

The Educational Ontology of Paulo Freire and the Voice of the Irish Adult Educator

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Abstract

This paper harnesses the teachings of Paulo Freire in order to give a voice to the Irish adult educator. The ontological aspects of Freire's theory are central to this task. Freire's ontological understanding of the human experience finds its fulfilment in his theory of conscientization. The two pillars of conscientization are personal and collective awareness. And it is the personal awareness aspect, as it relates to the pedagogy of the adult educator, which we are most concerned with here. The paper highlights how the voice of the adult educator should be considered as an ontological 'layer of data' which can contribute hugely to the discourse on adult education in Ireland.

Keywords

Critical pedagogy, ontological, conscientization, metaphysical, existentialism

Introduction

"I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and re-write my ideas."

(Freire 2005)

In recent years the voice of the adult learner has, rightly, been to the fore in the discussions relating to adult education in Ireland. This is a very good and necessary thing. However, we should embrace what the adult educator has to say about adult education. It is important to do so as these key stakeholders in adult education have much to say about the educational relationship with the learner and other aspects of adult education and how it impacts on society, the learner, and the educators themselves.

The ontological elements in Freire's writings were used to inform the epistemological element of the research. This was done in order to attempt to examine those aspects of adult education practice which can only be considered in a metaphysical way. The subjects of this research were adult educators who are at present practising in Ireland. The pedagogy of the adult educator was under investigation. The two primary aims of the research were:

- To investigate the use of Freirean concepts in the practice of Irish adult educators to highlight the metaphysical aspects of adult education practice
- To suggest principles which will be useful in investigating Irish adult education practice

When discussing the findings, in light of Freire's theory, there will also be a consideration of how the opinions and views of adult educators can contribute to the current discourse in Irish adult education. The central idea of this paper is that, through their ongoing practice, adult educators have a vital ontological layer of data/knowledge which can help to provide the necessary balance to the discourse of adult education in Ireland. This is an urgent need as current policy within the area is heavily influenced by technocratic and neo-liberal concerns. This phenomenon has the result that the functional and vocational aspects of engagement in adult education are put to the fore, personal, subjective and inward effects of education in the life of the adult learner is, to a large extent, ignored. Adult educators know themselves that engagement in adult education can have dramatic effects on the life of the adult learner – effects that can only be considered in a metaphysical way. Although not part of the discussion here, this philosophical position has consequences for adult education in the current political and social climate and in the sharp division between liberal and conservative ideas which have permeated their way into many aspects of life. However, at present we are solely concerned with what highlighting the voice of the Irish adult educator means for policy and practice in adult education Ireland.

The research paradigm: ontological and epistemological considerations

The task of ‘disclosing’ the voice of adult educators, in a formal ‘scientific’ sense was not a straightforward task. Difficulties arose by the framing of key questions in the process. This is where ontology and epistemology assisted because ontology and epistemology are concerned with the fundamental issues: *What* is there to study? *How* can we know about it? *How* do we find what we are looking for? Ontology focuses on the types of things that are a part of the world, how they exist in the world and how they should be researched and studied (Mautner 2000). Is, as Blackburn (2000) suggests, the social world best seen via *interaction* between individuals, or, do we begin our inquiries with theories of social behaviour or build theories as the research develops? This research embraced the former position and so the existentialist elements in Freire’s theory are the ontological keystone of the project. The idea here was not to examine the voice of the adult educator through any type of rational lens, but to allow the emotive aspect of their opinions to come to the fore. And the philosophy of existentialism – and how Freire used it – validates the impassioned aspects of the adult educators’ experiences. And it is those experiences which shape their pedagogy and their philosophical perspectives which in turn impacts their practice. This phenomenon formed an epistemology, or body of knowledge, which facilitated in building theory relating to Irish adult education practice. Twinned with this was the recognition that ontology is the metaphysical study of *being/existence* and so permeates all aspects of the adult educators’ lives, not just their practice in adult education.

In conducting the research, it was important to consider epistemology as the study of knowledge of the social world: ‘In the debate about ontology and epistemology it is necessary to absorb one thing; knowledge is frail. It is the job of the researcher to make it clear that in any approach to research (especially one of an interpretive nature), the researcher should maintain that he/she knows it is difficult to be clear about anything - and he/she should not be

over confident in conclusions, but be tentative' (Thomas 2009, p. 85). It is hoped, therefore, that knowledge treated in this manner serves to make any conclusions or discussion more reliable, subjective, and trustworthy. A solid theoretical backbone to the research, both ontologically and epistemologically, is even more necessary considering that the research is highly interpretive in both its inquiry and its analysis (Grayling 1996). This is helpful as it allows the subjective influence (the voice of the adult educator), which is the philosophical *locus* of this research, to be brought to light.

