THE 'SECOND CHANCE' MYTH: EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN IRISH ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES by Bernie Grummell

INTRODUCTION: NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSES AND ADULT EDUCATION

This article explores the 'second chance' myth that surrounds the role of adult education in society. The 'second chance' myth apparently offers all citizens an equal chance to access educational opportunities to improve their life chances. I argue that recent developments in educational policy-making are increasingly shaped by neo-liberal discourses that adapt adult education principles, such as lifelong learning and emancipation, for its own economic and political logic. This has important implications for adult education, especially its emphasis on equality of opportunity and social inclusion.

The growth of discourses of individualism, consumerism and market competitiveness in adult education policies encourages a belief in individuals' own responsibility to improve their employability and life chances. It promotes an approach to adult learning that works to the advantage of the marketplace, enabling economic flexibility for a global and casualised labour force. Adult education becomes part of the 'symbolic gloss of popular democracy' (Vincent, 1993:374). This has a two-fold result where i) reflective and critical analysis on how power – especially, economic and political power – operates are neglected in favour of individual reflection; and b) critical and emancipatory forms of adult education are marginalised. Critical theories on education argue that emancipation through education is possible but this has to involve the active participation and critical forces of the oppressed themselves, an 'education of equals' based on 'an active, dialogical, critical and criticism-stimulating method' (Freire, 1974:45). Ideally, the political and economic system should be sensitive to this form of education, creating the space and support structures for it to occur. This is difficult in a market-led system that encourages individual responsibility and discourages analysis of dominant economic and political orders.

Adult education is often described as 'second chance', offering adults a chance to re-access educational systems or to re-train in new educational skills and knowledge. This view of adult education's contribution to society has been promulgated in state discourses, most recently through the adoption of the concept of lifelong learning. This functional view of adult education emphasises its contribution to the economic and political order. Adult education also plays an important civic role, integrating people into civil society and encouraging democratic citizenship and emancipation. Following Jarvis' (1985:25) counsel that 'the concept of education will always be relative and reflect the social conditions of the time of definition', this article examines adult education policies in Ireland, identifying the central discourses that have characterised it in recent years. These discourses resonate with the analysis that emerges in international research about adult education (Edwards *et al.*, 1996; Hughes and Tight, 1995). In a recent review of adult education in Ireland, Fleming (2004:15) argues that the Irish state

has particular difficulty acting in the interests of this community or civil society because, some would say, it has been seduced, maybe corrupted, by the economy to act in its interests. In this way the tendency of the State is to support a vision of lifelong learning and adult education that sustains the economy and values learning that involves job skills and up-skilling. In fact the Government sets as a priority the learning that supports economic development. There is rhetoric of social inclusion and equality but that too has an economic intent. There is a contradiction between the inequality the system needs (according to the Minister of Justice) and the objective of social cohesion or social justice.

Fleming positions adult education as an arena where the system imperatives of the economic and political spheres have come into conflict with, even dominating over, social justice and community ideals (Fleming, 2004; Habermas, 1987). This raises important questions about the nature of society that we live in and the contribution of adult education within society. Fleming (2004:13) draws attention to the fact that state discourses surrounding adult education are based on a presumption of social inequality, citing a statement by the Irish Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform that 'a dynamic liberal economy like ours demands flexibility and inequality in some respects to function' (Crowley, 2004)'. I wish to explore the consequences of this neo-liberal perspective for adult education and more widely for democratic society.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT EDUCATION

The functionalist perspective that has dominated educational policy contends that education contributes to the socialisation and training of people into the shared value system and existing social order. Entirely absent from this educational perspective is any account of radical change or critical action, such as those that accompany the models of adult education proposed by Freire (1972) and feminist pedagogy (Weiler, 1996). Lynch (2000:100) argues that the sociology of education 'is a normatively-orientated discipline with a much greater focus on educational reform than radical change'. Consequently, radical and critical perspectives have remained marginal in mainstream educational debate. King *et al.* (2000:13) outline how critical perspectives see 'education as a process rather than a product. Issues of control and power, status, relationships, understandings of knowledge and pedagogy, and how they manifest themselves within education are central to their concerns'.

