In pursuit of critical literacy: Understanding experiences of exclusion for adult literacy learners

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Abstract

This paper explores exclusion and equality through critical theory, in the context of adult literacy provision in Ireland, by investigating the sites of exclusion that exist for a group of five male adult literacy learners. A summary review of literacy theories, exclusion and equality is provided framing the reporting of data from this collaborative action research study. Focus groups and visual methods were used to gather qualitative data relating to incidents, attitudes and experiences of exclusion. Findings relate to two main sites of exclusion namely workplace literacy and work-related training and form-filling and correspondence. Giving voice to participants and enabling them to record photographically and critique their individual experiences of exclusion bridges critical literacy theory and practice. It is argued that participative practice in research can empower learners to make links between personal literacy difficulties and the systems that permeate wider society, and to act for social change.

Introduction

Literacy is one of the most fundamental and valuable forms of "educational currency" and the key to unlocking "the larger coffers of other forms of capital: economic, social and cultural" (Feeley, 2007, p. 15). Considering one in four adults in Ireland displays serious literacy difficulties (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 1997), the issue of being excluded and isolated from these capitals is a very real problem for many.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the links between exclusion, equality and adult literacy provision in the context of critical literacy theory. A further aim is to link current theory to classroom based activities thus informing literacy practice. The research investigates the sites of exclusion that exist for a group of

adult literacy students who tell their own story of marginalisation and highlight how exclusion is of notable significance where literacy is concerned (National Adult Literacy Association (NALA), 2011a). Furthermore, by investigating issues that constitute real problems for people attempting to negotiate their way through the world, concepts such as disadvantage, community and equality are brought to the fore, which can aid our understanding of how society works and lead to change (Freire, 1970).

The paper begins with a concise review of literature relating to literacy theory and to the concepts of exclusion and equality. The methodological design and procedures are briefly outlined and the findings are presented and discussed. In light of the theoretical perspectives explored conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made for policy, practice and research.

Literature review

Low levels of literacy negatively impact on the individual and are likely to permeate a family unit (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2000). Potential negative consequences include unemployment and social exclusion (NALA, 2011a), lower income (Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit, 1993; NALA, 2011a) and reduced career aspirations (NALA, 2011a), questioning the meritocratic beliefs central to the way that our school system operates. The provision of literacy programmes is imperative in addressing aspects of social exclusion (Rose & Atkin, 2007), tackling past inequalities in the education system, and addressing current problems in relation to access and participation.

Although there are opposing views with regard to the categorization of literacy theory (Graff, Jones & Street, 1997), for the purpose of this research, the dominant theoretical perspectives are grouped into three main areas considered by Lankshear & Knobel (1998) and Mark (2007), who identified a triad of dimensions to literacy – operational, cultural and critical.

Concentrating on core skills such as reading, writing and numeracy, operational literacy is the predominant literacy that children entering school are taught. In the past, economic forces have encouraged this approach to literacy, to ensure that the skills needed for the workplace are developed (Mark, 2007). Historically, operational literacy was seen as an independent process, impartial to the vast range of social factors that exist within our society – "a neutral variable" (Lankshear, 1999, p. 205). Viewing adult literacy in this way does not consider the specific literacy needs of the student and concentrates on fulfilling

a standardized set of criteria, disregarding the contextual requirements of the adult learner. If literacy is a dynamic concept (Jarvis, 2005), driven by the need for specific skills to function in our world, the concept of teaching literacy as non-contextual falls short.

Cultural / Social literacy asserts that an individual needs to become adept in more than just words and numbers, in order to function in society and is recognized by many authorities (NALA, 2005; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2006) as best practice in literacy tuition. It is grounded in a strong belief in the empowerment of the individual, supports relaxed, learner-centred tuition, and disregards outdated ideas surrounding attainment of certain levels in reading and writing, lauding a more flexible approach to literacy, based on a student's learning needs (NALA, 2005). However, cultural literacy has been criticized on the grounds that skills learned in a classroom setting may not easily transfer to social situations (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997). In addition, it may encourage adult learners to slot into an existing society, as opposed to challenging students to consider how society could be changed for the better (Ozanne, Adkins & Sandlin, 2005).