The research themes

Paulo Freire's work is informed by aspects of existential theory. He used existential thought to inform the ontological aspect in his theory of adult education (Roberts 2002). In terms of ontology, three main underlining precepts are identifiable in Freire's work; and they have been used in this research to investigate the above aims of the research. The precepts also informed the questions which were used to interview the adult educators. The precepts, which became research themes, are: 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre 1946) which leads to 'conscientization' (Freire 1970); engaging in adult education as [an] 'ontological vocation' (Freire 1970); and a 'dialogical rejection' of subject/object dichotomies (Freire 1970). No detailed exposition of those themes needs to be presented for our task in this paper. But, we need to recognise that they are concepts which hold within them a perspective which suits the highly interpretive nature of the research paradigm and overall approach to the research. Using these aspects of Freire's theory allowed for a deeper discussion with adult educators about their experiences of adult education.

Research objectives and research questions

Before examining the questions, which were distilled from the research themes and subsequently used to formulate the interview schedules, it is necessary to briefly consider the objectives of the research. In doing so the complexity of the task when dealing with this type of data (people's subjective thoughts and opinions) will become evident. According to Verma

and Beard suggest (1981, p. 184) the statement of [a] supposition is a ‘tentative proposition which is subject to verification through subsequent investigation. It may also be the guide to the researcher in that it depicts and describes the method to be followed in studying the problem. In many cases suppositions or hypotheses are hunches which the researcher has about the existence of the relationship between variables’. If a supposition does indeed make claims with regards to the relationships between variables, and is the key to the researcher as to how the original idea might be tested, we have, in this study, postulated that the ontological elements in Paulo Freire’s educational theory represent a variable which have influence, and can be explored, in the pedagogy of Irish adult educator. We have endeavoured, therefore, to discover whether that is so for this sample of adult educators. The findings of the research, as will be considered below, support the premise that it is possible to present an ontological appreciation of the voice of the Irish adult educator from a Freirean perspective.

The findings support the fact that the adult educator is, at the very least, interested in continuing to develop a deeply critical approach to their educational relationship with learners and is interested in, and has much to say, about the metaphysical aspects of adult learning. And giving a voice to the adult educator is very prescient considering today’s somewhat uneasy political, social and philosophical climate.

The research objectives of this study are:

- To advocate concepts which will contribute, positively, to further investigations into Irish adult education practice. These concepts include: (1) The application of an ontological appreciation of Freirean pedagogy, as a research ‘optic’, by the wider academic community in the attempt to further understand the pedagogy of adult educators; (2) *Transformative learning* in interpretive research, such as this, should be conducted where the meaning of experience, for both the researcher and the research participants, continually informs the research strategy; (3) Application of

Freirean pedagogy which is seen through an ontological lens should be used and developed as a way to give a 'voice' to the Irish adult educator. This could be used to generate other strands of research within adult education.

- To explore the application of Freirean pedagogy which is seen through an ontological lens in the reflexive examination of the work of Irish adult educators.

As discussed above the research questions which were developed for this study stem from engagement with Freirean theory. The questions are:

- As an adult education provider how do you view adult education?
- What in your opinion does it mean to engage in education in adulthood?
- In what terms do you view your work with adult learners?
- Do you think adult education is a human right?
- How do you view your relationship with your learner?
- Do you think the learner can educate the adult educator?

Research context, analysis of data and theory development

As this investigation is a piece of critical educational research, every element of the research design followed an *anti-positivist* paradigm (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2008); we are not interested in objectivity, predictability, controllability or the construction of laws and rules of behaviour concerning the pedagogy of the adult educators. The design of this research was, however, influenced by an *interpretivist* paradigm. It was considered more interesting, from a human perspective, for the researcher to attempt to understand, describe, and interpret Irish adult education practice through the thoughts and opinions of its actors - Irish adult educators. The data collection for this research was carried out in regional ETBs which are in the mid-west and south region of Ireland. The subjects of the research are professionals who are engaged in the provision of adult education. They are both tutors and managers of adult

education programmes. Protective pseudonyms have been used to disguise the identities of the participants.