Critical theories have found some resonance within the adult education sector although, as the following sections will reveal, not always translating theory into practice. Acknowledgement of these different theoretical approaches to education is evident in the debate over pedagogy and andragogy. Pedagogy is commonly associated with the institutional structures of the schools – a set curriculum and accreditation system that is regulated by the state. For students, it is a functional or 'banking model' of education (Freire, 1972) where learning 'comes-from-above'. Any further educational activity after formal schooling is voluntary, intended to further develop the abilities and knowledge of the individual. Many educational theorists consider this latter form of education as a

distinct process from pedagogy. Knowles (1970:39) described this stage as andragogy.
He argued that as a person matures

> 1) his (sic) self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality towards
> one of being a self-directed human being; 2) he accumulates a growing reservoir of
> experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning; 3) his readiness to
> learn becomes orientated increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles;
> and 4) his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of
> knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation towards
> learning shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of problem-centredness.

Knowles' work has been criticised for its reliance on individual action and responsibility
and its assumption that differences between the learning styles of adults and children are
the most important factors in educational practice. Hanson (1996) argues that andragogy
appears as 'a form of abstract individualism rather than an engagement with learners
themselves within their real life situations.' (1996:103).

In 1970, UNESCO helped popularise a different understanding of adult education as
'lifelong learning' (Smith, 2001). This concept presents learning as an integral part of
people's life experiences permeating all stages and areas of life. Lifelong education is
defined by Klapper and Cropley (1991:31) as a process that would

> last the whole life of each individual; lead to systematic acquisition, renewal, and
> upgrading of knowledge, skills and attitudes, as this became necessary in response
> to the constantly changing conditions of modern life, with the ultimate goal of
> promoting self-fulfilment of each individual; be dependent on people's increasing
> ability and motivation to engage in self-directed learning activities; acknowledge
> the contribution of all available educational influences, including formal, non-
> formal and informal.

It is a model of learning that is closer to the critical perspective of education outlined by
King *et al*. (2000), but one that is increasingly incorporated into the neoliberal account of
education. The consequences of this incorporation will be explored in the case of adult
education policies in Ireland. As this article outlines, the current 'myths' of adult
education encompass an emphasis on individualism, productivity, institutional control
and a separation of economic and social roles of adult education. These 'myths' are also
evident in UK and European adult education policies, albeit within specific cultural and
social settings.

ADULT EDUCATION AND POLICY MAKING IN IRELAND

Ó'Murchú (1984) outlines how adult education in Ireland emerged from voluntary
cultural and agricultural movements in the late 1900s. These movements were involved
in the struggle for national independence and continued to develop adult education in the
newly established Republic. This voluntary base may help explain why state
involvement in adult education policymaking, is a relatively new practice. As the 1995

Department of Education and Science (DES) White Paper *Charting Our Education Future* acknowledged, much of the development of Irish adult education took place in an 'adhoc and unstructured manner' (DES, 1995:73). The state identified the pressures of modernisation and the weak economic situation during the previous decades as reasons for the lack of action (DES, 1998:40). However in the absence of structural support, locally organised community groups began to emerge during the 1980s, united by the need for action in two central areas – education for the unemployed and women. However, these groups suffered from a lack of state recognition and funding (Inglis *et al.*, 1993; Keogh, 2003; Aontas, 2004)

State recognition of adult education was finally achieved in 1998 with the publication of the first Green Paper on adult education. This marked the culmination of the long process to establish a national basis for adult education policy in Ireland. The Green Paper adopted a broad view of adult education, defining it as

> all systematic learning by adults, which contributes to their development as individuals and as members of the community and of society; apart from full-time instruction received by persons as part of their uninterrupted initial education and training. (DES, 1998:16).

It recommended 'a balanced approach to adult education, incorporating economic considerations within a broad spectrum of issues, including personal, social, cultural and environmental concerns.' (DES, 1998:7). The emphasis on economic factors in the Green Paper reflected a similar economic rationale to that used by OECD (1989), and the European Union (Keogh, 2004; Brine 2006). Adult education's contribution to Irish society was positioned within the context of 'an era of rapid economic change and job creation, [where] education and skill deficiencies must not pose a barrier to any person in accessing a livelihood' (DES, 1998:7). The Green Paper's recommendations concentrated on consolidating existing adult education structures and facilitating equality of access rather than assessing the quality of adult learning occurring in these sectors.