Critical literacy is embedded in Freirean theories surrounding discovery and the development of critical consciousness and while the theory supports contextualized learning as per cultural literacy, Freire (1970) urges the student to engage further. He believed that traditional Banking Education, the passive consumption of teacher-directed facts and figures, "attempts to control thinking and action and inhibits creative power", thereby becoming an "exercise in domination" (Freire, 1970, p. 59). Freire presents a solution to this in the form of Problem-Posing Education, whereby students are encouraged to explore a topic through a series of thought provoking questions that relate directly to students' lives. Crucial to Freire's theory is the concept of praxis in education, whereby he encourages the student to reflect on wider issues affecting society and to act for social change by recognising and addressing deep rooted inequalities.

This type of literacy encourages learners to discuss real issues that affect their everyday lives and introduces the teacher as a partner in learning as opposed to a source of knowledge. Furthermore, the perception of education is investigated as students engage with problems within society, and theorise solutions, as opposed to passively receiving a series of text based facts (Shor, 1992). However, this theory is underpinned by engaging critically with a student, which may not happen in the reality of the classroom environment (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2001).

Exclusion and Equality

Exclusion entails being "excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society" (Social Inclusion, 2012). A major factor behind social exclusion is the "joined up" nature of social issues such as unemployment, poverty, high crime rates and family breakdown (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Exclusion can limit employment, economic and life opportunities (Sen, 2000), is a habitual occurrence for those who experience literacy difficulties, and can prevent communication in and with the world. Forms, timetables, bills, text messages all involve some form of literacy capable of excluding the one in four Irish adults with serious literacy difficulties. Consequently, inclusive education "is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Focusing particularly on vulnerable and marginalized groups, it seeks to develop the full potential of every individual" (UNESCO, 2012, n.p.) and aims to eradicate discrimination and encourage and promote equality, social cohesion and personal empowerment.

At the core of literacy education and inclusion lies the concept of equality, one of the basic principles of egalitarianism and democratic social order. Equality is the idea that all people have equal value and importance (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2004) and is a central consideration for this research. Equality helps people to exercise choice and freedom, impacts on personal development and contributes to the evolution of cultural values (Baker et al., 2004). Literacy education therefore, is about a lot more than reading and writing – it is about human rights, liberty, personal development, cultural capital and justice.

The acceptance of exclusionary literacy practices as norms within society signifies that inequalities exist. Experts (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Feeley, 2007; Mark, 2008) maintain that literacy cannot only be a struggle to redistribute basic skills; it should incorporate a wider view which considers equality issues in society as a whole, an outlook shared with the critical literacy perspective. Some (Feeley, 2007) advocate a more structural / systemic approach to literacy, which will impact on educational disadvantage at a national level. This viewpoint suggests that because equality issues are interrelated we need to address a spectrum of disadvantage, and engage in significant social reform, in order to have any real consequence on literacy education. While it is crucial to recognise and discuss the causes of, and possible solutions to, low literacy levels, this systemic view of literacy could be interpreted as overwhelming from the perspective of literacy tutors. Were practitioners to adopt this viewpoint in relation to education, it could become difficult to undertake meaningful practice, until suitable policies were in place at a nation-

al level – a potentially protracted, dispute-ridden process. Therefore, this research fits in alongside Lynch and Lodge who suggest that resolving inequality "means working on a range of political, economic and cultural sites…simultaneously" (2002, p. 195). Systemic change combating inequalities is essential to an inclusive society. However, at times, systemic change arises from issues that are identified at a grassroots level, a process to which this research contributes.

Realising change necessitates the use of power and / or influencing power relations (Coe & Mayne, 2009). Inglis (2009) argues that power in society exists at two levels. On the one hand lies the social class divide, legitimised and perpetuated by state laws, policies and the distribution of funding. This is where the systemic view of literacy is situated. However Inglis suggests that we must also consider how power exists within ourselves and each member of our society, "the way we think, in how we see, read and interpret the world" (2009, p. 111). Critical literacy theory is framed around this belief and attempts to tap in to Inglis' second kind of power – the power that lies within us as individuals and as part of active communities.

This research highlights the relationship between literacy theory, exclusion and equality, through participatory literacy practice. Theoretical knowledge is important; it provides us with an alternative way of viewing and situating a literacy approach. It also tenders a platform of what is "known" should we wish to reflect on / add to current theory. Each of the literacy theories discussed addresses exclusion in different ways. For example, if a student has difficulties understanding a phone bill operational literacy would advocate teaching the alphabet, verbs, nouns, etc., to enable the student to read the bill. Cultural / social literacy would promote target teaching of the bill, focusing on the specific information relevant to the student. Critical literacy would encourage the student to critically reflect on the bill, explore associations with inequality and identify actions to assist in reducing same.

