

The challenge to liberating educators is to transform the abstract speech we inherit from our training...

(Freire, 1987, pp. 180-181)

As a facilitator of men’s groups, a big part of the work involved sitting down chatting over a cup of tea. The purpose, to get men in our culture to talk, to share a bit about their day, their lives, their sorrows and joys. It is hard to make the connection between neo-liberalism and unemployment in the course of a chit-chat, or a more just and equal society emerging over a cup of tea, but the possibility may be there. The abstract language of neo-liberalism and critical pedagogy seem to be in another world to the conversation among the men. Similarly, in the lecture hall, I struggle to find an ‘idiom’ (Freire, 1987, p. 181) which makes concrete the concepts of neo-liberalism and critical pedagogy. Yet this is the challenge to be overcome in practice as Freire argues ‘to transform abstract speech’ (p. 181), to make in meaningful to community education participants.

The chat over the cup of tea where men re-learn to communicate about their feelings to one another is just as critical as a lecture to students on the negative consequences of neo-

liberalism. Both have their place, and the possibility of change, the students in the lecture hall and the men in the resource centre.

In my experience as a practitioner, having that theoretical framework serves to place pedagogic work in the wider context of radical transformation. I would argue that making such connections between the theoretical and practical is essential to give meaning and purpose to community education work. This is evident in later sections where I explore how liberatory and feminist pedagogies have proved effective as counter-discourses to the dominant discourses of our time. The next set of discourses to be explored shift the focus from meaning to practice and the role of the community educator.

Review of the Discourses of Practice and Community Educators

As a researcher, I am curious about the origins of community education. I am inspired by the work of community educators in informal settings, community halls, resource centres and the change that has been achieved through this praxis. In contrast to the mainstream education system, where a significant body of academic research recounts the various sectoral history (Coolahan, 2009, 1981; O'Sullivan, 2005), community educators themselves have been to the fore in narrating the history of community education. The majority of authors whose work is reviewed here are likely to have facilitated adult community groups with a flipchart and marker in hand, and so these studies form part of a reflective practitioner genre in community education, which reveals much of the vibrancy of the field (Connolly et al., 2007, 1996; AONTAS, 2003; Barry et al., 2001).

The origins of community education in Ireland, and its increased recognition, owes much to 'the approaches pioneered within the community-based women's groups' (White Paper, 2000, p.17). In line with feminist education it promotes a participative approach "where women decide what they need to know and how they want to use that knowledge" (Smyth, 1999, cited in DES, 2000, p.111).

The experience of women's community education and feminist pedagogies provide a rich resource documenting the historical development of this practice in Ireland and its potential

as a pedagogical practice for the future of community education. These studies also highlight the discourses which are embedded in the narrative of community education in Ireland and also point to some that are curiously less present.

The glass fence revisited

In an earlier study of women's community education in Ireland Connolly (2001) describes the impact which women's community education had on her own practice:

I consider that women's community education movement has enabled me to be active, reflective, and to develop a sense of real purpose.

(Connolly, 2001, p.2)

She identifies the reciprocal relationship between community education and community development, and traces the roots of community education to popular education, which emerged in Latin America, theorised through the work of Paulo Freire.

Community education, like popular education is rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people. It is committed to progressive social and political change, based on the clear analysis of the nature of inequality, exploitation and oppression.

(Connolly, 2001, p.5)

Connolly's metaphor of the 'glass fence' (2001, p. 7) highlights the invisible boundaries between mainstream education and community education. As has been stated, one of the aims of community education is to influence the 'mainstream practice' (DES, 1998, p.88). The glass fence is that invisible structure which exists allowing permeability and separation between mainstream education practice in the formal sector and community education practice in the non-formal sector. In terms of permeability, mainstream practice has seen through the glass fence to discover the usefulness of community education's participatory methodologies e.g. small group discussion. However the glass fence protects the separation between a community education ethos and a mainstream education ethos. The community education ethos of radical critical theory challenges the entire structures of society perpetuating injustice and inequality, including the mainstream education system itself. The dominant ethos of mainstream education could be classed as liberal egalitarian, which guarantees equal opportunity in education, but falls short of guaranteeing equal outcome or fundamental change in terms of equality of condition (Baker et al., pp.30-31).

A glass fence separates community education and mainstream education,... Here, the glass fence allows observers to look through at new methodologies, while remaining disengaged from the philosophy underpinning these developments.

(Connolly, 2001, pp. 7-8)

The VEC is a suitable site to explore the interface between the formal mainstream and informal community education practices, as both of these fall within the VEC remit. This theme will be explored in focus groups with VEC community education facilitators.

Kane has spoken years earlier in the Scottish context about the widespread proliferation in adopting the critical pedagogical methods of Freire without the attendant philosophy and ethos (Kane, 1995). In the 1980s and early 1990s Freire's work was being talked about more and more in a European context, it was new and exciting, but the methodology was open to 'co-option' by groups, interest groups and political parties with a liberal and right wing agenda, without reflection about underlying structural inequality.

Connolly revisits the metaphor of the glass fence again in a further study (Connolly, B., 2003). By then employment and training agencies had appropriated the skills and methods of community education because of its success 'as a means to reach marginal groups' and 'developing relationships with people who are often silenced' (2003, p. 14). In this study, Connolly further explores the 'nature of community education' (p. 15). The ideological definition of community education as essentially about critical education for empowerment toward social change, is reiterated here. 'Community education takes place in groups' where participants 'engage with their experience in a critical way in the process' (p.16). The dimension of personal development where many courses stop short must be connected 'on a continuum with social and cultural' development (p.16). Connolly (2003), Beveridge (1999), Strain & Field (1997) and others are sceptical of the instrumentalist, mechanistic, skills-training understanding of community education, though Beveridge suggests community educators and participants can 'bend the vocational element to their own ends' (p. 294). Connolly asserts:

...community education is not about training or up-skilling the labour force. While the outcomes may include the entry of people into the workplace, it is as critical citizens, rather than workers or consumers/customers.

(2003, p.17)

In reconnecting the relationship between community education and personal development which became a feature of many courses run by community education groups, Connolly is taking up a debate which other authors also address (Ryan, 2001; Martin & McCormack, 1999). The personal is political and struggles can emerge as the natural response to experiences at the personal level, affecting self and family. However, Connolly cautions against missing the connection between personal, social and structural change:

Many community groups started out with the ideological agenda of structural change, but they lost the ideological dimension along the way....it is clear that the ideological aspects are paramount. People describe personal change in very profound terms, but they may ignore structural inequality, perceiving no connection between the social and the personal.

(Connolly, 2003, p.17)

Connolly's studies in community education set out a theoretical framework and epistemological paradigm which I share. However, I would caution that juxtaposing structural change with personal change at the community group level runs the risk of bypassing the institutions where this structural change needs to take place. The onus of responsibility for structural change has tended to be placed as the next step for those who have participated in personal change coursework, bypassing those agents who are part of the structures and institutions which maintain structural inequality. It could be argued that Freire placed a similar burden on the oppressed, whose 'historical task' was to 'liberate themselves and their oppressors as well' (1970, p. 26).

The present study attempts to move the personal/structural change debate forward, by placing change at the institutional or structural centre on a par with change at the community margins. It does so by engaging in a cultural and power analysis, as well as an institutional analysis of the VEC structures in which community education is located in Ireland. The task of the present study will be to examine the institutional level, the culture and dynamics, the discourses of power which perpetuate the glass fence, and explore how change might be effected at the institutional/structural level.

To accredit or not to accredit

As stated at the outset, women's studies outreach has been a driving force in demonstrating the empowering benefits of community education. The issue of community education's

relationship to credentialized knowledge is a theme which Quilty deals with extensively in her study of accredited learning as it relates to women's community education in an outreach university context (2003, pp. 57-66). The theme of accreditation emerged as a generative theme in the course of this research, due to current demands on VECs and further education providers for accredited job-ready courses (refer to chapter four). The White Paper and Green Paper make reference to the need to 'validate' adult learning in appropriate ways cautioning against what Lennon (1999) described as a 'time-consuming and costly' process 'dominated by mainstream values and principles (e.g. competition, individualism, focused on limited range of intelligences)' (p. 8). The Green Paper had emphasised that awards should be 'based on multiple intelligences' (DES, 1998, p. 102). Recent research by AONTAS notes the National Skills Strategy⁷ commitment to move '70,000 people from Levels 1 and 2 on the NFQ to Level Three and ensuring 260,000 up to levels 4 or 5' by the year 2020 (Bailey et al., 2011, p. 34).

Quilty (2003) deals with one aspect of this debate, supporting participants to negotiate the demands of a certified course. The study gives valuable insight for community educators in such positions. She identifies the challenge of bridging a gap between the 'abstract knowledge base' of the university and the 'experience of community education' participants (p. 57). Having engaged women's groups in their local community with the academic discipline of women's studies, she has discovered the potential power of this engagement between academic knowledge and experience by employing feminist empowerment strategies. Of particular relevance in this study is Quilty's commitment to 'interrogating the role of the institution within the learning process' (p. 59). The crux of the problem is centred around:

how do students communicate their knowledge and educational development in a manner that meets with the requirements or needs of the institution? ...how can the student harness their new knowledge and translate it academically through the assignment structure.

(Quilty, 2003, p. 60)

This calls for some stretching on the part of academic departments, the institution, to enable students in community education to reflect on their experience, but not simply stay at that

⁷ The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (<http://www.skillsireland.ie/>) has produced '*Tomorrow's skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy, 2007*' (http://www.egfsn.ie/media/egfsn070306b_national_skills_strategy.pdf)

point, but rather, move to conceptual thinking, re-interpreting their experience with the academic lenses of women's studies. Quilty refers to her own department's CHANGE study (p. 61) which recounts the achievements of the engagement between the 'learning institution' (p. 60), (a term which I like) and women's community education groups in Ireland. This study further interrogates the 'how' in the practice of community educators engaging with the 'life experience' of participants and connecting that to abstract knowledge (p. 64).

The theme of accreditation forms part of a wider discourse of credentialism, and the currency of qualification, what Bourdieu (1996) referred to as 'academic verdicts' (p. 19). As stated above, the accreditation theme is considered further in chapter four in the context of generative themes of recognition, which problematises the accredited / non-accredited dichotomy.

Women's community education as a model of good practice

The 1970s and 1980s had seen what Quilty refers to as an 'explosion' of women's groups (2003, p. 57) arising out of the informal community learning sector (Inglis et al., 1993). In the 1990s, women's community education thrived on resources from the EU through the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) programme and the Education Equality Initiative (EEI) which resulted in greater funding and formalisation of community education structures.

A number of studies (Fennell et al., 2003; Barry et al., 2001; McCann & Smyth, 1999) reflect the powerful positive impact of women's community education in the Irish context.

...community-based women's education has proved itself on the ground. It has developed strategies to address the challenges of economic, social and political disadvantage.

(Barry et al., 2001, p. 43)

These studies, based on rigorous research methodology engaging women participants, tutors, agency staff and support staff have something meaningful to say about all three aspects of this thesis, but particularly practice and the role of the community educator.

Smyth and McCann's study outlines the pedagogic value of feminist education as an empowerment strategy 'emphasising co-operation, agency, change and empowerment' (1999, p. i). It is a valuable intellectual resource to enable women to 'understand structures of inequality, power and powerlessness, and to act individually and collectively to change such structures' (1999, p. i). Feminist pedagogy is of interest in the present study, not only to research the ways in which it is effective, but to also examine how feminist pedagogy might inform the ways community educators approach men's community education and other groups who remain disengaged from it.

Feminist education pedagogy engages with women at grassroots level, in communities which experience poverty and marginalisation in order to 'address the complex discursive power relations, social systems and structures which diversely and unequally subordinate and marginalise women' (McCann & Smyth, 1999, p. 18).

What is appealing about the women's studies programme described in the study is the commitment of feminist academics and community educators to 'stretch the academy' (Thompson, 2000), to locate the programme in a community setting. An interesting point made by the authors concerns the 'institution's ambivalence toward Women's Studies' (p. 41). In later sections, this thesis also explores whether institutional ambivalence toward community education features in the VEC institutional discourse. The concept of the community educator 'operating within is one way of setting about the struggle' (Hey, 1983 cited in Smyth & McCann, 1999, p. 39), and I might add, operating 'without' in community outreach settings is a complementary practice. The struggle to engage both within and without whilst holding onto core pedagogic values is a tension I experience in my own practice. It is an experience with which adult critical educators and feminist educators can no doubt identify. A number of disciplines experience an embattled or subordinated position in the institution, feminist studies and equality studies chiefly among these (Lynch, 1999; Olson & Shopes, 1991). Community education by its very nature is an outreach discipline and so the space it occupies in the institution and that of its workers is explored in this thesis.

Two later studies give some insights into what works in women's community education. Mentoring is considered a crucial component in supporting participants make sense of their

experience with the lenses of feminist theory. The good mentor breaks down the barriers between abstract knowledge and being practical. They are ‘translators’ (Fennell et al., 2003, p. 5) between informal and formal education settings. Mentoring is an essential area of practice in community education and mentors need to have empathy with participants and their communities, as well as deep knowledge of the subject area (Tedder & Lawy, 2009; Fletcher, 2007). Above all, a good mentor is beautifully described as someone who combines ‘strong head-work *and* heart-work’ (Fennell et al., 2003, p.7).

The tone of these studies on women’s community education is upbeat. There is much to celebrate and to be hopeful about. Participant testimonies that course experiences were ‘life changing’ (Fennell et al., 2003, p. 57), are the kind of real transformations we would all wish for as community educators. As the studies show, these are not realised without some struggle not only on the part of community educators, but participants also. The lessons of feminist pedagogy are significant for what they may teach in further frontiers of community education.

The relative marginal status experienced by women’s community education may be explained by the failure to recognise its value by men who occupied the majority of senior managerial positions in the state and education in Ireland. Ironically, this proved costly to men’s engagement with community education, the issue we turn to next.

Discourses of masculinity and engaging men in community education

One frontier which remains a challenge in community education is engaging men as a particular group. In recent years men’s development work has been gaining momentum (Men’s Development Network, 2011). Liberatory pedagogy and feminist pedagogy, I believe, can serve as useful models for shaping a distinctly liberatory pedagogy for men, which could be deployed through community education. This may sound heretical, but there has been some thinking done in this area already (Owens, 2004; 2000; Ward, n.d.). The justification for men as a distinct group is supported by evidence of the marginalisation experienced by many men, through unemployment, ill health and isolation (EU DG Health & Consumers, 2011; Department of Health, 2008; Irish Cancer Society, 2005; Owens, 2000).

Men have been identified as one of the groups which need to be engaged in community education, notwithstanding the challenges and difficulties involved in such work (Owens, 2000). Traditionally men have tended to 'follow vocational or job related training' (Owens, 2000, p. 3). As a group, marginalised men are also oppressed by the similar forces which have oppressed women, namely, patriarchy, hierarchical worldviews and masculinist education systems (Connell, 2000; 1995) This conditioning too needs to be unmasked and challenged by men themselves. Whilst space does not allow further development of this theme in the thesis, there is value in interdisciplinary engagements involving feminism, studies in masculinities, and liberatory pedagogy.

Slevin (2009, pp. 47-59) documents her experience as a community educator working with men in rural East Donegal, an area affected by the high levels of deprivation. She struggles to reconcile the theoretical commitments implied in Freirean critical pedagogy with the practice in her work. Describing a programme which focuses on skills development and confidence building for unemployed men in the area she acknowledges the 'contradiction between the critical, transformative education I have posited as necessary in community development, and the 'Accelerate' programme, a minibuss driver training programme with a difference' (p. 56). She acknowledges this course could be considered 'uncritical' (p. 58), without a stated social change objective, but she has commenced at a place where the men are comfortable, 'where the individual is at' in order to 'build trust, skills, relationships, and a sense of solidarity as the group develops' (p. 56). Slevin's rationale for engaging men through this approach takes a longer term view of social change.

Community educators and activists operating from a community development model often have to reconcile their critical perspectives with the needs of communities and recognise that personal and social change is slow and requires innovative approaches (2009, p. 58)

Slevin's approach could be described as critically 'learner-centredness', a feature of the pedagogical approach of adult and community educators (Ryan, Connolly, Grummell & Finnegan, 2009, p. 131).

Redemptive v liberatory discourses in Irish adult education

O'Sullivan (2008, 2005) has branded much of adult and community education approaches as 'redemptive'. Slevin's work described above, hardly fits this discursive category, as I

argue below. O'Sullivan (2005) refers to 'redemption' as 'a common ideological orientation' featuring in 'adult education discourse' which suggests 'providers know what adults need and how they ought to change' (p. 526). O'Sullivan classifies redemptive features in adult education discourse under 'role education', with 'the objective of providing for personal improvement...in the enactment of social roles, be they civic, social, occupational or personal' and 'adaptability to change' (p. 526). The choice of the term 'redemption' draws on O'Sullivan's 'theocentric' paradigm (2005, p. 103) used to describe the dominance of the Catholic Church in Irish education, discussed in chapter two in the context of its rival, the VEC. By O'Sullivan's account, almost all adult and community education appears to fit the redemptive discourse, and adult educators are the apostles or vanguard leading the mission to redeem learners. In my view the redemptive discourse is too broad and sweeping to adequately account for the considered practice described in this review to date, in women's community education and in men's emerging community education. A discourse of liberation would seem more apt. Others have also challenged O'Sullivan's view, pointing to participant testimonies which 'bear little resemblance to the redemptive discourse which O'Sullivan claims dominates adult education' (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 131). In some ways O'Sullivan's account may also recall a view of adult education as a vocation, a paradigm with less relevance today.

International influence in Irish community education

This review of discourses in community education would not be complete without some reference to international influences, one of which is curiously absent in the Irish context. Foucault refers to the 'unsaid' in his elaborations on discourse (1972, p. 72, pp. 109-110). He questions 'how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?' (1972, p. 27). In the same way, it is argued here that there is a curious absence of certain influences one would expect to see in the formation of community education in Ireland, based on its history internationally. One such link is trade unionism and socialist politics.

Irish community education does, however, share elements of the ideological influence informing the trade union movement. The White Paper (DES, 2000) makes reference to the role of trade unions in adult education, however this is not framed in terms of ideological consciousness raising, but rather, in terms of workplace training for 'new entrants at the low skill end' (p. 135). The role envisaged for trade unions in the White Paper conveys a narrow functionalist understanding:

Traditionally, the Trade Union Movement has been a major player in the education of workers. The educational activity of the Trade Unions has embraced agendas covering member development and organizational development matters, as well as direct vocational or technical training.

The experience and the expertise which the Trade Union Movement has acquired in the 1980s in working with the unemployed in education and training can now usefully be applied to working with the employed in a similar context.

(DES, 2000, p. 135)

A more radical understanding of worker's education is traced by Crowther (1999) in the development of 'popular education' in Scotland (p. 29). He recalls the tradition of 'working class self-education' linked to McLean, a leading Scottish socialist who believed education 'had to be independent of the state' (p. 31). James Connolly, a founder of the Irish labour movement and a Republican grew up in poverty in Edinburgh and was self-educated in socialist politics. He was a leading figure in trade unionism in both Scotland and later in Ireland. However, any tangible connection between community education and the tradition of trade union workers' education appears to be severed or simply failed to register in the story of community education in Ireland. It would seem to be a genealogical line well worth pursuing in future research. However, there is evidence of strong collaboration between Irish, Scottish and English adult educators with a shared interest in popular education which continues today (Connolly et al., 2007; Crowther, 2005).

The focus of the studies reviewed in this section has been on pedagogy and the practice engagement with communities of women and men on the margins of Irish society. It is now time to focus on the centre, and the discourses of institution and structure in community education in Ireland.

Review of Discourses of Institution and Structure

As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, the vocational education committee (VEC) is the designated statutory provider of community education in Ireland. However, the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) was circumspect in prescribing a role for the VEC in the scheme envisaged for overseeing the development of community education:

There was widespread acceptance of the need for and the proposed role and functions of the National Adult Learning Council and the Local Adult Learning

Boards, but little consensus regarding the hosting of the local structures....where disagreements emerged, it crystallized around a pro-VEC or anti-VEC position.
(DES, 2000, p. 14)

Despite these disagreements, all Community Education Facilitators have in fact been appointed to the VECs, though NALC and LALBs have not been implemented. At an operational level, the VEC is therefore deeply involved in delivery of community education on behalf of the State. In this section, I identify a number of historical discourses shaping the VEC in Ireland.

There are several historical studies of the emergence of VECs, (Buchanan, 2005; Ryan, 2004; Byrne, 1980). Whilst these are predominantly local and celebratory in composition, they do convey the sense of an emergent movement in education in the early twentieth century which countered the elitism of academic education of the time. As these histories demonstrate, the VEC had radical beginnings, as one of the few alternatives to Church-dominated schooling, filling a gap in educational need particularly among working class and rural communities.

VEC historical discourses

Ryan (2004) and Byrne (1980) present local histories of VECs in Ireland. Based in the midlands of Ireland, these studies recount the general history of the VEC as well as foregrounding the dominant discourses in education in its history. It is the origins of these discourses and their role in identity formation of the VEC which is of particular interest in the present study. Whilst the naming of these as discourse is subjective and contestable, they are nevertheless offered here for their explanatory potential. Three specific discourses relevant to the VEC's educative role are the focus here; first, the 'College/Tech' discourse, second, the 'Church/State' discourse and thirdly, the 'Evening Classes' discourse.

The Vocational Education Act of 1930 (Government of Ireland, 1930) which established the VECs was designed to put in place a system of technical and continuation education 'to continue and supplement education provided in elementary schools' and included 'general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades, manufactures, agriculture, commerce and other industrial pursuits...' (No.29: Section 3). O'Reilly described vocational education as 'the main element of the manpower policy of the new state'

(O'Reilly, 1989, p. 153). Continuation courses 'were designed with the objective of fitting a segment of the youth population into slots in the developing systems of production' (p. 153).

The discourse of 'College/Tech' is one which would have been familiar among young people growing up in Ireland particularly since the advent of free second level education in the 1960s. Most towns in Ireland had both types of school. It was clear from public perception that College was for the 'more academic' students destined for careers in the civil/public service and professions, and the Tech for the 'less academic' or 'practical' students destined for careers in trade and industry. Even in the same family, some children attended college and some attended the local Tech. The origins of this discourse are traced as far back as 1930 as the following responses surrounding the Vocational Education Act 1930 suggest:

Church owned secondary schools were satisfied with a guarantee by the Minister for Education that vocational schools would not teach academic subjects, but that they would supplement rather than compete with secondary education. This guarantee had the effect of reducing vocational schools to an inferior status in the public perception and helped to generate an unhealthy disregard for practical subjects.

(Ryan, 2004, p.7)

There was therefore a class distinction in education terms. College academic education had higher status than the technical vocational education. This discourse was introduced in chapter one using the lens of Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital. An academic education was perceived to be of higher capital value than technical or practical education. The impact of this discourse on the development of the VEC as an institution providing technical education is an interesting area of inquiry. It is argued in the present study that traces of this discourse influence the modern identity of the VEC, in the reactionary sense in the guise of 'anti-intellectualism' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 74; Laverghetta, & Nash, 2010, p. 528).

Ryan's observation above, raises a second discourse, the 'Church/State' discourse to do with the tense relationship with the Catholic Church in the early days of the VEC. As has been stated, the VEC was among the first state-sponsored secular authorities in education. Up until 1930 and indeed up to the advent of free second level education in 1967, the

Catholic Church enjoyed unrivalled dominance in control and delivery of education in Ireland. Needless to say, the advent of a secular education authority, aroused some suspicion:

as new vocational schools sprang up in the latter years of that decade (1930's) opposition mounted. Fr. Martin Brenan, professor of education at Maynooth published an article...alleging that religion had no place in the vocational schools and that the national schools could do the job of vocational schools much better.

(Byrne, 1980, p. 19)

The hegemony of the Catholic Church did however gain a foothold in the vocational education movement and by 1958, 'out of a total of twenty seven chairmen (sic) of VECs, ...five were laymen and twenty two were priests' (Byrne, p. 19). Among the 'few attempts to theorise the changes experienced by education as a social institution since the 1950s' (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 103), O'Reilly (1989) reflects on the establishment of the VEC system as a first expression of 'assertion' by the State in the face of 'domination' of education by the Catholic Church' (p.158). This assertion was somewhat muted and the church managed to keep the lid on it. A disposition of due deference to the Church, characteristic of Church State relations since the foundation of the State, resumed in the VECs as with other public institutions in Ireland.

The incorporation of many clergy into the vocational education committees ensured that Church schools were adequately protected from undesirable intrusion or competition from the new committees, and that the educational aims of the Churches were accommodated in the new schools.

(O'Reilly, 1989, p. 160)

What the discourse of 'Church/State' as it was played out in the VEC suggests is that the organization acquiesced over time to establishment education. Drudy and Lynch (1993) suggest the new VEC schools in the 1930s 'elicited little interest from the church' (p. 123), having gained the state's assurance they would not encroach on the academic teaching role of church-controlled secondary schools. The effect of this according to Drudy and Lynch was to 'deprive working class children' who attended VEC schools from 'access to academic and intellectual subjects availed of by middle class children' (1993, p. 124). The present study examines how this discourse influences the VEC today, how the organization moved from its radical origins and position as a provider of an alternative education to become subsumed as part of an educational establishment over time, an establishment that was markedly conservative and Catholic.

The third discourse which shapes the history of the VEC is the advent of evening adult education. Reflecting on this history (Ryan, 2004; Byrne, 1980), I was inspired by the work pattern of the early 'instructors' (Byrne, 1980, p. 6), who delivered outreach evening classes 'in manual instruction, rural industries and domestic science'(p. 2) as part of the first Agriculture and Technical Instruction Act (1899), the precursor to the VEC. These classes in the early years of the twentieth century (1903) were held in the evening, were well attended and 'it is remembered that the instructor usually had to cycle to each centre from a local base...'(p. 6). In a sense, these instructors were the pioneers of outreach vocational education in Ireland and again there has been little research in this area with the exception of a number of theses (Geaney, 1996; O'Reilly, 1998).

Part of my purpose in this thesis through the focus on the role of the community educator, is to rediscover the role of the early instructors as an inspiration for today's outreach community educators. The practice of outreach community education gives energy to this thesis, as it holds the potential to deliver the kind of change which lies at the heart of emancipatory adult education.

The VECs inherited the role as main providers of evening classes for adults from the era of the early instructors at the turn of the last century. This was later reinforced through the appointment of Adult Education Officers in 1979 (Byrne, 1980, p. 76). VECs became synonymous with technical education and evening adult education to the extent that the provision defined the concept:

Personal learning in the form of self-development, hobby and recreational courses influenced the meaning which many people gave to the concept of adult education at the time. This can be attributed to the popularity of the evening classes provided by the Vocational Education Committees throughout the country.

(O'Sullivan, 2005, pp. 496-497)

In terms of discourse, the advent of VEC evening classes generated differing pedagogies, practices, courses and roles within the same educational institution, namely; formal and informal, accredited and non-accredited, tutors and teachers. To achieve an integrated approach among these different aspects of education is a challenge in itself, to do so within one organization is even more of a challenge.

The 'Evening Classes' discourse evolved due to the logic of the time, which stated that only teachers were qualified to teach adults in the evenings. Crucially, teaching staff in VECs occupied two roles, day time teacher and evening time tutor/instructor. Two significant developments added considerably to this workload in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These were the introduction of universal free second level education in 1967 and the decision by the Minister for Education to allow students of VEC schools to sit the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate Examinations on a par with their peers in secondary schools. Byrne reflects on these developments:

Night class enrolment was very satisfactory in the early 1960s, but reduced towards the middle of the decade when teachers found themselves preoccupied with preparations for the intermediate and leaving certificate courses.

(Byrne, 1980, p. 76)

The power of the 'Evening Class' discourse, the remnants of which are still powerful today, may have had more to do with accommodating the teacher than learners, yet its mythic power remains from that time as Byrne recalls;

The first Offaly C.E.O. (*Chief Executive Officer of the VEC*), Mr. Horgan, remarked that a vocational school whose windows were dark in the evening was a failure.

(Byrne, 1980, p.76)

The combination of the roles of day-time teacher and evening tutor in the VEC has shaped the modern discourse of recognition of the role of the community educator. The relative standing of formal and informal education and the location for its delivery in community or in school, similarly forms part of the modern discourse of recognition of community education.

These historical discourses which shape much of modern provision in VECs will be examined further in chapter six concerning the space which community education and its educators occupy in the institution, the VEC.

Discourses of ownership: Early relations between VECs and other providers

The early relations between other adult and community education providers and the VECs post-1979 (when Adult Education Organisers were first appointed), were not always straightforward. It is noteworthy that one of the studies on women's community outreach education (Barry et al., 2001) cited earlier, reveals a range of views, both positive and

negative in relation to the role of the VEC as a statutory provider in the sector. There are instances throughout the study where the VEC is praised for their contribution, ‘VEC support towards childcare training’ (p.56), ‘The group specifically mentioned support it had obtained from the VEC for their computer studies module’ (p.76). However, this experience is not shared by all women’s community education groups historically.

An earlier study of daytime adult education groups in Ireland recorded that the majority had ‘a positive feeling toward VECs’ but at the same time ‘one in five of the respondents strongly disagreed that the local AEO had been a great help’ (Inglis, Bailey & Murray, 1993, p. 53). It was further reported that ‘support appears to vary according to the interest of the Adult Education Officer’ (p. 56). Worryingly, the later WERRC study (Barry et al., 2001) reveals divergent levels of support for community education from VEC Adult Education Officers. The authors conclude:

it is our view that the degree of support given by AEOs to women’s community-based education is highly variable. Much appears to depend on the interest and commitment of the individual AEO, which may in turn be influenced by the membership of the local VEC Board and by the perspective of the CEO. While some AEOs are very supportive of community-based education for women and proactive regarding its development, others exhibited poor knowledge of the sector, and expressed negative or occasionally hostile views about the value of the work undertaken by local groups.

(Barry et al., 2001, p.80)

‘Ownership’ could be a possible name for the discourse happening here. Statutory power conferred by the state tends to drive further discourses of boundaries and territories attached to role and remit. Such discourse may have had less power or presence since the appointment of Community Education Facilitators in 2004⁸. Part of the CEF’s role is ‘developing and encouraging partnerships and links between community education and statutory and other providers’ (Bailey et al., 2011, p. 217; DES, 2000, p. 114). The extent to which this discourse is less powerful since 2001 will be considered in this research.

Structures to support community education

Given the close connection between institution and structures, this section reviews the structures envisaged to support community education. The White Paper (DES, 2000) sets

⁸ Community Education Facilitators were appointed to the 33 VECs in 2004 to work within the Adult Education Service as part of the team led by the Adult Education Officer. The additional staff member enabled the VEC to focus more time and resources on communities.

out the specifics in relation to ‘formalisation of systems’ (p. 114) for community education with the appointment of a ‘national team of 35 Community Education Facilitators to be based in the Local Adult Learning Boards’ (p. 114), the establishment of a ‘Community Education Technical Support Unit’ under a ‘National Adult Learning Council’ (p. 115) and a financial undertaking to allocate ‘10% of the annual increase provided under BTEI...to community education’ (p. 116). These specific recommendations and their implementation / non-implementation have formed the backdrop to discourses in the aftermath of the White Paper.

At times, the conversation for the past ten years resembles a broken record and has centred around recognition, resources, representation and implementation, or more specifically the lack of them. In a roundtable conversation among adult educators in 2001 about the White Paper one year on, participants expressed concern at the ‘absence of implementation’ (Fleming, 2001, p.32).

Whilst the CEFs have been appointed in the VECs, the Local Adult Learning Boards and the Community Education Technical Support Unit at national level have never been established. The National Adult Learning Council was temporarily set up only to be disbanded again (Murtagh, 2009, p. 218). AONTAS have continuously lobbied for the establishment of these structures. The level of failure to match state commitment in official texts with firm action is worrying ten years on for those who have witnessed the value of community education in their areas.

Discourses of control at institutional and NGO levels

Murtagh (2004) offers a review of present institutional structures and proposals for alternative structures for adult and community education. He comes to this aspect of community education with direct knowledge of the VEC sector at local level and managerial level. An underlying goal for Murtagh is that the adult education service should become part of the ‘mainstream’ (p. 43). The specific purpose of the study is to respond to the ‘biggest single task facing adult education’ as he sees it, ‘the establishment of proper governance and management structures at four levels, national, sub-national, institutional and community’ (p. 53). The study’s strength lies in its insight into the complex political

and bureaucratic structures which operate behind the scenes from the grassroots activity of community educators with groups in the field.

Murtagh's study, though well intentioned in attempting to sort out a fragmented structure, is illustrative of a structures level discourse at the managerial/institutional level and also at the NGO or grassroots level, as a later study shows. A discourse of control best captures the dynamics here. Murtagh's study regarding structures is a conversation for those engaged at this managerial level and is an issue that seems distant from the themes of everyday struggle in the lives of community education participants or even facilitators. The issues of concern to the author reflect the discourses which managers of these services are concerned with i.e. control, reporting and efficiency. For example staff reporting arrangements and the impact of institutional identity and loyalty are a concern. In relation to national co-ordinators of VTOS and Youthreach employed by the Department of Education and Science, Murtagh comments, 'it also has the effect of having staff within VECs identifying with the National Co-ordinators rather than with the VEC Adult Education Service.' (p. 45). A subtext of local versus national loyalty may be at issue here. A suggested remedy is that national co-ordination be 'taken over by the inspectorate (for adult education)' (p. 50) and argues for an enhanced role for the IVEA (Irish Vocational Education Association) to provide 'support service' to programmes such as VTOS, Youthreach and Community Education. I would argue that there is some inconsistency in criticising national co-ordination as currently configured independently of individual VECs, and then proposing it be nationalised in a VEC representative body, the IVEA. The discourse of systemic control seems to be embedded here.

Murtagh rightly calls for the establishment of NALC and the LALBs (DES, 2000, pp. 185-197). In relation to the latter, he believes VECs should 'start planning now for the establishment of the Local Adult Learning Boards and prepare a strategy to allow it to be both a provider of adult and further education services and a host to the LALBs' (Murtagh, 2004, p. 51). Again this reflects a positioning, that rightly or wrongly has more to do with control by the VEC than any other considerations. This is probably understandable given that during 'the period 1990-1998 the IVEA was involved in a battle for survival..' (p. 46) and since then 'the future of the VECs and the IVEA has been secured' (p. 46).