This emphasis is similar to the UK rationale of lifelong learning where an emphasis on 'skills for employability and skills for social inclusion co-exist but are not given the same policy priority'. (Appleby and Bathmaker, 2006:707). They recount how these competing discourses of adult education gradually moved 'towards privileging skills acquisition for national economic performance at the expense of an entitlement to lifelong learning.' (Ibid:708) Brine (2006) outlines how the dual definitions of lifelong learning in knowledge economy and knowledge society has resulted in a differentiation between two types of adult learners in EU policies, high knowledge-skilled and low knowledge-skilled learners. The high knowledge-skilled learners are privileged within the knowledge economy while the low knowledge-skilled learners are positioned in a knowledge society discourse where they are seen as a 'risk' and 'at risk'. The shifting discourses between knowledge economy and knowledge society are also evident in Irish adult education policies. Healy and Slowey (2006:360) outline how 'the notion of the knowledge economy underpins much contemporary policy debate on education in general

and lifelong learning in particular. The concept of lifelong learning, as in the case of "knowledge economy" is ubiquitous and vague'.

The Irish Government's White Paper on adult education (2000) placed a greater emphasis on citizenship, participation and community life. Adult education was defined as 'aspects of further and third level education, continuing education and training, community education, and other systematic learning by adults, both formal and informal' (DES, 2000:12). It identified six priority areas within Irish adult education that needed to be developed: consciousness-raising, citizenship, cohesion, competitiveness, cultural development and community development (DES, 2000:28). The focus of attention had moved from the primacy of economic factors and the labour market, to encompass a broader range of political, community and social aims (with a specific focus on equality and interculturalism) (DES, 2000:13). However, the White Paper's understanding of community development was limited to 'marginalised people who share common problems and who aim to become actively involved in solving these problems' (DES, 2000: 29). Collective action is limited to the efforts of marginalised groups themselves, negating any sense of state or societal responsibility for social exclusion and disadvantage. The consequences of these changing discourses for adult education in Ireland are examined below.

INDIVIDUALISM, CONSUMERISM AND REFLECTIVITY IN ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES

One of the central characteristics of contemporary discourses on adult education is the emphasis on individual autonomy. The individual is encouraged to take control of their learning, working towards the promise of personal development. This is a theme of adult education theories worldwide, including Knowles' concepts of andragogy and self-directed learning (1970), Mezirow's perspective transformation (1991) and UNESCO's adoption of lifelong learning (Smith, 2001). Bagnall's (1990:1) epitomises this individualist focus in his definition of lifelong education as

> the preparation of individuals for the management of their adult lives … the distribution of education throughout individual lifespans … the educative function of the whole of one's life experience … and the identification of education with the whole of life.

These theories present a vision of adult education that emphasise the continuous and unproblematic self-development of the individual. Lifelong learning is presented as a central element in modern living, an essential tool in our current communication and informational age. Hughes and Tight (1995) argue that this image of an independent learner accessing a continual cycle of adult educational services is a myth, one created to support the notion that we live in a time of unprecedented modernisation and change. A neoliberal logic associated with advanced capitalism and globalisation is inherent in this way of thinking (Giroux, 2002; Lynch, 2006). The individual is made responsible for their educational development in adulthood. It is their duty to be prepared for the current employment market – a market dominated by the demands of the communication,

information and computer technology industries in Ireland (O'Hearn, 2003). The emphasis on individualism and employability is evident in European policies, with Brine (2006:652) identifying a discursive shift in the Luxembourg Strategy to 'employability: the ability become employed … Thus, individualisation became linked with the concept of employability: a state of constant becoming, of readiness for employment.'

In line with this emphasis on individual responsibility and readiness, Irish state policies focus on enabling individuals to access learning opportunities. Equality of opportunity seems to refer to those individuals who have the economic, personal and time resources to access educational services, the high knowledge-skilled learners that Brine (2006) identifies. As Lynch (2006:4) argues, this ignores

> the fact that the majority of citizens in society at any given time are not self-financing consumers (children, older people, unpaid carers etc.). Many are in no position to make active consumer choices due to the poverty of their resources, time and/or capacities.

The focus on equality of opportunity has increasingly been joined by the aim of 'interculturalism', using adult education as a means for social and cultural inclusion (Department of Education and Science, 2000:13). State policies offer broad support for the ideals of community education – empowerment, participative democracy and societal transformation – but then return to the narrower practice of enabling access for specified groups in Irish society (women's groups, ethnic minorities and older people). Keogh (2003:23) points out that 'much community education in marginalized communities is a "second chance" compensatory model that is not expressly concerned with politicisation.' It adopts a 'deficit' approach of providing access for marginalised groups, where the individual is responsible for change and improvement (Rogers, 2006). The emphasis on politicisation, advocacy and solidarity in community education is lost (Somers and Bradford, 2006: 70).