Frequently, attention in the classroom focuses on the operational and social sides of literacy. This practice is both realistic and beneficial offering learners a system with which to address the practicalities of literacy (such as phonics / form filling) and culturally / socially situating the learning process, framed around the learner's needs. However, the relational nature of exclusion and its disproportionate connection to poverty and disadvantage (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001), also necessitates a space for learners to critically reflect on literacy and exclusion within society.

Methodology

In this collaborative action research, focus groups and visual capture were used to gather qualitative data relating to incidents, attitudes and experiences of exclusion, giving voice to participants and enabling them to describe their individual experiences of exclusion. A crucial element shared by action research theory and Freirean beliefs alike, is emancipatory social change, achieved through the broadening of participative practice in research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007, p. 301) point out that "those closest to the problem are in the best position to identify it and work towards its solution". Inclusive teaching practice was an important element of this research, as participants had some difficulties with literacy. Thus photography and group discussion were used to tap into participants' visual, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences.

The research took place in a local Adult Literacy centre with a group of five male adult learners aged between 25 and 65. Permission to conduct the research was received from the Adult Literacy Officer (ALO), the Board of Management (BOM) and the research participants. The purpose of the research and the implications for participants were outlined at an information session. Confidentiality was assured in relation to group identities; participants had the opportunity to ask questions and were assured of their right to withdraw from the research. The research group agreed to participation and gave consent for video recording of group discussions and the use of photographs. Participants' names have been changed to protect identity.

Two focus group discussions took place one week apart, fitting in with the scheduling of existing literacy classes. At the first discussion, the concepts of "exclusion" and "literacy" were examined using an application form as a code to enhance critical thinking (Freire, 1970). Participants were led through a critical awareness process in relation to the form, considered and described situations where they experience(d) literacy-based exclusion, reflected upon how these situations could be captured visually and were asked to return in a week with an image that represented exclusion. Photography allowed participants to express their feelings about exclusion through a non-literacy based medium, aided the reflective process and helped in the explanation / understanding of exclusion (Kingsley, 2009). The second discussion revolved around participants' photos and how they signified exclusion. The group then considered how this exclusion could be prevented and decided if action should be taken to rectify the situation and by what means.

Findings and discussion

In the first discussion, participants defined exclusion and identified and described times when they were excluded because of their level of literacy. Participants agreed that exclusion was "being left out of something" and that literacy could mean reading, writing, signs, logos, etc and participated in a discussion using a Supplementary Welfare Allowance Form. When discussing the way that the form is written the group agreed – "it's not too bad, but they ask for a lot of details". When asked whether they were affected by the form, observations included "I'd just give it to someone else and ask them to fill it out" (Peter) and "it's a psychological thing…I know now that even if a form is put up to me and I'm capable of doing it, I'm still nervous of it" (Brian). All agreed that their level of literacy had excluded them in some way from reaching their potential and that they had stayed "in the background" due to their literacy difficulties. The discussion concluded with participants agreeing to attempt to capture exclusion by taking photos that represented their experiences in relation to exclusion. Four of the five participants brought photos to the second discussion. Findings relate to two main sites of exclusion – (a) workplace literacy and work-related training and (b) form-filling and correspondence.

Workplace literacy and work related training

Mark illustrated the problems that a literacy difficulty can cause when a promotion at work led to increased reading and writing requirements. Examples included logging information and registering / responding to complaints.

> "He (the boss) was at me for ages…So in the end I said yeah and before I knew it I found myself in a room with all the management, all of them had folders and I'm there going oh no, how did I end up here?"

(Mark).

All of the participants reported difficulties in relation to attending and completing work related courses.

> "I went up towards the end and said it (*re. literacy difficulties*) to the tutor. And he said, well you could have told me at the start; sure it was there on the form. And I hadn't even looked at the form….everything goes, your confidence and everything"

(Peter).

John's photo of his local SIPTU office represented the difficulties that he had when he took up a union related role at work, plus the pressure that was put on him to complete relevant courses in relation to the job.

> "And he kept on to me that they had a college up in Galway and he wanted to send me up…you're on the list, you're on it, he kept saying…but I made excuses and I just wouldn't do it".

Brian had taken a photo of a sign for a civil defence battalion. He had been asked to complete the officers' training some years ago, had passed the initial interview and taken up a place but resigned after a few weeks, as he found it would involve a high level of reading and writing.

The group also thought it important that those who are giving courses to the public, be trained to deal with people who have literacy difficulties. Advising course attendees at the beginning of courses that they will be facilitated was also suggested – "I was only ever on one course where the guy giving the course said it openly what about the person who can't read and what about the person who's not good at writing?" (Mark). "James recalled a positive experience.