Using his insights as an insider researcher, Murtagh comments that ‘many VEC and DES staff who are not directly involved know very little about adult education’ (p. 48). This is an important insight from a senior figure with long experience of the VEC. The bulk of adult education classes are delivered through the VEC schools and the Principal has overall responsibility, supported by a Director of Adult Education, usually one of the school teachers. Elsewhere, Cullinane (2003) has cautioned, ‘successful secondary school teachers may not always make successful community education tutors’ (p. 82).

I believe Murtagh’s proposals may be built upon using a theoretical basis using the core principles of adult critical education and a community education ethos. Whilst this rationale may be implicit in his study, it needs to be made explicit for staff who don’t understand adult and community education. The study deals with complex structures which need to be created around the lived experiences, needs and issues of learners first, educators next as well as senior decision makers in VECs, DES and IVEA.

Conversely, AONTAS deal with the same issue of adult and community education structures in a discussion paper (2002), but from the grassroots perspective of community groups represented in the NGO. In this case it is a grassroots discourse of control which is at play rather than an institutional discourse of control. Previous failures to implement policy are noted, the Murphy report 1973 (pp. 1-2) and the Kenny report 1984 (pp. 2-3). In the White Paper, LALBs are to ‘act as autonomous sub-committees which are administratively hosted by the VEC’ (p. 5), an arrangement for which AONTAS ‘strongly lobbied’ (p.3-4). It is the author’s contention that some proposals regarding structures in the White Paper, while welcome, nonetheless cause ‘some confusion’ (p. 7), make ‘little sense’(p. 8) and AONTAS questions their ‘appropriateness’ (p. 9).

Legitimate and understandable as these claims may be in the context of a discussion document, I would argue that they belie the deeper discourse of ‘control’. AONTAS are obviously interested in maximising the level of ‘autonomy’ for its member community groups and the sector generally. This arises out of the view that the VEC ‘ad hoc Adult Education Boards have not been successful in addressing needs.’ (DES, 2000, p. 192). A discourse of autonomy could be construed from the study, but in the wider context the discourse of control seems more apt. This concern with control runs along similar lines to

Murtagh's article from the institutional perspective, and glimpses are evident in two statements where AONTAS claims that it is 'well placed' (2002, p. 10) to play a key role in new structures, again representing a positioning to do with control.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to review a baseline of contemporary community education studies in Ireland and internationally. Using a Foucaultian discourse analysis approach, the broad thematic parameters of contemporary themes in community education were set out. It is claimed here that this application of discourse analysis is relatively innovative given that community education has been a neglected research field. The discourses identified are intended to resonate in some way with the experiences of community educators in this research. Again they provide a platform not to dictate the later focus group conversations with practitioners but to provide some context for those conversations.

The literature reviewed in this and the previous chapter has examined 'what is already known on the topic of community education (Antonesca et al., 2008, p. 58). However, the literature is not left to accumulate dust. The 'constant comparative' approach described by Charmaz (2006, p.54) allows the researcher to simultaneously gather and analyse data, to engage back and forth with the literature, introducing new theoretical perspectives or advancing existing ones. The next step in that process is to describe the particular grounded theory methodology employed in this study.

CHAPTER 3 IN TOUCH WITH ITS ROOTS: CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY EDUCATION USING GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I describe the research strategy of the thesis. I describe how I will tune into the dialogue about community education which is taking place among community educators, using the initial themes identified in the literature in previous chapters as a springboard to take up this conversation. To reiterate, the purpose of this research is to enquire into community education from the perspective of its practitioners, exploring how community educators in Ireland view their practice in terms of *meaning, educator role and institution*.

The research methodology used in the enquiry to address the question is constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The primary research method I have used in the study is focus group interview. The research participants are community educators, 16 of whom are Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) working in the VECs, representing almost half of their cohort (46%) and 7 members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) representative of a cross section of practitioners of the network. The structure of this chapter is outlined below.

The chapter is arranged in three parts beginning with the process, rather than the theory or rationale behind the process. This is in keeping with the critical pedagogic approach to community education, which begins by engaging with the ‘thematic universe’ of participants (Freire, 1970, p. 77). Whilst I do make mention of theory and rationale early on in the chapter, my approach is to explain my research methodology from the ground up. In grounded theory, this is a juxtaposing of the traditional positivist research approach, which would usually begin by invoking theory underpinning the methodology before describing the process of gathering data.

When you theorize, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into experience. The content of theorizing cuts to the core of studied life and poses new questions about it.

(Charmaz, 2006, p.135)

The first part sets out how I went about addressing my research question. Having explored fundamentals of discourses in the literature of community education thus far, it was now time to research experience. This part describes the introduction of my research to my research community, the participants of the research, and the promotion of the research. As I describe this process, I also provide rationale for my choices regarding research design, method (Focus Group), research participants and the dynamics of hosting focus groups and follow up with research participants.

In the second part, I now describe the rationale for my research approach in greater detail. I return to my adult critical epistemology, 'reaching up to abstractions', explaining how it informs the methodology of this research. I include here, other possible routes of inquiry, and I provide reasons why I chose a qualitative research methodology.

In the final part of the chapter, I describe constructivist grounded theory as my preferred research methodology. The constructivist grounded theory approach has been developed by Charmaz (2006) based on the original grounded theory initiated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The previous chapters have introduced the most relevant theories which have a bearing on our topic, community education. In this chapter, I focus on theories from the perspective of my research situation and position. Whilst grounded theory is the central research approach, I also include emancipatory research principles (Baker et al., 2004) to inform my approach.

The research question and purpose will feature across all three parts of the chapter from the outset:

How do community educators in Ireland (a) interpret the meaning of their practice, (b) understand their role and its connectedness to liberatory struggle, and (c) negotiate their space in the institutional provider, the vocational education committee?

I conclude the chapter by briefly pointing forward to how findings generated will be analysed through grounded theory and discourse analysis.

Engaging with the conversation: The process of generating data

Making my pitch - why this research is useful

When I first drafted my letter to invite Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) in the VECs to participate in this research it was done so in ‘appealing’ tones. Researchers need to bear in mind that ‘people who agree to help you are doing you a favour’ (Antonesa et al., p.74). As I reflected on this basic disposition, I began to feel that as researchers we need to challenge this idea in some respects. As researcher I have tended to view myself in a dependent position vis a vis gaining access to my research participants, the idea that I am somehow ‘getting in the way’ of research participants’ busy routines and timetables, that they are indeed doing me a favour. My disposition and demeanor as researcher in the past has been almost apologetic for ‘taking up the time’ of the busy professional or busy student participant.

Having critically reflected about this, I decided on a bolder approach for my thesis research. Research is about engaging with the audience in a way that is also meaningful for the research group. Therefore I decided to design a focus group, in the manner as one would design a workshop or conference. This involved creating a focus group flier and distributing it among the target audience. Therefore the idea of a focused thematic discussion to gather views and reflections of community education practitioners at this point in time, ten years after the White Paper on Adult Education, proved to be a useful strategy. Enthused by this strategy, I designed a colourful flier, something more engaging and relevant to my intended research community, rather than a ‘begging’ style letter. As a result, I was invited to speak about my research at the Annual General Meeting of the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA)⁹.

The research community most relevant to my research are these co-educators working as practitioners in the community education sector. I was particularly interested in inviting these CEFs from the VECs to participate in the research, and CEFA was the appropriate representative body to approach. I wished to gain CEFs’ input to the research because of their particular role in the context of the White Paper (DES, 2000, p. 114) and their positioning within the VEC. CEFs combine a dual role both as community-based and

⁹ CEFA was established in March 2004 at an inaugural meeting in Galway as a professional representative association for Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) (CEFA on line, 2011).

institution-based practitioners. There are 37 CEF positions nationally, 2 of which are currently vacant. CEFA are organized into four regions, East (including Dublin), North/West/Midlands, South and South East, which meet at regional level up to four times annually. CEFA meet at a national level twice annually. I also extended the research to community educators working external to VECs, to gain a community-based perspective external to the institutional provider. For practical purposes, the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) were the most appropriate body to approach and the CEN Co-ordinator agreed to host a focus group which fulfilled this purpose.

I made my pitch as it were, in the form of a presentation about my research to the AGM of CEFA on 20th April 2010 (see powerpoint presentation in the appendix). The AGM was well attended. My presentation focused on the following points and lasted approximately 45 minutes (including interactive piece at no.6 below).

1. Researcher's Background

My own background in work and study in the field; commitment to reflective practice, and the praxis approach in community education, i.e. action, reflection and action.

2. The Research Area: Community Education

A distinct field of practice; formal education well researched v informal community sector research gap; context 10 years post White Paper; My primary interest in perspective of community educator.

3. What is known about Community Education ?

– Scope of Literature Review VEC histories and reports; AONTAS publications; Green Paper & White Paper on Adult Education; Lenses of theory, critical, egalitarian, feminist.

4. What is not known about Community Education ?

– Research Questions qualitative rather than quantitative focus; connectedness to tradition of struggle in community education; what is & what is not community education; community education and positioning in the VEC.

5. Purpose and Contribution of Research to Action

Knowledge should not become redundant and divorced from action; not only to understand but also to change the world; Implications for nature and goal of community education as well as practice and supporting structures

6. Sample of the Focus Group Process (See detail below)

7. Research Ethics and Next Steps

NUI Maynooth Policy Documents on Ethics in Research; Confidentiality and Anonymity assurances; Feedback of findings post focus group; Expression of interest form; Researcher contact details.

I also wished to provide the CEFs with a flavour of the process of the focus group (point 6 above). I planned to use the Freirean pedagogical concept of generative themes, discussed earlier to generate discussion during the focus groups. In brief this involved the use of a 'codification' (Freire, 1970, p. 102) which represents a generative theme in community education. This would be a broad theme of dialogue or debate in the discourse of community education. I constructed a codification around the theme of 'participation' in community education as illustrative of this process. This illustrated the basis for the approach I proposed to use later in focus groups, giving participants a taster of the focus group method. The codification is reproduced in figure 1 below as is the process of reflection and decodification which I facilitated with the AGM's assembly of CEFs (approximately 20 people).

Figure 1: Sample Codification for CEFA Annual General Meeting April 20, 2010



The CEFs present at the AGM were invited to look at the image for a few minutes and then reflect on the following questions individually and in groups. Afterwards, feedback was invited from participants and this is recorded beneath the appropriate questions.

1. What do you see happening in the scene ?
A facilitator hoping someone will turn up; A prepared room, tea coffee biscuits; The facilitator/student in the picture appears scared; Wrong day and time perhaps; Poor quality furniture and facilities; Not another circle (circle may be intimidating for new learners); Welcome on flipchart but atmosphere does not appear welcoming.
2. Why does this happen ?
Message about the course is not being communicated clearly; It is not connecting with people; It is daunting to sit in a circle; The course may not be meeting the needs of people; The room may be in a school rather than in an estate where people are more familiar; The course may be voluntary and is therefore unpredictable.
3. What courses are people showing up to ?
Practical courses e.g. working with their hands.
4. What are they not showing up for ?
Citizenship education.
5. Who is not turning up ?
Men (wide agreement); People who need to be turning up are not turning up.

The feedback above gives an insight into the powerful medium that critical pedagogy can be in an adult reflective process. Participants responded in an open way to the questions. As a facilitator, I was surprised at some of the feedback, particularly the resistance to circles. I also felt that the questions at 3,4 and 5 generated some interesting observations, for example, the response that participants are showing up for 'practical', 'hands-on' type courses. The response that men were not 'turning up' was quite unanimous, as was the absence of those to whom community education is targeted for participation. As a facilitator, I felt it important to move with the energy of the group and pose these questions which explore the issues in more depth. In this sample or taster of how the focus group would work, I was able to find an appropriate level of engagement as a facilitator and uncover some interesting themes early on in the research.

Following this activity, I explained the ethical guidelines briefly and then invited any of the CEFs present to complete the 'Expression of Interest Form' for participation in a regional focus group. CEFs from three of the regions expressed an interest in hosting a focus group for the CEFs in their region.

I was pleased with the outcome of this presentation and I felt it was a good start to what would be an ongoing process in the course of my research. I felt I had achieved a number of tasks as follows; I established my credibility as a researcher, I felt I formed positive relations with the Community Education Facilitators, and engaged the interest of the CEFs as a research community in this particular research.

Planning the focus groups

I then set about planning the actual focus groups. Four focus groups were planned and carried out over the following six months. The dates, venues and numbers of participants are included in Table 1 below. The duration of each focus group was 1 ½ hours.

Table 1: Focus Groups

Group / Region	Date	Venue	Participants
AONTAS Community Education Network CEN (National)	5 th May 2010	Dublin	7
CEFA East	18 th May 2010	Lucan	6
CEFA South	7 th Sept 2010	Limerick	3*
CEFA North/West/Midlands	12 th Oct 2010	Mullingar	7

*A fourth participant was unable to attend as planned on the morning of the focus group.

The flier which was circulated to the convenor for each regional grouping of CEFA is displayed in Figure 2. This was then distributed to the CEFs in that region. The focus groups took place in venues which were community-based in each of the regions. I also arranged to have a focus group with members of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN), to gain the perspective of community educators who were not formally attached to any particular VEC.

The key words appearing in the flier conveyed my interests as a researcher; ‘community education’, ‘struggle’, ‘social justice’ and a ‘decade of change’. I considered whether the suggestion of these ‘themes’ in the promotional flier departed methodologically from grounded theory. The image adorning the flier, (a group of people holding various placards on a yellow brick road with a distant horizon), may have construed a particular meaning about protest, campaigning etc. Could this suggest a particular meaning that I had in mind for community education as a researcher? Was I pushing an agenda?

In grounded theory, researchers must be careful not to ‘impose the researcher’s concepts, concerns, and discourse upon the research participant’s reality’, (Charmaz, 2006, p. 32). On reflection, I was alarmed and concerned that I may have departed from grounded theory from the start. I revisited Charmaz (2006) and found I could reconcile my approach with advice she offered in relation to approaching research with theoretical sensitivity based on


Blumer's notion of 'sensitizing concepts' (1969, cited in Charmaz, 2006, p. 16). I will discuss this idea further in the context of running the focus group, but I was satisfied that the flier was neither a blank canvas nor a leading piece but a socially constructed prompt for discussion .

The key information to point out in the flier concerned the purpose of the research. This involved six questions to prompt reflection and thinking on these broad issues prior to the Focus Group.

- Do community educators identify with 'struggle' ?
- Is 'struggle' relevant in 21st Century Ireland ?
- What is the purpose of community education? Is this reflected in practice ?
- What is & what is not community education ?
- What is the impact of the VEC sector in facilitating community education?
- How do community educators negotiate their 'space' within the VEC, in other organisations and in communities ?

I considered these questions broad enough to cover meaning, purpose, educator role, position and institution. At this stage I was anxious to have this conversation with the CEFs and AONTAS CEN members. As a researcher, I felt I had been rehearsing this conversation in a vacuum for some months, even though I was happily working at a grassroots level with men's groups in community education. It would be good to get down to talking in groups, to make the 'conversation in my head', much more real.

Figure 2: Focus Group Flier Invitation

<div style="background-color: yellow; border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <p>WORTH THE STRUGGLE! Reflecting on Community Education and its contribution to Social Justice in a Decade of Change 2000-2010</p> </div> <p style="text-align: center;">Community Education Facilitators Focus Group DATE VENUE</p> <p><i>It is ten years since the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education Learning for Life (2000), which included a full chapter on Community Education. The start of a new decade seems an appropriate time to reflect critically, share experiences and consider the future of community education.</i></p> 	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p>WORTH THE STRUGGLE! Reflecting on Community Education and its contribution to Social Justice in a Decade of Change 2000-2010</p> </div> <p>This Focus Group will explore a number of themes...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do community educators identify with 'struggle'? ▪ Is 'struggle' relevant in 21st Century Ireland? ▪ What is the purpose of community education? is this reflected in practice? ▪ What is & what is not community education? ▪ What is the impact of the VEC sector in facilitating community education? ▪ How do community educators negotiate their 'space' within the VEC, in other organisations and in communities? <hr/> <p>The Focus Group Leader is Liam McGlynn, a student on the Doctorate in Education Programme at NUI Maynooth. The Focus Group forms part of his research towards his doctoral thesis. Liam is interested in hearing the voice of practitioners in the field. This research aims to create that space.</p> <p>The Focus Group may be of interest to VEC Community Education Facilitators in and will include brief input, reflection, discussion and creative engagement in a relaxed participative process. The process will be audio-recorded & findings fed back to participants, and made available for the community education sector.</p> <hr/> <p>Booking Slip (Please complete and return to: Liam McGlynn, Ed.D. Programme, Dept. Adult & Community Education, NUI Maynooth, Co. Kildare)</p> <p>Further Information: _____</p> <p>Please indicate (✓) which date would suit you best: DATE1 <input type="checkbox"/> DATE2 <input type="checkbox"/> I'm available either DATE1 or DATE2 <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Name: _____ Tel Contact No. _____</p> <p>Organisation: _____</p> <p>Contact Address: _____</p> <p>E-mail: _____ Dietary / Special Needs _____</p>
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Running the focus groups

I was very pleased with the interest shown in hosting focus groups expressed by the VEC CEFs and the AONTAS CEN members. As the schedule of focus groups approached, I set about planning the running of the actual focus group and drawing up a number of 'codes' (Sheehy, 2001, pp. 20-21; Hope & Timmel, 1995, pp. 75-77) to stimulate reflection and discussion.

I began each focus group by agreeing the guidelines with the participants (Figure 3). I decided on an open style introduction that invited participants to take some moments of reflection on 'one significant achievement' and 'one significant disappointment' in community education over the past ten years. Participants were given the option of

addressing this question nationally or locally. Different coloured post-its were provided to jot down thoughts. This introduction enabled each participant to introduce themselves, and speak a little on the theme of community education in a general way. This generated interesting feedback which could be taken up in the course of the focus group.

I also considered my own role as facilitator within the focus group. I believed it was important for me to explain the background to my research, my interest in community education both as practitioner and researcher. Whilst I already did this at the AGM of CEFA, I felt it important to do so again in brief (in particular for CEFs who would not have been in attendance at the AGM and for the benefit of the AONTAS focus group members).

Prior to focus groups, I gave some time to considering the role of my own 'voice' and 'experience' in the research and how I would include and/or curtail my own inputs during the discussion. Again, my concerns here arose out of guarding against imposing my own agenda, or simply taking up participants' time to make inputs. I will further consider the role of 'insider researcher' in the course of the analysis and findings chapters.

Figure 3: Focus Group Guidelines

WORTH THE STRUGGLE!

**Reflecting on Community Education and its contribution to Social Justice
in a Decade of Change 2000-2010**

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION
Community Education Facilitators Association

GUIDELINES

*Welcome ! These are a few guidelines to aid our discussion
this afternoon.*

- This research abides by the NUI Maynooth – University Policy on Ethics in Research.
http://www.nuim.ie/researchsupport/research_ethics/
- Participants’ anonymity and confidentiality is protected in the course of the research. (i.e. identifiers as in people’s names/ VEC organisation will not be named. (e.g. CEF1 East, CEF 5 North / West / Midlands, CEF2 South).
- The transcript of the recording of the focus group will form the basis for quotations on the themes emerging in the conversation with Community Education Facilitators about Community Education.
- Each focus group participant will be forwarded a summary of the emerging themes including their own quotations which it is proposed to include in the thesis.
- One of the aims of the Focus Group is to create a safe space for CEFs to feel confident about ‘telling it like it is’ in their experience.
- The Focus Group will provide space for reflection..... time to collect your thoughts.
- Group Discussion is encouraged and whilst allowing the conversation to flow, we are mindful of listening and speaking with one voice at a time (for recording purposes).
- By all means ask for clarification.
- Mobile Phones. Please switch off/put on silent

Background to constructing focus group codifications

Having completed focus group introductions and guidelines, the main body of work in the focus group could now commence. This involved the introduction and display of Freirean 'codifications' referred to above, for the purpose of generating dialogue.

The process of constructing codifications commenced at an early stage prior to the first focus group and continued throughout focus groups. In designing the focus groups for the present study, the Freirean method of group dialogue investigating a 'generative theme' (Freire, 1970, p. 77) further developed by Partners Training for Transformation (Sheehy, 2001, p. 20) offers a useful model for conducting focus group discussion. To recall in brief, Freire's generative themes refer to issues which are relevant and critical in people's lives, individually and in community, and about which people have strong feelings. In Freire's 'culture circles' (Freire, 1970, p.84; 1987, pp.67-68) people assembled and discussed these issues with the assistance of an 'educator' / 'investigator' (1970, p. 89). This dialogic process involves the educator and educatees acting as 'co-investigators' (1970, p. 62).

The methodology of that investigation must likewise be dialogical, affording the opportunity both to discover generative themes and to stimulate people's awareness in regard to these themes.

(Freire, 1970, pp77-78)

Freire used these themes as the raw material or program content for his literacy workshops. The material content was relevant to the lived experience of participants. Freire used 'codifications... to represent situations familiar to the individuals whose thematics are being examined' (1970, p. 95).

The Freirean use of codes to illustrate a generative theme back to a community is not to be confused with coding in grounded theory which is the process of rendering data following its collection in research (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Both are distinct processes. Coding in the Freirean sense makes use of 'pedagogic codes' during focus groups, whereas coding in grounded theory draws out the 'research codes' from the transcript of dialogue. Lest there be any confusion, I will use the term codification to distinguish Freirean codes constructed to initiate dialogue on a generative theme during focus groups.

I chose a number of loosely constructed codifications to initiate open discussion in the focus groups. For reasons which I shall elaborate below, I was anxious to establish an open disposition as a grounded theory researcher, and therefore felt it wise not to make codifications overly bounded or circumscribed. Their purpose was to initiate rather than dictate the trend of discussion among participants.

My intention as a facilitator was therefore to make use of the codifications in a flexible manner. If I felt the transition to another codification would interrupt the flow of a conversation that seemed really meaningful, I would forego introducing a new codification at that point. I prepared three codifications relevant to the three aspects of enquiry in the thesis, community education's *meaning*, *role* and *institution* (VECs).

In respect of meaning, I initiated discussion through reading out the meaning of community education offered in the White Paper (DES, 2000, p. 110), (see Figure 4). Accompanying questions included 'which definitions did participants prefer?' or 'which definition was the most evident from practice?'

In respect of origins of community education, and what inspired community educators in their role, I used a display of images to convey a variety of causes and struggles, and invited participants to identify one which resonated with their experience (see Figure 5). In relation to how community educators viewed their role, I facilitated two additional activities in the focus groups with CEFs. In the first activity undertaken with one of the focus groups, CEFs were invited to draw an image to represent how they viewed their role in community education / in the VEC. These images are displayed in chapters four, five and six, the analysis and findings chapters. The second activity was undertaken with two CEFA focus groups. Having undertaken initial coding of transcripts of earlier focus groups, I prepared a page naming a number of themes which came up as points of struggle for participants of earlier focus groups. I invited subsequent focus groups to circle any of these which were relevant to them as struggles in their role as CEFs and to add any new struggles not mentioned before (see Figure 6).

This latter activity was based on Charmaz's use of 'theoretical sampling' and 'the constant comparative method' (2006, pp. 96-113) in constructivist grounded theory. Theoretical sampling refers to the 'return to the field' (p.111) having constructed some 'tentative

categories' following initial coding. Charmaz describes theoretical sampling as 'starting with data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and then examining these ideas through further empirical enquiry' (p. 102). It forms part of the ongoing 'constant comparative method' as researchers 'go back and forth between data collection and analysis' (p. 104). Using the second activity outlined above in later focus groups, I was able to focus 'further data collection to refine key categories' which emerged in earlier focus groups (p. 110). I considered whether this was good practice in terms of what Charmaz meant by theoretical sampling. As Charmaz describes it, she returned to the same participants again, to undertake further data collection. It would have been unrealistic and difficult for me to reconvene the same focus groups for further data collection, given the limited timeframe available to me. Given these constraints, I decided in later focus groups to make mention of 'tentative categories' produced in earlier focus groups without imposing these on the group.

I did not have a specific codification for the role of the institution (VEC) in community education. On reflection, I found that a rapport was well established in each focus group discussion by the time we came to consider the role of the VEC. This allowed for the use of some straightforward questions about the VEC's role, and what challenges, if any, were encountered by CEFs in negotiating their position in the VEC. This part also explored whom CEFs perceived as their allies in the sector. The earlier codifications inevitably raised some themes which also generated reflection and dialogue about the VEC's role and relationship to community education. All of the codifications used during focus groups are reproduced below (see Figures 4 to 6).

Figure 4 Codification 1 Definitions of Community Education

Defining Community Education

Learning for Life - White Paper on Adult Education 2000

.....a variety of definitions.(p. 110)

On the one hand, it has been seen as an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community. In this sense, it could be seen to incorporate almost all adult learning opportunities provided by the formal education sectors at the community level - it is education in the community but not of the community.

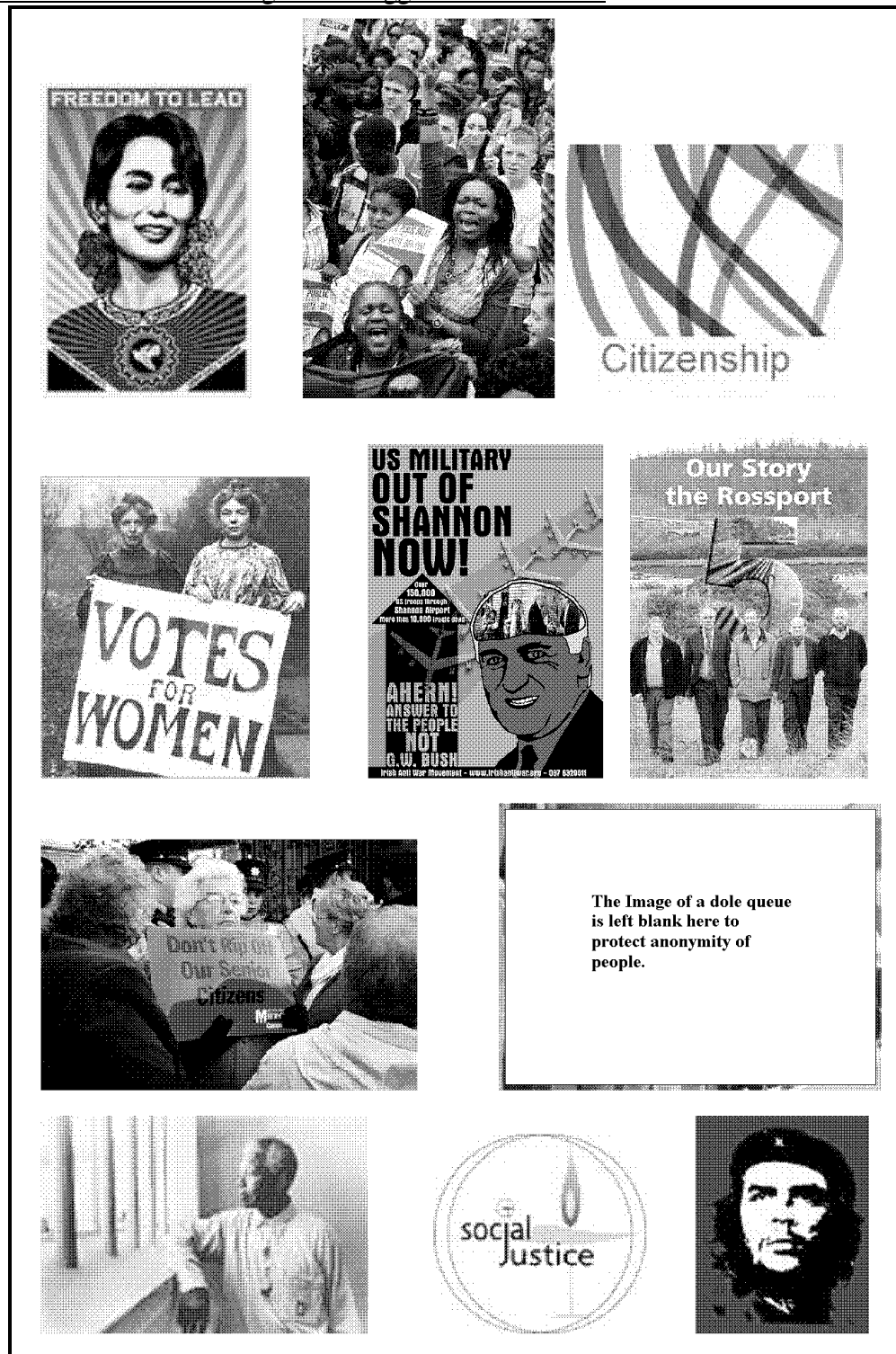
(Learning for Life, p. 110)

A second view – and the one adopted by the Green Paper – sees it in a more ideological sense as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and collective level. Such an approach to Community Education sees it as an interactive challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision-making processes.

(Learning for Life, p. 110)

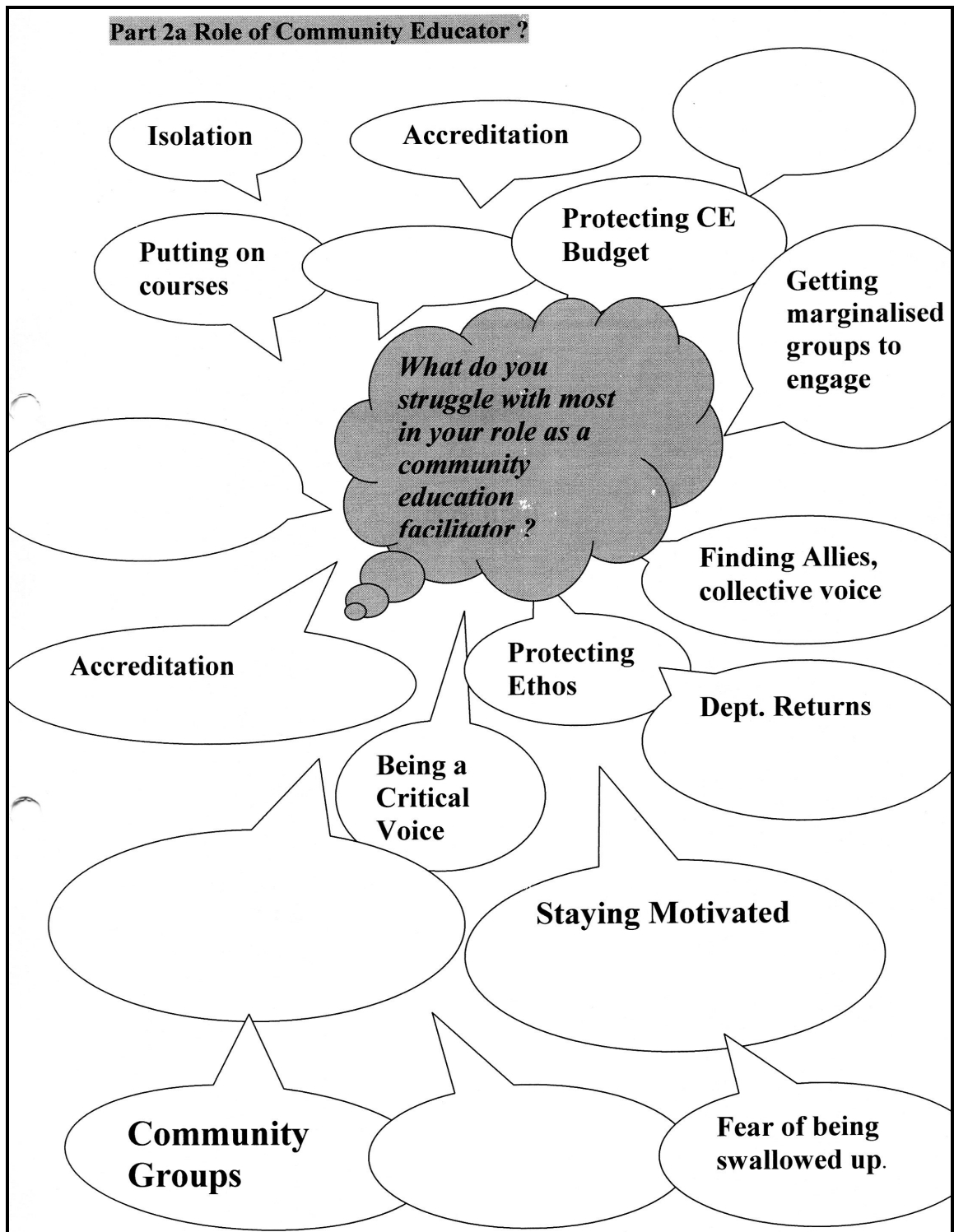
These definitions were read aloud to the focus group and the handout was also provided to each participant.

Figure 5: Codification 2 Images of Struggle and Resistance



These images were scattered on the floor or on the table of the venue for the focus group. They represent both local and global themes, struggles, protests and campaigns. They include; iconic images, (Aung San Suu Kyi, Mandela, Che Guevara), image of a queue (unemployment), Older People's protest, Anti-War poster, Rossport 5, Women's suffrage, and anti racism demonstration.

Figure 6: Handout 'What Community Educators Struggle with in their role' (used with last 2 focus groups)



The blank spaces were left on the codification to allow participants include their own issues for consideration.

Ethical considerations and follow up with participants

The research was undertaken in accordance with the guidelines of the NUI Maynooth – University Policy on Ethics in Research.¹⁰ The research project was examined and approved by NUIM Social Science Research Ethics Sub-Committee. The British Educational Research Association’s Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004), (BERA, 2004) were nominated as the professional code of ethics appropriate for research in my particular field. Focus group participants were kept apprised of ethical considerations before, during and after their research involvement in regard to (i) protection of their right to anonymity and confidentiality, (ii) the obtaining of their prior consent before final submission of thesis findings, and (iii) assurances regarding the storage and safeguarding of focus group transcripts.

Focus groups have been audio recorded with Olympus DSS Digital Data Recorder. The data has been transcribed in full text format. Original audio files and transcribed text files are stored and secured in password protected files.

The focus group transcripts have been anonymised to protect identities of participants. Initial and focused coding was carried out on the transcripts using MAXQDA 10 software. These files have also been secured.

The primary aspect of this research which posed an ethical challenge for me is the ‘insider researcher’ stance (Brannick & Coughlan, 2007). I was aware of the need to maintain an open disposition, avoiding bias, to allow the perspective of other community educators come through in this research. I consider my insider researcher role further in a reflexive way through the analysis of findings (chapters four to six). In completing the process of the NUI Maynooth *Protocol for Ethical Research* I gave undertakings to research participants to provide them with a copy of the initial draft findings following transcription of the focus group discussions. In following through on this commitment, participants were not only part of the focus group dialogue, they also had a reflective role in confirming the accuracy of the draft findings provided to them. Emancipatory research seeks to ensure research participants have a sense of ‘ownership and control over the generation of knowledge

¹⁰ Webpage of the Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee at the National University of Ireland Maynooth <http://research.nuim.ie/support-services/research-ethics/SSRESC>

produced about them and their world’ (Baker et al., 2004, p. 179) As researcher I am conscious that ‘it is generally the researchers who produce the final text, the written record of the research event. This gives them a power of definition that cannot be abrogated at will.’ (Baker et al., 2004, p. 176).