The pedagogy of Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire was inspired by many thinkers. Building on the theories of a diverse number of intellectuals in his own theory, he was influenced by the Socratic Method whereby dialogue is used as an epistemological tool and not a methodology (McLaren and Silva 1991). Freire's work was also shaped by Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, Marx, Engels and Sartre (Dale 2003). Freire understood humans as both *thinking* and *being*. His ontological understanding - his interpretation of existence, reality and being in the human condition - is dualistic. This is the theory of reality as being composed of two exclusive elements which, for Freire, translated as consciousness and thinking and matter and being. It is important to consider now which is primary and which is derivative: consciousness and thinking or matter and being? To answer this, we can map Freire's ontological interpretation of the nature of being. Freire is concerned with examining the relationship between thinking (idealism) and being (materialism). Thinking is related to consciousness and this leads to idealism, while being relates to matter and practice, and this leads to materialism (McLaren and Leonard 1993). Idealism may be broken into subjective idealism and objective idealism. At this point Freire's ontology becomes related to the political world of the adult learner: 'In order for the oppressed to be able to wage their war of liberation, they must perceive the reality of the oppression not as a closed world, from which there is no exit, but as a limiting-situation which they can transform' (Freire 1970, p. 27). It is important at this juncture to be reminded of the fact that the political world in which Freire theorised about was a very different place to the Ireland of 2019. Most educators would accept, to (broadly) varying degrees, that educational opportunities in the area of adult education in

contemporary Ireland cannot be compared to the Brazil under military dictatorship in the 1970s. Freire, as stated in the quotation in the introduction, advises not to use his theories unless we re-invent those theories.

He saw the world as being interpreted by historical, economic and social forces (Freire 1970, p. 72). Here, the influences of the theories of Marx in Freire's work become evident. The influence of Marx and historical materialism on Freire can also be demonstrated by Freire's exploration into the duality of the concept of humanization. Freire says, 'concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition [sic] of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality' (Freire 1972, p.26). According to Freire, this duality may be transcended by applying a dialectical understanding in our attempt to make sense of the world. This is accomplished through a critical understanding of language. He propounds that language and its dialectical relationship with thought and world and the dialectical inter-relations of language itself - ideology, social classes and education - break down the duality of the situation and a new understanding of the world emerges. When taking a closer look at some of the transcripts from the adult educators this type of understanding is evident.

When developing his ontology - Freire's understanding on how we come to *know* the world through the senses - he did so by interpreting the world as an objective reality; a reality which is entirely independent of the existent (the subject), but which is a world that is capable of being known (Freire 1970, p. 72). Dialogue is the human phenomenon to which Freire's ontology is anchored (Freire 2005, pp. 72-74). Freire explains how dialogue is ontological in nature *when* he says: 'Revolutionary leaders and educators do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation', but in order to come to know through dialogue with them, both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation - the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist' (Freire 2005, p.146).

Therefore, Freire sees the human being as having a body which is conscious, and it must be understood as such. For Freire (1970) education was a means to liberate. He asserts that liberation should come about through a uniquely human dialectical process; Freire's 'dialogical rejection' of subject/object dichotomies. He believes, however, that it is the opposite which is actually happening in the educational process, proposing that information is not passed on but is deposited; the learner is an object, and the educators are the subjects. Freire believes that it is a situation where men and women become uncreative:

Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently, receive, memorize and repeat. They do have the opportunity to become collectors and cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is men themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. Knowledge emerges only through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

(Freire 1970, p. 53)

Freire (1974) stresses the importance of developing a critical perspective while engaging in adult education. Indeed, a constant theme in both Freire's practical work and his theory is the significance of how engaging in adult education programmes relate to the world around us. Even when aesthetic moments arrive during engaging with texts, for example, the learner must remain critical: 'Education is joyous to the extent that it becomes an active, dialogical, critical process, texts can become 'beautiful' when critically engaged. Unless it is critical, education cannot become an act of *knowing*' (Freire 2005, p.111). Holme (2004) advises that in order to engage in education in a full sense, adult learners need to unveil the meanings of educational content and texts in order to consider the socio-economic influences that are to blame for them suffering from educational difficulties in the first place. Freire forced adult education into the consciousness and vocabulary of western educators (McLaren 2005). He engineered an appreciation of adult education which underlined the relationship between low levels of

education and the ‘uselessness of endlessly obsessing with the mechanistic side of education’ (Freire 1970, p. 41).