Crucially, the individualist focus of these discourses and the streamed approach of encouraging access for 'risk' groups cannot facilitate the sense of collective responsibility, trust and action necessary for civil society. Hargreaves (1980:187–8) argues that these approaches promote 'the cult of individualism' where education is diverted from its social and civic role to the 'promotion of the educated individual.' Vincent (1993:371) characterises the current ideological stance of adult education as 'consumerism', where policies centre on notions of 'individual self-determinism'. Through adult education, we can – in theory at least – select our own future, prepare ourselves for careers, gain additional qualifications, develop our personalities or engage in new social activities.

The concept of reflectivity is related to this idea of consumerism and the changing nature of modern society. Boud *et al.* (1996:33) define reflectivity in the context of learning as 'a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations.' It has been theorised in the work of Mezirow (1991), Schön (1983), Freire (1974) and

others. It has also evident in sociology, in Giddens' (1984) theory of reflectivity and Habermas' (1987) theory of communicative action. While these theoretical frameworks are very different from each other, it can be argued that they are united by this shared interest in the idea, and consequences, of reflectivity.

The key assumption behind reflectivity is that it will lead, hopefully, to a process of thinking about the world and our position within it; something that is seen as essential in the modern 'risk' society. As Strain (1997:150) argues

> new societal strategies for individual learning are predicted on the need to preserve human and social values in the face of certain irreversible social re-figurations, leading to the institutionalisation of what Giddens has called 'manufactured uncertainty' and the formation of what Beck (1994) has characterised as 'risk' society.

For critics of these theories, a crucial point about reflectivity is neglected. The focus remains on the individual who is seen as responsible for reflectivity and enacting change at an individual level. Mezirow's perspective transformation, for example, 'refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated to – and transformed by – one's past experience. It is a personal paradigm for understanding ourselves and our relationships' (Mezirow, 1981:4). The analysis of power structures at a societal level is neglected in favour of this concentration on individual integration into existing societal structures. Inglis (1997:6–7) argues that theories like Mezirow's 'leads to an over-reliance on the individual rather than social movements as the agency of social change, and consequently, to an inadequate and false sense of emancipation.'

This type of individual reflectivity concentrates primarily on the first stage of 'situated pedagogy' that Freire describes, where students identify 'subjective problem-themes' of concern to them and which carry an intrinsic motivation for reflection (Shor and Freire, 1987:104). There is an absence of 'dialogic pedagogy' or 'critical transivity'. This latter stage marks the move to action and transformation, not of the individual but of the institutional structures of the world. At this stage, 'a critically transitive thinker feels empowered to think and to act on the conditions around her or him, and relates those conditions to the larger contexts of power in society' (Shor, 1993:32). Critical reflectivity on the wider power structures of society, as well as individual context, is necessary for social and political transformation.

NEOLIBERALISM AND ECONOMIC CHANGE IN ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES

Education policies in Ireland and the United Kingdom have been dominated in recent years by a discourse of economic change, especially through the capitalist structures of globalisation and market competitiveness (Lynch, 2006). Adult education is heralded as a form of 'investment in human capital [that] will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twentieth-first century' (1998 UK Secretary for Education and Employment report cited in Tight, 1998:256). Hughes and Tight

(1995:291) identify economic factors as central features of the current myths surrounding adult education, with the productivity myth maintaining that a link exists between education and 'individual earnings, organizational productivity and national economic performance'. This is linked to the 'change' myth that argues in favour of

> the rapid transformation of the economic and political structure of the world order: the impact of transnational capital; the ever more comprehensive integration of resources, labour and markets; the pervasiveness of media and consumer images (Weiler, 1991:449).

Hughes and Tight acknowledge that the link between productivity and change is 'partial and difficult to interpret' (1995:299). However, it is an idea that is still worth focusing attention on due to its pervasiveness as a value of modern capitalist countries, including the United Kingdom and Ireland. Morgan *et al.* (2000) reflect the importance of this logic in Ireland with over three quarters of those participating in formal adult education citing work as the reason. Increasingly, adult education and lifelong learning are perceived 'either as a part and extension of work – something which is effectively unavoidable or as a new form of work in its own right.' (Tight, 1998:262). It is evident in the Lisbon European Council goal 'that by 2010 the EU should become '*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world ... with more and better jobs and ... greater social cohesion*'.' (cited in Keogh, 2004:19; original italics).