The research community sample

In this section, I describe the details of the research sample. The sampling data is included in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Focus Groups Representative Sampling Data

Practitioner	Research Participants	Total Cohort	% Representative / Participation Rate
VEC Community Education Facilitator (CEF)	16	35	46%
AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN)	7	40 (average attendance at CEN meetings)	N/A ¹¹

The gender breakdown of the sixteen CEFs who took part in the research was fifteen (94%) female to one (6%) male. The national profile of the 35 CEFs working across all VECs is 31 (89%) female to 4 (11%) male. The research sample is therefore largely representative in gender terms. In terms of urban and rural representativeness of CEFs, four were urban-based and twelve rural-based which would also be representative of the national cohort. All CEFs who participated in the research have been working as CEFs for more than three years. Ten of the sixteen CEFs have worked as CEFs for five to eight years. The first appointments of CEFs were made from 2003 onwards. Some postholders had worked previously within the VECs in pilot community education roles, literacy or other programmes within the adult education service. All CEFs have an educational background in the humanities in areas such as community development, social sciences, and theology studies. The AONTAS training programme for CEFs which ran for the first two to three years 2003-2006, included training on critical pedagogy and participatory practice. Freire’s work is specifically named in the CEFA position paper on community education (CEFA, forthcoming 2011).

¹¹ AONTAS community education network has a total membership of 130 individual / groups. Average attendance at CEN meetings is 40 individuals. The focus group practitioners (CENs) were assembled from a cross-section of practitioner members and arranged with the CEN Co-ordinator.

The total membership listing for the AONTAS Community Education Network is 130 including individuals and organisations from 19 counties (AONTAS, 2011). The network was established in 2007 and has convened on 13 occasions up to 2011. On average three meetings are held annually with average attendances of 40 individuals at each meeting. The CEN Co-ordinator assisted in convening seven activist community educators from this group of 40 regular participants.

The themes of the gatherings focus on the goal of the network which is to ‘recognise, resource and raise the profile’ of community education (AONTAS, 2011, p. 2). The work of the network has been very much centred on the concerns of the independent groups working in community education in Ireland, and provides a forum for information sharing, academic input, planning and lobbying.

The gender breakdown of the seven activists who attended the CEN focus group for this research was four female and three male. All participants have been activists in community development and community education for more than five years. This focus group represented activist community educators from the overall CEN membership.

The focus group: Facilitating dialogue, recording & transcribing

Setting aside for now the debate about teaching / facilitating in the Freirean pedagogic sense, my purpose as researcher was to create a space for my research participants to have open dialogue on their generative themes. At the same time, I was cognisant of the need to ensure flow, coverage of themes, ensure equal voice and time, judge my own researcher interventions and to avoid leading themes which had not emerged in prior focus groups. I did however pose the codifications to initiate dialogue. Participants have all experience of facilitating groups and therefore they all respected the norms agreed in the focus group agreement. All consented to have the discussion recorded and the dialogue was rich in its content and the atmosphere of the focus groups was relaxed as people were not inhibited by the unobtrusive recording device (Olympus DSS digital data recorder).

Immediately after each focus group, I recorded my impressions of the process. Following each focus group the entire voice transcript of dialogue was transcribed fully to text. The transcript files and the text files have been stored in password protected files in compliance with the NUI Maynooth ethical clearance protocol referred to above. The quotations used

in the findings chapters have been drawn from these files with the express consent of the focus group participants.

A key feature of the focus groups was the interest which participants expressed in the dissemination of the research following completion. To ensure follow up I provided each participant with the draft findings chapters which included their own quotes which would appear in the final document, rather than their own quotes in isolation. Each participant therefore had a clear insight of the format, presentation and content of what would form the thesis findings chapters. The risk for the researcher with this approach is that a collective perspective rather than an individual personal perspective is reflected back to the participant. Some participants may be uncomfortable with the collective picture or emerging outcome and may wish to withdraw part of their contribution. However, in the interests of authenticity, and despite such risks, this open approach was adopted to afford a sense of ownership on the part of participants in the final outcome of the research.

Critical, grounded and collective: Rationale for methodology claims

Shaped by critical ways of knowing

In the Introduction chapter, I named my epistemology as adult critical education. Integral to my epistemology, I identified critical theory and liberatory pedagogy, originated by Freire, as the most influential components in my practice as a community educator. This epistemological stance has an important bearing on my chosen research methodology and method which I describe here. I am guided in my research by what Antonesa and others say in relation to methodology, that it 'is how researchers make their epistemology and theoretical stance work for them in their research'. (Antonesa et al., 2008, p. 70). My epistemological commitments have had a significant bearing on my choices in relation to research methodology for this study.

Qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things.

(Berg, 1998 , p.2)

A critical and qualitative research methodology

As a researcher interested in phenomena of the social world, I have a preference for qualitative research approaches. An adult critical approach in research terms is one of a number of post-positivist approaches. It valorises reflexivity on the researcher's part. The researcher's epistemology and understanding of 'values, passion and politics' (Antonesa et al., 2006, p.18) are under the spotlight as much as that of research participants. A research approach informed by adult critical values equalises the research engagement with participants, researching 'with' them, rather than conducting research 'on' them (Wolcott, 1990, p. 19).

The conventional view of research is to 'find out' something new in relation to a phenomenon. The orientation toward problem-solving in positivist research is also a dominant tendency, focused on finding solutions without critically analysing problems. The critical research paradigm adopts a problem-setting approach.

Problem-setting is an intrinsically valuable scholarly activity. Good research is something that opens up the nature of problems and sticks with hard questions.
(Antonesa et al., p. 19)

This approach resonates with Freire's 'problem-posing education' (1970, p. 60) which problematises issues impacting on the daily lives of people affected by disadvantage and inequality. A problem-posing research paradigm asks hard questions about causal factors behind problems. In this case, the phenomenon of community education is problematised.

The nature of community education and its struggle for recognition lends itself to post-positivist research strategies. As a researcher interested in community education's core meaning, its practitioners and its institutional setting, I believe critical and qualitative research methodologies, hold greater promise in terms of generating findings in this enquiry.

The dialogic and participatory nature of community education is well-suited to focus group interview (the method chosen for this study). The goal is to generate 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) in the dialogue facilitated by the researcher among participants, to capture the generative themes in the praxis of community educators working at the interface between community groups and the institution. This critical qualitative approach will yield

findings which, when analysed, describe in more depth, the inspirations, understanding, challenges and aspirations of today's community educators, than would be gleaned from a more extensive quantitative survey.

That said, quantitative research drawing on a positivist empiricist research paradigm, has for example, made a valuable contribution to measuring the persistence and extent of inequality in education in Ireland (Lynch, 1999, p. 7). The most recent research on community education in Ireland carried out by AONTAS used a mixed methods approach producing findings which correlate with findings in this thesis (Bailey et al., 2011). These will be incorporated in the analysis and findings chapters of this thesis.

Returning to the observation made by Antonesa and others at the outset, constructivist grounded theory emerged as the most appropriate methodology, which allows this researcher remain true to epistemological and political commitments, whilst remaining open in the research process.

Grounded up from the grassroots

Community education is generally understood as a community-based grassroots practice undertaken with and by community groups as the White Paper on Adult Education recognises:

Its contribution was particularly acknowledged in the following areas - in reaching large numbers of participants, frequently in disadvantaged settings.
(DES, 2000, p.110)

...such groups already have the potential for education and training delivery into communities or groups which are frequently hard to reach by the formal providers.
(DES, 2000, p.117)

Community education in the tradition of radical critical pedagogy, places emphasis on the primary role of people in communities affected by socio-economic disadvantage as being 'subjects' not 'objects' of change.

Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become subjects of the educational process...
(Freire, 1970, p.67)

It is this ‘rootedness in the community’ (DES, 2000, p.113) and the agentic role of people living and working in communities to drive change which informs my choice of grounded theory methodology for this research. It was important for me to find a research methodology which would be compatible with community education practice. Liberatory pedagogy begins with people’s lived experience in the educative process. The grassroots experience is the starting point for learning, what Freire termed ‘reading the world’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.xiii). As its name suggests, grounded theory research is similarly focused on theorising from the grassroots up.

The process as well as the task are important in the pedagogies used with community education groups (Prendiville, 2004, p. 30). It is important to maintain both in the course of one’s work as a community educator. Similarly in grounded theory, Strauss believed that process not structure was fundamental to human existence and he emphasised ‘the active role of persons in shaping the worlds they live in’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 25). This enquiry explores both agency and structure in community education.

Choosing a collectivist research method

Having chosen grounded theory methodology for its compatibility with my research interests, I was equally interested in using a compatible research method to engage with my research community, community educators. Community education is distinctive as a collective educational practice. The White Paper on Adult Education refers to the ‘collective’ dimension of community education and community development.

They share a common goal of the collective empowerment of the participants based on an analysis of the structural barriers to people’s life chances...

(DES, 2000, p.110)

I was driven by a conviction that the way to achieve a collective dimension, was to use the tools we advocate in our practice namely, reflection, dialogue, facilitation, and yes, sitting in circles discussing the issues that matter. I felt this could be achieved through focus group interview, a collectivist research method.

The value of collective reflection and action is attested to by several authors. Young, writing about justice, refers to Heller’s understanding of citizenship as ‘persons deliberating about problems and issues that confront them collectively’ (Heller, 1987 cited in Young, 1990, p. 33) and Mayo writes that ‘people can educate, learn and work

collectively for change both outside and within institutions' (1999, pp. 5-6). A further reason why I chose a collective focus group as a research method, was based on a 'hunch' (Hood, 2004) that I would gain some insights into the dynamics of collective discussion and how understandings and positions about community education are formed and re-formed through dialogue in groups. If one were to sit down and map out one's individual master plan for community education, it would no doubt reflect values we hold dear. However, the reality is that most decision-making is a collective process involving competing voices, ideologies and values. Collective processes are therefore interesting forums for exploring voice, position and power.

Research is about engaging with the research audience in a way that is also meaningful for them. Therefore the idea of a focused thematic dialogue to gather the reflections of community education practitioners at this point in time, ten years post the White Paper on Adult Education, seemed to be a useful strategy.

I find the discourse model of collecting data (Antonesa et al., 2006) the most appealing because it allows the researcher to 'draw on her/his own experience (although not to the extent of drowning out that of the participants)' (p. 78). The focus group has the potential to be a space for creative engagement where meaning is '*formed*, not merely expressed or reported, through the speaking that takes place in the interview or focus-group process' (p. 78). This idea of meaning-making, in the course of the focus group moves away from the idea that research is 'information-extraction' (p. 78).

The focus group method therefore accommodated this discourse model, alongside generative dialogue and a grounded theory methodology. My role in the focus group as researcher was to facilitate the dialogue to 'enter into a conversational mode' and where space allowed, to share my 'own experience' (p. 78). Crucially, the discourse model is compatible with grounded theory allowing the researcher to make 'cross-connections' between focus groups where 'one participant may say something that can be used productively in subsequent interview or focus groups' (p. 78). This is similar logic to the process of theoretical sampling in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96).

An emancipatory researcher stance

For me, it is a privilege to have the opportunity to undertake research and academic writing about community education. As a community education researcher I was struck by the analysis which Baker et al. (2004, pp. 169-187) provide to the social research community concerning the privileged position which researchers occupy vis a vis the lives of those whom they research. They caution academic researchers who 'may view themselves as radical, reforming, feminist or emancipatory' occupying an elite position in society (2004, p. 175). Drawing on data from less privileged groups, 'academics create virtual realities, textual realities, ethnographic and statistical realities' (p. 175). As researchers we need to be mindful of this privilege.

A further point made by Baker et al. concerns a feature of positivist and post-positivist research which tends to provide 'detailed analysis of the lifestyle of those who are subordinate or poor' which is presented in various reports without any detailed 'analysis of the generative forces and processes that maintain others in positions of dominance or affluence.' (2004, p. 172). This latter point, is a key reason for my choosing to engage with educators and the institution in this research as opposed to community education participants. This is in no way to minimise the importance of research involving participants of community education programmes. It seemed to be the best fit for this researcher given the struggles of the community educator are often at the level of institution and organisational politics and culture.

The principles of emancipatory research commit researchers to 'reciprocity' involving the researcher and researched in 'dialectical theory building' rather than 'theoretical imposition.' (Lather, 1991, p. 56). Grounded theory methodology shares this principle with emancipatory research.

Reciprocity involves engaging participants from the start in the research planning and design, as it is only through such participation that marginalised groups can begin to control the naming of their own world.

(Baker et al., 2004, p. 182)

Emancipatory research principles inform the grounded theory methodology of this research in terms of enabling research participants who are practitioners in the field to have the maximum possible input to the research and to exercise control in shaping the findings of

the research. In practical terms this has involved the dissemination of preliminary findings among research participants. The research has also contributed in some ways toward the development of a position paper on community education by the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA, forthcoming, 2011), an unexpected action to which this research process contributes.

Grounded theory and Community Education

A grounded theory methodology

This research engages with the conversation going on among community educators about community education. Grounded theory is suitable for ‘studying fundamental social or psychological processes within a social setting or a particular experience’ (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7).

Grounded theory requires an ‘open-minded’ stance (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 26). Denscombe equates grounded theory with theory making (2004 p.111). He contrasts theory making with theory testing. The hegemony of positivism and theory-testing is such that ‘most of us are deeply affected by positivist models of research, even when trying to conduct it in a post-positivist manner.’ (Antonesca et al., 2006, p. 81). It is easy to get locked into a spiral of theory testing, based on a fixed position, ‘a rigid set of ideas’ (Denscombe, 2004 p.111) originating from gut-feeling, professional experience or intuition about the phenomenon of community education. A grounded theory approach requires openness to the possibility of surprise, strangeness, the ‘stated and unstated’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.83), and the possibility of different experiences of community education to what one may hope for, or even expect.

In this section, I describe the elements of Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory methodology which I draw on in the thesis. I also focus on earlier developments of grounded theory by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents....Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, and then prove it. Rather one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge.

(Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 23)

Charmaz departed from Glaser's view of grounded theory as a methodology of 'discovery', preferring the idea that theory is actually 'constructed' through investigation of a phenomena in the social world (2006, p. 8).

My first motivation for choosing a grounded theory approach is best summed up in Strauss and Corbin's view that the 'researcher has to be thinking about data – preferably be steeped in them, know a lot about the area under study' but at the same time be 'puzzled or disturbed about some feature of those data...so that questions will be raised and sought' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 29). At the outset of this research, the features which were puzzling about community education for me centred around the community educator's role. This was for me a powerful role, yet poorly recognised in education circles. The meaning of the practice went beyond location in the community to empowerment of marginalised communities. I was curious how community educators viewed the connection of their practice to its roots in liberatory struggle. I was also curious to know how community educators today work within the system, the education apparatus, which was traditionally the focus of much struggle for change in favour of marginalised groups¹².

Making the final decision to go with a constructivist grounded theory methodology involved quite a bit of soul-searching and self-doubt. Could the concept of struggle create a strait-jacket for the study ? Did this resemble theory-testing, in the sense that I was researching a connection that was being imposed on community education i.e. the connectedness to struggle ? Charmaz alerts potential grounded theorists to guard against 'pre-conceived categories' (2006, p. 32). Taking this on board, I was comforted by the 'open-mind' as opposed to 'empty-head' approach recommended by Dey (1999, cited in Charmaz, 2006, p. 48). Remaining open doesn't mean abandoning one's observations, prior perspectives or indeed one's hunches.

Grounded theorists nurture a disposition of theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, p.96) in the course of research. The researcher brings personal experience, professional experience and theoretical literature to bear on the study and must be mindful to 'step back and ask, what is

¹² Contrast the recent refusal of Government to reverse cuts in special needs assistants for the most needy students with the sanctioning of increased registration fees for third level students to satisfy the insatiable needs of a third level sector, the most privileged sector of education. (Flynn, 2008, p. B3A)

going on here ? Does what I think fit the reality of the data ?' and to 'maintain an attitude of scepticism' in the sense that theory constructed in the course of the investigation is 'provisional' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 44-45). Charmaz suggests that contextualized grounded theory:

can start with sensitizing concepts that address such concepts as power, global reach, and difference and end with inductive analyses that theorize connections between local worlds and larger social structures.

(Charmaz, 2006, p. 133)

Reading the quote above provided a 'eureka' moment for me. Struggle and resistance come to bear on the research as sensitizing concepts rather than pre-conceived ideas, and enable theoretical connections to be made between local worlds and larger social structures. Charmaz also encourages 'playfulness' in the process of theorising, rather than seeing it as a 'mechanical process'. (2006, p. 136). In this research, I drew on imagination (associated with playfulness) to gain a picture of the early instructors of the VECs, the organic intellectuals of Gramsci's factory floors and the radical educators working in *favelas* of Freire's Brazil.

Coding, memo-writing, theoretical sampling and theorising

Initial coding is the first analytic step in grounded theory. Initial coding (open coding) refers to the process of labelling or 'actively naming data' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47) generated from focus groups. The transcripts (in this case 5hrs 40mins of discussion) were transcribed 'sticking close to the data' (p. 47) using active codes e.g. 'empowering', 'being part of a buzz', 'silencing' (see chapters 4-6). 'In-vivo codes' (p. 55) or expressions particular to community educators were also noted e.g. 'returns', referring to reports to the Department of Education and Skills. Charmaz emphasizes that it is important to remain open to theoretical possibilities. She points out that 'line by line coding' carried out at an early stage on transcribed data serves to 'reduce the likelihood that researchers merely superimpose their preconceived notions on the data' (2006, p. 51). Initial coding and focused coding was carried out after each focus group, and prior to subsequent focus groups.

Focused coding, the second analytic step in grounded theory is the process of synthesising initial codes, integrating them into more salient categories. Codes at this level are more 'directed, selective, and conceptual' and they 'synthesize and explain larger segments of

data' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Focused coding or selective coding is the '*story*: (my emphasis) a descriptive narrative about the central phenomenon of the study', with the 'core category' or conceptualization of the story forming the 'story line' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). *Recognition, isolation, and solidarity* are examples of some focused codes which emerged in the narrative of practitioners in the focus groups.

Charmaz refers to 'theoretical coding', a sophisticated level of coding which specifies 'possible relationships between categories you have developed in your focused coding.' (2006, p. 63). The literature refers to theoretical coding families which closely mirror sociological concepts such as 'agency and action, power, networks...inequality' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 66).

Having constructed a number of categories through the initial, focused and theoretical coding phases, grounded theorists 'write memos to serve analytic purposes' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 80). Charmaz refers to the memo as an opportunity to reflect on the 'links between my ideas and the stories that gave rise to them' (p. 76). Similarly, for me, Foucault's idea about struggle (1976a, p. 83) created a sensitizing concept which linked with the story of community education emerging in the literature. I found memo-writing useful as a non-restrictive practice which allowed me to 'record' what I saw 'happening in the data' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 80). Charmaz views memo writing as a tool 'to develop your ideas...early in the analytic process...to clarify and direct your subsequent coding' (2006, p. 84). I chose to do memo-writing throughout the data gathering stage (focus groups) and during the post focus group analytic stage:

First, assess which codes best represent what you see happening in the data. In a memo, raise them to conceptual categories for your developing analytic framework – give them conceptual definition and analytic treatment in narrative form in your memo.

(Charmaz, 2006, p. 91)

Constructivist grounded theory involves theoretical sampling. This involves a constant comparative approach. This involves the researcher moving back and forth between data collection and data analysis, constructing new approaches to emerging categories based on what has been gathered already, thus directing where to gather more data.

Theoretical sampling involves starting with data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and then examining the ideas through further empirical enquiry.

Charmaz recommends theoretical sampling as a technique to ‘tentatively conceptualise’ categories emerging during the data collection process. The process helps to ‘indicate areas to probe’ (p. 107) in subsequent data collection. This aspect of the focus group process was crucial to moving the conversation in a more probing and meaningful direction, avoiding ‘saturation’ (p. 113) by simple repetition. Tentative categories were carried from earlier focus groups to the later focus groups.

The final step in constructivist grounded theory is theorising (Charmaz, 2006) which involves ‘the practical activity of engaging the world and of constructing abstract understandings about and within it’ (p. 123). This will be the task of chapter seven of this thesis.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter for the merits of combining a constructivist grounded theory research methodology with Freirean dialogue on generative theme in the study. This research strategy is warranted on the basis that the Freirean focus group enables the researcher to gain direct insight into the culture circle of community educators and the generative themes of their practice. Grounded theory as a research methodology and community education as a pedagogical practice share a grassroots intersection, namely, the voice of research participants in naming their world, in this case community educators. In the chapters which follow, community educators in Ireland begin to name their world.

PREFACE TO ANALYSIS & FINDINGS CHAPTERS

As we attempt to analyse dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly we must seek its constituent elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers.

(Freire, Pedagogy of the oppressed, 1970, p. 68)

Human existence, for Freire, ‘is to name the world, to change it’ (1970, p. 69) through reflection and action. Words spoken are reflected upon in dialogue and acted upon to change the world. The process of dialogue among people with common concerns and issues is central to Freire’s critical pedagogy. Similarly, dialogue in focus groups is the generative process which drives this research.

The focus groups held with community educators during this research generated powerful words, ‘generative themes’ (Freire, 1970, p. 77), that form the basis for a rich analysis of the world of community educators. Their reflections on the meaning of their work, their struggles, their connectedness to wider struggle, what inspires them, their fears and hopes, and how they negotiate their space as educators in the VEC, make for a ‘thick description’ of the contemporary community educator (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30). These themes and reflections are presented in the analysis and findings chapters which follow.

In keeping with the tripartite framework of the thesis, the following three chapters, reflect the analysis and findings covering meaning, role and institution in community education in Ireland. Chapter four *Holding onto ethos*, explores the meaning of community education for community educators. Chapter five *There’s only one of us*, explores the role of community educators and their sense of connectedness to struggle for social justice, as well as their inspirations, challenges, fears and hopes in the work. Chapter six *Every VEC is different*, gathers the reflections of community educators on the role and space they occupy in the VEC, the institutional provider in community education.

The analysis process leading to the findings in these chapters involved a marrying of focus group discussion together with a ‘return to the literature’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.163). This ‘constant comparative approach’ between dialogue and literature means findings are viewed in the broader context of the past and present narrative of community education.

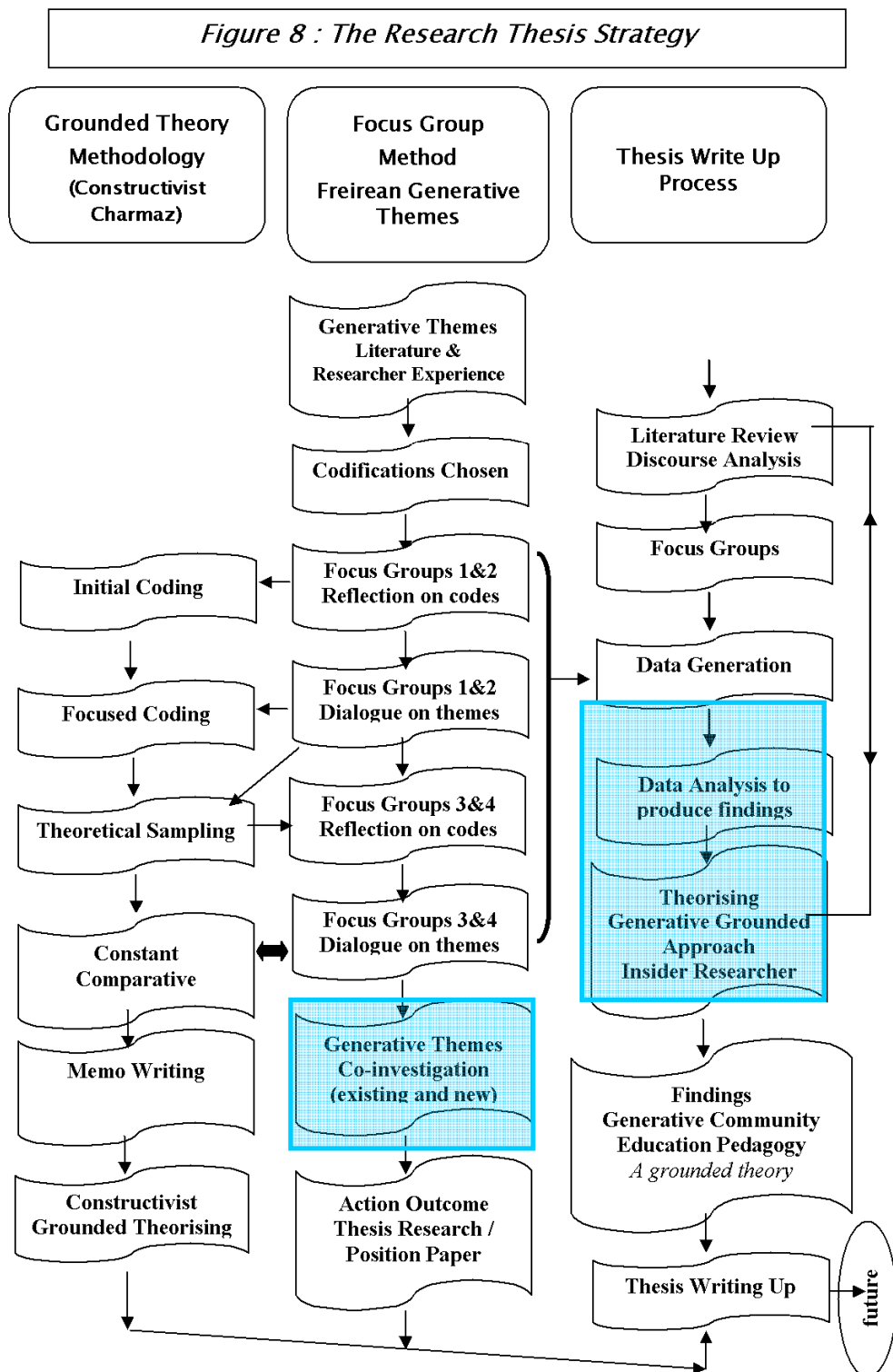
The process was further informed by my perspective as an ‘insider researcher’ and theorised through constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The discourses identified in the literature earlier, are explored further along with emerging discourses in the focus group transcript (Fairclough, 2003; Foucault, 1972). The discussion of findings is therefore integrated in these chapters.

In terms of structure and style, the section headings name the generative themes. To use grounded theory terminology, these represent the findings which have been elevated to ‘theoretical categories’ through the data analysis process (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 102-107). The subheadings represent the focused codes which emerged from the initial codes and in-vivo codes present in the transcripts of focus groups. Figure 8 sets out the overall structure and linkages between research methodology, method and findings. The shaded areas illustrate the work of the following chapters in the overall framework.

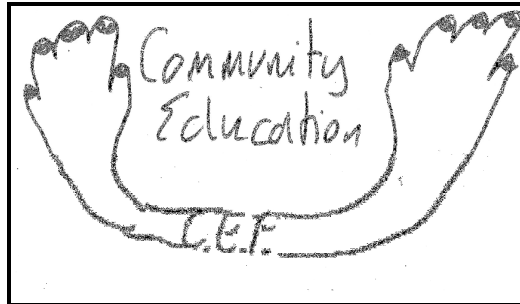
The presentation style involved a number of choices, reflected in the layout of the data in these chapters. In some cases an extract of dialogue involving a number of participants is presented as a conversation flow. In other instances, a number of individual comments are brought together as evidence supporting a particular finding. Finally, the context of focus group discussion and the questions/comments of the researcher are included in either the narrative text or the quoted text throughout the chapters.

The identities of all participants in the following extracts from focus groups are protected using anonymised aliases. In the case of Community Education Facilitators employed by the VECs, the alias ‘CEF’ is used followed by randomised numbers, one, two, three, up to 16 e.g. CEF 1, CEF 8. It was agreed that regional identifiers for the three focus groups with CEFs would be excluded to further anonymise their identities. In the case of participants of the AONTAS Community Education Network focus group, the alias ‘CEN’ is applied in the same way e.g. CEN 1, CEN 7.

Figure 8: Diagram of Thesis links Methodology, Method and Analysis/Findings Write Up



CHAPTER 4 HOLDING ONTO OUR ETHOS: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS ON THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION



Mine is two arms and they are trying to hold onto the community education services in the VEC and I suppose even within the country. I would see it as our role to try and hold onto what we have, hold ground, protection I suppose of what's left and what we can hold onto.

(CEF 4)

Introduction

How do community educators in Ireland (a) interpret the meaning of their practice, (b) understand their role and its connectedness to liberatory struggle, and (c) negotiate their space in the institutional provider, the vocational education committee?

The findings in relation to core meaning or ethos of community education are explored in this chapter. As CEF 4's artwork illustrates, community educators see themselves as custodians of a practice. The idea of stewardship is evoked in the image and explanation. But what is the meaning of the practice being minded by community educators ?

The issue of the core meaning emerged early in focus group discussions surfacing in the introductions and reflections on achievements and disappointments, as we shall see. Defining community education was the theme of the first codification in each focus group. The codification chosen (Figure 4) was the double definition offered in the White Paper on Adult Education, discussed in chapter two. This was read aloud, followed by reflection. The codification served to kickstart dialogue about meaning.

Three broad generative themes emerged in the dialogue which flowed from this first codification with each focus group. These are categorised as core meaning/ethos, recognition and community.

Generative Themes of Core Meaning & Ethos

Before we consider these findings, first, a word about ethos. The word ‘ethos’ is somewhat contentious in the Irish context, where it tends to be bundled with ‘Catholic’, resulting in the word being associated with ‘Catholic ethos’, a subject of recent debate in school enrolment policy in Ireland (McGarry, 2008; Boland, 2007). However, ethos may not have this connotation in other contexts. In the context of this research the word is clearly used by participants and researcher to convey the idea of ‘core meaning’ or ‘essence’ of community education. The dialogue covered a number of issues which tapped into themes raised in the literature at the outset of the research. Broadly these concern; the desire to hold onto a core ethos, the issues raised by a dual definition of community education, and disappointment at the lack of understanding of community education.

Achievement and disappointment in meaning making

Focus group participants were asked to introduce themselves and to identify one significant achievement and one significant disappointment over the past ten years in community education, since the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000). Some of the achievements and disappointments made reference to how community education was understood, making reference to ‘ethos’ and ‘meaning’ of community education. These contributions recall instances of how community education had a particular meaning, an ethos, a way of working, focused not so much on particular issues or problems but part of a wider social justice movement.

This participant’s view is illustrative of community educators understanding of their work as quite distinctive ‘a way of working with people’ connecting personal development to social development.

I suppose the ethos that we’re trying to come from that it’s really an approach to working with people...we developed a course ...to integrate personal and social analysis.

(CEF 12)

This participant recalls the achievement of engaging with women on a methadone programme and identifies community education with social justice.

I suppose achievements wise, it's kinda personal and wider...but the social justice thing, I feel we very much worked with the women in a way which you know that they were just delighted people were talking to them about things other than parenting and drugs.

(CEN 5)

A number of participants referred to a sense of achievement working with particular groups in peripheral settings, women's groups and the engagement of so many groups. These contributions may not explicitly state meaning, but it is clear that the work is very meaningful. CEF 2's contribution is representative and recalls the achievement of outreach and nurturing a community group in taking ownership and responsibility for their community education.

For me the achievement is introducing the concept of community education to peripheral communities who hadn't been aware of it before and supporting the process from the very very outset.

(CEF 2)

Shor throws some light on the meaning of his teaching work in terms of connecting theory to practice, 'the primary goal is for theory to embrace everyday living' (1987, p. 3), but he acknowledges the challenge 'of merging critical thought with daily life' (p. 3). In my experience, I arrive at practice with my theory, my epistemological commitments, but it is always reshaped and moulded by the practice. The meaning of the work is shaped in the very doing of the work, praxis 'action and reflection' (Freire, 1970, p. 69).

This participant sees an achievement in community education becoming more visible. The meaning here is not so much specified but is implicit in the work gaining traction through its increased funding and visibility.

...there has been a big improvement in (the area) in terms of access to funding for community groups and communication and networking and so community ed. is more visible than it was.

(CEF 4)

Young (1990) has described how 'the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible' (pp. 58-59). Rendering groups invisible on the basis of race, ethnicity or sexual orientation, also translates to professions and alternative ways of knowing such as liberatory education.

This participant identifies community education's survival instinct and its oppositional nature to commodified meanings of education, which pay 'lip service' to enabling people participate as full citizens in society.

...the first thing that came into my mind as an achievement was that we're here you know...despite the celtic tiger...and the whole emphasis on if it doesn't pay and if it's not labour market orientated then it doesn't matter...paying lip service to citizenship stuff.

(CEN 7)

Finally, this participant refers to the meaning of community education as flexible, less formal and 'out into communities'.

...there are many groups that we work with who traditionally wouldn't have access to education and the fact community education is so flexible and can bring the education out into communities.

(CEF 11)

Participants also alluded to meaning in naming their disappointments in community education over the past ten years. Disappointments expressed concerns regarding 'lack of recognition' (CEF 6), and 'lip service paid to community education' (CEF 7).

The conceptual category which seemed to best express these initial reflections on community education is 'meaning making' (Mezirow, 1991). As the above reflections on achievements and disappointments convey, there is a sense that the practitioners view the meaning and significance of their work, through the very engagement in that work. There is a clear sense of meaning making in the 'doing' of community education. There is a concern that it is not recognised or fully understood by significant parties. This finding concurs with my own view that community educators make meaning through their practice, it shapes their theory, a theme we will discuss further.

A tale of two definitions

Defining anything is the attempt to establish its nature, to create some parameters or boundaries around its meaning. In the case of community education, the White Paper on Adult Education, which was a definitive policy statement acknowledges a 'variety of definitions' (DES, p. 110). My interest as a researcher was to address the question of

meaning and the apparent conflicting meanings, between economic purpose on the one hand, and social purpose on the other (Thompson, 2000; Duncan, 1999).

The codification used to initiate discussion on definition was the dual definition of community education taken from the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000, p.110) reproduced below (see figure 4). Participants were asked (a) which definition they preferred and (b) in their experience which definition reflected the predominant practice in their VEC or in community education generally.

...a variety of definitions. On the one hand, it has been seen as an extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community. In this sense, it could be seen to incorporate almost all adult learning opportunities provided by the formal education sectors at the community level - it is education in the community but not of the community.