So, considering education as Freire saw it can be understood as a counteraction against a central problem with the idea of functionality: meaning that this is a functional pedagogy which defines itself in the educating of adults in order to participate effectively within society. Feely (2007) suggests, it is not concerned with examining the social inequalities which are to blame for the unequal dispersion of educational opportunities that places the adult learner in the adult education class. A functional approach to education naturally reproduces unequal relationships: ‘The *denunciation* of dehumanizing, countering oppressive aspects of everyday reality was inextricably linked to the *annunciation* of the path to transformation. This dual relationship was pertinent for oppressor and oppressed alike, both of whom are dehumanized by a continued, unequal relationship’ (Freire 2007, p. 26).

Additional to his belief that functional literacy reproduces unequal relationships, Freire considers that ‘although the subject of humanization has always been humankind’s central problem, humanization has now taken on something with all the hallmarks of a concern which can no longer be simply ignored’ (Freire 1970, p.28). This concern for humanization results immediately in the identification of dehumanization. Thus, the individual begins to recognise and examine the amount to which dehumanization has taken place. The individual may now ask if humanization is a real possibility. Furthermore, Freire believes an examination of history, in objective terms, together with humanization and dehumanization, are a possible outcome for the individual who is an ‘uncompleted’ being aware of their incompleteness. Freire states: ‘considering that both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first (humanization) is the people’s vocation’ (Freire 1970, p. 31).

Humanization brings us immediately to the identification of dehumanization, not merely as an ontological outcome (or some 'result' of our *being*), but as a retrospective and historical actuality (Freire 1974).

The ontology of Freire

Much of Freire's ontology was influenced by the philosophy of existentialism. In existentialist thought it is the subjective experience of the human being which is at the centre of its enquiry into the human experience. And it considers the human being not just as a thinking being, but as an acting, living, and feeling human individual. In existentialist thought the body is not distinct from consciousness or being: 'to distinguish between a mind and a body or between the mind and the world, to make the 'I think, therefore I am' of the mind a certainty and to doubt the body, would be to follow the Cartesian mind body dualism' (Earnshaw 2006, p. 136). According to Sartre 'consciousness exists its body' (Sartre 2008, p. 329). For Sartre there is no duality. There is no duality between mind and body in Freirean ontology also (Freire 1970). (It is this appreciation of the act of engaging in education which this paper embraces. And some of the comments from the adult educators below compound this idea). Engagement in adult education is an act made manifest by the body and mind (the consciousness) together. Therefore, educational engagement should be viewed as an inter-dependent relationship between the world of ideas and the historical/materiel world. Sartre (2008) maintains that when we talk about our bodies a problem arises, for we are confusing our inner intuition i.e. our experience of our bodies through our senses for example, pleasure and pain, with the data that comes from other areas in life such as clinical and biological environments. This, for Sartre, is not a good thing as this leads to a conflation of the senses and external and physical experiences (Cox 2002). Sartre (2008) believes that we do not actually experience our bodies in this way. Rather, he says, we 'live our bodies' (Sartre 2008, p. 302). Sartre (2008) hypothesises that consciousness is 'in' consciousness. Although consciousness can reflect on itself, he maintains

it dissolves the Cartesian duality by asserting that it is by our senses how we exist in the world (Earnshaw 2006). This cessation of Cartesian duality is so meaningfully expressed by Gabriel Marcel when he says: 'I *am* my body' (Marcel 2009, p. 12). Another writer and theorist to express an anti-dualist understanding of the relationship between our minds and our bodies – an appreciation which for us is important as it relates to the experiences of adult education both for the adult educator and for the adult learner - is Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty constructed an anti-sceptical account of reality which is not dualist and has its foundations in perceptual experience. According to Cooper (2008) the originality of Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of the world we as human beings experience is because of the focus he accorded to the role of the body in the construction of the spatiotemporal world; for Merleau-Ponty, a human being's 'primary mode of knowledge is in the hands' (the body) (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 143). However, running parallel to this notion of the body is his idea of consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty consciousness is not a matter of 'I think that', but rather is a matter of 'I can' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 137). As such, Merleau-Ponty insists that we must 'exercise our operative intentionality' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 144). This 'I can' idea (this *upsurge* of being, we may say) is an interesting notion for our attempt to examine the voice of the adult educator from an ontological perspective. Embracing this perspective, we can form the premise that being involved in adult education – either as a learner or educator - presents an individual with the opportunity to further 'authenticate' one's existence. Therefore, I wish to draw a subtle distinction between what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'lived' body and the 'objective' body.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) the 'objective' body (the material body of bones and flesh) has a 'merely contingent' relation to its owner. However, it is the 'lived' body - the body of the 'I can' (to borrow Merleau-Ponty's phrase) - which is not separable even in thought from one's existence. We can postulate then that engagement in adult education – whether as a learner or