The consequences of this unproblematic acceptance of a neoliberal logic need to be examined. These myths symbolise the wider change in modern democracies from 'the idea of a public good towards the idea of private good' (Lawson, 1998:56). In a private market system, it is up to the individual to access educational services, especially through a meritocratic system of certification that can be translated to tangible assets of employment and promotion. This is a very instrumental view of educational reproduction that ignores issues of power and control. It has lead to what Jonathan (1990:16) describes, in the United Kingdom context, as a 'head-on clash between two commonly accepted duties of the state: to maximise individual freedom and to promote justice for the group as a whole'. The state's abandonment of education to the 'blind workings of the market' (Jonathan, 1990:22) has profound implications for the public nature of education and for civil society, especially in terms of the distribution of power in society. This neoliberal viewpoint on education

> undoubtedly can work to the advantage of management in business and industry, professional organizations and large-scale institutions when individuals who depend on them appear to be voluntarily directing their educational projects through formal learning contracts and in accordance with institutional purposes (Collins, 1996:112)

Critics of this discourse argue that education becomes a process that serves the instrumental demands of the existing socio-economic order. Control over the structures of education and learning remains firmly in the hands of experts and institutions. Collins (1996) argues that education has become a constraining and disciplinary force. He feels

that adult education strategies, such as self-directed learning and learning contracts 'are essentially accommodative to prevailing institutional and societal needs' (Collins, 1996:114). These strategies encourage the individual to monitor and regulate their own behaviour and development – to be self-reflective – in a way that will contribute to the efficient management of the organisation. Citing Foucault (1979:198), he argues that it forges a 'docile body, that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved' (Collins, 1996:114). Inglis (1997:6) similarly argues that the concept of empowerment has been used in a specific way in business management to encourage

> workers to choose to commit themselves to the values, goals, policies, and objectives of the organization as a rational means of improving their life chances. In the move towards more subtle forms of discipline and control, instead of having to be supervised, workers internalise their own surveillance.

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

INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL, PROFESSIONALISM AND EXPERTISE IN ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES

Professionalism and expertise are widely accepted as part of the meritocratic educational system – the recognition and reproduction of valued skills and information. However the type of expertise that is valued by educational institutions is rarely questioned. Schön (1996:29) contends that professionalism is primarily associated with 'technical expertise' rather than any other forms of expertise. These designated holders of instrumental and technical expertise gain a powerful position in society and tend to reflect the dominant ideological interests of the society in question (Collins, 1996; Gramsci; 1971). This 'alliance between the state, professions and capital' that Hughes and Tight (1995:297) describe, demonstrates the power of political factors alongside the economic factors outlined in the previous section. This is allied, in the Irish case, with the political practice of social partnership where relevant interest groups, including education groups, negotiate national wage agreements and develop social inclusion. Somers and Bradford (2006) outline how this process co-opts interest groups into the process of governance, through professionalisation, negotiation and accountability. This presents particular challenges for community and voluntary groups, including adult education, to maintain trusting and participative relations with their local communities and to retain their social justice and advocacy objectives.

The dangers of an expert-orientated approach are inherent in what McAuslan (1980 cited in Vincent 1993:369) describes an the 'ideology of public interest' where 'lay involvement is therefore strictly limited, and when it does occur may be directed by the professionals into non-contentious and marginal areas.' For example, the educational system is controlled by the expertise of professionals, who in turn transmit their expert

knowledge to students preparing them for membership of the professional classes throughout a system of certification and meritocracy. It is an institutional and functional model of education where professional educators shape and deliver an 'educated public' (Ranson, 1990). It is accepted by a public 'beguiled by the notion that learning … can be achieved only through the mediation of an expert.' (Collins, 1996: 118).

The power of educational experts and institutional forces in shaping the nature of education can be described as a form of 'education from above' where the authority structures of educational expertise and professionalism determine the type of learning that occurs (Freire, 1972, 1974; Shor and Freire, 1987). Collins is critical of this authority structure, arguing that adult educators should work 'on strategies to identify and preserve valuable non-institutionalized (individual and community orientated) learning endeavours that are threatened by bureaucratized and professionalized interventions' (1996:113–4). This approach has gained support within critical perspectives of adult education in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Hargreaves, 1980; Jonathan, 1990; Vincent, 1993; Inglis 1997).