A second view – and the one adopted by the Green Paper – sees it in a more ideological sense as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and collective level. Such an approach to Community Education sees it as an interactive challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision-making processes.

(White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life, p. 110)

The first findings under the tale of two definitions, conveys the idea that the dichotomy was ‘set up’ by the inclusion of both in the White Paper.

I think the problem with the two definitions and I think it was a real fault of the White Paper because you are immediately setting up a division in community education in my opinion...’

(CEN 2)

That’s exactly the problem we had at the beginning. There were already two views out there.

(CEN 3)

The complexity of definition is evidenced by practice on the ground, yet there is a sense that practitioners in community groups, other organisations, VECs and AONTAS have a preference or aspiration to work from an empowerment understanding of community education set out in the second definition above.

I would say, my experience of working with the community education network is, I think, even, the process of what we did, and I think it was at the second meeting we were looking at the two definitions and seeing where people fit, and where they

were aspiring to possibly be the second one, but actually they're stuck in the first one.

(CEN 2)

Well before we get to that, I can see we have a problem with definitions...in the document two definitions of one thing and possibly other ...so I can see where this has all started and why we still look at definitions. For me I'd say the second one is my preference. I think the first one is probably more the VEC's view, somewhere in between is the VEC's view.

(CEF 4)

The notion that community educators feel 'stuck in the first definition', the more generic meaning of 'anything delivered in the community' is I would argue due to a popular perception of community as location or place, rather than a community 'spirit' or 'bond' what Tönnies (1887) referred to as 'gemeinschaft'. CEF 4 commented that 'it would be interesting to hear where they (the VECs) think we are' in terms of definition. Again location may be the primary meaning construct in the institutional view.

In the two later focus groups, participants were asked what key words they would include in their definition of community education. These were noted on flipchart. One group recorded: *Ethos / Values, Partnership, Learner-Centred, Social Outcome, Democratic (as in all had equal say), Local, Empowering (did more than teach a skill), Community-owned (linking in with the local)*. The second group recorded *Accessible, Empowerment, Bottom-Up, Autonomy, Equality, Fun, Flexible, Local*.

Below is an extract of a flow of dialogue about definition from one of the focus groups.

RESEARCHER This is the definition that came out in the White Paper. The other Community Education Facilitators would have said that every VEC is different in terms of taking different aspects of definitions. So a lot of what you have come up with there...(the listing of key words above) Which definition are you more drawn to? That's the first question and then maybe what definition (dominates) do you feel, in your VEC or in the VECs generally?

CEF 14 I'd go with the latter (def 2)...it seems more like the ideologically driven moreso...

CEF 9 If I could start on that, I'd say my experience is that the VEC per se is not overly exercised by either definition or at top level only aware of what we do. My

immediate boss would be seriously promoting the second definition, so I would have no barrier to my seeing my role as the second definition.

CEF 14 I feel the same, they're not overly exercised about either and there's something about very little time for reflection the higher up in the organisation, it's more about implementing the European and national policy.

I suppose at a more broad level I think there are issues, it would be kind of...looking more towards that (def2), but I know this sounds very judgmental, but I think people say, you know it is like motherhood and apple pie, you couldn't disagree with it, you know, but actually the practice then I think gets, goes into what the department wants us to do, what the EU are saying, you know, and this bit while we say of course sounds great, you know empowerment, and so on, but actually policies that come out or practices, are you know, in many cases far from empowering.

CEF 3 Yea in the main I would concur with what others have said. I think the second definition. If I'm being very honest I feel that if that definition is to be applied in practice it requires a considerable amount of human resources.

There are some interesting points worth noting in the extract. Firstly, my own researcher voice is revealed here. By referring back to what other CEFs had said, I was attempting to do theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96), highlighting their preference for definition two, to move the discussion a stage further in this focus group. I also introduced sensitizing concepts, 'most marginalised' and 'social purpose' of community education here.

Secondly, the White Paper's phrase 'ideologically driven' used in the empowerment (second) definition was taken up by one of the participants as the preferred definition. In theorising meaning, it appears the White Paper implies that the first definition of community education is somehow less ideological (DES, p. 110). In my view, the first definition is every bit as ideological as the first.

Thirdly, there is also an interesting reference by participants in the above extract (CEF 14) and in earlier quotes (CEF 4), where the VEC is referred to as 'they'. Both participants are working within VECs, yet they reveal a 'distancing' between the organisation and self. I would suggest this is not unique to VECs and its workers, irrespective of role, and is probably an expression we all use in objectifying the institutions with whom we work. In

this context, I would argue that it reveals a dissonance between institution purpose and worker purpose, signs that some values and meanings are not shared.

The analysis would suggest an overall finding in relation to definition, that says practitioners express a preference for the empowerment definition, the ‘more ideological’ definition of community education. Whether the space is created for this definition to be more widely accepted and implemented in practice will be considered as we proceed to analyse the competing meanings with a stake in community education. These fall broadly into the two categories of empowerment and vocational/instrumental meanings.

Empowerment and its meaning

The theme of empowerment was referred to in many contexts, however, it emerged in the context of discussions on the meaning of community education in particular. What is clear from an analysis of the data from the focus groups is the range of meaning attributed to empowerment. These include; community responsibility, personal development / confidence building, a disposition in one’s teaching, a subversive activity done quietly, empowerment as levels of capacity building or pre-empowerment, and finally, radical critical empowerment. Each of these meanings is considered in turn.

(i) Empowerment as responsibility - The following contributions refer to empowerment in community education as synonymous with the ‘community taking responsibility’ for the programmes to be undertaken.

I suppose from our point of view, I think there’s a lot of elements of empowerment, in again, we’d give out grants to groups and I think that in itself is an empowering experience because you are giving the groups money and they are responsible for identifying tutors, for arranging venues.

(CEF 1)

(ii) Personal Empowerment - Empowerment is also understood as contributing to a community education participant’s personal development which leads to community involvement and engagement in wider issues. Empowerment is associated with building of participant’s confidence and self-esteem.

A lot of the people we deal with particularly in terms of (past) learning experiences, probably haven’t been too positive and I think in terms of empowerment for them

they set what their achievement is, you know its about allowing them achieve on whatever basis.

(CEF 1)

A lot of groups would go now and maybe as individuals would engage in other things in their community like a parent's council where before they didn't have the self-esteem or confidence to go so that would be empowerment there...

(CEF 7)

(iii) Empowerment and tutor disposition - This participant, reflecting in the context of their preference for the second definition of community education, describes the implications for a community education programme. This demands resources, training tutors in the philosophy of community education in order to develop 'a sense in their delivery' or disposition of empowerment that is core to their work.

If you're talking about every single group that you engage and every tutor that you work with adopts a sense in their delivery, whether its IT or whether its art and crafts, that at the core of their work is empowerment and you know, personal development as well as the skill. There's a huge amount of, I suppose, initial training (tutors) that needs to take place.

(CEF 3)

(iv) Subversive empowerment - The meaning of empowerment is also viewed by this participant as subversive, something which community educators tended not to 'shout about from the rooftops'.

...so this notion of empowering all these community groups and they are going off doing their own thing, is quite a new thing you know and you kind of handle it as quietly as possible, you are not exactly shouting from the rooftops...

(CEF 2)

(v) Empowerment as capacity building - Community education as empowerment also means building the capacity of community groups to advance their particular issue, to enable their group develop skills for further social action. It was felt by some CEFs that the groups with whom the VECs engage are at a pre-development level and would not be at the stage of political agitation for social justice, in that sense. These contributions arose in the context of the discussion of movements and campaigning for social justice in relation to struggle.

I suppose where I would see our role as a facilitative role. We would run a lot of community leadership type courses where we would have lots of different groups, environmental groups, maybe anti-racism groups, you know all that kind of stuff. They come in and they get an opportunity to look at facilitation skills, group work skills and community and leadership skills and we are not necessarily going in with an agenda, we are offering them opportunities to develop the skills.

(CEF 1)

You know we are operating at the level I think just maybe beneath that...a lot of the groups we have, have very low confidence, they're a bit away from being hugely involved in (campaigning etc) ...I think we are maybe on the ground, stepping them up to these kind of levels.

(CEF 2)

(v) Radical Critical Empowerment - Empowerment is also understood as a term which has been 'co-opted' and 'corrupted'. Whilst those responsible are not explicitly named, CEN 5 characterises those with power in attributing typical expressions to them; 'we don't want that sort of participation, we just want you to sit down and agree with us'. This community educator adopts a stance which many of us adopt in counter-hegemonic roles and that is to create a distance between 'self' and 'power-holders', which is an interesting stance, and conveys the idea of power as a possession. Of course, Foucault viewed power as something operating in a much more subtle way as 'something which circulates', 'never in anybody's hands' and 'exercised through a net like organisation' (Foucault, 1976b, p. 99). As we see below, CEN 5 identifies the crucial link between empowerment and power. This is a more critical and radical understanding of empowerment.

participation and empowerment have just been co-opted and in my belief they have just been corrupted. Participation, as long as it's the type of participation we want, not the other God forbid and empowerment we use as a word...obviously for individual capacity building is part of empowerment but the other bit is that for real empowerment somebody has to give up a bit of power and that hasn't happened at all, certainly it's my belief in the community development education sector there has been none of that. God forbid you pick up a placard, we don't want that sort of participation, we just want you to sit down and agree with us.

(CEN 5)

Little wonder there should be so many meanings of community education, given the broad sweep of empowerment. The latter understanding, radical critical empowerment, goes some way further than the other meanings. Whilst CEN 5 acknowledges other

understandings, for example, 'individual capacity building', the important link is made between empowerment and 'power', and the need for 'somebody to give up a bit of power'. This participant's contribution fits neatly with Inglis's theorising of empowerment where he argues that 'to understand the notion of empowerment and emancipation, we must begin with an analysis of power.' (1997, p. 2). Inglis also contrasted individualist approaches to empowerment, as in personal empowerment, above, with a more radical interpretation of empowerment. He viewed this as 'trying to change the system' as opposed to individualist empowerment 'working within the system' (p. 2). Inglis prefers the system change view which involves 'challenging structures of power' (p. 2). To help in this task, he draws on Foucault's conception of power as a useful tool for analysing power dynamics.

The notion of empowerment as capacity building or pre-empowerment activity shows similarities to Kieffer's view of empowerment as developing 'coping skills, self-esteem, community organization, and neighbourhood participation.' (1984, cited in Inglis, 1997, p. 11). This contrasts with Inglis's more radical critical view of empowerment as emancipation, 'a collective educational activity which has as its goal social and political transformation' and deals with 'structures rather than individuals' (p. 11).

The evidence from the literature and the responses of community educators in this research would suggest that whilst there is some variation in understanding of empowerment, there is an aspiration among practitioners to work from an empowerment definition. However, whilst empowerment may be preferred to an economic / skills-focused meaning of community education, (which we discuss below), the finding suggests that there is contestation regarding the kind of empowerment which the sector would settle upon. The finding here suggests that the meaning of empowerment forms a spectrum from personal confidence building to capacity building to radical critical empowerment. The implications of this finding need to be considered in relation to the question of community education's meaning and analysed further in terms of educator role and institution. I would argue that while community educators identify with an empowerment meaning, this does not go far enough. The meaning of empowerment for community education needs refinement and further analysis as part of a critical analysis of power.

The economic skills-focused meaning

The text of the focus group discussions is replete with references to the wider economic purpose view of education and how that impacts on community education. These contributions are obviously framed against the backdrop of an economic crisis in Ireland in the period 2008-2010, when unemployment reached a level of 14 per cent. The contributions are presented below and show how a range of themes impact on community education, including; the economy, individual advancement, the labour market, job-creation, and future skills training.

This participant's reflection on community education's resilience 'despite the celtic tiger' featured earlier in the context of the commodified meaning of education. Another participant reflects on the dominance of 'individual advancement' and the economy.

...despite the celtic tiger...and the whole emphasis on if it doesn't pay and if it's not labour market oriented then it doesn't matter.

(CEN 7)

most or all of education except community education in the VEC, it's all got to do with this individual advancement and that's what the whole world is looking at now, individual advancement, the economy, you know, it's not looking at social inclusion and community development.

(CEF 12)

The above reflections suggest a theme of community education under siege. The dominant economic purpose paradigm is 'bigger' and is 'what the whole world is looking at now' to the neglect of social inclusion and community development. Other expressions elsewhere suggest community education's comparative minority status 'small fish in a large pond' (CEF 4). At the same time, there is a sense also of resilience 'we're still here'.

The sense that the economic climate will dictate the path of community education and the view of decision makers that community education is a sector which will encompass almost anything as long as it is delivered 'out in the community' is expressed in the following contribution.

There is a need for education in the community for an individual but who does that in a VEC? I think that has come up now more in the economic climate at the minute, those demands are coming on stream and no one else is going to do it, and so community education is out there, so therefore 'they should do that'. That is taking away from the other definition that we would have been working towards a number of years ago.

(CEF 11)

...you can see where it has come from the definition as well. It could be seen to 'incorporate almost all adult learning opportunities...It's there in the definition so you have to be all things to all people.

(CEF 4)

The first definition in the White Paper referred to in CEF 4's contribution above, provides a certain cover or scope for community education to be consumed by policy makers following the dominant economic purpose paradigm. Again, the dissonance between community educators and distant decision makers is interesting in the quotations above. For example, in the phrase 'they should do that', the imagined voice of the policy maker is invoked, dictating what 'they' should do as community educators. Community educators 'are out there' and are viewed by decision-makers as conduits for any courses deemed necessary in the community.

In the following extract, the participants convey the sense that economic purpose and upskilling drive meaning in community education from the perspective of the educational authorities. This meaning is entrenched and the educational establishment have no understanding of what community education is about, or that it is in any way different. It is viewed by policy makers (Department of Education one presumes) as playing a role like other sectors, which is subservient to the economy and future skills needs which the economy dictates.

CEN 3:...the actual essence of what community education is about... I don't feel that the actual structure has supported that, what they've done is they meet a need, what they perceive to be a need but their core concept is still no different. Lets programme them to pass a god-damned exam!

CEN 7: They want to shove people through the pipeline of skills for the Expert Group on Future Skills Need. They don't want self-directed learners who have the capacity to build their own curriculum.

In the extract above, CEN 3 expresses frustration at the absence of community education's 'essence' in what is supported in the community. This idea is similar to the earlier contribution regarding the need for intensive training and preparation of tutors to embody the ethos of community education in their delivery. This ethos is clearly at odds with the

skills-focused meaning referred to above. CEN 4 also identified a gap in the pedagogical training where the economic purpose is 'entrenched in how we train our teachers'. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is evident here. Gramsci argued 'every relationship of hegemony is an educational relationship' (1971, p. 666) and the hegemony of the dominant economic paradigm in education becomes entrenched through 'spontaneous consent' given by the 'great masses of the population' (1971, p. 145). As stated in chapter two, it is difficult to express a counter-hegemonic argument in the face of widespread joblessness, yet I believe community educators have a vital public role in critically exposing the flaws in a purely economic paradigm in education. After all, it is the neo-liberal economic model subscribed to which has caused widespread joblessness (Korten, 2010; Douthwaite, 1992).

Building on the themes raised in the earlier focus groups, the 'job-focused' drive in the wider education field was brought as a theme to further explore in the later focus groups. In response to the question whether CEFs experienced any pressure being brought to bear to provide courses which would respond to these labour market forces, the responses ranged from 'no pressure at all', to 'subtle pressure' to 'external pressure'.

CEF 5: I can only speak for me and there isn't (pressure). There is no expectation on me in my role in this county. So I can't speak for anybody in other counties. I know that pressure is there externally to me, but I don't feel under any pressure to deliver on that job creation side.

CEF 1: I'm kind of getting more pressure, funny not that its coming from the organisaiton (VEC), but from a lot of the community groups now. They are actually coming to me saying you know we have all these people coming into us now who are unemployed, we want to offer them something and why can't you deliver a course that's accredited that will be job-focused...

These CEFs don't experience an internal organisational demand or pressure to provide job-focused courses. For CEF 1 this is not a pressure of the authorities so much as a societal demand. The pressure is however acknowledged and is viewed as external to the VECs in these cases. Interestingly for this participant, it is the community which is making the link between the unemployment crisis, community education course delivery, accreditation and job-focused outcomes. In some ways, this demonstrates the power of the hegemony of the economic paradigm in education; it is 'embedded in a system of practices – behaviours and actions that people learn to live out on a daily basis' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 95).

Communities have expectations of an education system which also go uncritically challenged. Is it the role of community educators to gently challenge such expectations? Faced with the demand for 'job-focused' community education, I believe community educators need to resurrect links with 'trade unionism' and 'workers' education movements' (McGrath, 1999; Duncan, 1999) to both respond to the need for jobs and skills, but at the same time, to do so in a critical way which asks what kind of jobs? and what kind of labour do we wish to organise? In that context links need to be established with NGOs such as the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE).

This contribution from CEF 14 below conveys an organisational discourse in their VEC about job-focused education, which contrasts with CEF 5's experience of 'no pressure' to put on such courses.

RESEARCHER Do you find that a big pressure in your own VECs that ...well, we need to be putting on courses that get people a job and that get people skilled. Do you find that?

CEF 14 I certainly do....the way it manifests itself like 'why aren't you (doing) more certified learning so that people can progress and progress to more certified learning or progress to the labour market'. And also it's an undermining of the social value or social outcome of people's participation... the Adult Education Officer isn't pressuring me, it's a much more subtle kind of thing rather than saying you must do that you know...

CEF 9 I'm actually in the exact opposite position in that there is a policy in our adult education service that community education puts on no certified courses...

Again there is dissonance evident here. CEF 14 describes the imagined response of the VEC saying 'why aren't you (doing) more certified learning'. This pressure to provide job-focused education is 'manifest' in 'subtle' ways. As with similar responses earlier where perceived power-holders, the Department of Education and VEC senior management are being referred to by community educators, it is done by means of their 'imagined response' which is often mirrored in practice. Oppositional or counter-hegemonic voices often invoke the terms 'faceless bureaucrats' to describe influential decision makers who steer policy behind the scenes in socio-economic and political arenas. Fairclough refers to the idea of 'nominalisation' whereby the actors who are responsible for a policy are nameless or erased from texts.

...the agents of processes, people who initiate processes or act upon other people or objects are absent from texts.

(Fairclough, 2003, p. 13)

In the same way the community educators in these focus groups refrain from naming, not only on confidentiality grounds, but also, because it is part of the discourse surrounding the competing paradigms in education. The management who blindly follow an economic or upskilling paradigm of community education are not named, but the philosophy they peddle is characterised and negatively personified. For instance, there is no particular vignette offered in the dialogue presented, illustrating how the enforcement of an economic or job-driven paradigm actually takes place. Yet it is there, albeit in its 'subtle' manifestation as CEF 14 described above.

The lack of understanding of community education

Given the two meanings and definitions discussed so far, it is unsurprising that 'lack of understanding' about the role and purpose of community education arose as a theme as well. The locus for this lack of understanding is explicitly placed by participants at higher executive and administrative levels in VECs and the Department of Education and Skills.

So it's even in our own organisations there is very little support for community development or a community education approach or maybe even an understanding of what it is....I don't think they think about it at all.

(CEF 12)

The disappointment, I suppose again going back to our own VEC was that the Community Education Service is not fully understood by certain personnel within the adult education sector of the VEC

(CEF 7)

I don't think there is an understanding of it (CE).

(CEF 2)

This lack of understanding is viewed variously as, 'not thinking about it at all'. Contributions from focus group participants convey the sense that because community education appears to be 'all things to all people' as said earlier (CEF 4), then it is considered appropriate by CEOs and Managers to run any programmes / courses through community education budget lines. Again, the loose definition, describing community education as 'an extension...into the wider community' of 'all adult learning', gives official sanction, as it were, for this lack of understanding (DES, 2000, 110). This becomes

a more significant concern especially when budgets for the work are being allocated and possibly enmeshed in the future. This CEF illustrates how community education is viewed by 'the top' as just giving out money.

I also think the other struggle is being pulled in every direction because at the top there's no understanding of what community education is... 'but sure the groups will be...sure you just give them money they'll go on their own'...

(CEF 1)

The varying levels of understanding of community education at CEO / senior management level in VECs, and higher civil servant level in the Department of Education is an example of how community education has tended to depend on the good will of individuals in positions of power and influence rather than a holistic organisation-wide or department-wide appreciation or understanding of the value and importance of this sector in education.

... the previous one (CEO) would have been very very supportive of community education you know and had a soft spot for it, but that's petering out now under the new leadership...

(CEF 14)

For me the achievement over those ten years was the appointment of the CEFs to begin with, the fact that it was put in the White Paper... the vision that (civil servant) had, who was in the Further Education section in the Department of Education and it was that person's baby really and that person left just after we were appointed and our posts were approved, that person moved on within the Civil Service.

(CEF 5)

The lack of understanding of community education probably has a bearing on the differing approaches to community education across the VECs which are discussed later. This echoes similar findings in recent research commissioned by AONTAS (Bailey et al., 2011, p. 89). This finding points to the issue of organisational leadership and community education. The findings here suggest that community education facilitators are the lone voice explicitly articulating community education, sometimes with institutional support but this depends on individual efforts. They are the leaders in community education, but ultimately not the managers of it, which explains the dissonance expressed here.

Holding onto ethos

Returning to where we started on our quest for meaning, ethos was a recurring theme which emerged early on and gained some momentum in the course of focus groups. As a generative theme it is about what is the essence, the core, what is distinctive about community education. In many ways, core is a more preferable term to ethos given its Catholic connotations. Ethos refers to the ‘characteristic spirit of a culture’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005, p. 305). Participants described how they felt a certain obligation to identify the core of community education and ‘hold it’. It is viewed as a ‘common philosophy’.

but we have to we really have to hold our process and hold the way that we work and trust in that process and try and manage that tension at all times.

(CEN 5)

I remember when we had our national training at the beginning, there was that thing of each VEC is different, we talked about needing to come together and have a kind of common philosophy.

(CEF 12)

Identifying and communicating again I think is crucial, what is distinct or different about community education, even at the ethos and values level, what is it about when you come down to the core?, I would find it a real challenge to communicate that without being perceived as very judgmental, ‘you’re so special’, you know, that kind of view, I’d struggle with that.

(CEF 14)

The desire to work out of a core meaning is evident, but to do so in a way that is not perceived as judgemental. This suggests the struggle involved with being counter-hegemonic and challenging the consensus.

Participants also expressed the view that community education is bound up with the practitioner’s core values. It is viewed in practice as a way of engaging that makes a difference in people’s lives, and opposes ‘a culture of silence’ (Freire, 1970, p. 87) or apathy. It is also suggested that when there is no alignment between ethos, the piece that is ‘ours’ and practice, then it becomes frustrating work (CEN 6).

How do we engage in a way that makes some difference as opposed to being silent. Ok. And I think that’s a real issue and maybe, maybe its part of and I think I actually think that’s ours... I don’t believe it (belongs to) Department of Education.

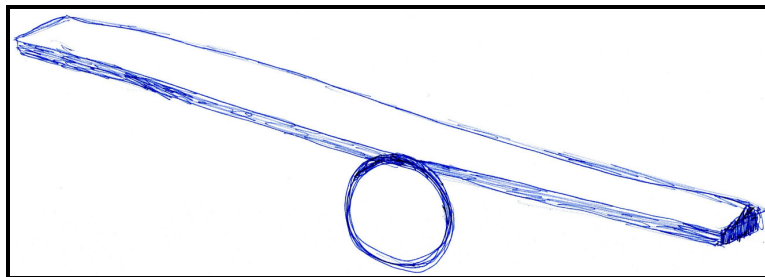
(CEN 4)

Unless your core values, your fundamental vision, your ethos, your values your ethos around community education, unless there is some alignment between them, then you are just cracking your head against a brick wall...

(CEN 6)

CEN 4 asserts 'stewardship' of the practice of community education. It does not belong to the provider or the delivering department, but is held by the practitioner. In this sense, community education becomes recognisable in its practitioners in the practice. The generative themes of recognition are considered next.

Generative Themes of Recognition



This image of a 'see saw' contributed by CEF 16 depicts the variation in terms of recognition experienced by community educators.

so that's my disappointment they (educational authorities) haven't actually recognised it.

(CEN 3)

Recognition emerged as a significant generative theme in the course of the focus groups. As the image of the see saw suggests, there is an oscillation in terms of where community educators view the level of recognition attributed to the practice and their own role. It is a broad theme which captures much of the historical narrative of community education in Ireland over the past forty years (AONTAS, 2009). As the findings below suggest, the community educators in this research view recognition as a pivotal theme. In this section, recognition is considered under its subthemes. These are misrecognition, accreditation and dilution/homogenisation of the field. These will be discussed in turn. Fraser's work on the politics of recognition (2000) and aspects of Honneth's work on the 'struggle for

recognition' (1995) provide useful frameworks for analysis of these themes with a view to theorising recognition in community education. The accreditation theme and how community education is valued, raised issues about new managerialism and its possible impact in adult and community education.

Misrecognition of community education

The contributions from participants below, demonstrate the oscillation in recognition further. The contribution from the AONTAS participant below captures the 'status' of community education, situated 'on the fringes' a field whose 'great thinkers' in the critical and liberatory traditions of adult education 'aren't recognised'.

I also think you mentioned the word status earlier. I think status is a huge thing in community education. I think that's why it's considered on the fringes...

So I think status in terms of a knowledge of the sector, the experience, the great thinkers that influence community education that aren't recognised...

I think maybe because we are not in the formal system it's seen definitely not on a par, not equal, it's second class and we talk about it as non-formal education. We don't call formal non 'non-formal' we are comparing ourselves to the formal system. I don't know how you get a shift in thinking on that.

(CEN 2)

A significant point made by CEN 2 concerns what could be termed 'negative definition'. Community education defined by reference to its counterpart, 'formal education' is placed in a subordinate or 'non' position, rather than defined on its own terms. The same is true of accredited and non-accredited courses as we shall see below. I would argue that the real issue here is recognition, irrespective of whether learning is formal or informal, accredited or non-accredited. The following contributions from CEFs also convey the variability of recognition as we shall see throughout the text of focus group discussion.

And then I suppose in terms of disappointment I would still think there's a lack of recognition of community education to adult education.

(CEF 6)

Well in relation to the McCarthy Report¹³, they did say that the money spent on community education is a very good spend.

(CEF 10)

¹³ Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, chaired by Colm McCarthy, School of Economics, UCD. (Department of Finance, 2009a).

Recognition is a central theme in Honneth's work along with struggle, the means by which subjects strive for recognition (1995). Rejecting the Machiavellian egocentric conception of the person, Honneth's argument is that a person achieves self-realisation through a 'struggle for the establishment of relations of mutual recognition' (1995, p. x). The reflections of community educators regarding the 'fringe' or 'second class status' is significant in terms of the theoretical concept of 'lack of recognition' or misrecognition. Misrecognition, referring to unequal, mistaken or no recognition at all, features in theoretical debate in social theory, most notably in the context of the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1997). Fraser is helpful here, as she deals comprehensively with frameworks for understanding and challenging misrecognition.

To be misrecognised, accordingly, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interactions, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem.

(Fraser, 2000, p. 114)

Fraser's framework for understanding misrecognition as 'status subordination' can be usefully applied to community education with a view to 'examining institutionalized patterns of cultural value for their effects on the relative standing of social actors' (2000, p. 113). Community education being one actor in the educational field is perceived by its practitioners to have a lower status than other actors in the field; primary, post-primary, and third level education, referred to as 'mainstream' education (DES, 1998, p. 88). Young (1990) describes the 'critical function' of cultural politics 'to ask what practices, habits, attitudes...contribute to social domination and group oppression, and to call for collective transformation of such practices' (p. 86). The institutional culture of the VEC as presently configured would appear more oriented to formal school-based education within the dominant work / job-training paradigm.

The usefulness of the concept of 'misrecognition as status subordination' is not only its explanatory power, but also its pursuit of 'institutional remedies for institutionalized harms' (Fraser p. 116). This is an issue to be taken up further in chapter six when we focus on educational structure and institution in the context of community education.

Valuing accredited and non-accredited community education

Recognition in education has long been bound up with credentialised knowledge. As discussed in chapter two, women's studies (Smyth & McCann, 1999; Fennell et al., 2003; and Quilty, 2003) demonstrates the value of accreditation options in community education. Community education features both accredited and non-accredited options in practice. As discussed above, the term 'non-accredited learning' itself suggests a less privileged position for this strand of community education. Community education is challenged to fit the accreditation system 'FETAC etc. etc.' rather than, the system facilitating community education.

...it's not right unless it's certified, or there's no benefit to it unless it's certified.
(CEF 11)

...it crops up every time the whole notion of how we measure ...you know the outcomes and more and more just like CEF 11 is saying... you know... the numerical, the FETAC etc. etc.

On the other side of it as well, you know, the fact that there is certification available to groups who have been outside, you know who have been disadvantaged early on, is a positive as well....

(CEF 13)

The issue is a complex one as these contributions from CEFs suggest. CEFs do not reject certification entirely. Its value for participants in disadvantaged communities is acknowledged, in recognising academic effort of people living in communities affected by poverty. The negative aspect of certification concerns the ways it plays into the whole demand from funders (Department of Education) for measurement of outcomes driven by performativity models of 'new managerialism' which demands 'value for money', and 'quality assurance' (Brady & Randle, 1997; Grummell et al., 2009, 2008). CEFs expressed how they judge outcomes differently to their organisation, the VEC.

You know I found at regional meetings recently that I am still saying the same thing, that we are not concentrating on individual progression, but (rather) you know progression into the community, increasing capacity. The whole idea about certification and what is progression? Progression can be seen, you know as FETAC 1 to 10...that's progression, but that's not what community education is about, I don't think.

(CEF 12)

there is very often a mismatch between what I think the outcomes of community education are and maybe what governments or VECs maybe are looking for in terms of outcomes from community education. Very much it's still seen as... 'it's very nice but we really need to move on to BTEI now if we want to get anything

sensible', rather than acknowledging you know for somebody, doing a six week art course is success, and you know if that's as far as they want (to go), that's their success. So it's that whole 'FETACisation' you know that you have to accredit everything.

(CEF 1)

CEF 1 expresses the obvious delight at seeing a participant enjoy their artistic awakening through an art class, whilst at the same time experiences the frustration of the 'progression' imperative. Both CEFs are placed in situations where they have to repeatedly explain, justify and defend the positive outcomes of community education from their perspectives. There is also a danger that accreditation systems which demand to be fed with numbers, will neglect the specificity of progression that community education values, focusing rather on how the numbers stack up. Of course, accreditation, particularly for groups hitherto denied access to education due to poverty and inequality (e.g. women) has proved transformative (Smyth & McCann, 1999) and should be supported. The issue being problematised here is how accreditation becomes an end in itself without any real transformation.

Perhaps the most marked feature of new managerialism is the tendency to place a greater value on accredited courses and programmes which engage greater numbers of participants. The attitude of community educators to this performance measurement is expressed through popular 'in-vivo' codes (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 55-57), 'ticking boxes' and 'bums on seats', evident in the quotes below. Used on its own, it is a completely inadequate performance measurement, as the participant below (CEF 12) explains.

loads and loads of computer classes and fill up the cabin with huge numbers, but really from my perspective the less people we have on our returns, that's actually showing that we are working with people who are harder to reach, but the Department just don't want to know that...

(CEF 12)

Its all about numbers I think today...I mean...its all about bums on seats and that's all the VEC really want to know about. It comes down to returns and returns to department and it is numbers.

(CEF 4)

when the Department of Education finally decided they would measured what community education did, they measured really, only the number of learners who attended certified and uncertified courses. And there's almost no measurement of what I would spend half my time doing which was activating communities and

building contacts and all that sort of stuff. So I think that is a threat to our future, that what we are doing is often, not measured.

(CEF 9)

‘What we are doing is often, not measured’ sums up a key point on the theme of recognition and the failure of new-managerialism in education to adequately communicate the story of community education’s real benefits to a wider audience. Simply filling in the boxes and producing these in report tables for dissemination on official websites fails to adequately narrate the transformations occurring in community education. These benefits are referred to in these contributions and documented in the WERRC studies from chapter two. In this context, testimony would be a more meaningful measurement than participant numbers alone. CEF 9 raises a very important issue, pointing out the need to find ways to measure the unquantifiable, to value the work of the community educator. This theme will be rejoined in the next chapter focusing on the role of the community educator.

Part of the difficulty with accreditation, and the emphasis on numbers of learners, is that, such is the power of the discourse of ‘credentialism’, that it is hard to replace with a discourse of ‘reflective’ or ‘experiential’ learning. Friends and family members will usually ask the art course participant ‘what will that course qualify you to do?’.

I suppose it’s very hard to get across to people the outcomes, you know the positive outcomes there can be without accreditation.

(CEF 7)

The challenge is to demonstrate those positive benefits in the sheer joy of learning. This seems very difficult against the tide of credentialism. One answer may lie in the idea of ‘Learner Recognition’. Accreditation is usually attached to the course or programme which is accredited. There would seem to be a case to focus recognition on the ‘participant’ rather than the course. In the meantime, some progress may be made by renaming non-accredited learning in positive terms such as, experiential learning. This participant calls for alternative ways of recognition apart from accreditation.

For me, you can accredit the second bit...So where a group needs some support around a funding application or empowerment around some issue of conflict or whatever, that that actually gets recognised as education in the same way as a certificate for a course on conflict resolution.

(CEN 2)

It is important not to dismiss the importance of accreditation since it is recognised currency in the sphere of academic cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1996). It is also a source of joy for community education participants when they too can take their places on a podium with other graduands.

Accreditation is also bound up with funding. When it comes to applying for funds, community education groups have to succumb to the rules of the 'game', what Bourdieu called the 'illusio' (1996, p. 3). This involves playing by the rules which have been designed with mainstream education in mind. The rules in this game suit courses designed to accredit learning in streamlined ways.

...it's terribly frustrating because they (funders/department) have no concept at all of community...there's that battle all the time...they're going to fund accredited options all the time...

(CEN 6)

Accreditation is also viewed as existing side by side, 'dovetailing' with non-accredited options in community education. Across the VECs some will provide this mix of accredited and non-accredited options and in some VECs they will provide either exclusively accredited or exclusively non-accredited courses. That this should happen in a harmonious way in some VECs does not negate the comparative lack of recognition of non-accredited community education.

So I see it dovetailing. Some of my groups might decide that they want to do sean nós (dancing)... they don't actually want to do accredited computers at the moment but they might decide in three months but they know that this is there as well, you know, you can.

(CEF 2)

Finally, on a positive note, accreditation is also viewed as an opportunity to be pursued to the advantage of the community education sector.

