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Going back to our roots: the role of transformatory education in the battle against social exclusion

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Introduction

In the UK, the 1990s have seen the creation and honing of government generated discourses on social exclusion and lifelong learning. To a remarkable extent these discourses are discrete. The Social Exclusion Unit's recent report 'Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal' addresses various educational issues yet fails to include the phrase 'lifelong learning'. Government publications on lifelong learning dedicate similarly negligible space to social exclusion. The Green Paper 'The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain' suggests that learning 'contributes to social cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging, responsibility and identity' and 'builds local capacity to respond to change' (Uden 1998). Yet in spite of rhetoric espousing 'joined up thinking' to 'joined up problems', the potential of adult education approaches to combatting social exclusion still has to be identified and analysed. As McNair recently observed 'we have not yet got the role of adult learning firmly enough into the minds of those shaping broader social policy as the Social Exclusion Unit's report ... demonstrates' (McNair 1999). Recently completed research which we undertook at a voluntary sector family resource centre situated in a deprived neighbourhood presents some key ideas from which educators could design initiatives grounded in familiar transformatory praxis yet innovatory in the current social exclusion context. In this paper we explore the issues affecting policy and draw on the research findings to show how community education presents a means of reconfiguring the established problem/solution welfare nexus.

Problems and solutions

The Social Exclusion Unit draws its membership from the civil service and from people with, according to the website's homepage, 'front-line experience of tackling the problems of social exclusion'. These include representatives from a range of sectors: local authorities, probation, the police and private and voluntary organisations. The Department for Education and Employment is represented. The working definition of social exclusion is: 'what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown'. Truancy, school exclusions, 16-18 year olds outside education or employment, teenage pregnancy, street living and 'deprived neighbourhoods' have been the focus of the Unit's work. The rhetoric has a different feel to that of previous governments' initiatives with similar groups: the acceptance of the long-term nature of the issues is reflected to a greater extent in the responses. Furthermore, emphasis on quantitative indicators has been combined with more imaginative and sustained qualitative perspectives.

The terminology applied to the situations is not static: for example, the original phrase 'worst estates' has been acknowledged to be stigmatising following representations from those involved and modifications made. However, just changing the terms used leaves approaches intact. Given limited resources, it is important to spend money appropriately but a question remains around the stigmatising nature of the very identification of a problem. For people who live in an area which meets particular criteria, it could be surmised that there are several possible responses ranging from relief that the situation has been appreciated by the powers-that-be to cynicism based on previous experience or on the perception that there is little chance of meaningful change. The formulation of responses to social exclusion is framed in terms of problems and solutions.

Welfare based initiatives aimed at individuals or families are comparable. Using felt measures of

need, it is not unusual for social and welfare inputs to be targeted towards people who have been recognised by professionals as having a 'problem' or 'need', being 'at risk' or being 'troubled'. The aim is often 'to help people to find solutions to their own problems'. But how many people want to be told by well-paid professionals that they have a 'problem' or 'need', for example with their approach to bringing up children or managing their limited finances, even if the next stage in the process is developing a solution? It should be acknowledged that working with people to identify their problems and solutions is a positive development from previous normative measures where trained and qualified professional 'experts' defined who was 'in need', 'at risk', 'troubled' or had a problem. Experts specified the need or problem and outlined the solution. Inevitably, both the definition and solution were formulated in terms comprehended by the 'expert' and not necessarily appropriate to the individual in terms of gender, class, race, sexuality or (dis)ability. However, when designing their own solutions, people are restricted by their own knowledge and by the expert's knowledge. Professionals' use of power and patterns of practice retain an inevitable arrogance founded on the belief that they have the expertise to understand problems and ability to formulate solutions. Such an approach is specifically disempowering for clients. Currently, for example, parenthood classes are being established in an atmosphere of moral panic. Some parents with children with whom they have trouble coping believe that a class would help because they have heard that classes exist whilst others have less choice about attendance. However, classes take a banking approach, emphasising the leader's expertise, placing them in a position which validates their power. Many people employed in people-focused occupations want to 'help' their clients but this approach can prove patronising. Through leading classes, their worker's professional position and the relationship based on dependency are reinforced.