Feminist pedagogy has also added a valuable level of analysis to these approaches with their emphasis on the situated nature of educational experiences (Weiler, 1991; Preece, 2002). They point to the high status of scientific and technical knowledge within the education profession and the corresponding neglect and low status of experiential knowledge – what Schön (1996) calls the 'tacit' or 'implicit' knowledge of everyday life. Knowledge that is associated with the private sphere is disregarded in favour of the political, economic and technical knowledge that dominates the public sphere. The tendency of critical and emancipatory writers to focus on universal truths and their presumption of similarities between learners is also criticised by feminist writers. Emancipatory theorists such as Freire and Habermas have failed to examine the issue of how the different levels of power are dependent on factors like race, gender, culture, history and socio-economic background (Weiler, 1991; Collins, 1996; Hanson, 1996; Lynch, 2000).

LEISURE, CONSUMERISM AND THE VOLUNTARY NATURE OF ADULT EDUCATION

The critical and feminist school's accentuation of the extensive nature of learning and education across private and public spheres of life raises the question of where the boundaries of education are set. The field of adult education increasingly acknowledges that the 'demand for learning is spread across the life span … and that the social contexts for learning encompass a wide and increasingly complex range of settings and practices' (Strain, 1997:141). The area of leisure has long been recognised as an important element in adult education services. The traditional image of adult education as a luxury and voluntary pursuit acknowledges this in the broad array of hobby-based learning activities that it encompassed (Bell, 1996).

Increasingly, these spheres of leisure and learning are being perceived as intertwined in a new relationship in modern consumerism. Strain (1997:151) contends that 'the

marketisation of the education system … has lead to a profound blurring of the boundaries between entertainment and learning.' He argues that this convergence between leisure and learning occurs as a consequence of technological changes and the growth of consumerism. The distinction between learning and leisure raises important issues for educationalists. As Edwards *et al.* (1996:1) highlight, education is not an activity that a neat border can be drawn around as 'adults learn in a whole variety of settings – in the home, workplace, community – which cannot be contained within a boundary of education.' For many theorists, adult education does, and should, include non-formal methods of learning such as educative, experiential and informal learning (Sargant, 1991; Klapper and Cropley, 1985). As Sargant (1996:198) points out

> Most people interweave their learning with the rest of their lives, their work and their family and use some leisure time for their studies … for some people the boundaries between leisure and learning are virtually invisible. Frequently, leisure activities provide a bridge into active learning. On the other hand, many people learn from their leisure activities without realizing the knowledge or skills they are gaining.

Participation in adult education in many European countries has risen over the past few decades with an average of 35 per cent to 40 per cent of the population of Ireland, the United Kingdom and Norway engaging in some form of adult education (King *et al.*, 2002; Sargant, 1996; Rinne and Kiniven, 1996). National surveys in Ireland and the United Kingdom reveal that younger age groups have a greater level of involvement in formal education courses, as do males and people from higher socio-economic backgrounds (King *et al.*, 2002:37; Sargant, 1996:203). The numbers of mature students re-entering formal educational systems has risen, reflecting the emphasis on re-training, certification and professionalism (Sargant, 1996; King *et al.*, 2002). This is also replicated in the rising levels of participation in vocational and work-related subjects across Europe (Sargant,1996; Rinne and Kiniven, 1996; Morgan *et al.*, 2000; King *et al.*, 2002). It is evidence of the influence of the 'economic drivers' that Tight (1998:255) identifies; as educational policies promote subject areas that are seen as economically important. Women have a higher level of involvement in the voluntary and uncertified adult education sector (King *et al.*, 2002:32–3). This part-time and voluntary learning plays an important role for women with care responsibilities whose participation is limited by economic, time and spatial factors (King *et al.*, 2002).

The neoliberal framing of education as a consumer choice has profound consequences for voluntary and informal learning. State policies present this growth of voluntary and leisure-based adult education as part of the cultural and civic development of society – the idealistic and unspecified emphasis on citizenship, participation and consciousness raising that the Irish Government's White Paper on adult education describes (DES, 2000:28). It is seen as contributing to the 'public interest' ethos promoted by social democratic states. However, the uncertified and voluntary nature of this learning results in its participants being 'seen as sociable enthusiasts who, unless they are unwaged, are naturally expected to pay for their pleasures' (Bell, 1996:160). Crucially, this discourse of consumerism marginalises the civic and emancipatory potential of adult education to

develop 'critical transivity' where learners can reflect and act on power structures in society (Shor, 1993).