I think that the way that community education has taken the whole of the FETAC system and been able to assist accredited learning options for the learners has been great and I think within that system there are great opportunities to influence the curriculum and how I suppose we can marry that community development aspect into it.

(CEN 6)

As researcher, I realise my own implication in the accreditation / non-accreditation debate. It is easy to argue for recognition of non-accreditation from the standpoint of one gaining more 'academic capital' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 131) through the research. At the outset I claimed that the issue to focus on was recognition as opposed to whether community education is accredited or non-accredited. Honneth posits that 'the social conditions for esteem are determined by the prevailing sense of what is to count as a worthwhile contribution to society' (1995, p.xvii). The struggle for community education is how to make community education matter whether it is accredited or not. The findings here call for greater recognition for non-accredited learning in community education on a par with accredited learning. They complement each other. The focus then shifts to shaping the 'curriculum', the 'what is taught' in community education, the content of community education as opposed to its status.

Dilution and homogenisation of meaning

Focus group participants expressed the view that in the current recession and over the past two years (2008-2010) of the decade under review, there has been a tendency at government department level and policy making level to overlook the boundaries of meaning between for example, literacy education, upskilling, vocational education and community education. Participants conveyed their concerns that this appears to be done in the context of developing globalised budgets for the sector. This translates into the blurring of boundaries between VEC programmes such as VTOS, BTEI, Literacy, Adult Education and Community Education.

The generative theme of 'dilution of meaning' reflects a similar experience in the community development sector in recent years with the drive toward 'cohesion'. In concrete terms, this has meant that over 160 voluntarily managed community development projects were subsumed under '25 new integrated local development companies' (Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, 2011, on-line)¹⁴. Dilution of

¹⁴ Arising from the joint Ministerial initiative on the review of local and community development structures, the Government agreed a series of measures in January 2004 designed to improve arrangements under which community and local development initiatives are delivered and improve cohesion and focus across various measures. Available from: <http://www.pobail.ie/en/LocalCommunityDevelopmentProgramme/CohesionProcess/>

community education is also occurring in the context of the VEC's expansion into other areas of education.

If you look at that idea of community development in communities, it's getting diluted if you like, and when you look at community education in the bigger context of the VEC, getting into primary schools now and a whole load of other things...

(CEF 12)

These policies, a growing feature of public sector management, appear to follow a pattern involving cohesion or dilution of programme boundaries, whilst at the same time introducing an expansionary theme. Again, the driving force behind these policies is 'new managerialism' (Brehony & Deem, 2005). The dangers of this dilution for the meaning of community education are exacerbated by the phenomenon of homogenisation as expressed by other participants. Homogenisation assumes that there really isn't any difference between community education and other programmes. Again this appears to be happening in the context of budget-setting, and drives to efficiency, so much a feature of departmental budgeting during the last few years in Ireland following the *Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes* (DF, 2009a).

I feel that it's being marginalised in terms of national policy, that all programmes are going to be homogenised and the distinctiveness of community education is going to be lost.

(CEF 8)

this kind of homogenisation of adult learning, loses the astuteness of whether its literacy or labour activation or community education you know.

(CEF 14)

In the context of globalised budgets being provided to VECs in the future to bring together distinct programmes within VECs such as community education, literacy, BTEI etc., this participant expresses the likely status or position of community education in that context.

all your courses, if they aren't accredited, aren't employment focused, aren't all the things that, maybe the current Government sees as being important therefore your budget will be phased in order to reflect this lack of 'ticking those boxes'.

(CEF 10)

Programmes which 'tick the right boxes' are more likely to benefit in programmatic review. Courses which are seen to be 'delivering' measurable results are likely to be favoured. New managerialism has crept into educational management in Ireland and is a

feature of third level management and other sectors as well (Brady, H. & Hegarty, 2008; Brady, N. & Randle, 1997). There are obvious connections between new managerialism and neo-liberalism. The latter orthodoxy permeates the private economic domain and consequently the language of 'marketisation' (Brehony & Deem, 2005, p. 220), shapes new managerialism.

Homogenisation and dilution of the meaning of community education is a form of what Honneth would refer to as 'disrespect' (1995). He poses the question:

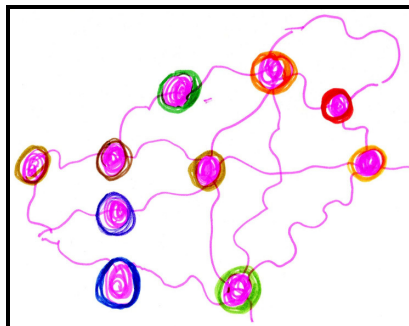
how is it that the experience of disrespect is anchored in the affective life of human subjects in such a way that it can provide the motivational impetus for social resistance and conflict, indeed for a struggle for recognition?

(Honneth, 1995, p. 131)

Whilst there has been an awareness of this disrespect, it has not been named as that by community development workers and community educators and has not 'become a source of motivation for acts of political resistance' (Honneth, 1995, p. 138), at least not in an overt sense. However the potential is there as findings in relation to solidarity reveal in chapter five.

A new managerialist regime takes no account of the distinctiveness of community education. A drive to efficiency leads to policies of homogenisation and cohesion which have been discussed in this section. Community education is challenged to make its case in terms of this alien language. The language of community education draws on the themes of grassroots communities, not the boardrooms of big business. The generative themes of community are considered in the next section.

Generative Themes of Community



Mine is just I suppose... me with other groups of people, you know linking between them all, sometimes here, sometimes there.

(CEF 13)

Meanwhile, the investigators begin their own visits to the area, never forcing themselves, but acting as sympathetic observers with an attitude of understanding towards what they see.

(Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970, pp. 89-91)

The role of the community educator depicted above is that akin to the facilitator. They facilitate connectedness between individuals and community and within and between communities. Inevitably, the theme of community featured strongly throughout focus groups. These are reflected in this section through repeated reference to the links between community education and community development. Community educators reflected upon and discussed their relationship with peers working in community development. The community educators also view their role as encouraging a sense of ownership and leadership for community education in the communities where they work. The reflections on both these themes reveal some interesting and unexpected findings.

Community education and community development links

Clarke, writing of the English experience of community education describes how:

the history of community education reveals a project which has painted itself into a corner. It has lost its sense of direction by neglecting to address and interpret its key concept of 'community' in more than a parochial and superficial way.

(Clarke, 1996, p. 26)

Clarke's view of community as a social system where people have 'a place to stand (security), a part to play (significance) and a world to belong to (solidarity)' (1996, p. 46) is useful knowledge here, particularly Clarke's reference to solidarity. Honneth (1995) also attached great emphasis to the notion of 'solidarity' (pp. 128-130) in his outline of a struggle for recognition. The links of solidarity between community education and community development in Ireland were a recurring theme of the focus group dialogue. Both share the values and goals of empowerment and social justice. The close relationship between practitioners in both sectors was perceived as threatened by the process of 'cohesion', whereby community development projects become subsumed into the new partnership companies referred to in the previous findings. Community educators refer

elsewhere in focus groups to the loss of ‘allies’ in community development. At the same time, there is a sense in which community development and community education are placed in a position of rivalry for the provision of courses to the same communities, as part of a struggle for scarce state funding.

The bonds that exist and the positive benefits of the links between community education and community development are evident in the comments of these focus group participants.

Prior to that I was working in Community Development...I would feel that would be more my natural home rather than an institutional teaching context.

(CEF 14)

I suppose for us one of the achievements, well I suppose we’re working at it all the time is to try and move adult learners or community ed. learners who have great skills developed over the years, to try and get them into a situation where they can actually go back and start delivering to their community tutoring, teaching in their communities.

(CEF 1)

However, there is evidence at the end of the decade, that the wider context of ‘scarce resources’ is placing a strain on the relationship between community educators and community development workers. Much of this is driven by institutional and organisational rearrangements. The threats to the relationship between community educators and community development are more manifest now:

before there was the possibility of working with community development and you know, having that partnership with community development...but I think that, that is becoming less possible now.

(CEF 8)

The evidence suggests that a once strong and complementary engagement between community development and community education is being slowly eroded through the cohesion rearrangements referred to earlier at community development level. The reciprocal nature of the relationship is under threat. Honneth has described solidarity as ‘an interactive relationship in which subjects mutually sympathize with their various different ways of life because, among themselves, they esteem each other’ (1995 p. 128). This solidarity has been threatened in recent times.

...getting marginalised groups to engage is always a struggle and it has been made more difficult by the loss of development workers in CDPs, where they have been taken into the Partnership company they have been assigned new roles. I as a

representative of the VEC cannot engage really with marginalised groups without some level of leverage in the community, of a development worker, someone who knows, so I find the loss of other organisations on the ground seriously backward.

...

(CEF 9)

Similarly, any potential restructuring of community education within globalised budgets may further erode the relationship between community education and community development in detrimental ways. New-managerialism in the public service is manifest in budget-cutting from a distance. Currently in Ireland bailouts are for banks not for communities.

Whatever state funding is available, there is a discourse of control evident here again (as in chapter two) wherein VEC management desire to not 'give too much away' to the community, as expressed by this participant.

CEF 14: It was said to me a couple of years ago you know it was said in my presence, you know, 'we were giving too much away to the community' you know...and what's that about? But I think there is a thing about you know, the relationship between community education and the communities is sometimes seen as a threat almost, you know in some sense if you go too far that way (toward the community).

RESEARCHER: A threat, who would you say it was perceived as a threat to?

CEF 14: The other programmes are drawing from those same communities.

It is interesting that this was expressed to the CEF before the economic crisis, when funding was more available and programmes were expanding. It is also interesting that the provider (presumably the VEC) viewed the relationship between community education and the communities as posing this threat. The threat relates to the issue of control and decision making, which at managerial level, boils down to budgets and personnel and controlling these important areas.

Community led and community owned

A final theme emerging in the focus groups was the belief in the importance of community groups being empowered to take ownership of community education themselves.

...It's that ultimately they are still deciding what it is that they are choosing to do, so at that level there is an empowerment, there is learner-centred, it is community led.

(CEF 3)

The following extract from one of the focus groups generated a number of important community subthemes as follows; firstly, the CEF's view that the community group should have a sense of ownership in the community education provided locally and a say in choosing tutors; and secondly, the trust that exists between the CEF and their community groups is evident in the dialogue, which contrasts with the lack of trust, in some cases, shown to the CEF by their own VEC.

CEF 14: Our (community education) funding letter. You know it explicitly set out about communities choosing the tutor. I thought it was quite significant in the sense of putting back into the community their role, their very active role in identifying tutors.

CEF 3: While that might be prescribed from the department, the set up in ours has always been the VEC gets tutors, I tried it initially as I thought it made more sense for groups to find tutors, but very quickly, 'that is not the way it is done here, that is not the way it's going to be done', so I am never going to see that letter.

CEF 9: And I didn't see that letter and that is actually typical, the department communicates with the CEO, and the CEO forgets where we are. In my case there's nothing sinister about it because I do offer community groups a choice of tutors off my panel. So there is nothing sinister in it but that does frequently happen, the terms sheet comes from the department and we don't get it.

Trust may not be named in the dialogue above, but it is an underlying theme in the interaction at the different levels between educator and community and between educator and their own institution. A trusting relationship between the community educator and their community to the extent the community may choose tutors, is perhaps seen by VEC management as ceding control to the community. Concealment of information relevant to key workers is at odds with Freire's aspiration to dialogue, 'to the extent that we are communicative beings who communicate to each other, we become more able to transform our reality' (pp. 98-99).

The following extracts from another focus group also shows CEFs' support for community involvement and control at a structural level in community education.

I think there was an opportunity there to bring that partnership approach to local, I suppose counties and local areas, where there was possibilities if it had been done properly that local communities could have gotten involved in the structure, looking at their own education

(CEF 5)

...the whole notion that they can do this, can manage, this control of their own fate, introducing the notion and supporting and that is the achievement for me... to wait until they are on their own feet.

(CEF 2)

In my experience working in both community development and in community education in recent years, the community has in many ways become a pawn in a highly politicised site. It is the 'target' for many for us (self-included) who work for the 'agencies' bringing education, skills, enterprise into an area through a partnership approach (Community Workers Co-operative, 1996). It can lead to a struggle for the hearts and minds of community members to engage with our project. We arrive with a 'corporatist' partnership model of community (Geoghegan & Powell, 2004, p. 227) and impose this on the people. To my mind, we the workers, need to stop and reflect ourselves on the question Clarke (1996) posed earlier, 'what is community?' (p. 26) and what does it mean for us ?

Conclusion

The findings of the research on the meaning of community education, analysed from the generative themes of core meaning / ethos, recognition and community, offer insights into the complex nature of that meaning. At the outset I argued that the lack of consensus on meaning posed a threat that almost anything goes in community education, or as one participant put it, 'being all things to all people' (CEF 4), may render community education meaningless.

What is striking from the contributions of community educators in this research is that they make meaning from their 'practice'. This finding that community educators make meaning from practice echoes a sentence repeated in the Freire workbooks used by literacy groups in Sao Tome and Principe, 'It is by practicing that one learns. Let's practice.' (Freire & Macedo, 1987, pp. 63-75).

The findings reveal a diversity of meaning around community education. The issue of two definitions offered for community education in the White Paper is problematised in this research. I argue that a proliferation of meanings leads to a fragmented approach to community education (Murtagh, 2009, p. 218). In practice it has undermined the empowerment meaning of community education.

The clear aspiration coming through in the focus group discussions is a preference for community education informed by empowerment. Yet, it is not necessarily clear as to what type of empowerment is envisaged, there is no collective settlement on this point. These findings point to the need for a more informed focus on what is empowerment and agrees with Inglis's call for a critical analysis of power to further inform the empowerment meaning of community education (1997, p. 3).

Honneth's 'struggle for recognition' (1995, p. 132) is a useful framework with which to examine relations of recognition in community education in Ireland. Honneth describes three relational domains where recognition is sought by individuals; 'love', 'rights' and 'solidarity'. For the purposes of this research, it is the third of these which is most relevant for the recognition of community education, the degree to which solidarity or equality of recognition is a value of a group, community or institution. Honneth has argued that it is disrespect which has led to the 'morally motivated struggles of social groups – their collective attempts to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of reciprocal recognition' (1995, p. 93). The findings of this research point to the erosion of recognition of community development and community education as distinct and necessary approaches in the fields of sociology and education respectively. I believe community educators have a crucial role to play in this struggle for recognition. The role of the community educator in this struggle is explored in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER 5 THERE'S ONLY ONE OF US: FROM ISOLATION TO SOLIDARITY
ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS ON ROLE OF COMMUNITY EDUCATORS**

Those open to transformation feel a Utopian appeal but many feel fear also. They are attracted out of a conviction that education should liberate. They turn away because they understand the risks of opposition politics. They fear standing out as radicals, as people who rock the boat.

(Freire & Shor, A Pedagogy for Liberation, 1987, p.54)

Introduction

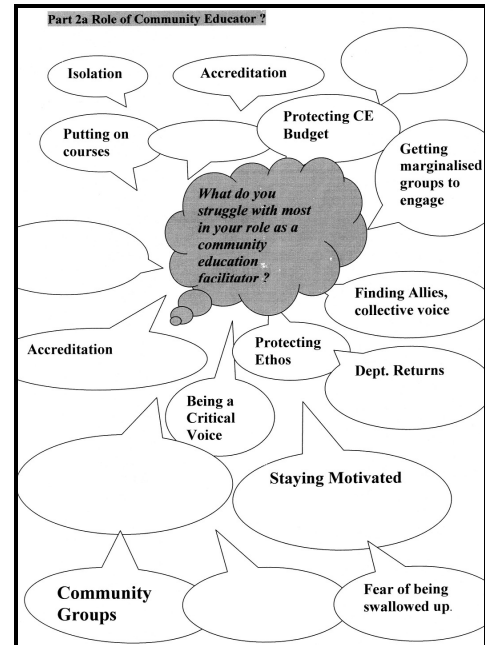
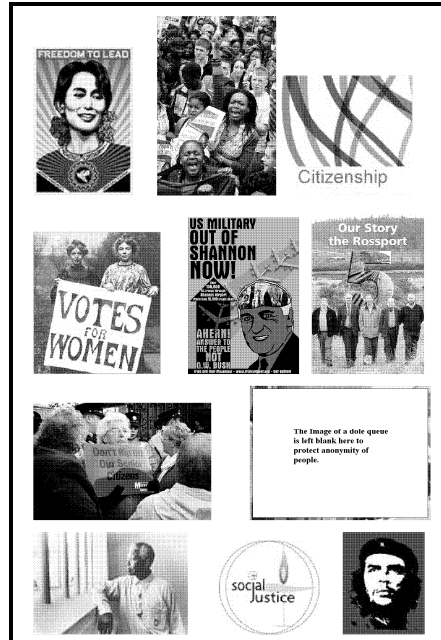
How do community educators in Ireland (a) interpret the meaning of their practice, (b) understand their role and its connectedness to liberatory struggle, and (c) negotiate their space in the institutional provider, the vocational education committee?

The role of the community educator, the second theme of our enquiry, sits between core meaning and institution. The reflections on this aspect in focus group discussion give some insight into the practice and generative themes of community educators in Ireland today.

The focus group sought to draw out the reflections of community educators on what inspired them to get involved in this work, how they view their role, exploring the connectedness of their role to the wider struggle for social justice and to identify what are their current struggles.

The codifications, introduced earlier (chapter three), were used to initiate dialogue on this aspect of the focus group. The purpose of the first codification (collection of pictures) was to explore the connectedness of community education to the tradition of empowerment of the disempowered, popular movement and struggle for change, whether it be apartheid in South Africa, women's right to vote, or local community action against the state or large corporations. Participants were invited to choose a photo that held meaning for them, or if there was no picture, to remember what inspired their involvement in the work. The second codification built on the responses and key themes arising from the first two focus groups. It represented the current issues which community education facilitators struggle with in

their work. I presented each codification with a verbal explanation of my rationale for choosing these codifications. The codifications are reproduced below:



The four generative themes or conceptual categories presented in this chapter produce findings which give insight into (i) community educators' sources of inspiration, (ii) the connectedness of their practice to the broader theme of struggle and, (iii) community educators' perception of their role, and (iv) their experience of solidarity and its possibilities for the future.

For the purpose of authenticating my interest and experience in community education I explained my background working in the community education and community development sectors, including six years in the VEC sector including my role at the time of the focus groups.

Generative Themes on Inspiration

Probably for me, the reason why I study is...maybe I'm looking at theory from books, from people like Freire (who has been mentioned) and linking that to everyday practice...

(RESEARCHER FOCUS GP 1)

In the course of the focus groups, I named my own sources of inspiration and sought to create a space where community educators could identify their particular sources of inspiration also.

From inherent sense of injustice to inspiring role models

Many of the community educators reflected an inherent sense of injustice and inequality as a source of inspiration for their early interest in community education. They drew inspiration from figures who modelled good practice in bringing about positive change in their communities as well as celebrated leaders whose cause was justice and equality. Freire sees the ‘revolutionary educator’ as someone ‘whose efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanisation’ (1970, p. 56). It is to this vision of the community educator that I also subscribe.

...it's from the very start of my being a kid, you know inherent. I suppose from my family background as well just you know the inequality I saw living in one part of Dublin and people just beside me, down the road, who were denied... You know, how come they couldn't get a job and I could or whatever?, so this probably has most relevance to me (picture of dole queue).

(CEF 13)

I was in Trinity when Joe Duffy¹⁵ was there. And that was really powerful because again, he was from a working class background going into the hallowed ground of Trinity College, where I was also a Northsider¹⁶, and he started bringing in the kids from Pearse Street into the college to walk around on the cobble stones, they had never been inside the walls.

(CEF 13)

The nurturing and growth of awareness of injustice during student life in college, identified above, echo Shor and Freire’s dialogue about the role of education ‘in the late 60s in the States, and in parts of Europe’ as a ‘radicalising part of society’ (1987, p. 32). Shor nostalgically remembers the ‘mass movements’ of the 1960s, compared to the individual commitment required of modern day radicals; ‘your challenge now makes you individually more visible, and thus more vulnerable’ (p. 54). The image of working class children brought up within a few miles of a privileged university, and being shown around the

¹⁵ Joe Duffy is the Presenter of RTE’s popular phone-in show Liveline. He was among the first students from a working class area to attend Trinity College and in 1980 he was expelled from Trinity College for a year for his radical student politics.

¹⁶ Northsider – Dublin people who live on the north side of the River Liffey. A cherished identity, viewed as more working class than the Dublin Southsider in general terms. These identities are the subject of humour and banter (fun).

grounds and walk ‘on the cobble stones’, is a powerful image of new possibilities. Such actions, uncontroversial today, were not without risk at the time and incurred the sanction of the establishment.

A spirit of volunteerism and the strength of support for local organisations in Ireland such as the ‘Credit Union’¹⁷ have a formative influence in nurturing a commitment to the community. The history of community development in Ireland includes self-help groups formed locally in rural parishes such as ‘Muintir na Tire’ (people of the land) in the 1930s and ‘Save the West’ Campaign of the 1960s (Kelleher & Whelan, 1992, p.3).

It is in me...to see the injustice of situations. My family involvement in a credit union for thirty or forty years, my mother and father were both volunteers, so that had an impact on me as well.

(CEF 4)

I suppose I picked the social justice symbol there because it incorporated a broad range of other things that were there. I always had that inherent sense that there was this injustice in the world. I would have been involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in School and my cousin went to work in South America when I started secondary school and I was really inspired by that.

(CEF 12)

CEF 12 identifies a feature particular to Ireland, the experience of overseas development work being brought to bear on Irish community education and community development. Many volunteers, lay and religious missionaries brought a global perspective to bear on the Irish situation. Democratic movements such as the Anti-Apartheid movement led by Kader Asmal (1995), a South African living in Ireland were effective role models for social justice campaigns in Ireland.

This ‘inherent’ sense of injustice may or may not prompt the community educator to take a stand, a stand that could be costly, as this awareness is usually linked to a drive to change, a power to take action.

When I think about it, I think inherently I do have this strong sense of justice, now I wouldn't be the activist on protest marches, but I think most people in Ireland suffer from apathy anyway.

¹⁷ The Irish League of Credit Unions are located in most towns and districts of major cities. They provide loans and micro-finance to individuals and families on modest to low incomes and are a popular financial institution at community level.

(CEF 3)

There is an awareness of injustice but an 'apathy' which hampers change. The challenge experienced by community educators is to engage with 'authentic struggle to transform the situation' (Freire, 1970, p. 29) in the sense that their analysis and awareness demands action. CEN 5 feels the burden of acute awareness and the implications.

Injustice, I feel it very strongly, I feel it's always there for me and it's part of why I continue to work in the area that I'm working in. Sometimes I wish I wasn't so aware, so political, a lot of the time. Because of that power I sense the power that can go alongside that.

(CEN 5)

Again, the above contribution bears out what Shor spoke about at the top of this chapter about the 'risk of opposition politics' (1987, p. 54). Elsewhere in this chapter, community educators refer to the politicised nature of their work and the risks involved in empowering and emancipatory education. These bear similarities to the experience in places like Latin America and the US during the 1960s, about which Shor and Freire speak (1987). Community education is for me risky business. One runs the risk of upsetting system leaders by exercising one's own power of choice to take steps to change systems.

Transforming systems not meeting the needs of those on the margins

The systemic injustice described below is a motivation for CEF 8 to 'do something to try to change that'. The sense in which a system has little understanding of groups on the margins of society is well expressed in this contribution. The young people from an area affected by disadvantage have desperately predictable futures if they, their parents/families and community are not supported through community education and community development.

I worked with some of the kids from Pearse Street. That was how I got into education. Just seeing that you know... you knew where those kids were going to be in five years time. And you know possibly where they were going to be in ten years time and it was all so predictable you know and I suppose... There's a little café in the town which is just opposite the Courts and you know people go in for coffee before the court starts, you know well who's who in it,... it's like this soap opera of ...this is the lawyer and this is the...you know...and It's something about trying to change that.

(CEF 8)

The inference is that a life leading to frequent encounters with the law is what lies ahead for some of the young people. The 'legal set' so well described in the café culture before

the court sitting has little contact or understanding of the lives of these young people. The need to bridge the chasm between these sectors in society is one of the many challenges which community education aims to address.

Community educators are motivated to respond to the failings of the education system to meet the needs of many children affected by poverty and disadvantage. Connell has identified the important role which compensatory education can play as one way to address the issue (1993, p. 21), but he points to a more urgent need for systemic transformation, through constructing a curriculum from the standpoint of the least advantaged, as discussed in chapter one.

I started off working in a secondary school and I very quickly thought the system was not meeting the needs of the majority of the children that were there. I then got into community education and I suppose I was very idealistic in that I can change the world and why is it that some people are seen to be less than other people and it shouldn't be like that and we should be able to do something about it.

(CEF 12)

Exposure to education in a critical field, is often the first step toward critical thinking, whether it is studies in adult education, critical theory, equality, development studies, or feminism. The 'transformational power of education' was also an inspiration for engagement in community education work, and this participant speaks of the 'dawning' of a new way of understanding the world, a 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow, 1995).

Finding myself in a very different scenario than I ever thought I would and beginning to have that dawning. How I had been brought up to see the world was not the way the world was... that whole process from personal to the political and then just seeing the transformational power of education and learning in its broadest sense.

(CEN 6)

Mezirow describes Freire's writings as an inspiration. Mezirow views his perspective transformation in terms of discovering 'a crucial missing dimension in my mental model: conscientisation (critical reflection)' (1996, p. 8). Freire similarly inspired my engagement with critical pedagogy.

Generative Themes of Struggle

Displaying the set of images of struggle (Figure 5), I was conscious of the need not to impose a meaning or ideal type for community education, implying that community education should resemble such struggles or protest for social justice, equality or political rights. In grounded theory, the researcher should seek to evoke rather than impose meaning. As discussed in the methodology chapter, I approached the use of these codifications not as imposing meaning but rather as ‘concepts’ to convey the origins and connectedness of community education to movements for change that involved struggle, resistance and collective action.

In what follows, community educators found some of the images evoked a connection with a particular movement or struggle which sparked participants’ interest in community education. Some participants were more explicit in their identification with one or other of the pictures on display.

Identifying with the tradition of struggle

The concept of struggle is intricately linked with movements of the left, democratic movements, civil rights, egalitarians and radical educators. We have explored Foucault and Honneth’s concepts of struggle in earlier contexts. Here, struggle is viewed in the political sense. Giroux places critical thinking as ‘a constitutive feature of the struggle for self-emancipation and social change’ (1983, p. 7). Mayo conceives civil society ‘as a site of struggle’ (1999, p. 38). For me, struggle suggests the deep-rooted nature of power and structure which maintains an unjust world order and it calls for resistance. I believe community educators have a crucial role to play in this struggle.

A number of contributors to the focus groups recall Liberation Theology¹⁸ as an early influence in this direction. My own epistemology was similarly shaped; ‘I worked overseas in the late 1980s and at that time Liberation Theology was very inspiring’ (Researcher Focus Group 2).

¹⁸ In the Christian Churches (Roman Catholic), a number of South American theologians, developed an interpretation of the Bible which argued that God identifies with the poor through the preferential option for the poor evidenced in the choices made during the life of Jesus Christ. The theology was branded by Rome as Marxist, as it resembled the historical role of oppressed classes in shaping a new dispensation. Many of the theologians were officially sanctioned and sometimes ‘silenced’ by Rome. (Gutierrez, 1973).

Social Inclusion is a sort of cosy little term isn't it. I just wish the whole thing was a little more, you know something like Liberation Theology, you know yes, it was a powerful movement, it was really gutsy. I suppose, we have come through, you know the money and all that sort of thing and that's taken the whole notion of you know the struggle seems to be gone.

(CEF 13)

The 'gutsy' nature of a movement like liberation theology as it was in the 1970s in Latin America is contrasted with the 'cosy' equivalent 'social inclusion', a term widely used in EU governance policy today. Liberation theology involved a direct challenge to the establishment, the church and state and therefore involved risk for its advocates. Social inclusion is a less divisive, less oppositional concept than the liberation of the 'oppressed' (Freire, 1970, p. 26). Freire's liberatory pedagogy is closely associated with 'two dominant strands, Marxism and Liberation Theology (Mayo, 1999, p.15).

CEF 14 I would have done theology and liberation theology...It would have really been the spark for me...the whole notion of promoting 'active citizenship'. I actually think they don't want active citizens they want compliant citizens you know so, at this stage for me a kind of motivating thing would be social justice.

RESEARCHER So citizenship has become a bad word, it is perceived as compliant.

CEF 14 It has been adopted or taken on and that whole notion of active citizenship has been really demeaned in my view if you look at what has happened organisations that would have had some kind of critical approach like, the Equality Authority.

CEF 14 recalls liberation theology as 'the spark' for 'motivating' an interest and commitment to 'social justice'. This leads immediately to the present, and how citizenship is understood in Ireland and the contrast between 'active citizens' and 'compliant citizens'. Citizenship as a concept has been co-opted by the State to mould active citizens from a young age. Critical citizenship is not encouraged and compliance with conventional understandings of citizenship is rewarded¹⁹. Similar to 'social inclusion', underlying values of critical citizenship are watered down in the same way that liberation, social solidarity and equality are diluted in meaning, when co-opted as state policy. CEF 14 and a number

¹⁹ Gaisce The President's Award for young people aged 15 to 25 focuses on achievement in areas of personal endeavour, excellence in team activities and fundraising for charitable causes, with less focus on critical awareness raising "participants are not only improving themselves as active citizens; they are also making an invaluable contribution to their schools, colleges and communities." President McAleese, Annual Report 2009. Available from: http://www.gaisce.ie/html/downloads/Annual_Report.pdf

of focus group participants referred to the undermining of the work of the Equality Authority in countering discrimination as an example of the risks involved in working from a critical perspective²⁰. This is discussed further in the theme of ‘silencing critical voices’. The contributions above demonstrate how community educators make connections between the past and the present, drawing inspiration from past struggle and critical movements to meet the challenges of the present.

Community educators identified with varying struggles, people standing up for their rights, and communities taking on powerful vested interests. One example of popular protest was the mobilization of thousands of older people supported by their advocacy organisations, to campaign for the reversal of proposed cuts to medical card entitlement for the over 70s (Donnellan, 2008).

our senior citizens, it's back to that whole thing, the power of people working on whatever it was they wanted to address, it was very much driven by what they wanted to do and what struck me about that campaign, they all came out there in their droves, they all stood up proud...it was something about how community ...provides a vehicle in a way. It gives the individual a voice and helps the collective...

(CEN 6)

The possibility for community education to engage with national protest at a collective level enables community educators to play a vital role in bringing awareness of a national issue to bear at a local level. The protest over medical card cuts was supported by engagement between national advocacy groups and local active retirement groups at community level.

A local campaign about which there isn't necessarily a local community consensus, can pose a challenge to the position and stance which community education takes. The Shell to Sea campaign mounted by local landowners (the Rossport Five) in North Mayo against the plans of the Irish Government and Shell to lay a pipeline, garnered much support in the local community and from external activists. At the same time some local groups argued in favour of Shell's plans saying it would bring jobs to the local community and provide for

²⁰ The Equality Authority received news in 2008 of a disproportionately higher (43 per cent) budgetary cut than similar bodies, established by Government. It is claimed this resulted from the critical scrutinizing role it played in highlighting discrimination within the State (Coulter, 2008).

the energy requirements of the State. Such resistance poses a dilemma for the community educator.

I was looking at the Rosspport Five one...that struck me as there's a huge amount of community education that a group of people living in a small area have to educate themselves and become both educated and activated so as to be able to challenge Shell, a multinational company. The power that happens when people come together to fight for their community and what they see as their community and I know there is conflict around that and difficulties and other struggles within that community but I suppose that's the one that's coming out at me as the power of a development process and an educational process and to be able to fight and to work with struggle.

(CEN 7)

That was the only one I could relate to (Rosspport 5). I felt you can't personify struggles within individuals and I don't think community education is about the icons like Che Guevara. It's a different kind of thing, ...it's about bringing people together to be able to struggle collectively.

(CEN 2)

The picture of the Rosspport Five, which I chose to include in the collection for the codification illustrates solidarity and resistance²¹. The comments above foreground the struggle in terms of local people 'educating themselves' to take on a large multinational and at the same time dealing with internal 'conflict' in the community, where there isn't necessarily community consensus around the issue. The concept of struggle is not identified with a mass movement following an 'iconic leader' so much as a more local 'collective struggle', involving more conflicting aspects and internal dynamics of struggles within struggles. The challenge for the community educator in choosing a particular stance in local struggles is not fully explored here, but comes up again in relation to the theme of 'space to be critical' in chapter six.

The picture of women from the early suffragette movement resonated with this participant in relation to gender inequality and equal pay. It is often personal experience which motivates critical action.

I'd have to say I'm old enough to not have had equal pay in my first job. So I was at quite a young age conscious of equality and issues, I suppose my whole life I have been at least peripherally involved in various local issues or national issues...

(CEF 9)

²¹ The picture is taken from the front cover of the book narrating the story of the campaign of the Rosspport Five who spent almost ninety days in prison for resisting a high court order allowing Shell to carry out work on their land. (Garavan et al., 2007)

This direct experience of inequality is similar to what Honneth (1995) described as ‘the denial of basic rights’ or ‘withheld recognition’ (p. 116) in the sphere of ‘legal recognition’ (p. 94).

The struggle of engaging the most marginalized

The struggle which community education facilitators experience in particular is to engage groups who have traditionally not taken up options in second chance or further education, for example men. In the course of this research I worked in the area of men’s community education. This work is intensive, involves working with allies in the community development sector to engage ‘hard to reach’ groups.

The past ten years of my work has been working with the unemployed. I can see the difference a small course can make for somebody who has nothing to do all week. Just coming can make a difference to someone’s appearance, attitudes and health, it’s a very small thing but it makes a huge difference so that’s something that resonates with me a bit.

(CEF 4)

The difference community education can make through a small course ‘for somebody who has nothing to do all week’ is embodied in participants gaining confidence and making personal gains in health. CEF 3 reflects below on the image of people queuing for their welfare, an image of ‘loss and no real sense of hope’, and its particular impact on men. Gender conditioning does have the impact of creating a male expectation to be employed, to be the provider. For anyone who has experienced standing in a dole queue, the experience embodies a loss of dignity and a desire to remain invisible. It is the embodiment of ‘loss’ as CEF 3 observes. Bourdieu has used the notion of embodiment in his concept of habitus:

generative schemata of classifications and classifiable practices that function in practice...that are the product of the embodiment, in the form of dispositions, of a differential position in social space.