> "I went on a first aid course…and I said to the guy look I'm not good with the pen. And he said no problem, let me know any time you're stuck. You're not going to fail your exam…I felt more confident because I said it from the start".

Some of the group thought that there should be less writing on courses in relation to areas that don't require writing (e.g. truck driving).

> "but you see all of these courses about why do you want to drive a truck? Why do you think? That's all only nonsense. They should bring you out on the road and teach you how to drive a lorry. Not so many forms"

(James).

In addition, Mark and Peter believed that there should be more multiple choice questions on assessments.

Participants' experiences of fear, embarrassment and negative memories in relation to courses, is supported by NALA's (1998) assertions in relation to barriers to attending training endorsing the claim that literacy difficulties can have a negative effect on life chances (DES, 2000). Attendance at literacy classes aims to give

students the confidence to participate in other courses. Further possible solutions could include advertisement of courses as literacy friendly, with modules written in plain English, the option of assessment through multiple choice exams and the reassurance of the availability of confidential literacy support for those who may need it. The decision to refuse training / promotion means that income levels will never rise beyond a certain point. By limiting career prospects, participants could be making a decision that not only has an impact on many aspects of their own lives, but also the lives of their children and the experiences of the communities in which they live (NALA, 2011b). This illustrates the "joined up" nature of social exclusion and the associated knock on effects. Organisations offering courses to lower skilled workers need to be aware of literacy difficulties, if they are to combat exclusion and promote equality; not only during the course, but also when providing introductory information to potential students.

Form-filling and correspondence
Several participants recognised the disempowering nature of form-filling. Peter spoke about giving blood.

> "Sure that's why a lot of people won't give blood. Did you ever look at the questions on them? …if you were handed a form like that… it's worse than anything…I don't understand half the questions"

(Peter).

Peter subsequently brought in a photo of his local credit union, which had treated him unfairly during a loan application and told him they could only hear his appeal in writing. "It made me scared to go near the bank…I had no confidence after it..."

However, none of the participants challenged the authority of the organisation that designed the form. Fawns & Ivanic (2001) suggest several reactions to form-filling by way of resistance to institutional power, including utilising the terms "not applicable" (N/A), entering into dialogue with the organisation, refusing to fill in forms and teaching critical awareness. While all of these suggestions may not be viable, the concept of resisting the form is useful as it demonstrates that we have an alternative(s). However, entering into dialogue with an organisation about a form depends on there being personnel, trained in literacy awareness, available to customers / the public.

Mark and Peter discussed how problematic sending correspondence can be.

> "I remember going to get a mass card one time and the man asked me to spell the surname. I was so embarrassed. I didn't expect him to do that… And I said, you know something, I'll probably give it to you wrong so I won't say it. And I left"

(Mark).

> "Well, she said, I'm sorry but …you'll have to put that in writing. I said…I can't really write. Well, she said, you'll have to find someone that can"

(Peter).

Mark brought in a photo of a card, representing difficulties he has in writing and sending cards and his resulting avoidance of this activity.

Correspondence is embedded in social situations, beliefs and practices and has both meaning and consequence (Barton & Hall, 2000). Representing personal connections between people and linking the individual with his / her social world (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), card writing tends to encompass a personal sentiment and may therefore assume particular significance.

The group advocated more literacy awareness training for people working within the public service and for tutors involved in workplace training, alternative assessment procedures for compulsory testing and more visual aids, in particular, the literacy help sign/symbol. "They take it for granted that people can read and write… they're probably not being trained to deal with people with difficulties" (Brian). While only Brian knew anything about the literacy help sign prior to the study, participants suggested more widespread introduction of this sign into businesses and public places would be a positive step towards inclusion, echoing the views expressed by adult learners consulted by NALA (2010).

When asked whether they would like to take action in relation to the exclusion they had discussed, some felt that they would not be listened to as individuals, but that correspondence would be better coming from the Adult Literacy Centre – "I think that that stuff is better off coming from the centre…from the boss of the centre" (James). Others were reluctant, due to issues in relation to confidentiality and self-confidence. Freire puts forward a "dialogical cultural theory of action" (1970) which incorporates a number of constituent elements,

including cooperation, unity for liberation, organization and cultural synthesis. Future research in this area should give a more detailed consideration to these elements

This research was underpinned by critical awareness and by Freirean theory concerning discovery, reflection and action. Critical literacy theory urges the student to think of literacy as not only reading and writing skills, but an opportunity to create a more equal society. It also relates to Inglis' (2009) view of the power that exists within us as individuals. Subsequent classes with this group involved much discussion concerning exclusion, demonstrating a heightened critical awareness and a willingness to reflect on aspects of society that are excluding them, and to question the systems that support this exclusion. This trend has been recognised by previous research (Birden, 2002) and is a central objective in critical literacy. While it is important to acquire the basic skills to participate fully within society, the introduction to a critical way of thinking and being in the world is crucial to effect change and is of more value to both individuals and their communities, empowering learners themselves to act for change.