The dominance of consumerism and market discourses has important consequences for the status of voluntary and leisure-orientated educational activities in state policies in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Non-vocational educational and leisure activities are increasingly seen as non-essential (in the crude sense of being perceived as unnecessary for the demands of the employment marketplace). Hence, these activities are provided as supplementary commodities and used in the same way in which 'any consumer uses supplies, whether these are adult learning centres or supermarkets' (Bell, 1996:158). Voluntary educational, civic and leisure activities have changed from being part of an active community to a lifestyle commodity. Bell (1996:161) points to the further irony inherent in these changes, as

> certain activities hitherto thought of as belonging strictly to the leisure category, such as rock-climbing and sailing, have suddenly begun to play a role in industrial training and selection, thus making them also, despite their sporting origins, an integral part of the [UK] government's now favoured occupation-related sector of adult learning.

Employers and managers increasingly look to the fields of education and leisure to assist them in their efforts to develop a flexible and educated workforce and to provide a marketplace of consumers willing to purchase their educational products. Inglis (1997) argues that business management and industrialists have adopted adult educational concepts, such as lifelong learning and empowerment, as part of their management strategy. It is a form of incorporation which involves getting workers to share the same values and practices as employers and managers, and to work with them to improve competitiveness, quality, loyalty and, most of all, productivity and profit (Inglis, 1997:5). Hughes and Tight (1995) put forward a similar argument in their analysis of the myths of productivity and change, with Collins (1996:112) likewise contending that 'the rhetoric of self-directed learning [is] often harnessed to a … notion of human resource development'. Learning and leisure activities move from their traditional role as a contributing force to personal and community life to a commercial element of consumer lifestyle or an additional aspect of people's work life.

CONCLUSION: ADULT EDUCATION AS AN EMANCIPATORY FORCE

This article has provided a critical review of policies and theories on adult education, assessing how they shape our understanding of the role of adult education in society. I argue that the current focus on individual autonomy, economic productivity, expertise and consumerism result in adult education's emancipatory potential being constrained. These theories imply that critical reflection by individual learners will lead unproblematically to greater levels of understanding and participation in the processes of society. Responsibility is placed on the individual to take control over their learning, working towards the promise of self-fulfilment and emancipation. It encourages an approach to adult learning that works to the advantage of political and economic elites

(Collins, 1996:112). The issue of equality of opportunity in educational services, especially sectors with low participation levels, comes to the forefront of educational policies. But equality of opportunity is framed by a neoliberal discourse that emphasises individual choice and market needs. This casts other forms of learning and knowledge (such as experiential and tacit knowledge) into the private sphere and the domain of leisure. As Ranson (1990:159) argues, adult education is in danger of becoming 'a personal development for one's private role in civil society rather than a preparation for an active role in the public domain'.

The neglect of other forms of adult education, especially critical and emancipatory forms of learning, is highlighted by Inglis (1997:11) in his argument that

> the discourse of management science and empowerment, for example, is simply part of an overall discourse of the human sciences which produces and secures order through the investigation, documentation and analysis of human behaviour. The managerial science of empowerment becomes another knowledge producing a more subtle penetrative power. Empowerment is surrender and compliance to this power; emancipation is resistance and transgression.

Inglis' argument about empowerment (working within the system) and emancipation (trying to change the system) highlights the continual concern of theorists to provide an analytical model of emancipation through education. These efforts involve an in-depth analysis of how power works, in Habermasian terms, to prevent the colonialisation of the lifeworld and promote free, undistorted communicative action (Habermas, 1987). As Freire emphasises, this project has to involve the active participation and critical forces of the oppressed themselves, an 'education of equals' based on 'an active, dialogical, critical and criticism-stimulating method' (Freire, 1974:45). Ideally, the political and economic system should be sensitive to this form of education, creating the space and support structures for it to occur. Adult education needs to dis-entangle itself from neoliberal incorporation to create space for contextualised and emancipatory learning. As Freire outlines, this has to occur in a learner-centred and grounded way through dialogic pedagogy and critical transivity. Both formal and informal modes of learning must be developed in a collective frame that builds solidarity and works towards an examination of the role of power in the lives of individuals and communities. This will promote a civil society where 'the structures of power can be renovated and the citizens control the uses of power.' (Höyrinen-Alestalo, 2001:211).

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