(Bourdieu, 1996, p. 2)

Habitus refers to a unitary set of ‘characteristics of a position’ within the social space, ‘which unites the practices and goods of a single agent or class of agents’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8). A complex idea, habitus, applied in the context of men out of work, points to the wider impact of the experience on self-confidence, status, choice and ability to maintain levels of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1998). Habitus is further interpreted by Webb, Schirato and Danagher as ‘the set of durable dispositions that people

carry within them that shape their attitudes, behaviours and responses to given situations' (2002, pp. 114-115). Unemployment is such a situation, as experienced by countless thousands in Ireland during the current recession. Unemployment and marginalisation impact on mind and body shaping a habitus of resignation, withdrawal and grieving.

So the group I think of most, let's say at the moment, and even in my current work probably this one here (picks up the picture of a queue), the individuals on the unemployment line, because I think for me now in Ireland, my real sense is that they are the individuals who are suffering the brunt of apathy ...just my experience to date of, particularly men, just such disappointment, such loss and no real sense of hope

(CEF 3)

There is a strong awareness among community educators that these are the individuals and groups for whom community education is designed to respond. The work of reaching out to individuals and groups experiencing the effects of poverty, unemployment and marginalisation is difficult and requires collaboration with the community groups.

The disappointment goes back to trying to get hard to reach individuals and groups and identify what the groups want to do in order to bring them forward, it's a continuous challenge.

(CEF 10)

Community educators convey a deep commitment to their work that goes a bit further than simply doing a job to sustain oneself. Community development workers and community educators invest a lot in their desire for their groups to grow and be sustainable. The need for patience and doing the work at the pace the group is capable of sustaining independently is often a delicate balancing act, as this practitioner reflects.

I worked with a group in X and they were struggling and I did a lot of work for them and I helped them pull together a plan, and two years afterwards, funding was pulled (withdrawn)...and my disappointment was, in my desire to help them I made them appear more confident than they actually were and it did them no good at all for me to work so hard on their behalf.

(CEN 4)

These reflections assert that community education is patient work, it is done at the group's pace and results in terms of returns are difficult to quantify. The groups who are hardest to reach may be those who have been marginalised by the system without the system

necessarily realizing it. These may be people who may have left school early, or have practiced a trade in the past which is now deemed redundant by the technological revolution. It seems to me that community education has a choice; to change the people (O'Sullivan, 2008, pp. 14-15) or to change the system (Inglis, 1997, p. 3) or perhaps both.

The silencing of critical voices

The theme of 'silencing critical voices' emerged in the course of the focus groups. A feature of the cutbacks in state spending in recent years suggests that important bodies which provide a critical public scrutiny role, in areas such as poverty and equality are perceived by the state as luxuries we cannot afford. The loss of these bodies such as the Equality Authority and the Combat Poverty Agency were regarded by community educators in this research as a phenomenon of 'marginalising' the 'dissenting voices' who challenge the state and wider publics. As an example, under the guise of financial savings, the integration of the Combat Poverty Agency into a government department has compromised its "independence" and "ability to speak out publicly on issues that cause poverty" (Duncan, reported in O'Brien, *The Irish Times*, 19 June, 2009).

...Yes like Combat Poverty, where are those that...you know could stand up outside of the mainstream and status quo...they are gone you know.

(CEF 14)

In what way does this generative theme of 'silencing' impact on community educators and the role they play in working with community groups at grassroots level? The following exchanges reveal a sense of the risk and fear involved in being critical which has featured earlier in community educators' reflections on struggle and critical movements.

When the White Paper came out there was a certain, there seemed to be much more openness to dissent, fostering dissent to... I'm forgetting the word now...political action and empowerment. Over the last three or four years all you see is a suppression of dissent, the getting rid of the Equality Authority, the whole undermining of all of those structures...

(CEN 7)

There is a whole kind of silencing going on, like ok there is the whole individualism and materialism point of view, but even in community development, you know, any dissenting voices are getting their funding cut, they're getting wiped off the face of the earth.

(CEF 12)

A way of silencing voices of dissent is this kind of thing, 'you are being unpatriotic' ...you just hear this like...don't say anything out against what's happening, because

you know...you'll destroy our chances of getting out of it (the recession). That's sort of a negativity. There isn't space to actually be critical. Critical voices are very quickly marginalized.

(CEF 8)

Community educators observe 'suppression of dissent', 'undermining' and the community groups with whom they work, who exercise a 'dissenting voice are getting their funding cut'. The implicit fear for community educators is their own budgets being cut or merged in the same ways as the community development sector. The operational discourse of government during the 2008-2010 period is captured in phrases such as 'we all need to pull together and play our part' and 'patriotic call to action' (Lenihan, *The Irish Times*, 15 Oct 2008). The implied consensus was that all need to share the burden of cuts, including the weakest, for the unregulated wrongdoing of the strongest, the banks, the state and big business. Not to do so, represented an 'unpatriotic' approach. The effect of this 'patriotic' discourse is to further silence dissent. The effect on community educators is expressed by CEF 13 in terms of keeping 'what you have' in the face of possible cuts.

The infrastructure, the bodies that were questioning have been dismantled (Equality Authority) or Combat Poverty. They are dismantled or their funding cut 50% or whatever. Their voices are silenced. So there is a kind of a fear thing as well of you know, you just keep what you have...

(CEF 13)

This generative theme of 'silencing' which emerged in the focus groups is a reminder of Freire's understanding of the theme of silence.

The theme of silence suggests a structure of mutism in the face of the overwhelming force of the limit situations.

(Freire, 1970, p.87)

Limit situations refer here to structures which support the status quo. In silencing critical voices on equality and poverty, the state downplays their significance, prioritising the economic purpose in policy and programmes. The actions of the state as described above in silencing critical voices represent a 'culture of silence' (Goulet, in Freire, 1973, p.viii). What are community educators to do faced with this culture of silence? The actions of the state prompt community educators to respond through a pedagogy which asserts critical analysis and critical voice.

*...to find a space to find your voice to say, actually, No, we're not happy with this...
(CEF 12)*

The disappointment is...there's something about how community education providers...we are so grateful for so little...and that we have been kept in that oppressed state. In some ways that we are not angrier or more demanding or we are you know around this whole education for social justice, we're not fighting it physically, we're not angry enough or something...I don't know. I'm very positive about what's happening in the community education network.

(CEN 6)

*How do we engage in a way that makes some difference as opposed to being silent.
(CEN 4)*

Fear of threatened budget cuts can maintain silence, but expressing anger, saying 'no, we're not happy with this' is also a valid response. In response to CEF 8's view that 'there isn't space to be critical', CEF 12 points to the need for 'the skills in how to be critical'.

the skills in how to be critical. We have this women's studies course and you know loads of people didn't (know about) the women's movement, so you know, it's a lack of knowledge like all these struggles and you know the history of it is like a secret or whatever and whole generations seem to not know about this.

(CEF 12)

The pedagogic role which community education usefully occupies is the educative function to support expression of critical consciousness, by raising awareness of 'subjugated knowledges' and histories untold (Foucault, 1976a, pp. 81-82). CEF 12 cites the suppressed, 'secret' knowledge of the women's movement as an example. It is an oppositional movement which ended silence.

The 'disrespect' (Honneth, 1995, pp. 132-138) with which the state treats volunteers and workers in the community development sector even during the good times and more recently in bad times is a sign of the politicized nature of the work, referred to in the previous section. The discourse of 'cohesion' so much a feature of the state's approach to local and community development in recent years succeeded in dismantling much of the hard won supports for a vibrant, critical and autonomous community development sector (Community Workers' Co-operative, 2011). Some community development workers have lost their jobs in the process, as this practitioner recounts.

My second disappointment is that I've lost my job and I'm on the dole ...and I suppose the biggest thing around that was that sometimes in the work that I'm doing, it's highly politicised, so your ability to do the job is kinda insignificant. It's whether your structure is relevant as it happens, so it's very hard to take that you can be very good at your job but there's no need for the job.

(CEN 4)

Apart from the devastating personal loss, the funding cuts have impacted on community education's links with community development as earlier findings suggest. The doctrine of cohesion and merging of local entities was 'enunciated' (Foucault, 1972) long before the recession in Ireland, fuelled by the same efficiency drive of new managerialism referred to earlier.

The process has been an ideological attack on CDWork and participative democracy, designed to DISEMPOWER local marginalised communities from decision-making & control of projects & their work.

(Community Workers' Co-operative, 2011, p. 6)

In the macro context, the politicised nature of the work involved community groups engaging with the state in the social partnership process, a process some community activists considered 'an elaborate way of fashioning consent by co-opting oppositional forces within the community and voluntary sector into dominant mainstream structures' (Geoghegan & Powell, 2004, p. 235). By appearing to give a voice to the community sector at the table, the state can claim exoneration from silencing or disempowering anyone.

Generative Themes Reflecting on Role

What gets measured: returns and administration

Reflecting on the many struggles which CEFs encounter in their work, the themes of departmental returns, administration and not having enough time consistently emerged among focus groups. What doesn't get measured was highlighted in the earlier section in chapter four dealing with recognition of accredited and non-accredited courses. The creeping influence of new managerialism present there, also features implicitly in themes here.

The disappointment... it's the fact that my role is far more administrative than I thought it was going to be when I took it up.

(CEF 3)

The returns submitted to the Department of Education and Skills pose difficulties for Community Education Facilitators who, whilst recognising the importance of accountability for resources allocated to marginalised groups with whom they work, find the gathering of this data a sensitive matter and in some cases may not be disclosed by group members until sufficient trust is established in a group.

And the groups that were mentioned in the White paper but aren't reflected in what we have to return to the Department of Education currently. You know so there were very specific target groups mentioned in the White Paper re. community education that isn't reflected in the data which the Department are gathering.

(CEF 10)

...the other part of it is, when we work with a community group, we work with the group. We don't work with them, because they're all the ex-offenders, and over there you have the homeless men and there we have the marginalised women, whatever, it's whatever the group is and if they come to us and say they want to do something with us in community education we don't pigeon hole them and say you're that category...That's where the mismatch is between what the department want us to account for and what we think is reasonable to say... look it's a women's group.

(CEF 5)

The theme of reporting and gathering information regarding categories and profile of groups raises a number of issues as the above contributions suggest. These concern; (i) equality and how we evaluate its status and implementation within a programme, (ii) labelling and its impact, and (iii) separating new managerialist demands from equality objectives. Let us consider each in turn.

(i) Evaluating Equality Implementation: Educational programmes are subjected to varying strands of evaluation, from many perspectives, including, attendance, attainment, progression, quality assurance, best practice and equality. These all involve an element of quantitative reporting. The phrase 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' comes to mind when we consider the more extreme positions in debates between positivist and post-positivist researchers/evaluators. The positivists may only countenance a claim to truth based on empirical quantitative data, whereas post-positivists will claim the essence of truth resides in the qualitative detail of particular cases. Researchers/evaluators working from 'egalitarian' and 'emancipatory research' (Baker et al., 2004 pp. 169-187)

perspectives would seem to occupy the middle ground, holding on to the baby of quantitative data to evaluate equality, whilst discarding some of the bathwater of statistical excess.

Community educators are focused on building relationships with groups, therefore a level of trust needs to be established before quantifying and categorising the members of a community group for the purposes of returns to lead departments and funders. Being more inclined to empowerment and confidence building goals, community educators have little time for categorising and counting. At the same time, there needs to be recognition that resources allocated to community education are given on the basis that equality objectives, among others, will feature in the outcomes. In previous research I cited Barry (2000) who makes the argument that 'equality data is essential to the analysis and monitoring of progress toward greater equality in Irish society.' (cited in McGlynn, 2006, p.51). CEF 5's reflection above points to the 'mismatch' between department reporting requirements and what is reasonable, which would suggest a middle ground needs to be found here.

(ii) *Categorising and Labeling Groups:* CEF 5 raises an important theme concerning how individuals and groups are identified in reports and returns. It is not possible to enter into this issue in great detail in this research, however, community educators perceive a disconnect between the department's encounter with learners, which is often limited to numbers in returns under labels and categories, whereas their encounters as practitioners are face to face engagements with real people with complex lifestories and complex needs. The 'pigeon-holing' and 'categorising' of people participating in community education can lead to further disempowerment and fails to tell the whole story of people's lives and experiences in education.

(iii) *New managerialist demands versus equality objectives:*

In chapter four, the impact of new managerialism was highlighted. The reflections of the community educators suggest, here again, the disconnect between the department's set of categories and those groups specified in the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000, pp. 164-175). As new public management takes hold in public service administration, requests from lead departments for valuable data which would support equality objectives can get caught up in the maelstrom of negativity toward measurement practices demanded

from a distance. Clearly these administrative and evaluative processes require more appropriate application which will not detract from the grassroots engagement with community groups.

In response to the codification inviting participants to name what it is that they struggle with most in their role as community educators, other responses included 'time management', 'managing grants' and 'tutor hours'. Focus group participants expressed the challenges of time management, and the impact which administration has on engagement with groups. The administrative burden is added to considerably with the demands of accreditation.

I had time management as well. Just not having enough time to do everything I need to do properly... there's so much to be done at certain times of the year and I think for accreditation, the time factor involved with FETAC.

(CEF 5)

The everyday work of community education facilitators does involve administration of grants and minding budgets to allocate adequate tutor hours. There are wider issues in relation to the recognition of frontline practitioners, the tutors in community education, which is the focus of the next section.

The community educator: recognising the practitioner

Recognition is also a crucial theme relevant to practitioners and the pedagogic practice of community education. The recognition of community educators is considered in more detail here in the light of focus group dialogue.

The first set of observations concern the practicalities of being a community educator or tutor in the sector. These are considered against the backdrop of practitioner qualifications and their relative status and recognition within the teaching profession in Ireland. Community Education Facilitators liaise with community groups about engaging tutors, as well as training and induction of new tutors in the values and ethos of community education.

I wrote two and picked one (what CEFs struggle with in the role). I think what aggravates me the most is the turnover of tutors and then the need to up-skill new tutors in adult education and appropriate methodologies and that happens because once tutors have got really confident and got very good, BTEI and Literacy are

three times my budget, so they have way more hours, so my tutors migrate to more work. So I am continually having to staff up new tutors and upskill them in the whole way we're working ...

(CEF 9)

The insecurity of tuition work poses difficulties in the Community Education Service of VECs, making it difficult to retain a core group of tutors maintaining a particular ethos and approach in their work with community groups.

I'd agree...yea...there'd be more opportunities...it comes back to the kind of position of community education you know and where it is in terms of the HR (Human Resources) side, the insecurity around part-time tuition in community education. It's a huge issue you know and then lobbying on that registration with the Teaching Council and who can register and who can't ...

(CEF 14)

Induction of tutors in 'appropriate methodologies' and 'in the way we're working' is a vital part of the work and suggests the commitment of community educators to a distinct pedagogy. But, what of the recognition and status of this pedagogy ?

There has been a long struggle for recognition of adult and community education as part of the teaching profession in Ireland. The White Paper (DES, 2000) had called for the establishment of an 'inter-agency working group...to progress the issue of formal recognition of qualifications for adult education practitioners' (p. 151). The White Paper noted concerns for two groups of practitioners (a) those with an adult education qualification but without a formal teaching qualification, and (b) volunteer tutors without a qualification. Existing community educators wish to support the formation of a new generation of community educators who have themselves participated in community education.

to try and move adult learners who have great skill, to get them into a situation where they can actually go back and start delivering, tutoring, teaching in their communities.

(CEF 1)

The historic power of the teaching profession comes into play here. The qualifications required for an Adult Education Organiser in the VECs are those recognised for purposes of appointment as teachers in post-primary schools (DES, Circ. Letter 42/79, 1979). This reflects the 'daytime teacher' and 'evening adult tutor' historical discourse of the VEC as

discussed in chapter two. However, progress in terms of recognition is finally being made. The Teaching Council are in the process of formally recognising teacher training in further education. After 2013 formal qualifications will be required for teaching on FETAC accredited courses in the further education sector²² (Teaching Council, 2009, pp. 17-18).

Recognition of credentialised knowledge is a two-sided coin. On the face of it, it is important that practitioners and students in adult and community education have a sense of security in the currency of the courses and qualifications they pursue. On the other side, it is important that people without such qualifications, but who have experience and work as practitioners in the field, be accorded equivalent recognition.

The community educator: recognising the pedagogy

The effects of lack of recognition of adult and community education as a distinct pedagogy are apparent from the diverse views concerning what the pedagogic practice actually involves. Similar to empowerment in chapter four, there is contestation about the nature of the pedagogy of community education.

The following contributions emphasise the facilitative role of community educators. The community educator's stance below is 'avoiding going in with an agenda' or 'putting the group down a certain direction', whilst at the same time raising awareness that these issues / campaigns may be of relevance and interest and allowing seeds to be planted as such.

I suppose where I would see where we could have a role as a facilitative role. ...we are not necessarily going in with an agenda,

(CEF 1)

Like I would think that would be very difficult, to go in with an agenda, and you know, kind of send...put a group down a certain direction.

(CEF 10)

²² Teaching Council Regulation 5 applies to tutors and teachers delivering FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) courses i.e. accredited awards (levels 1-6). The regulation sets out in detail the degree requirement and experience requirement for registration up to 1st April 2013. Thereafter, applicants will have to have obtained an approved qualification in either post-primary teacher education or further education teacher education.
http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/_fileupload/Teacher%20Education/FINALFEGeneralandProgrammeRequirements.pdf

...and we have an environmental group and they often come to us in relation to getting speakers. It is all facilitated. We don't engage in their agenda or whatever they're about.

(CEF 7)

What these findings suggest is that community educators don't impose an agenda, which is a different issue entirely to going in without an agenda. The approach to community education of not going in with any agenda ignores the politicised nature of community education to some extent. It suggests that as community educators we can remain depoliticised in our engagements with groups. Freire's idea that no education is 'neutral' is relevant in the engagement between educator and community group:

Besides being an act of knowing, education is also a political act. That is why no pedagogy is neutral.

(Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 13)

Freire suggested that a neutral stance in education is a myth. As educators we cannot be detached either in the epistemology we carry or the pedagogy we practice. However, community educators in this research assert that the work of consciousness-raising be done at the pace of the group.

Anytime something comes (to do with campaigns), ...I'm suggesting (to groups) that this thing is worthwhile and if they do it or not, its up to them to be motivated after that...

(CEF 5)

Where does facilitation end and conscientization begin? This question focuses on a classic dilemma for community educators. It is linked to the neutral education idea as well. Freire rejected a notion of facilitation as abdicating a teaching responsibility. Facilitation is no more neutral than teaching or education.

in de-emphasising the teacher's power by claiming to be a facilitator, one is being less than truthful to the extent that the teacher turned facilitator maintains the power institutionally created in the position.

(Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 377)

Freire argues that 'the facilitator fails to assume his or her role as a dialogical educator', by viewing dialogue as a 'mere tactic to involve students in a particular task.' (1995, p. 380).

Acknowledging the desire not to impose an agenda, there is also space in community education for conscientisation by enabling groups to reflect and act on the social and political levels as well as the personal and community levels.

...we developed a course called (Personal and Political²³), and I suppose we had hoped that organically then they would look at moving onto community development, getting more involved in their community and in social analysis.

(CEF 12)

...about 3 years ago the Department (Community Affairs) decided that it would merge a number of community development projects (in area x). they would go from 8 to 6 and they asked me would I facilitate the process and I said I would not, but that I would facilitate the CDPs to write a paper and to actually fight against it happening... and they won!

(CEN 4)

Conscientisation (conscientizacao) (Freire, 1970, p. 85) is the outcome of the praxis of reflection and action, which is the cornerstone of critical pedagogy (Mayo, 1999, p. 63). The action can often take the form of resistance which is the stance CEN 4 has chosen with the community projects in the extract above. This principled position also involves solidarity between the community educator and the community group, which challenges the Department's manipulative power.

These findings suggest, firstly, that there is some road still to travel to grant appropriate recognition to the role of the community educator on a par with other roles in the teaching profession and secondly, like empowerment, there is no clear settlement on the way a pedagogy of community education is applied in practice by community educators. Recognition of the pedagogy and the practitioner by the teaching profession in Ireland will begin to address this pedagogical issue.

Resilience: from 'part of a real buzz' to 'we are still here'

Many of the participants have been involved in community education for the duration of the decade since the publication of the White Paper in 2000. The contributions of the community educators on their role reflect the ebbs and flows, achievements and disappointments and current themes of concern and hope in the work of community educators.

²³ Personal and Political is the anonymised name of the course.

Participants recalled the sense of excitement and newness surrounding the publication of the White Paper in 2000 and the inclusion of commitments on community education. There was a sense of being part of 'a real buzz'.

I suppose achievements wise, it's kinda personal and wider. I think it goes back to when I started in community education and there was a real buzz on the ground...
(CEN 5)

I started this work in 2001 and there was a huge buzz around that time...
(CEN 7)

Community Education Facilitators similarly recalled the creation of their posts and a sense of optimism for the future.

...I think that was an achievement, that the Department managed to deliver for community education and created our posts, and for me that's the achievement.
(CEF 5)

There is no doubt that community educators are now facing a challenging time in 2011, as Ireland struggles with a recession which has impacted on the lives of almost everyone in the communities where they work. The dominant theme to emerge in this aspect was the 'resilience' captured in the expression 'we are still here' despite recession and cutbacks.

I suppose one significant achievement I suppose both nationally and for CEFs is that we are still here, in spite of massive cutbacks nationally particularly in the community sector.
(CEF 4)

These focus group reflections suggest the resilience of community educators in their role. What might be the attribute community educators look to in challenging times? CEF 14 talks about the 'spark'. It is something about the energy and discovering that 'buzz' and enthusiasm which sustains community educators in their work in the face of the many challenges and indeed opportunities for the future.

Hopeful...I'm kind of thinking what is it that maintains the spark for me it's identifying what's really interesting about stuff and you know pursuing that...
(CEF 14)

Generative Themes of Isolation to Solidarity

The future for community educators is buoyed up by the resilience of the past decade, resilience no doubt hewn from challenging experiences over the period as the next set of

reflections reveal. A number of CEFs in the focus groups conveyed a 'sense of isolation' in the role. Other reflections concerned identifying allies in the work. A strong theme which emerged, pleasantly unexpected, in one focus group was the idea of solidarity and the need for a strong collective strategic approach in support of community education. This solidarity was shared by other focus groups and these reflections conclude with an appreciation expressed by all focus groups for having the opportunity to 'have this conversation'.

Isolation 'there's only one of us'

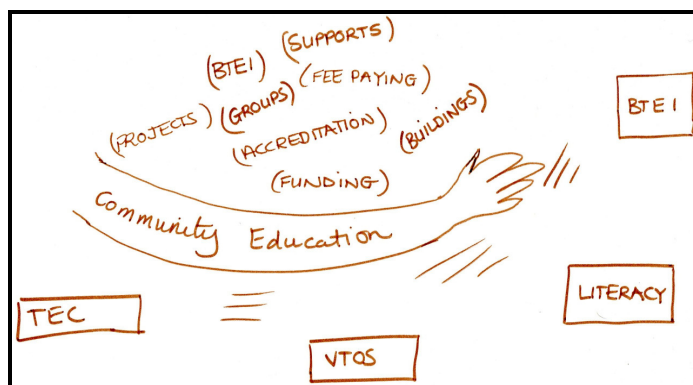
The generative theme of isolation was a further unexpected theme to emerge in the focus groups in particular identified by some CEFs in the VECs, generally because there is only one such post in the VEC in each county.

It can be a very lonely place for a community education facilitator I think in VECs...
(CEF 2)

For me one of the big things was having another CEF in other counties, before that there were only a few counties which had a community education person, so I suppose I felt quite isolated in that...
(CEF 12)

Isolation was one of the themes circled by this participant in the codification sheet on what community education facilitators struggle with most in their work (figure 6).

*from a geographic point I am very much isolated from some of the community groups, some of the partners that I work with and even from, let's say my own peers within the VEC.
...almost every other service there are two (workers)...2 Youthreach, 3 VTOS, there are 2 Adult literacy centres.*
(CEF 3)



Mine's is the sweeping arm. I suppose for me, and I don't necessarily see it as something that is bad, I do like the diverse nature of everything that I do. I do see the other services as very much boxed, you know like BTEI there can only deal with certain people, you know literacy there, I think community education is this sweeping arm which pulls in everything else then around it, whether we should be doing the other parts or not, it does sweep up those.

(CEF 11)

Because the role is relatively new, and the practice less understood by traditional educational management, this may contribute to the community education facilitator's sense of isolation. CEFs are often considered by management to be available for myriad tasks, as illustrated aptly by the sweeping arm above. Being 'the only one' in this role in an otherwise homogenous vocational education environment, can pose challenges for CEFs to maintain the boundary around their role.

CEF 11: but there is this element as well that if they (the VEC) want to run something that doesn't fit anywhere else, community education can do that, because obviously if you are not putting on forty courses, you obviously have the time to do that!

CEF 12: But then, isn't it a tall order as well, I mean there is only one of us in each VEC in the whole county.

Community educators emphasise participation as central to the work. Therefore isolation jars with the image of community education taking place in vibrant 'culture circles' (Freire, 1970, p. 101), women's groups, men's groups, in community halls and resource centres. I have referred earlier to my own experience, being energised by the work with community education participants in such settings, being part of the buzz, yet challenged in the institution and often isolated if like-minded allies are absent.

I believe there is some learning to be gained from looking to adult educators in history, who have overcome isolation to forge solidarity in challenging circumstances. Gramsci (1971) developed some of his most creative ideas in prison, Freire (1987) used his period in exile to share his ideas internationally. Belenky (1997) worked with colleagues in an isolated region in America. In Ireland, the early outreach instructors in the VECs travelled long distances to remote village communities usually working alone with their groups (Ryan, 2004). My intention here is not to hold up isolation as a virtue, but rather, to suggest that isolation isn't uncommon as an experience in community education.

Community educators today, like their predecessors in history, seek out like-minded people. Collaboration is a generative process which uses adversity such as isolation in creative ways. Honneth suggests ‘war often represents a collective event that is able to create spontaneous relationships of solidarity and sympathy across social boundaries’ (1995, p. 128). Collaboration in response to adversity and solidarity in times of war are similar responses, though different in scale.

Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual (1971, p. 142), thought in isolation, yet practiced on factory floors, describes the deep solidarity between the intellectual and the factory worker. Community educators whether in isolation or in teams, think in participative ways, find allies, build alliances and gain strength in solidarity.

Importance of allies and solidarity

The experience of isolation may be the catalyst for the solidarity which CEFs discussed in focus groups. The theme of reliance on allies was a feature of the dialogue.

I lost a colleague in work, who was kind of...a key mentor and was coming from the same kind of community education ethos that I would be coming from and I really miss that in the VEC now because you know the other people are not singing the same song.

(CEF 12)

As earlier findings have shown (chapter four), there are natural links between community educators and community development workers. Whilst these have been strained in recent times, due to cohesion and a drive to homogenisation of programmes in the community and voluntary sectors, the spirit and potential of solidarity is still evident.

...I as a representative of the VEC cannot engage really with marginalised groups without some level of leverage in the community, of a development worker, someone who knows...

(CEF 9)

So people are so worn down by unemployment and all the pressures that they have, it’s hard to find a space to find your voice to say, actually, No, we’re not happy with this and what can we do about it and be really in solidarity with other people to actually say no this isn’t right, we’re not happy with it.

(CEF 12)

Honneth traced social esteem as a third form of mutual recognition in the work of Hegel and Mead (Honneth, 1995 p. 121). Honneth uses the term solidarity to describe this third struggle for recognition. In the context of the other two levels of recognition, self-esteem

and self-respect, social-esteem is achieved by being a valued member of a community, sharing the 'value-community' and 'the cultural self-understanding of a society' (p. 122). However, community education tends to be critical of the dominant 'self-understanding of a society', particularly if it is defined by an economic neo-liberal paradigm. Honneth does make reference to a more popular understanding of solidarity which would be more aligned with community education:

up to now the concept of 'solidarity' has been applied primarily to group relations that arise in the experience of collective resistance to political oppression.

(Honneth, 1995, p. 128)

Solidarity and its vibrant promise replaces the lack of support and absence of allies experienced in isolation. These findings point to CEFs' desire and commitment to a collaborative process to manage isolation and build solidarity.

On rocking boats and being strategic

In this sense, the emergence of social movements hinges on the existence of a shared semantics that enables personal experiences of disappointment to be interpreted as something affecting not just the individual himself or herself but also a circle of many other subjects.

...they generate a subcultural horizon of interpretation within which experiences of disrespect that, previously, had been fragmented and had been coped with privately can then become the moral motives for a collective 'struggle' for recognition.

(Honneth, 1995, pp. 163-164)

Honneth reflects on 'dissapointment' and 'disrespect' experienced in 'fragmented' ways, often 'privately', as a motivation for agents coming together to struggle for recognition. Honneth's reflection matches poignantly with an unexpected finding which emerged in the course of the research. A kindling of solidarity emerged in the course of one focus group. This piece of dialogue arose in the context of discussing the potential of the Community Education Facilitators Association.

CEF 12: I think there is potential though, because if you look at it, there isn't a community education unit nationally, so really we are the only community where people are talking about this in the country.

CEF 4: 'We're community ed., but we're not rocking any boats'.

CEF 13: It's very safe for us by being part of the Department of Education umbrella, because that's you know where our threat is lessened by being in there, because we are part of establishment.

CEF 11: I think if we were going to rock the boat, I think we should, ideally, that's what everyone will think yea, yes let's get up and do it, but you need to be very sure that every single CEF is rocking the boat and there's not a few sitting back saying I'm not rocking any boat.

The dialogue encompasses some significant themes, which need to be theorised further. Responding to the idea of CEFA as a potential voice for community education, CEFs identify the different approaches across VECs to community education as an obstacle, but acknowledge the gap of no national unit or collective voice. The perception of community education as a non-dissenting voice, possibly due to being perceived as 'part of the establishment', within the VEC, is suggested. At the same time, the dialogue ends with a resolve to act, but this needs to be collective.

The dialogue above challenges the 'fear of standing out as radicals', referred to by Freire and Shor, quoted at the top of this chapter (1987, p. 54). In fact the tone of the extract above, nullifies Shor and Freire's somewhat arrogant view that some educators attracted to critical pedagogy fear 'to rock the boat' (p. 54). The mechanics of articulating a collective voice to resist departmental/VEC management plans are expressed in pragmatic terms, the 'need to be strategic'.

CEF 12: I think there's something about...we need to be strategic as well, using the language of the establishment, you know not kind of...going head to head but certainly within the system.

CEF 4: Strategic is very important, if you are going to rock the boat, make sure it's the right boat at the right time with the right people in it...all rowing in the same direction.

The 'need to be strategic', to use 'the language of the establishment' and to choose the 'right time' match with Freire and Shor's ideas concerning 'tactics and strategy' (1987, p. 57). These ideas have merit:

If you consider that strategy means your dream, the tactics are just the mediations, the ways, the methods, the roads, the instruments to concretise the dream, to materialise the strategy.

(Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 57)

Community educators' dream or vision of change centres on empowerment of those previously excluded in education, which we discussed earlier. Solidarity among community educators comes particularly to the fore when the work is further misrecognised, or threatened by homogenisation. In Freire and Shor's terms, the strategy is for recognition of community education practice and pedagogy and achieving this in tangible ways. As for the tactics, CEF 12 identifies 'using the language of the establishment' as key. This calls on community educators to be tactically pragmatic. Part of the role necessarily involves community educators in engaging in the 'language of the establishment'.

Because of the political problem of power, you need to learn how to command the dominant language in order for you to survive in the struggle to transform society.
(Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 73)

Rocking the boat is 'enunciated' (Foucault, 1972, p. 88) as a 'statement' (p. 99) in the dialogue. It is a powerful metaphor for a critical community education.

At the very outset, from the very root, the statement is divided up into an enunciative field in which it has a place and a status, which arranges for its possible relations with the past, and which opens up for it a possible future.
(Foucault, 1972, p. 99)

The spark of solidarity evident in this extract of dialogue suggests a possible future for community educators acting in critically collective solidarity. These themes will be further considered in the context of the VEC institutional role in relation to community education.

Needing to have this conversation

Community Education Facilitators value the opportunity to 'have this kind of conversation' and would wish to create space for this dialogue in future gatherings of the Community Education Facilitators Association at regional and national level.

You'd love to have this conversation with the VEC, with your bosses in the VEC, but it really doesn't.
(CEF 4)

I really enjoyed it, because to hear from my colleagues, it's just great to hear what everybody else had to say and I think we all come out of a very similar basis really, our personal philosophies or whatever are similar.
(CEF 13)

I often don't even get to have that discussion with my colleagues around why is community education different because whenever we are all collectively at a meeting it's very much set by the agenda which never really allows that discussion

to take place, to have that creative discussion around what is your role and how is it different.

(CEF 3)

It's good to take part in research, because sometimes we are just taken away with our routine and we forget that we are part of a bigger picture and what we do is interesting and can be studied.

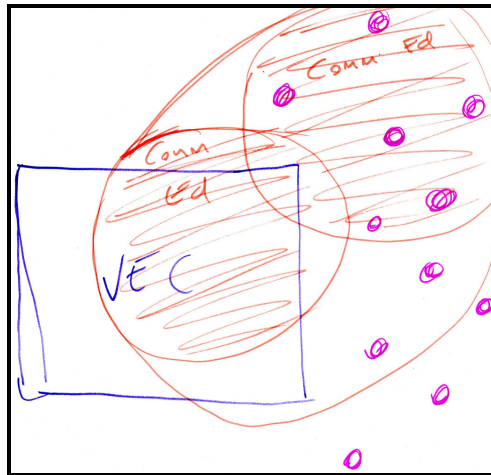
(CEF 5)

These final contributions on the generative theme of the community educator's role and practice, bear out the creative potential of dialogue and sharing among practitioners. Having this forum where co-workers in the field can tap into each others ideas and experiences can provide a rich resource for the practice. It can also sharpen focus and recognition of a practice that 'is interesting and can be studied'.

Conclusion

The generative themes emerging in the focus groups with community education facilitators in the VEC and the AONTAS community education network reveal a complex role in the field in Ireland. That said, the key themes emerging reveal a rootedness and connectedness to a tradition of struggle for justice and a commitment to those on the margins of mainstream society. There is a palpable awareness of the silencing of critical voices by the government (the state) and a failure on the part of state and educational authorities, including the VEC to recognise the distinctive practice of community education and the critical role of community educators. Whilst this struggle for recognition is made all the more challenging by a sense of isolation, there are however strong bonds of solidarity forming among community education facilitators in the VECs. It is to the VEC, as the key provider in community education in Ireland that we turn next.