The findings reported represent the views of a small sample of adult learners and cannot be taken as in any way representative of the views and experiences of adult learners more generally. Gender issues present during the research process should be mentioned. The all–male research group existed as a class prior to the study and were chosen to participate for a number of non-gender related reasons including excellent attendance, a history of spirited discussions and a willingness to try new ways of learning. In addition, almost all participants had been together for at least six months, which had fostered a group sense of trust. Participation rates of men in literacy education and adult education in general are relatively low due to complex issues surrounding barriers to participation, leading NALA (2009) to conclude that "literacy and education settings are increasingly being viewed as the female domain" (p.38). While the group were chosen for reasons not related to gender, it may have played a part in the research. Men's identity and role in society is often defined by their jobs and this study resulted in findings surrounding work based literacy and training. Perhaps this issue was more to the fore than it would have been in a mixed / all female group. Participation of men in adult education is important – lack of participation of any demographic leads us to question equality of access, provision, flexibility and responsiveness (AONTAS, 2008).

There are a number of recommendations as a result of this research. An updated literacy survey of the Irish population should be conducted as a matter of urgency. At a policy level, a more widespread awareness campaign around workplace literacy and introduction of workplace literacy programmes is advised. Furthermore, research into employers / trainers and their opinions / knowledge / conceptualisation of the exclusionary consequences of work place literacy difficulties would be useful. Literacy training and support for tutors and trainers is also proposed. The vital role of NALA and the VECs in combating exclusion for those with low levels of literacy must also be acknowledged. Furthermore, literacy awareness classes for individuals whose job involves dealing with the public, particularly those in public service organisations is crucial to reduce exclusion. The use of the literacy awareness help sign could be investigated and promoted by students as part of their class / group work. Finally, at a community level, critical thinking strategies should be incorporated into literacy / basic education classes, to create opportunities for students to effect change.

Conclusion

Literacy provision can be conceptualised from operational, social / cultural and critical perspectives. In order to fully cater to individuals presenting with literacy difficulties, we must consider the value of incorporating elements from each of these methods. The interwoven concepts of adult literacy, exclusion and equality and the disproportionate connection between exclusion and disadvantage (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) necessitate a space for adult learners to critically reflect on literacy and exclusion within society.

Exclusion begets exclusion and is connected to a host of ancillary social issues. This research underlines the social division between those with literacy difficulties and those without and the exclusion that can arise because of this disparity. Participants spoke of the fear and embarrassment felt in relation to literacy problems and how these affected course participation, promotions and everyday activities such as giving blood, sending a card and applying for a loan. Hence, for literacy learners, exclusion and inequality are phenomena to be faced on a daily basis, a concept that is underappreciated by many.

Quality adult education aims to empower adult learners to achieve their full potential (UNESCO, 2010). This research focused on bridging critical literacy theory and practice. Critical investigations into the experience of exclusion assists learners in making links between personal literacy difficulties and the systems permeating wider society. This meant that participants were able to

connect the exclusion that they had experienced to broader societal concerns and to deliver possible responses such as more training for public service and training personnel, less writing on courses for more practical subjects and alternative testing procedures.

Freire stresses the concept of praxis as reflection and action which cannot be condensed into either "verbalism or activism" (1970, p.106). Missing from this research was a way in which to translate the knowledge, experience and suggestions of the group, into a more structured plan to take action against exclusion. Therefore, this research as a Freirean exercise is incomplete without the presence of a transforming action to free the dominated culture from alienation (Freire, 1970). The dialogic cultural theory of action suggests a starting point with which to begin this process.

When considering action, we must also reflect on ourselves and the ways in which practitioners can act against exclusion. It is easy to feel as if we are being swept along in a wave of new regulations, documentation requirements and funding cuts. As Inglis (2009) points out, power exists within us as individuals and as part of active communities. Embracing critical literacy as a viable form of learning within the spectrum of literacy education is a necessary action for us as tutors to take against exclusion.

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