educator – can enhance the ‘I can’, as an ontological phenomenon of being which re-aligns the workings of our ‘objective’ and ‘lived’ bodies to our minds and consciousness’s. Adult education, therefore, can be, and is, a kind of ontological tool. Education, and our mechanical and intellectual engagement in it, is informed by the senses. Therefore, it helps adults to realise their metaphysical potential-in-the-world. In fact, we may even surmise that it can provide the individual with another opportunity to come face to face with his or her incarnate self.

So, how does this highly technical understanding of the human experience relate to Freire’s ontology. In every step of their quest for freedom it is necessary for people to view themselves as men and women involved in the ontological and historical vocation of evolving fully into a complete human being: ‘reflecting and taking action now, become vital when one does not erroneously attempt to dichotomize the content of humanity from its historical forms’ (Freire 1970, p. 48). And this idea is developed further here when we see the human being as a being which is yet incomplete. Because of this incomplete state the individual is the only being who treats not merely his/her actions and deeds, but his/her very self as the qualifier of reflection. Through this ability he/she marks himself/herself out of all the other animals as animals cannot separate themselves from their routine and are therefore incapable of contemplation and reflection (Freire 1970). This comparison of Freire’s is not to be viewed as a naïve and superficial distinction. It is by examining this distinction that we see the parameters which shape and delimit the action of every individual in his/her *life space* (Roberts 2000). (Adult education can play a major role in this experience). Animals are unable to define objectives or influence their modification of nature with no meaning beyond themselves. An animal is basically a ‘being-in-itself’ (Heidegger 2008; Freire 1970; Sartre 2008). Richard Shaull supplements this Freirean interpretation of the distinction between man and the world of an animal by saying that ‘a human being’s ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in doing so moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and

richer life individually and collectively. This *world* to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a *given* reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved' (Shaul in Freire 1970, p. 14). Human beings who are attentive to their activity in the world, and who carry out the objectives which they select - including their relations with the wider world and with other human beings – colour the world by means of their imaginative presence. Indeed, humankind's existence is unlike the existence of an animal, it is historical. People not only live but exist; 'animals live out their lives on an a-temporal, flat, uniform prop; humans exist in a world which they are constantly recreating and transforming' (Freire 1970, p. 80).

Conscientization

What follows is a brief description of the Freirean theory of conscientization. The basis of Freire's theory of conscientization is dialogue: 'Dialogue is an encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world - dialogue is an existential necessity' (Freire 1970, p. 69). Human beings, according to Freire (1974), emerge out of their submersion and gain the faculty to intervene in reality. This happens due to *conscientizacao* (Freire 1970). *Conscientizacao*, usually referred to as 'conscientization' is the strengthening of the attitudes and awareness of all emergences: 'One of the cardinal principles in Freire's philosophy is that of a man's vocation to *be more* – more, that is, than what he is at any given time or place. There are thus no developed men except in a biological sense. The essence of the human is to be in a continual non-natural process. In other words, the characteristic of the human species is its repeatedly demonstrated capacity for transcending what is merely given, what is purely determined' (Veiga 1993, p. 9). In the same way that a person's ontological and historical vocation may be hampered by particular socially manufactured constructs - that one's understanding is 'therefore, on one level, conscientization, or the process of becoming aware, provides a space in which one's perception of reality may change' (Blackburn 2000, p. 17).

Conscientization is more than a mechanically driven intellectual process - it is the essence of a dialectical process which manifests action. Conscientization leads to reflection, which leads to action, which brings us to liberation (Freire 1970). In the same way that existential philosophy calls for an individual to rigorously assess their own lives in an attempt to come to an authentic awakening, the Freirean theory of conscientization invites the individual to become aware of social, political and economic contradictions (and non-contradictions and opportunities)¹ which are present in society (Freire 1970; 1974).