CHAPTER 6 *EVERY VEC IS DIFFERENT: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS ON THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL PROVIDER IN COMMUNITY EDUCATION*



This is conceptual art. What I was trying to represent was the VEC, I notice community Ed. is much bigger than the VEC, but you know sometimes the organisational push feels very square and feels like trying to fit into it and sometimes you are kind of on the edge of it, and you're doing stuff that's kind of edgy...and then other times, you're just drawn just right back in and a lot of the stuff, the energy is going back into the VEC and... that's really it.

(CEF 8)

Introduction

*How do community educators in Ireland (a) interpret the meaning of their practice, (b) understand their role and its connectedness to liberatory struggle, and (c) **negotiate their space in the institutional provider, the vocational education committee?***

The Vocational Education Committee is one of the most recognizable educational institutions on the Irish educational landscape. The institution and its impact on community education and vice versa is the third area of interest in this research and so the role of the VEC as the key educational provider in community education within its adult education remit, formed part of the discussions during the focus groups. As outlined in chapters one and two, the 33 VECs play a pivotal role in education in Ireland. In chapter one, I considered the role of the VEC in Irish education from a sociology of education perspective drawing on theoretical concepts of Bourdieu and others. In chapter two, I reviewed the key discourses emerging in historical and organisational studies concerning

the VEC in Ireland. It was noted that there was a scarcity of specific research on the public education role of the VEC as an educational institution.

These studies formed a platform for exploring the space which community education occupies among other educational programmes within the VEC structure. In the focus groups, I chose to take this aspect of the discussion last. Three of the focus groups were with community education facilitators (CEFs) of the VECs, so this aspect of the research related more to their particular situation. I chose not to use a codification for the discussion, preferring to be more direct in posing questions relating to how CEFs negotiated their space as practitioners in the VEC. My research interest as outlined in chapter two, concerns how the critical practice of community education, which has origins in oppositional liberation and egalitarian struggles, locates within the VEC, an institution forming part of the mainstream educational apparatus, though not 'synonymous' with the state (Drudy & Lynch, 1993, p.125). I was particularly interested in how community educators negotiate this space, in a sense, as radicals in a site of opposition, the mainstream educational apparatus.

The findings presented in this chapter, form three broad conceptual categories. These are, firstly, generative themes concerning the VEC as a community education provider, secondly, the themes of lost opportunity referring to the failure to implement new structural arrangements for community education envisaged in the White Paper (DES, 2000, pp), and thirdly, the generative theme of collective voice, reflecting CEFs' views on the potential of the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA) as a forum to advance the interests of community education.

Generative Themes on the VEC as Community Education Provider

Institution bashing is a feature of modern discourse, and a trap many commentators fall into at one time or another. Fairclough's nominalisation concept comes into its own here (2003, p. 14). Criticising the 'institution' without naming any agents or group of agents within it is an example of nominalisation. It can serve as a convenient device to hurt no one and hurt everyone at the same time. However, this does not excuse the need to interrogate public institutions and hold them to account for their public role, and that includes education

bodies. That said, this section comes with a health warning. The reflections of the community educators here have been selected in collective form to reflect themes which appear to place the worker in conflict with the dominant ethos and values of their institution, the VEC. This can be a problem when quotes are selected from different parts of separate conversations and compiled together. A picture of discontent may be amplified to some extent.

To counter the impression of discontent portrayed in some of these findings, the engagement with the community education facilitators of the VECs, left me rather with the impression of a group of practitioners who are deeply committed to their work and the role of their institution. They voice concerns and criticisms for the purpose of achieving authentic change not only with their community groups, but within the structures of education and society, including their own organisations.

Radical origins to mainstream service

The awareness of the ‘radical’ origins of the VEC as a movement of change in Irish education are recalled in these findings. These reminders position the VEC as an educational lifeline for those who were otherwise marginalized by the elitist academic education system in Ireland prior to the introduction of free post-primary education in the 1960s and indeed beyond that juncture.

*The VECs fill the gap you know where the second level schools were academically focused, so they were much more like the methodologies and stuff, they were reaching out to people who were not going to be engaged by traditional second level. So they bring that ethos with them, but pulled all the time now I think by the other education, more formal education
...but I think VECs were formed out of slightly radical and I think we still have that in part, but more and more we are drawn now to teacher qualifications, you know, the teacher registration, we have FETAC etcetera etcetera.*

(CEF 13)

The original identity of the VEC as an institution ‘reaching out’ to those who were marginalised by the ‘more academic’ education system, is recalled here. This radical ‘ethos’ is still carried ‘in part’, though the organisation is ‘pulled’ in the direction of the more formal educational provision. This appears now to shape the modern identity of the VEC. The more dominant mainstream ‘service’ model of education holds sway. The new public management language of ‘service provider’ and ‘user’ (Walsh, 2006, p. 96) has seeped into the lexicon of community education and community development.

...but also at VEC organisation level you know integrated ways of working you know and its like we are a service as opposed to we are individual programmes within the service...

(CEF 14)

Despite its new identity as educational ‘service provider’ in the formal education sector, this finding interprets in a new light the early history of the VEC recounted in chapters one and two. The observation that the VEC ‘brings along’ this historical ‘radical ethos’ in its institutional memory, as an educational body supporting adults and young people forgotten by an elitist mainstream education system, suggests possibilities for a future radical positioning. It reveals the possibility of a ‘subjected historical knowledge’ of the VEC being excavated again (Foucault, 1976a, pp. 84-86). By remembering the VEC’s radical origins, community educators may have a key role to play in recreating this radical orientation in VEC work in the future.

Every VEC is different

The theme of differences among VECs in their approach to community education arising from the statutory position of VECs as independent and autonomous to one another in each county, was a recurring finding of the focus groups, as the following contributions suggest.

I don’t know that we all do the same things. We are all encountering the same things but every VEC is so different in how community education is run...

(CEF 4)

I think well as in dealing with...like, all the different, the fact that there’s sort of thirty three VECs working like independent republics in coming with all of that kind of linked to bringing that into one organisation, I think it is kind of difficult to get a consensus and approach as well.

(CEF 14)

As observed below, there are advantages to having a variety of approaches. It has allowed CEFs ‘leeway to try out various models’ of community education.

I suppose that every single VEC is different has some advantage to it. And it arose because there wasn’t a serious department brief going ...it gave us a leeway to try out various models and that... which isn’t all negative.

(CEF 9)

This finding confirms the variety of approach to community education across the 33 VECs. This is not necessarily a good or bad development, it is simply the case. What is interesting is how ‘every VEC being different’ impacts on community education as a field of practice. This theme emerged in the last chapter under ‘rocking boats and being strategic’ as a potential obstacle to community educators articulating a unified voice. I was interested to explore the theme further by enquiring what would be the effect of having a co-ordinated national approach as envisaged in the White Paper (2000, pp. 185-192).

RESEARCHER: They are all different and there was that sense that every VEC, it depends on what VEC you are in. Would having a National Adult Learning Council, would that have made a difference? in terms of community education would it have meant there would be more coherence between all VECs around something in community education?

CEF 5: I think it just would have been another quango. I don't think it would have created any coherence. I think as you said VECs very often are independent republics and you can have all the national strategy and all the national purpose you like. The White Paper is there...still VECs operate it and read it very differently between themselves so in fact the local need is usually the solution that's trotted out for it, 'according to local need'.

CEF 5's view is significant in revealing the local nature of the VEC being more important than affiliation to a national movement. I would argue that the VEC is a local institution. In a New Zealand context Brooking (2003) illustrates how ‘local logics’ (p. 4) features in the selection practices of boards of trustees in regard to appointment of principals in primary schools. He defines local logics in terms of a ‘comfortable fit’ (p. 4) between applicants and the values of the institution and the community of which it forms part. Being a locally-based institution, with one in each county, I argue that the VEC in Ireland operates from a local logics perspective as well.

As the participant expresses, ‘you can have all the national strategy you like’, but what counts for the VEC is ‘the local need’ which takes precedence and is ‘usually the solution that's trotted out’ where a VEC applies policy in a locally tailored way. In keeping with this local orientation, CEF 5 viewed the failure to implement the local structure, the LALB as more significant for community education, than the failure to implement the national structure, NALC.

Oh the disappointment, goes back to that legislation and the adult learning boards, and the fact that, I think there was an opportunity there to bring that partnership approach to local, I suppose, counties and local areas, where there were possibilities if it had been done properly that local communities could have become involved in the structure, looking at their own education along the lines of the community and voluntary forum and the county development boards.

(CEF 5)

Again the local arrangements are significant and communities have more ‘possibilities’ to get ‘involved’. The existing structures which are based in the ‘county’ are viewed as models. CEF 5’s view that the National Adult Learning Council would probably have no great bearing on VECs, reveals the VEC’s self-understanding as predominantly a local organisation addressing local need. This is an important finding in that it gives some insight into the ‘local logics’ which define the VEC. Rightly or wrongly, national bodies and institutions are often viewed as distant ‘quangos’ with little local relevance or real impact from the perspective of the local organisation.

On the broader point of these findings concerning the degree to which every VEC is different, there are also signs that this is changing and there is less variation across VECs in community education work. This is no doubt linked to the networking which is taking place at regional and national level through the Community Education Facilitators Association, which will be discussed in later findings.

Eight years ago, when we when community education facilitators group started, I think the VECs were a lot different then and they are becoming more similar now. You know the variation is a bit less now.

(CEF 10)

Schools culture and community education culture in the VEC

Given the range of educational provision under the remit of VECs from post-primary to further education at local level, it is no surprise that the whole spectrum of educational philosophies and methodologies exist side by side within VECs. A schools culture and a community education culture may exist separately, collide, or collaborate together. Without inter-sectoral dialogue, collisions may occur around territorial and other themes. The focus group extracts below relate some of this impact on community education.

CEF 3: the divide between post-primary education and adult education and where they kinda collide and they do. I remember one stage I was delivering a course for a

community group and somebody took it up with me at some stage that the school wasn't happy because I was supposedly taking numbers from their nighttime classes.

...My personal belief is ...let's say the Principals are still very much chiefs in their own kingdom and pretty much can do what they like and you know adult education tries to work around that, but that's just my experience.

CEF 9: I think the main focus of the administrative VEC is schools. And structures are what suit schools, they are rarely set up to suit adult education. We manage it as best we can.

VECs are not homogenous organisations. In chapter one the educational sociological profile of the VEC suggested at least two educational approaches can be traced, the formal second level approach and the informal adult and community education approach. Uniquely, VECs are microcosms at local level of these partitionings between primary, post-primary and further education at the national departmental level. The finding above suggests that the dominant educational paradigm governing the VECs is the one associated with formal second level education, the school. Acknowledging that this finding may be contested, for now, it is examined in relation to its impact on the VECs' institutional engagement with community education.

As described in chapters one and two, the VEC is a complex educational site. The dominance of a formal education paradigm or school culture in the VEC may be due to the perception that school is viewed as a serious business, after all the life chances of young people are bound up with terminal examinations. The historical narrative of the VEC, as a provider of 'compensatory education' (Connell, 1993, pp. 21-23) for those unable to access the elitist formal education system, did offer an alternative to this privileged system. However, I would argue that the VEC offered 'compensation' rather than 'resistance' to the structures which maintained this educational privilege. Whilst this compensatory role was very important, I argue that the VECs became more conformist within an unequal education system, having made gains for its own student body, for example, gaining approval to offer the Leaving Certificate (Byrne, 1980, p. 53).

Whilst the VEC schools became the main provider of education to the less privileged in society, ironically in the process, VECs became local elites, with members of the local government authority holding the bulk of seats on the committee. The VEC is supported by

a resource-stretched administrative staff, and managed by a ‘corps’ (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 180) of educational officerships, headed by a chief executive officer (CEO) usually male and usually a former school principal. The anecdotal evidence suggests that the leadership of the VEC up to the present has been largely drawn from the ranks of teachers in VEC schools in the second level system, though this trend is changing.

In the absence of detailed research on the profile of VEC post-holders at senior management level, the table below indicates the gender breakdown for CEOs in the VEC, compared to adult and community education personnel, AEOs and CEFs in 2011.

Posts	Total	Male	Female	Vacant Posts
CEOs	33*	19 (58%)	14 (42%)	0
AEOs	49	13 (27%)	27 (55%)	9 (18%)
CEFs	37	4 (11%)	31 (84%)	2 (5%)

* 10 of the 33 CEO positions are Acting positions, 4 of which are held by males and 6 held by females. (Chief Executive and Executive Officers Association, on-line; Adult Education Officers Association, on-line & Community Education Facilitators Association, on-line, 2011)

Consistent with the pattern in other sectors of the education system, the gender breakdown of CEOs in VECs reflects ‘the general dominance of men in senior management’ (Grummel et al., 2009, p. 331). The dynamics of a predominantly male senior management used to a school-control ethos interacting with a predominantly female community education service working from an empowerment ethos, explains some of the lack of understanding of community education at senior management level in the VEC referred to in earlier findings. Space does not allow to explore the gender dynamics in this context, but it does warrant further analysis.

CEF 5 suggests a shift occurring in adult and community education from a school-teacher approach to a community-education approach.

I think one of the big changes in the VEC has happened maybe in the last seven years and I think a lot of the AEOs who were appointed in the 70s have retired. For years it was the same person doing the AEO’s post, they were a homogenous group. They had a very set way of doing things, a lot of them had been teachers and they drifted into this role.

(CEF 5)

And I think the current crop of AEOs have come from far more interesting backgrounds than the first set of AEOs in that a lot of them have been VTOS coordinators, some of them have been CEFs some have been ALOs, whereas before traditionally they were teachers who got this job and that was their focus.

(CEF 5)

However, Bane (2003) reflects a different impression, describing a vibrant project in the early days as an Adult Education Organiser. He faced similar resistance to what CEF 3 described above:

At times it was not pleasant to observe and be powerless as managers and principals and people of my own profession felt free to present as abrupt and rude and disrespectful. Of course, we were intruders, of course we did not matter.

(Bane, 2003, p. 52)

However, the broad point which CEF 5 makes is valid, as adult and community education staff of VECs are drawn more and more from a community development / community arts background as opposed to a school teaching background.

Bourdieu's analysis of the 'educational institution' and the role it plays in 'the reproduction of cultural capital' (1996, p. 5) shines some light on the 'school culture' dominant in VECs as suggested in the above findings. Whilst Bourdieu was concerned with schools, a dominant aspect of VEC work, the analysis also has relevance to adult and community education. Bourdieu compares the elite educational institution to an 'immense cognitive machine, operating classifications that, although apparently completely neutral, reproduce pre-existing social classifications' (1996, p. 52). The evidence from annual feeder school and third level access surveys (Flynn, 2008c; Fitzpatrick et al., 2005; Clancy 2001) confirms that VEC schools are at a greater disadvantage to elite schools in Ireland in terms of academic attainment. However, there appears little oppositional clamour from VECs to end this inequality, at least publicly. The radical oppositional origins of the VEC are somewhat silenced here. That said, VECs have advocated their own model as a local education authority which would go a long way to ending this inequality. The Irish Vocational Education Association, the umbrella organisation of VECs in Ireland, similarly

appears silent in its public statements²⁴ on this front. However, the IVEA does advocate at the political level for recognition of the needs of disadvantaged communities within their remit (IVEA, 2009) and has collaborated in planning with the Equality Authority (IVEA & Equality Authority, 2007). These developments attest to its role in challenging educational inequality.

What relevance do schools in the VEC have for community education in the VEC? The answer to this question lies in the fact that schools are a significant part of the community and are therefore relevant for community education. Put simply, parents may participate in VEC community education in the evening whilst their children attend the VEC school during the day. The Green Paper (DES, 2008) viewed community education as a model with potential 'to influence mainstream practice, particularly in reaching and engaging with those who are most excluded.' (p. 88). A community is not compartmentalised in the way institutions are constructed, therefore a co-ordinated approach to the community is required across sectors in the VEC. It calls for a shared analysis and common ground to both name and challenge educational inequality in whichever sites it occurs, classrooms or community centres.

Baker and others see a vital a role for 'social institutions', particularly the 'education system' in advancing equality:

The institutions of contemporary welfare states are not directed towards full equality, but do aspire to certain limited egalitarian objectives... How these institutions can be reformed to achieve these limited goals more effectively is a perfectly legitimate question for contemporary egalitarians.

(Baker et al., 2004, p.17)

The findings here concerning a school ethos versus a community education ethos problematise the compartmentalising of services in the educational institution. I would argue it results in an unintegrated analysis and disjointed provision of education in the community. Whether the VEC reproduces or disrupts the reproductive patterns of

²⁴ A brief survey of press releases issued by the IVEA over the period 2009-2010 show the major themes to be concerned with positioning of the VEC as a model for school patronage at primary level (meaning a further expansion of the VEC's role and remit), opposition and 'dismay' at the proposed reconfiguration / amalgamation of 33 VECs to form 16 new bodies. The latter focus is justified, in that a 'county-based' locally accountable structure will be lost, at the expense of saving costs of salaries at the higher executive level, the CEO grades of the VECs. (http://www.ivea.ie/news/press_releases.shtml)

inequality described by Bourdieu, is answered to some extent by these findings. Compensatory education in VEC schools does go some way toward disrupting the unequal patterns of educational reproduction, but a greater coalition with community education and its empowerment ethos could significantly disrupt this inequality.

From 'competing territories' to 'common ground'

'Competing territory' and 'minding one's own corner' were themes which emerged in all the focus groups with community education facilitators. Whilst these generative themes share some of the thematics of struggle for CEFs, they are, however, more relevant in the context of the structural and VEC institutional focus of this chapter.

Territorial issues can emerge as a challenge within the VEC among different programmes. This phenomenon may be exacerbated with the Department of Education and Skills' emphasis on returns reporting participant numbers and progression rates. Therefore in stringent economic times, when budgets are under pressure, programmes may seek to maximise the number of participants, to satisfy value for money evaluations by departmental budget managers. This in turn drives competition on the ground for the same participants from the same communities.

I think there's a certain amount within the VEC structure where there's territory as well, you might say you know we need to do something in that community and we're going out there, we're working there. But yet you have, maybe, colleagues in Literacy for example (doing the same) you know whereas, ... 'hold on that's ours, what are you doin in there?' I mean there's more than enough people out there for us to deal with, but yet there's an awful lot of competition.

(CEF 1)

we would have very clear delineation where if that's what a group is looking for we would refer them to Back to Education (BTEI).

(CEF 1)

At the same time, the boundaries between different programmes are respected in VECs. In the current climate the issue isn't the delineation which is very clear between programmes but rather, the tendency to either duplicate provision or to work on the base of groundwork by other programmes. It is argued by CEF 1 above, that there are many who need to be reached in different areas, rather than concentrating all resources in one area.

‘Competing territories’ and ‘minding one’s own corner’ are not only sites of struggle within the VEC, they are a feature of the local and community development sector also, moreso at an inter-agency level. This is borne out in the findings from one of the CEF focus groups where working in partnership ‘with other agencies’ was identified as a challenge with which CEFs struggle.

I have interagency work and working with partnerships. I find that quite challenging. I mean there’s hidden agendas both within the VEC and with other agencies as well and, I suppose people say its the best way of working but it’s nearly the most difficult way of working I find inter-agency work very...a challenge.
(CEF 10)

I was a great believer in partnership but I have to say in the last couple of months I’m doubting the whole you know like notion of it really, because, it can be very edifying but a lot of agencies are becoming...I think because of the current climate they’re all looking inward and they’ve all become very territorial.
(CEF 2)

Again, the phrases ‘looking inward’ and becoming ‘very territorial’ and ‘minding themselves’ in the ‘current climate’ of scarce resources, portray a somewhat gloomy picture of various statutory and voluntary agencies in partnership arrangements. Watt articulates a community development view of partnership:

Partnership structures should reflect the underlying principles of partnership, i.e. a shared agenda and an equality between partners and a shared commitment to address the underlying causes of social exclusion, including poverty and discrimination.

(Watt, 1996, p. 11)

As stated in earlier sections of the thesis (chapter four), the model of partnership in Ireland is a ‘corporatist’, imposed arrangement (Geoghegan & Powell, 2004, pp. 227-232) which is somewhat at odds to the vision expressed by Watt. These findings suggest that partnership is a very different concept to solidarity. Solidarity suggests a more voluntarist coming together of agents with common values and interests.

Inter-agency work, within which the VEC is a local partner, can be a site of struggle or a site of solidarity for finding common ground. Bourdieu’s concept of the ‘field of power’ is a useful tool for explaining power dynamics in such sites.

The field of power is a field of forces structurally determined by the state of the relations of power among forms of power, or different forms of capital. It is also, and inseparably, a field of power struggles among the holders of different forms of

power, a gaming space in which those agents and institutions possessing enough specific capital (economic or cultural capital in particular) to be able to occupy the dominant positions within their respective fields.

(Bourdieu, 1996, p. 264)

At local county level in Ireland, the VEC is usually the educational body called upon to sit on various partnership fora²⁵. Whilst this provides an excellent opportunity for educators to engage with other actors on the local stage and gain exposure to other philosophies and ways of working, the commitment also involves challenge as partners 'look inward' and 'become territorial'. It could be argued that the VEC has gained experience and competence in understanding the local statutory and community sectors moreso than other educational actors through this involvement which brings educators beyond the classroom.

These collectives are spaces of possibility for common ground. To find these spaces, means being aware of 'competing territories' and 'minding our own corner' as themes, but not being controlled by them. Fear can exacerbate the culture of 'silencing' by quelling the possibility of 'standing up and fighting' in solidarity with other programmes.

If we were to go in the morning and who our allies would be to fight our corner as well, I think there would be some people who would say, great there's more money coming our way. I don't know that if we were to go in the morning that they would stand up and fight, you know the way some people or some organisations rally around if something is going to be lost in an area...In our VEC I don't know if our BTEI or Literacy Co-ordinator would ?

(CEF 4)

Lest we be overwhelmed by the torrent of gloom accompanying these particular findings, in raising this question, CEF 4 is expressing an appeal to solidarity, a value closely associated with community education. This is perhaps the clue to finding the common ground to which CEF 14 refers below. The common ground may generate solidarity as allies 'support our own' and unite against a 'common enemy', the more distant department or national government.

I know the response of the CDPs has been to come together and see ...and it has done a lot in terms of trying to move away up from 'minding their own patch' which is...It's more...the common enemy is up there now (State /Government / Department).

²⁵ These fora include, the County Development Board, the Social Inclusion Committee, the Local Drugs Task Force, the Local Area Based 'Local and Community Development Company', formerly known as Partnership Companies.

Solidarity is the binding force in the face of denial of recognition, as Honneth has outlined. This solidarity was also expressed in the context of the 'fight' against oppression by Freire.

Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity: it is a radical posture...true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality...

(Freire, 1970, p.31)

Practicing solidarity and finding common ground can lead to a resistant, and at times, a confrontational stance toward the established order. The next set of findings examine the space for criticality in the VEC.

Having space to be critical

The work of community education facilitators will naturally bring them into contact with local issues. These are the generative themes of the community and may have local and indeed national political content. I refer here to politics in the broad sense, not the narrower party political sense. I was interested in knowing what challenges such engagement might present for the CEF. I posed this as a question, after the 'pictures of struggle' codification used earlier in this focus group.

RESEARCHER: Would there be restrictions on your role in relation to getting involved maybe in protest or in struggle ?

CEF 3: I know in my previous role it would have been said to me, you're better off not to be seen to have any strong political affiliation...which I was kind of surprised, because I subsequently learned of others who were quite open about their political affiliation and stuff like that and you know, so I suppose different individuals have different opinions.

The meaning of political interpreted from these responses reflects the notion of politics in the broader sense. Whilst 'affiliation' may suggest a party political meaning, the impression from the responses from both CEFs in this dialogue, is that for community educators, political engagement means solidarity with a particular stance by a group on a local relevant issue or policy platform. The response however, from the VEC management perspective is sometimes framed in the narrower context of 'party political' implications of the actions in which the organisation is involved through its staff.

The politicised nature of the VEC, having elected representatives on the committee, can impact on community educators' involvement in specific issues on occasion. As suggested in the finding below, when 'interference' does occur, it is done so, using a clientelist approach typical of local politics in Ireland. The elected representative voices concerns to the senior management, who convey the concern to their staff. However, as confirmed by the participant here, these occasions 'in general' are rare.

CEF 9: the VEC Board having politicians on it would have a history of people being involved in politics, but its interesting, we are interfered with, for example, in response to some of the amalgamations of the community groups in our area our network have decided that they would lobby Department of the Taoiseach and Pobail and Department of Finance and I as the facilitator of the network volunteered to write on behalf of the network and I actually got asked by senior management not to send the letter a while, now somebody else had brought the letter to senior management's notice. But I hadn't realised there was a political agenda...So from that point of view I could be interfered with, but in general I'd say No.

O'Reilly, also an 'insider researcher' critically analysed the VECs in the 1980s, and referred to this clientelist political culture.

Committee members who are aspirant politicians or aides to senior politicians may also see some role for the VEC in their own career developments: a 'honeypot' in which they have a management role is important in a clientelist political culture.

(O'Reilly, 1989, p. 167)

If 'interference' by CEOs / senior management in the activity of community educators is rare, the issue of 'amalgamation' which concerned CEF 9 is less rare and has been a relevant theme for community development groups nationally, over the past number of years. This issue would have brought community development workers and community educators into oppositional resistance to Government policy. Community educators working in a statutory body such as the VEC funded by the state, have to negotiate their stance, which involves weighing up a number of factors, not least one's employment and career prospects.

CEF 3: The reality is if you choose to get involved in a particular initiative, it's a question of what are you going to put first, is it your own personal or is it the overriding political protest that you want to engage in, because ultimately at some stage if you do want to progress up you know, the ladder, you may want, you may rely on these very same individuals (political reps on the VEC) at an interview panel later on so...there is actually some friction here.

(CEF 3)

In the last chapter, when considering the theme of ‘rocking boats and being strategic’, one community educator suggested that being ‘part of the establishment’ neutralised any threat to the establishment. This is a common theme for ‘insider’ educators and ‘activist educators’ (Anderson & Marshall, 2009), in the same way as it is for ‘whistleblowers’ in other contexts.

Shor has observed that ‘there are authorities policing the teacher’ (1987, p. 59). In the context of resistance on the college campus to the issue of racism in the early 1970s, Shor recalls the ‘firing of some radical teachers’ (p. 58-59). In the context of the VECs in Ireland, the findings here suggest reprimands are infrequent and relate to the clientelist local political dimension. However, as Shor suggests ‘the teacher will feel the pressure of official response, some form of reaction or repression, which is a sign that the limits have been stepped over at this moment,’ (p. 59).

The final dialogue concerning space to be critical affirms that such space exists. One interesting aspect of CEF 14’s narrative, is that the theme of the struggle is the same or similar to that of CEF 9, the campaign of resistance to cuts/amalgamations to community development projects. However, the responses of the VECs in each case are more nuanced.

RESEARCHER: But in your role in the VEC is it a difficult thing is it to be involved?

CEF 14: I’m not too sure I understand because I can think, within the last two years, when there were cuts for say the CDPs and that like, there would have been, there was the two marches here, but like, a number of the people from the VEC would have participated and a blind eye would have been turned to their involvement in it you know.

RESEARCHER There’s space...

CEF 14 There’s space yea, and it wouldn’t be just kind of VEC, that was from the area. There’d be a strong sense of you know we will support our own regardless.

Having this space to be critical is important in a time when community educators have witnessed the silencing of critical voices by the state, through funding cuts, cohesion, and incorporation into larger entities. The findings here emphasise again the magnetic effect of

the 'local' dimension as the impetus for protest and struggle in Ireland, 'support our own'. This is an important learning point for activism in Ireland. The popular phrase 'all politics is local' comes to mind here, and should give some strategic direction for the project of community education. It must begin by localising the abstracted injustices, the 'isms' of racism, sexism, inequality and injustice, finding these generative themes which are surely present in every local place.

Generative Themes of Opportunity

Missed opportunity – structures not implemented 'gone belly up'

When asked about significant disappointments over the last ten years, the majority of focus group participants identified the non-implementation of structures which were promised in the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000). These included Local Adult Learning Boards (p. 192), the National Adult Learning Council²⁶ (p. 185), the Community Education Technical Support Unit (p. 115). Another commitment which was not delivered concerned the recommended working group to progress formal recognition of qualifications for adult education practitioners (p. 151), referred to earlier in the context of practitioner recognition.

...the new structures coming in the new local education boards and the National Adult Learning Council...and the VEC Adult Education Boards were going to turn into this much more participative process...and all of that is just gone belly up...
(CEN 7)

In terms of the disappointment, as I said looked outside, and I suppose in terms of the White Paper I really think it was a missed opportunity that the National Adult Learning Council and the Local Adult Learning Boards weren't put in place at a time when there was an opportunity to do that and it's just died in the water. And I think the knock on effect of it has been that while, you know VECs were doing very good work, there's something about it needing a newer structure, a different way of thinking...

(CEF 14)

A range of expressions stand out in the terrain of the theme of missed opportunities, including phrases such as 'lost opportunity', 'steam running out', 'dying in the water', 'gone belly up', reflecting disappointment, but not loss of hope, which emerges later. This

²⁶ As stated earlier, the NALC was temporarily set up but later disbanded in Budget 2009. (Department of Finance, 2009b; Murtagh, 2009, p. 218).

finding confirms a pattern of non-implementation in the adult education policy making process to which Murtagh (2009) refers:

During the previous 30 years, many proposals for developing this domain of adult education had been made, but the more significant ones were not implemented.
(Murtagh, 2009, p. 107)

Murtagh identifies the policy options which were implemented in adult education over the years, including the appointment of adult education organisers in 1979. However, he states, 'the national adult education body, recommended in two previous reports on adult education and in the White Paper on Education (DES, 1995, 81) was not established' (Murtagh, 2009, p. 108). In 1984, the so-called 'ad-hoc adult education sub-committees' were established in each local VEC on a non-statutory basis, rendering them practically powerless. Again, the local takes precedence over the national in this respect. Murtagh confirms, 'the debate on the institutional architecture' for adult education in the policy process surrounding the Green and White Papers, 'concentrated more on local than national structures' (2009, p. 218). Murtagh traces the non-implementation of adult and community education policy to a pattern of 'poor' policy making and 'failure' on the part of the Department of Education and Skills to drive the process (p. 211).

I would posit that the pattern of implementation and non-implementation of key aspects of adult and community education policy represents a 'cherry-picking' of the White Paper, motivated by a discourse of control and power. In this respect, whilst I build on Murtagh's account, I go further in positing these discourses at play here. It would be speculative to pinpoint the locus of control, yet the pattern suggests that the measures which were implemented were those with which the Department and VECs were comfortable, and those which were not implemented would have caused discomfort to existing power flows within and between the Department and VECs. The implemented measures represented 'business as usual'. The VEC retains direct control over implemented measures of the White Paper e.g. employment of CEFs (and AEOs in the past), whereas VECs would have less control over the proposed national and local structures, if they were autonomous at local level. This position would seem to be supported by the earlier finding reflecting the greater importance of the 'local' relative to the 'national' in the VEC's institutional understanding. This argument could also be said to mirror the workings of local clientelist

politics, to some extent. Some politicians may back a policy nationally and undermine it locally usually at the behest of local power elites. VECs are powerful local mediators in education (Drudy & Lynch, 1993).

By virtue of their composition, the vocational education committees are a highly politicised and powerful mediating force in second-level education....The VECs are largely controlled by representatives of local authorities.

(Drudy & Lynch, 1993, p. 125)

Alternatively, cherry-picking may be interpreted positively. Aspects of the White Paper which have been implemented have proven positive on the ground. The appointment of CEFs represents such a positive development (Kavanagh, 2006; AONTAS, 2011, p. 103) and may actually pose a greater threat to the comfort of local political elites in the long run.

What might have been, if the opportunities had been taken, point to the possibility reflected in focus group expressions such as 'a more participative process', 'a national place and voice for community education', 'visibility' and 'a different way of thinking'. These reflect the hopes of community educators, the final generative theme in this study.



This is magic community education dust! It represents community education being a catalyst for other things, asking uncomfortable questions in the VEC and other organisations and I suppose trying to find leverage in the system, a bit like what you were saying, being on the edge, finding where are the gaps so that you can make things happen. I'm being creative, I suppose I'm trying to see new possibilities for change.

(CEF 12)

New opportunity for collective voice – cefa 'there is a forum'

Again, on the potential of the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA) as a collective voice, the CEFs are aware that there will be challenges to achieving this, but the need for such a collective voice gains support. This first comment below identifies the challenge, the stages which will have to be gone through, the need to identify who will take responsibility to drive it, and by implication the sharing or rotation of these roles.

I suppose, I would find that we had a lot of energy in the beginning you know, setting up the organisation. Now I suppose there's a changeover within the personnel and new CEFs themselves who are bringing new ideas and new energy to it... We're around the country. Who can drive it? Who can move it on? I think there are stages of growth of an organisation. I think the fact that there are thirty three VECs working like independent republics...bringing that into one organisation... I think it is kind of difficult to get a consensus...

(CEF 14)

The crucial need for a unified voice is evident in these findings. CEFA will need 'energy' and 'drive' to counter possible budget changes in the future.

But I would feel it's important in dealing with the Department that we have some sort of a unified voice especially with Community Education, BTEI and Literacy being amalgamated which is definitely on the cards. And I think it's really crucial that we want to hold in that amalgamation, because we are the smallest strand of the budget.

(CEF 9)

Community educators are exercised more often about activating voice among participants and learners, than their own collective practitioner voice in institutional fora and in powerful corners of the field of power. The literature of liberatory pedagogy in texts of Freire, Shor, Giroux and some feminist pedagogical texts such as Belenky and the Women's Ways of Knowing collaborative, focus the practice on groups experiencing oppression 'gaining a voice' (Belenky, 1997, p. 56). Describing the Listening Partners Project, Belenky emphasises 'creating a safe space' where participants could 'risk expressing themselves' (p. 81), and advocates 'political as well as personal responses to problems that are primarily rooted in social structures' (p. 96). Hope and Timmel's Training for Transformation programme proceeds along similar lines (1999, 1995). Therefore, community educators are frequently engaged in facilitating such liberatory sessions in work with their community groups.

Gaining a critical voice as a collective of community education practitioners should follow seamlessly, however, this cannot be taken for granted. Differences across VECs, the status and recognition of community education in each VEC, the diverse meaning of community education, all need to be acknowledged if a safe environment based on trust is to be created in such a forum.

In the following dialogue, community education facilitators have gained a degree of recognition and representation on the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA), the umbrella body which articulates policy positions on behalf of the VEC sector. The challenge now for CEFs is how to express 'what it is' community educators stand for and what is needed for community education to thrive. The dialogue teases this out and voices a concern that community education does not become 'swallowed up' by more influential voices in an efficiency exercise driven from the top (Department of Education).

CEF 13 Up to recently, sure from the IVEA's point of view we didn't exist at all. Now they need all of us in there for whatever reason... So, there is a forum...

CEF 12 Yea, but a little bit of me is concerned that BTEI, which is about up-skilling and Community Education are getting mangled into the same space and maybe that's why we're there and I don't think that's such a good thing.

CEF 13 Well I think at least they know we exist now, and then we have to say what it is...

CEF 12 From that point of view, we need to get organised, because otherwise we will get swallowed up.

This dialogue indicates the value of having a forum such as CEFA as a space for community educators to tease out the strategy and tactics of engagement with influential bodies. Already the value and gains of having a 'regional' and 'national' network as CEF 7 and CEF 3 claim here, are useful and supportive at a very practical level.

I think the regional networks and our meetings and that you know inform each other and we pick each other's brains and we see what different projects are being done. We are more clear when we go back to our VECs what we are doing. We are clear that our VECs know about it as well.

(CEF 7)

I actually felt the formation of the Community Education Facilitators Association ...I feel the fact that its set up is important because I think the association is going to play a critical role in the future.

(CEF 3)

The 'critical role' of the Community Education Facilitators Association will grow in importance in the coming years. Greater awareness of difference across VECs may actually lessen variation as CEFA can engender a greater 'coming together' to 'promote' and gain recognition for an empowering and emancipating community education.

I remember when we had our national training at the beginning, there was that thing of each VEC is different, we talked about needing to come together and have a kind of common philosophy, and I suppose that kind of goes back to the idea of the potential of what CEFA could do in terms of promoting, you know, if we are all saying we should be working out of the second definition, then somehow communicating that to other people around rather than just to ourselves...

(CEF 12)

The message from the focus groups involving the community education facilitators endorses the potential value of the Community Education Facilitators Association not only as a support to CEFs otherwise isolated as practitioners in a large organisation, but also as a

critically reflective voice for community education. The forum is a space for sharing the stories of practice, the joys and challenges of the work. It is a space for community education facilitators to come together and ‘have this conversation’ as this research has shown. It is also a space for the serious work of articulating voice, expressing policy positions generated from the grassroots practice. It is ultimately a space for building solidarity ‘a semantic bridge’ between practitioners, who are isolated not just geographically, but moreso pedagogically, ‘a bridge that is sturdy enough to enable the development of collective identity’ (Honneth 1995, p. 163). The potential of this collective identity to articulate a strong voice in the struggle for recognition of community education is apparent in these findings.

Conclusion

The reflections of community educators on the role of the VEC in this chapter together with theoretical and discursive analysis in earlier chapters aims to address a research gap regarding the public education role of the VEC in Ireland.

The awareness of the radical origins of the VEC and the fact that the VEC retains a learner base of young people and adults from communities affected by poverty and disadvantage offers the possibility for the institution to be a radical voice for equality in education. The predominant self-understanding of the VEC as a local organisation and a distancing and distrust of national educational authority has been both negative and positive for advancing community education. CEFs have pointed to the variety of practice across VECs, making it difficult to articulate a unified voice for community education. On the other hand, local manifestations of opposition to centralised decisions on issues such as homogenisation and cohesion of distinct programmes provide critical space for community educators to engage in political struggle. These findings also examine the veracity of a schools culture and community education culture in VECs. Findings suggest that they both exist and point to the fruitful possibilities for a coalition between both in the future. Finally, community educators speak about the vital need for sharing of experiences, having space to be critical and articulating a collective voice. Having a forum such as CEFA has potential to generate the solidarity which will sustain community educators in their future struggles

CHAPTER 7 COMMUNITY EDUCATION: THEORISING A CRITICAL PRACTICE, ROLE AND INSTITUTIONAL SPACE

In setting out on this research journey, I relied on two touchstones, what I am passionate about in education and what will sustain me in the work. Putting my passion for community education to work in the settings where I choose to practice is a goal which sustains me. This thesis sought to engage with fellow practitioners in the field of community education, to tune into the generative themes in the social world of community educators. A key motivation for this study is my own experience as a community educator. I see the role of community educator as fulfilling a clear meaning and purpose within a wider struggle for liberation and social justice. It is in the work with participants and students that I gain inspiration and energy, however, it is systems, institutions, and co-workers who may not share my preferred epistemology with whom I collide. I was interested in knowing if other practitioners had similar experiences, how they make meaning of their work, handled struggle in their role and negotiated effective space in their institution.

In this concluding chapter, I draw on the findings emerging from this research and the relevant themes from the literature to consider five contributions which I believe this thesis makes to the field of community education. Firstly, I consider its contribution to theorising community education as opposed to constructing a theory of community education. Secondly, I identify how the research methodology I have chosen proves particularly appropriate and useful in tuning into and excavating the generative themes of community education and community educators. Thirdly, the thesis elicits how community educators make meaning of their practice, how competing ideology is evident in the discourses surrounding its meaning and how empowerment is central to that meaning, yet elusive both as a concept and as a shared understanding across the sector. Fourthly, I set out themes of the struggle for recognition of community education emerging in this thesis, through the role reflections of community educators. Fifthly, the thesis produces findings which support the argument for community education occupying a critical space in the institution, the VEC and across the education field.

This thesis contributes to an understanding of community education from the perspective of community educators. It introduces a unique research strategy combining Freirean dialogue

on generative themes with constructivist grounded theory. This thesis has investigated community education and calls for clarity on its meaning and purpose, recognition of its educators and their role and critical space in its institution.

Theorising Community Education: Organic Intellectuals to Critical Educators

I agree with Charmaz who prefers ‘theorising, not theory’ (2006, p. 128). Charmaz chooses theorising to capture the essence of her research work. Theorising is a ‘practice’ which involves ‘engaging the world and of constructing abstract understandings about and within it’ (2006, p. 128). I came to this study with the baggage of one relatively well versed in critical theory and liberatory pedagogy. A rich resource, it has served me well as a framework for situating my practice within a bigger picture. All too aware of critical pedagogy’s grand claims to transforming the world, this research process has afforded me the opportunity to be critically reflexive, to take a fresh look with a critical lens at critical theory and pedagogy once again.

The modern community educator no longer arrives on the scene fired up with their copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Theory contained in the text of a book can inspire reflection on one’s experience, and action for better futures, yet how useful is it in practice? Critical theory may fail to comprehend the subtleties of diverse oppressions (Young, 1990), the particularities of complex issues with which communities struggle. This is not to discard theory as useless, but to sound a cautionary note as Thomas does, to guard against the ‘allure of theory’ (1997, p. 75). In asking ‘what’s the use of theory?’, Thomas questions the value of formulating theory per se, suggesting that there is a ‘hegemony of theory’ which is ‘far from being emancipatory’ and is rather an ‘instrument for reinforcing an existing set of practices and methods in education’ (p. 76).

there is the danger that in compacting, trimming, and generally forcing the worlds with which we work into theoretical molds we distort and misperceive those worlds.
(Thomas, 1997, p. 92)

In choosing a constructivist grounded theory approach to this research, I was forced to be open to emerging themes in the data generated through engagement with community educators. Like Foucault’s concept of discourse, grounded theory offers flexibility, a tool

for analysis of the social world rather than a theory imposed on social reality. For example, grounded theory enabled me to theorise from initial and focused codes such as ‘every VEC is different’, ‘there’s only one of us’ to ‘having space to be critical’. These themes located in the ‘vocabular universe’ (Freire, 1969, p. 49) of the research participants generated a theorised community education grounded in the world of its workers.

Therefore, this thesis presents a theorised community education as opposed to a theory of community education. The epistemological base of critical theory and critical pedagogy served as a springboard for the research, shaped and critiqued by feminist theory. No one theory can explain the diverse social world of community education. I have also learned from this research, and from mentors in the past, that whilst I carry a repertoire of formal academic theory to the work, there are many committed practitioners who act out of these same value sets and theoretical frameworks, not having studied them in any formal way. These are perhaps the unsung heroes, the real inventors of theory to whom Naughton attributes ‘craft knowledge’ (1981, in Thomas, 1997, p. 94). As history shows, ‘technologies flourished long before theories’ (Thomas, p. 94), so it is with community education, practice precedes theory.

Having sounded a note of caution on the construction of a theory of community education per se, I now wish to affirm the significant learning from the process of theorising with which I have engaged these past three years. This research has attempted to make meaningful and significant the role and practice of community educators in the modern era.

Tracing this role across historical periods and varying contexts in this research suggests some common features of engagement and motivation for the workers who took up these roles, variously described as organic intellectuals, radicals and border crossers, outreach instructors and boundary workers. There are common threads of engagement with those on the margins, at a grassroots community level. There is evidence of a shared worldview, a commitment to the struggle for social justice, liberation and equality. Gramsci, who invested much in a new class of ‘organic intellectuals’ (1971, p. 142) to advance the cause of the working class, described their role as involving ‘active participation in practical life’ (p. 141), ‘constructor, organiser, permanent persuader’ (p. 142). Following an era of popular radical struggles in the 1960s, many adult educators mourned the isolation of those involved in struggle in the 1980s (Giroux, 1992, p. 5; Shor, 1987, p. 54). It seemed

oppositional politics, resistance and critical pedagogy had lost its way as campuses and communities fell silent. However, Giroux also referred to a 'fight back' and 'a new generation of cultural workers' (1992, p. 5). Like Gramsci, Giroux calls for 'educators and cultural workers to become border crossers engaged in an effort to create alternative public spheres' (1992, pp. 21-22). Critical educators have a crucial role to provide a 'counter-discourse' to dominant ideologies which influence daily life (Giroux, 1992, p. 30).

The findings of this study have indeed suggested there is a new generation of organic educators. The labels describing the role of community educators historically are not clichés, they point rather to an educational role and tradition committed to authentic struggle for social justice and equality. Sadly, this transformed world has not yet been achieved and is likely to be a quest for another generation. The struggle is still communicated and conducted by conversation, debate, protest, events, mainstream media and indeed new social media. It is as relevant today as it was in other times. What this thesis has sought to do is to recognise the role of community educators as critical to this struggle.

The Merits of a Generative Grounded Theory Methodology

Adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach to this research has afforded me the opportunity to be creative in my research. As outlined in chapter three, I wished to combine the research methodology of constructivist grounded theory with Freirean liberatory pedagogy in exploring the world of community educators. In a sense I was making use of the practice of community education as a tool for researching itself. My purpose was to tune into the conversation of community educators in the setting most familiar to them, the focus group circle, a Freirean 'culture circle' (1970, p. 101). In choosing Freirean codifications to generate discussion, I was conscious of the risks in imposing meanings, sensitizing concepts in the minds of practitioners, but I was conscious too, not to arrive at focus groups with a blank canvas. I believe such codifications can act as catalysts to get to the nub of generative themes that are important and relevant to community educators. The codification is not the dialogue, but rather, the spark for generating the dialogue.

In the ordinary course of pedagogic work, codifications are drawn from listening surveys in communities, and they are used to reflect back to the communities the generative themes, the issues about which people have strong feelings in the communities. In the course of my research work, my listening began with the literature. I believe there are valid reasons for drawing on the themes reflected in the literature of community education as the basis for constructing codifications for dialogue. The discourses in the literature of community education provided the raw material from which to construct codifications for focus group dialogue with community educators. I was therefore able to use this generative grounded theory methodology for my research purposes.

As advocates of collective and participative approaches in the work, I would argue that it is appropriate if not necessary that research with community educators follow similar lines. If we advocate collective participation in our pedagogy, then we must be prepared to commit to collective research approaches as well. I felt privileged to engage with community educators in their group settings, in their regional networks, to have facilitated an opportunity to 'have this conversation' as the findings reveal. I am also convinced of the creative power of the collective approach. The research contributed in a small way to the development of a position paper by the community education facilitators in the VECs (CEFA, forthcoming, 2011). To the extent that this methodology uncovered generative themes in the social world of community educators, exploring their role and institution, it proved its worth as an innovative, creative and appropriate research tool for community education.

The Meaning of Empowerment and its Recognition

The first strand of this enquiry sought to identify what meaning community education holds for its practitioners in Ireland today. This involved a thorough analysis of the official literature in Government policy statements on community education, the Green and White Papers on Adult Education. These texts acknowledge the historical development of community education in Ireland, particularly through community based women's groups, and the potential of community education to engage adults experiencing marginalisation and exclusion in Ireland. Some differences of emphases were identified between both documents, the most telling being the acknowledgement of two definitions of the concept

of community education in the White Paper, the definitive policy statement on community education. The ‘more ideological’ empowerment definition was presented alongside the more general outreach, community-based, ‘adult learning’ definition, which I call the ‘economic purpose’ or ‘skills-focused’ definition of community education.

The findings which emerged affirm community education practitioners’ strong preference for an empowerment understanding of their practice. However, there was a wide variation in the understanding of empowerment from personal empowerment to capacity building to radical critical empowerment. There is a strong desire to work from an empowerment disposition, and the findings reveal that community educators make meaning in the course of their work, in their interaction with community education participants. It is in these spaces that empowerment becomes meaningful and real. Community educators are meaning makers, constructors of community education in the engagement with groups. At the same time as later findings reveal, they crave the space to have ‘this conversation’ about meaning, essence and what is really at the core of their work.

In spite of clear leanings toward an empowerment definition, it is argued in this thesis that the effect of the open-ended dual definition of community education in the White Paper, has been to dissipate the meaning of community education in practice. It has left the door open, as it were, to a proliferation of meanings. It is argued here that community education as ‘all things to all people’ renders it meaningless and undermines the empowerment potential at its core. In this research, community educators reclaim a social purpose and empowerment meaning for their practice.

The context in which the White Paper was crafted has changed substantially over the first decade of this new millennium. Ireland endured an economic boom during the celtic tiger years, only to endure an equally transforming recession in the last two years of the decade. Published in 2000, amid optimism, the White Paper shows traces of the dominant instrumental, job-driven and economic-purpose paradigm which had gained hegemony in the education field and Irish society in the intervening years. Community education has had to be ‘resilient’ as one participant said, to withstand this hegemony. Community education always seems to have to fight to justify holding onto its space. It is as though, in both good times and bad, community education is a luxury we cannot afford, unless it is doing

something to contribute to the economy. In a time of recession and mass unemployment, it is difficult to argue against the desire of a jobless community to host courses which provide people with skills ultimately leading to a job, a path out of poverty.

The social purpose of adult and community education, whilst acknowledged in official government policy is nevertheless, subordinated to meeting 'the demands of the economy', and the 'task of re-skilling and upskilling the workforce' (DES, 1998, p. 3), in an environment of 'increased competition', (DES, 2000, p. 9). Rejecting the clamour for job-driven courses and offering critical courses, such as social analysis instead, is a brave choice. Despite the clamour, and the tendency to give in, and be swept along by the current of up-skilling, community educators resist such pressure, carving out a space to maintain their empowerment role, to offer courses which empower individuals and communities.

It is argued in this research that the community education sector in Ireland needs to reclaim a radical critical empowerment. The findings suggest there is a lack of settlement in community education in Ireland regarding the meaning of empowerment. As outlined in chapter four, Inglis calls for a 'Foucaultian structuralist analysis' of power which 'helps people understand how they are limited and controlled by discourses and practices' (Honneth, 1993; Kelly, 1994 cited in Inglis, 1997, p. 4). What needs to be reclaimed, is that which has been 'subjugated' (Foucault, 1976a, p. 82), subordinated and rendered meaningless, an understanding of empowerment as emancipation, a fundamental change in systems and structures (Inglis, 1997).

A key finding of this research was the drive toward accreditation of learning identified by participants. I argued that the issue is recognition of both accredited and developmental learning. This finding also points to what knowledge counts. Foucault's concept of the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' is really useful knowledge for our purposes here. These are the 'local popular knowledges' (Foucault, 1976, in Gordon, 1980, pp. 80-82), the 'minor knowledges' (p.85) which have been rendered obsolete in the onward march of science and progress. They have been effectively crushed by the dominant discourses of our time, capitalism, economic growth, positivism, masculinist history. In chapter four, CEN 7 used the 'in vivo code' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55) 'lip service' to describe mainstream education's attitude to citizenship these days. There is greater emphasis on labour market

courses. What Foucault does is excavate these buried knowledges. In an Irish context these may include, meitheal, cooperation, sustainability, feminist histories, and many more. There are new social movements concerned with environmental sustainability and human wellbeing with which community education could make really useful alliances. These are custodians of much of the subjugated knowledge, of which critical empowerment is one. The task according to Foucault is to challenge the power of the dominant discourses.

We are concerned, rather, with the insurrection of knowledges that are opposed primarily not to the contents, methods or concepts of a science, but to the effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse within a society such as ours.

(Foucault, 1976a, p. 84)

What are the implications of a rediscovery of empowerment in the Irish context of community education? Should all community education tutors take a module on the Foucaultian conception of power? I believe, Inglis provides some direction here. He advocates a pedagogical approach which enables the ‘educator helping the oppressed to be able to see and understand how power operates in their lives’ (Inglis, 1997, p. 15). Crucially, Inglis advises us to mind our language in this process. In analysing regimes of accepted truths, discourses and practices, community educators would do well to avoid obscure mystifying language to ‘reveal the nature of power in a clear and accessible manner’ (p. 10). Rather we approach this task with co-workers and learners alike, with a degree of humility, as a genuine attempt to connect with the currents of power in everyday life. As community educators, a critical analysis of power therefore seems necessary for a more complete understanding of empowerment.

Community Educators and the Struggle for Recognition

The second strand of enquiry in this thesis examined the role of the community educator and its connectedness to liberatory struggle. As a practitioner in the field, I came to this as an ‘insider’²⁷ researcher, aware of my own investment in the theme (Brannick & Coughlan, 2007). There are I believe, different degrees and levels of ‘insider’ researcher, for example, in the course of this research, I worked in a number of community-based settings with

²⁷ I deem it appropriate to view my role as insider researcher because I worked in the VEC sector for much of the research period. By the end of the research period I was working in a third level institution.

different educational institutions. At the outset of this research I stated that I identify as a community educator. I believe this identity travels, irrespective of the community or institutional setting where one is engaged. My interest in the role of the community educator, is sparked from my own experience working in the sector and the questions it prompts. Being aware that practitioners in other sectors of education seem to have recognised and valued roles; teacher, lecturer, inspector, educational officer, co-ordinator, I argue that the role of adult and community educator merits equal value and recognition. This led me to research the role, its origins, inspirational forces, its connectedness to struggle for change, and to explore this with other practitioners in the field.

As this research shows, the role of the community educator can be traced in the literature to Gramsci's 'organic intellectuals' and Freire's 'radical' or 'problem-posing educator'. In the early work of the VECs in Ireland, the 'outreach instructors' were the early forerunners of today's community educators. What these roles share in common is a commitment to locate the educational engagement at the grassroots level. These roles were also quite new and different to the mainstream.

The findings generated in this part of the research fitted into categories of inspiration, struggle, role reflection and isolation to solidarity. The 'inherent' awareness and experience of injustice, identifying with social justice struggles, the example of mentors working in the field, were all inspirations for the contributors to this research. The spark for community educators is often experiential, the children from poor communities entering a privileged college campus, or the different worlds of the lawyer and the young offender, but these experiences can be profoundly significant as motivators, 'its something about trying to change that' (CEF 8). In my early reflections on the work, as part of this research, I realised 'struggle' was a relevant concept for me. So much of community education work appears to be bound up with it. Struggle was a sensitizing concept which I brought to the research. I wondered if it was a relevant theme for other community educators.

What emerged in this research as the most significant finding was the 'struggle for recognition' of community education. I had expected community educators to engage with struggle at the level of resistance and protest against injustice and inequality in a radical way. However, what emerged was much more complex. The 'struggle for recognition' as

described in the literature by Honneth (1995), fitted the experience of community educators reflected in the findings. In particular, the lack of understanding, the misrecognition, the relatively lower status of the pedagogy and practitioner role in community education, were experienced by community educators in subtle ways. The 'edginess' or 'uncomfortable' questioning of community education is somewhat blunted, by the diversionary focus on returns, progression and numbers, the chief concern of educational authorities. The insecurity, part-time hours worked by community education tutors reflects the comparative status of community educators to other members of the teaching profession. The assumption that secondary school teachers are qualified to teach adults, which appears to be the official position of the Department of Education and Skills, belittles the rigorous training of adult and community educators, and the pedagogies appropriate to these adults. The failure to implement the 'inter-agency working group recommended to progress the issue of formal recognition of qualifications for Adult Education practitioners' (DES, 2000, p.151), until quite recently, demonstrates the lack of recognition.

Community education is critical work and is therefore risky work. At the same time, it is highly motivating work, practitioners sense they are 'part of a buzz'. Community education is slow work, 'at the pace of the group'. It fulfils the important role of 'bringing people out of their homes'. Community education is resilient, withstanding the subtle pressures which drive the 'flavour of the month' in other sectors of education, such as 'labour-activation'. Of course these are important, but community educators in this research ask should their work be less valued, because there are fewer numbers, because they work with 'hard to reach' groups. They question why their work should be homogenised, further blurring the boundaries. In a sense, community education is being forced to join in the firefighting, the emergency effort to get everyone back to work, to come to the aid of an ailing economy that is profoundly problematic in generating the unemployment now affecting it. Community education's more critical role is to analyse a dysfunctional system, to build the resilience of communities in hard times. In many ways, community education is there to pick up the pieces. Other sectors of the education system and the VEC will be busy coping with the large numbers, a bonanza of new people to be upskilled, whilst the community educators and their groups ask the more critical questions 'why?' and 'how has it come to this?', and 'what needs to change?'. Of course, this runs the risk of being silenced, as has happened at least two critical institutions in recent times, the Combat Poverty Agency and

the Equality Authority. The choice for community educators is one of being critical or being silent.

Solidarity emerged as both a support to community educators and a potential vehicle for advancing the practice. In a positive and hopeful development the value of 'having this conversation' and the merits of community educators coming together was realised through the focus groups. The CEFA forum is a space for community educators to turn isolation into solidarity. The implications of this are important. Community educators often work in isolation as these findings reveal. There is a desire to work and act in solidarity, as the only group of practitioners talking about this in the mainstream education system. Community educators need to strategically use tactics of every available channel to argue the case for recognition, recognition recognition.

Community Education as Constructive Critical Voice in the VEC

The third and final strand of enquiry in this thesis concerns the institutional provider for community education in Ireland, the vocational education committees. Again, my interest was sparked by an 'insider' research perspective. Having worked in the VEC sector, over a six year period, I could tune into the conversation of CEFs, the issues of variations across VECs, the different programmes and emphases of different educational sectors of the VEC. I also had a particular interest in the idea of radical workers negotiating a space in a traditionally radical turned conservative institution. I also needed to remain open to having my perspectives challenged in the literature and in the engagement with community education facilitators. It is unfair to paint the culture of all VECs with the same institutional brush. My personal epistemological commitments concern my own experiences as a worker in institutions, not only VECs, and how I negotiate such sites. In my opening reflections on my research situation, I expressed how I thrive in the direct educational work with participants and students, whereas I struggle with the institutional culture. What drives my interest in this aspect of the research is how to be a better community educator in radical critical ways, and yet be fully engaged with my institution.

An interesting finding of this research concerns the radical origins of the VEC as an alternative educational movement in Ireland. This emerged in O'Reilly's study (1989) and

was matched in the contribution of one of the participants who recalled the VEC's 'slightly radical origins' (CEF 13) as a provider of education for young people and adults from more disadvantaged backgrounds, those excluded by the mainstream elitist education system. However, as the literature suggests, this initial 'assertion' by the state in an otherwise church-run education system, was short-lived as the majority of VECs were chaired by clergymen (O'Reilly, 1989). The early cutting-edge radicalism of VECs has all but disappeared in the intervening eighty years, as the institution has become enmeshed in the state educational apparatus. This study argues, based on the literature and the conversations with community educators working in the VECs, that the VEC has a predominantly 'local' self-understanding and a local elite organisational management culture, connected to a clientelist local politics. The leadership of the institution is predominantly male, drawn from the mainstream formal education sector, thus a 'school-culture' informs senior management's educational outlook in most VECs. However, there is some evidence in recent years that this pattern is changing, with more female appointments to CEO posts and a more diverse range of educational sectors in senior positions.

The radical beginnings of the VEC may be dormant, but remain in the institutional memory as the literature and findings support. However, the findings do point to the ways a mainstream educational philosophy which posits 'promoting competitiveness' alongside 'addressing inter-generational poverty' can filter into VEC educational programmes (DES, 2000, p. 9). The VEC is not immune from the growing 'commodification' of education (Thompson, 2000) and its schools are challenged to respond to the grinds culture and 'private education market' (Lynch, 1999).

In a world in which e-commerce transcends national boundaries, education has become a marketable commodity that can be traded globally.

(Thompson, 2000, p. 1)

There is evidence of the VEC being drawn in by the Department of Education's 'service provision' model of education driven by new managerialist orthodoxies in the public service. However, the radical origins of the VEC remain a source of possibility, and a new critical assertion could be led by community education in the future. The anecdotal evidence from feeder school surveys and further education statistics (DES, 2010c; AONTAS, 2010) confirms that VECs still cater for young people and adults from areas and backgrounds affected by poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. This sector of the

population forms a radical base who have been marginalised by an unequal education system (Baker et al., 2004). Through their unique position, community educators have a potentially vital role in mobilising their communities, through critical conscientisation. In the 2009/10 academic year 55,953 participants took part in part-time community education courses (DES, 2010c, p. 3), representing 30% of the total full and part-time adult further education cohort, and 5% of the total population in education. It is an indictment of an education system, that any percentage of a population or specific communities are continuously failed by that system, as it 'degrades education for all' (Connell, 1993, p.15). This cycle of 'educational reproduction' challenges us as community educators to find ways to disrupt such pre-determined 'trajectories' (Bourdieu, 1996). It is the task of all egalitarians, not just community educators, to support the work of conscientisation in poor communities, to harness the vibrant potential of community education.

Establishing and maintaining a space for community education to be the constructive critical voice of the VEC, first requires an acknowledgement of possible obstacles in the institutional culture of VECs. In this research, I have argued through a review of literature on the historical development of VECs, my own experience as an insider researcher, and from the contributions of CEFs in this research, that VECs have a self-understanding which is predominantly local, and operate from 'local logics' perspectives (Grummell et al., 2009). This tends to maintain a uniformity as opposed to diversity in the institution, a parochial as opposed to a global culture. I have also argued that the 'school-ethos' of formal education is the dominant educational paradigm at management level in most VECs, though there are signs that this is changing. Whilst, these findings may be contested, community educators do have space in the VECs to be critical. Community Education Facilitators do not feel disempowered or necessarily curtailed by their VECs in their politically engaged work of social justice. This work is significant in its local manifestation, e.g. the cohesion of community and local development, part of a national departmental policy. What is problematised in this study is the misrecognition, the lack of understanding of community education on the part of VEC senior management, something 'they' are not 'exercised about', or 'don't think about at all' (CEFs). That the institutional leadership in VECs doesn't really understand community education is major cause of concern.

Some opportunities for community education to be afforded its due recognition, have so far been missed. The appointment of community education facilitators was a most significant and welcome development. The promised infrastructural supports to underpin community education and the failure to implement these were identified as the key disappointments for community educators. Had these structures been implemented, particularly, the 'community education technical support unit' (DES, 2000, p. 115), the local adult learning boards and the national adult learning council, community education would have achieved greater 'visibility' (CEF 4), though NALC would likely have had less impact than LALBs, given the distancing between the local and national in the VEC context.

This research has made a compelling argument that the measures recommended in the White Paper on Adult Education which have been implemented by the Government, have been those elements which are less contentious, the elements over which the VEC maintains local operational control, i.e. the appointment of staff and allocation of budgets. Whilst Murtagh (2009, pp. 214-223) has argued that much of the failure to implement policy in adult education has been to do with poor management and commitment by the Department of Education and Science, I have argued in this thesis that a discourse of 'control' and 'power' is more evident at both institutional and grassroots level based on (a) evidence from the literature, and (b) the perspectives of the CEFs speaking from a vantage point within the VEC. Community educators do express disappointment in the failure to implement these structures but do not speculate as to reasons. Based on the literature, and the record of what has and has not been implemented, I argue that aspects of community education which were implemented represented those which posed no serious threat to the local control of staff appointments and budgetary control by VECs. Furthermore, they posed no threat to 'business as usual' in the 'field of power' relations (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 74) between the department and VECs.

New opportunities for community education to find and express its critical voice emerged in the course of the focus group discussions. These findings were unexpected but very encouraging themes to emerge. They were encouraging because they focused on the possibilities which the Community Education Facilitators Association (CEFA) presents for community education facilitators in the VECs. The sense of isolation which some CEFs experienced in their role had also been unexpected, however, the potential of CEFA as a

counter-balance to that as a forum for finding ‘solidarity’ (Honneth, 1996), was significant. CEFA as a forum, has a potential which is beginning to be realised. It is only in recent years, that the association has taken on the support and networking role for CEFs which was formerly supported by AONTAS. The findings of this thesis point to the ‘need for a unified voice’ to make the case for community education to state ‘what it is’, what kind of community education, do practitioners and their participants want ? CEFA offers that space where community education gains recognition and where community educators ‘stand up for’ their practice, plan strategically so as not to ‘be swallowed’ up by more influential voices in the education field. Above all CEFA is an ideal space for ‘having this conversation’ to support community education facilitators to overcome isolation and build solidarity.

Community Educators and the Struggle for Recognition


There has never been a better time to be a community educator in Ireland. It may sound rhetorical to make this claim especially during hard times. However, this thesis has documented a struggle for recognition for our role and work and there are positive signs of the growing recognition of community education’s relevance and importance (Teaching Council, 2011). The challenges in hard times are enormous and community educators have a crucial role to play to work in radical ways with communities to alter structures which oppress and exclude. It is unambiguously critical work but deeply rewarding in realising the change at its core.

The capacity of community education to enable us to dream of better futures is inspirational. I recall too, the inspiration of my own educators and mentors in the field. It is a privilege to have the time, space and resources to explore one’s work in a reflective academic way. I believe this research makes a contribution to our understanding of community education and community educators, a misrecognised practice and role in education. By examining the VECs in Ireland, I feel it uniquely draws attention to the educational institution, its culture and currents of power, and how community educators function creatively and critically within it. I hope this study will speak to the experience of community educators in other settings and institutions. The challenges of the twenty first century are enormous at both global and local levels calling on community educators to struggle for change at structural, institutional and grassroots levels. I dedicate this study to community educators everywhere and to those with whom they struggle.

Appendix 1


Slide 1

WORTH THE STRUGGLE!
Reflecting on Community Education and its contribution to Social Justice
in a Decade of Change 2000-2010



Community Education Facilitators Association
AGM, 20th April 2010
Research Presentation
Liam McGlynn
Ed.D. Programme Student, NUI Maynooth


Slide 2



OUTLINE

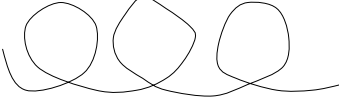
1. Researcher's Background
2. The Research Area: Community Education
3. What is known about Community Education ?
 - Scope of Literature Review
4. What is not known about Community Education ?
 - Research Questions
5. Purpose and Contribution of Research to Action
6. Sample of the Focus Group Process
7. Research Ethics and Next Steps

Slide 3




1. Researcher's Background

1. Professional Background – Community Development Worker, Access for Under-represented Groups to Higher Education, Community Education.
2. Educational Background – Adult & Community Education, Training for Transformation, Facilitation, Global Development Issues.
3. Reflective Practice
4. Praxis - Action Reflection Action Reflection
- Practice Theory Practice Theory




Slide 4



2. Research Area: Community Education

1. A Distinct Field of Practice ? Nature of Community Ed.?
2. Formal Education Sector - Well-researched
3. Non-formal Adult & Community Ed. Sector - Under-researched (Some Masters and Doctoral Theses)
4. White Paper Adult Education *Learning for Life* – 10 Yrs
- Vision, Intention, Implementation (Researching the Archive)?
5. **Primary Interest in knowing what motivates Community Educators, hearing your stories, your views through Focus Groups.**
6. Research Gap(s) e.g. Equality in Education focuses on Formal sector primarily. Also most data for participation focuses on formal primary, post-primary and third level.

Slide 5



3. What is known ? – Literature Review

1. VEC documentation on Community Education (websites, reports etc.)
2. AONTAS – Publications documenting development of Community Education in Ireland.
3. Green Paper and White Paper on Adult Education & Submissions to these policy statements.
4. Journals & Periodicals Adult & Community Education Sector
5. Lenses of Theory & Practice in Adult & Community Education (**Interest developed from Position Paper 2009**)
 - Critical Theory & Liberatory Pedagogy, Freire, Gramsci, Foucault
 - Egalitarian Theory, UCD Equality Studies, Baker & Lynch
 - Sociology of Education – Bourdieu
 - Feminist Theory – Young, hooks, Connolly, Ryan

Slide 6



4. What is not known ? – Research Questions

Focus of Enquiry is Qualitative rather than Quantitative

- Do community educators identify with 'struggle' ?
- Is 'struggle' relevant in 21st Century Ireland ?
- What is the purpose of community education? is this reflected in practice?
- What is & what is not community education ?
- What is the impact of the VEC sector in facilitating community education?
- How do community educators negotiate their 'space' within the VEC, in other organisations and in communities?

Slide 7



5. Purpose and Contribution of Research to Action

'...the purpose of academic discourse is not only to describe and explain the world, but also to change it.'

(Equality: From theory to practice, Baker, Lynch Cantillon & Walsh, 2004, P. 169)

'Understandings need to be linked into a political forum so that knowledge does not become redundant and divorced from action.'

(Equality: From theory to practice, Baker, Lynch Cantillon & Walsh, 2004, P. 186)

- The Research has implications for:
 - the Ideal (defining nature/goal of community education)
 - the real (the practice in community education)
 - Issues in Community Education e.g. courses content, funding, structures accountability, supports, practitioners, participants, voice.

Slide 8



Slide 9



6. Sample of the Focus Group Process

1. What do you see happening in the scene ?
2. Why does this happen ?
3. What are people showing up to ?
4. What are they not showing up to ?
5. Who is not turning up ?

Slide 10



7. Research Ethics and Next Steps

- Research abides by NUI Maynooth – University Policy Documents on Ethics in Research
- Confidentiality and Anonymity Protection
- Feedback (summary statements including the quotes to be used in the thesis)
- Expression of Interest Focus Groups – Please Complete Form
- Researcher Contact Details:
Liam McGlynn, EdD Programme Student, NUI Maynooth

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