Examinations of the findings

What follows is not an exhaustive list of the contributions from the adult educators, but rather a sample of those offerings. The chosen pieces serve as vignettes, which, it is hoped, demonstrate the deep level of thinking and feeling of the adult educators for adult learners and adult education.

(Nessa) Well, partly I view adult education in a functional sense. Obviously, people are here to improve their vocational skills. But I think it [adult education] is connected to them [the adult learner] in a more inward way. Education, and their lack of it, relates to feelings about themselves – their feelings of failure... of inadequacy about a bad experience in the past. Even I think their feelings about themselves as a person. They... feel inadequate. Education, and the lack of it in an everyday sense, makes them feel inadequate. It can be quite disturbing to them. It shakes them up. So, I view adult education as both a human right on one level, but I view it as something deeply personal to the adult also. Education is growth. The educational process is far reaching.

(Aidan) I view adult education, and indeed my role as an adult educator, as being a much bigger thing than just teaching someone to improve their skills or to get a job. If adult education was just about skills, important as that is, the focus would be entirely on the technical aspect of the content and other practical stuff. But I view adult education as being much more than that. Because it taps into their whole life...and that is my starting point...before they ever put pen to paper or discuss assessments or module descriptors. I view adult education as possibly

¹ The author believes that the phenomenon of conscientization can positively support existing structures also; Conscientization could positively compound aspects of the values and traditions of western society. But, that is to be examined on another occasion.

representing someone's 're-starting' [sic] point. Education can help someone go somewhere in an inward way.

(Vincent) *I think adult education is so important in the adult and I try to instil this into my learners also. Adult education and community education, it is important to remember, is not a charitable thing. I mean to say this - adult education is a 'right'. But it is more than just a 'right'. Think for one second. Take any of the arts – like science, music, or poetry – all the things that make life worth living. Life is not just about an income. OK, if someone's educational standard is very low they are probably going to have a low income also. Education can also affect their social life. I view adult education as impacting all areas of an individual's life. And I know from previous learners that when a learner does begin to engage in education they grow...they encounter more potential in themselves.*

(Magda) *Developing education in adulthood can be daunting at first for the adult learner. I have seen it myself. I have seen over the years the change in body language even. When learners come through that door – not all learners mind you, but most – when they come through that door their shoulders are slouched, they are timid; their voices even can seem meek. But here is the power of adult education in adulthood. Eventually, because education is a hard road, the fact that they are developing their skills they are also, literally, beginning to come out of their shells. An adult learner even begins to carry themselves more proudly.*

(Nessa) *You know education in adulthood can be a very personal thing. And, by that I mean...for example, I will never forget a woman I had as a student. She was in her 40s. She had 2 children when she was no more than a baby herself. She had no education, and no real help from her husband, I might add. She raised those two children and they turned out OK. Now, I knew this woman to see after all Westtown (pseudonym) is not a big place. She always looked as if life had got the better of her, y'know. Well, anyway didn't she walk in here one day [sic]. I began to take her for one to one tuition. She was weak but was determined. That was a number of years ago now – today that woman has studied for an arts degree. Now, my point about adult education being a personal thing is this. Yes, she happens to be studying for a degree but when I see that woman now – she no longer looks as if life has gotten the better of her. She now has gotten the better of her own life. That's what education...developing your education as an adult...can do. Education in adulthood I think is a spiritual thing as well as anything else. By spiritual I don't necessarily mean religious.*

(Aidan) *I view my work with adult learners as having a process to it. When I start working with new learners I generally tell them a little about myself...some different experiences...they usually respond to this. I centre my work on sharing. I think if you can get to know each other*

as adults and on an equal level; then that is where the work can begin. I always view my work as having a strong element of sharing to it. But that sharing has a cut-off point – I would never discuss anything that has got to do with private things in our lives.

(Nessa) *Actually, there's no getting away from it....I view my relationship with my learner as being deeply connected to my own life. I think my own personal life experiences and the courses that I did...I think all of that was contributing to me saying "you know...better learning takes place if we can be human with each other and if we can understand each other...and then if we can understand each other and if I can...you know...not 'step' into your life but at some level I can listen to your life and share parts of my own. It's a kind of journey.*

(Vincent) *I think that it's OK to show a little bit of vulnerability. In other words that it is OK to show that you [as the educator] don't know everything. They are adults...they know the body language and they see...that's the way they look at things in their life...they will figure out if you are real.*

(Magda) *Let me tell you that adult education, as in the immediate tutoring of adults, can be very taxing. Adults can drain you emotionally but that's part of it. You hear a lot of things, but you need to respect that. Sometimes I think I'm some kind of therapist. However, although you need to respect privacy you are there primarily to get through the work. I respect my learners deeply as I was one of them.*

Recommendations for policy, practice, and future research

As alluded to in the introduction, the voice of the adult learner has had an impact on Irish adult education from both a pedagogical aspect and, to a certain degree, a policy development aspect. Vital as that is, the voice of the adult learner is not our concern here. The priority here has been to engage in a theoretical way with the voice of the Irish adult educator. By applying a Freirean lens to the vignettes reproduced above we can at least bring these opinions into a theoretical realm and in the process add not just to the significant body of Freirean educational theory, but

also to contemporary discourse on Irish adult education. The overarching theme which the voice of these educators presents us with could be translated as a type of caution. And that caution is to step back from the technocratic and political concerns of adult education and to keep a focus on those aspects of adult education which permeate the ontological experiences of the adult learner and, indeed, the adult educator. The following comments may serve as recommendations for policy, practice and future research or they may simply be observations. When considering the views of the adult educators we may suggest that adult education policy development must not fall into a pedagogical malaise whereby we solely acknowledge the economic benefits of adult education. In parallel with these concerns perspectives on adult education, such as presented here, should promote the communicative, humanising, and transformative aspects of this area of education, particularly as they effect the personhood of the individual. Adult education teacher training programmes should include a focus on becoming/being a reflexive educator. Therefore, distinct policies need to be embraced within the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which highlight the need for continuing professional development and in-service training for all adult educators.

Adult education policy makers should be increasingly sensitive to the critical and emancipatory theories of adult education espoused by Paulo Freire. This would continue to promote the socio-economic and functionalist aspects of adult education development while highlighting and encouraging the 'consciousness raising' (ontological) aspects of adult education. The educational relationship between the adult educator and the adult learner *must* be thought of having a mentoring aspect to it. This should be reflected more in the discourse on Irish adult education and in programmes of initial teacher/tutor training. Adult educators (if not already doing so) should embrace the understanding of their pedagogical experience - how a philosophical examination of one's attitudes, beliefs and biases can contribute to the

understanding of how one forms an educational relationship with adult learners. This will have positive theoretical and methodological repercussions for their practice in adult education.

This research has shown how an ontological appreciation of the voice of the adult educator can help an adult learner to bear witness to the primordial recollection of their being; this understanding of the impact of adult education development on the consciousness of the adult learner should have profound implications for adult education research and practice.

As has been advocated throughout this paper, the application of Freirean ontology as a way to examine the voice of the adult educator could be utilised by the wider academic community in the attempt to further understand the pedagogy of adult educators. This has application in the examination of the adult educator/adult learner educational relationship. This in turn will have significant implications for the further understanding of the democratising effects of adult education in society. This type of research promotes and upholds the notion of *transformative learning*. Interpretive research of this kind should be conducted where the meaning of experience, for both the researcher and the research participants, continually informs the research strategy.

Finally, the paper has highlighted how the voice of the adult educator can be very valuable in the current climate of epistemological flux in educational and social research and can constructively contribute to a balanced dialogue between both sides of the social, educational, and political spectrum in Ireland.

The re-imagining of Freirean theory for Irish adult education practice

The over-arching aim of this research is to bring a beneficial re-orienting from traditional pedagogy to a more ontological consideration. We can say with some confidence that this shift in focus is to be welcomed in adult education discourse. The re-creation and re-thinking of Freire's ideas, as they directly relate to Ireland in the 21st Century, needs to be developed further. Although recommendations for policy, practice, and future research have been made a

more detailed discussion will be developed at a later time. While referencing the voice of the Irish adult educator in relation to Freire's ontological and metaphysical considerations, the discussion will encompass the political context of Ireland today. This will feature an evaluation of the Irish government's reliance on neo-liberal economics twinned with a consideration of the major changes in to our social life and structure.

Nevertheless, we have seen how the particular focus on Freire's theory which was presented above can be an important area of discussion for adult education in Ireland today. The language and practice of philosophical inquiry is sadly absent from much of the academic and educational discourse and public discourse in modern Ireland. Therefore, it is the I-thou relationship - as it relates to adult education practice - which is at the centre of this research.

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