This approach shares many salient features with 'labelling perspective': people's very being is defined only in terms specific to the identified problem. Addressing the subject of deviance, Gove reminds readers of Tannenbaum's 1938 remarks:

The person becomes the thing he (sic) is described as being... the emphasis is on the conduct that is disapproved of. The parents or the policeman, the older brother or the court, the probation officer or the juvenile institution, insofar as they rest on the thing complained of, rest upon a false ground. Their very enthusiasm defeats their aim. The harder they work to reform the evil, the greater the evil grows ... The way out is through a refusal to dramatise the evil. The less said about it the better (Gove 1980 :9).

Contemporary social interventions are formulated in a manner which has the same tendency to pathologise. The need to target resources leads to the suggestion that a 'problem' lies with the individual or the estate and that a solution comes from a change within the individual or estate. The professional is often working in terms of defined needs in order to promote welfare; a model which is associated with the threat of encouraging dependence. However, professionals' skills could be employed in the battle against social exclusion without the pathologisation of individuals and estates and without working to a 'welfare' model. In addressing the causes and manifestations of social exclusion, it may seem surprising that 'the less said about it the better' could be an adequate - let alone positive-response. We are not proposing ignoring difficult social problems: we are proposing exploring the relevance of an alternative paradigm, familiar to adult and community educators.

Tea not tears

We were commissioned by the Save the Children Fund (SCF) to identify 'unintended outcomes' at an inner city family centre whose work it supported. Intended outcomes were thoroughly documented in terms of designated indicators but senior staff believed that there were further, additional components. Quantitative data were gathered using informal individual and group interview methods together with ongoing action research elements over a three month period. The centre's provision included activities for young people, information and advice sessions, a group for parents and toddlers, childminders' drop-in group and various courses for parents and carers: a wide range but scarcely unique for a community or family centre. The unusual addition was provision for young people excluded from school. Statistical data on the centre's users and the surrounding area showed many of

the aspects identified as component ingredients of social exclusion: the existence of problems.

Our findings suggested that the centre's holistic approach to work meant that people were not seen in terms of their problems. Many agencies' staff take a holistic approach to their clientele but methods of referral and targeting identify people in terms of their difficulties rather than as whole human beings. The centre's approach drastically reconfigured the agenda. People's needs and difficulties were not necessarily on the agenda: the focus was not on the identification of problems or on addressing the causes or on working towards solutions in abstraction from the individual. The repositioning of the problem - solution discourse in a non-central position led to a model of work which was effectively focusing on people themselves. For many, the centre's provision provided a respite from the usually unremitting focus on their needs: 'It was like ... an extended family, all prepared to make you a cup of tea, mop the tears up'. This family valued you as an individual; wanted you to move on. The 'family' atmosphere was extended by uniting, in the single centre, parents and small children with young people. The limiting approach presented by 'working with people to find solutions' was replaced by a 'can-do' culture where personal development was central. Interviewees spoke of having their horizons raised, being encouraged to try different things, going on a range of courses, above all of taking the next step and seeing that they had things to offer. They showed that they had become 'subjects' rather than 'objects'; dynamic operators proactive in their own destiny despite social circumstances.

The right to respect

SCF's work has a clearly stated basis in an agenda of children's rights ('children' is identified by SCF as a portmanteau term which includes young people). The work of its founder, Eglantyne Jebb, was the direct precursor of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UK's 1989 Children Act put the topic into the public arena but debate has tended to focus on child protection and to stall around issues such as physical punishment. This has limited debate on issues such as the joined up statistics which show the negative impact on children and young people of adults' poverty and, for young people in particular, the right to reject cherished beliefs.

The centre's value base was grounded in the rights agenda yet, during our research, the word 'rights' was little heard except from management. The term in regular use by the majority of interviewees was 'respect'. The translation of a theoretical emphasis on people's rights into practice can result in an approach which is condescending or patronising. However, such an outcome is one where respect is absent. 'Respect' has a range of meanings from showing people courtesy and valuing them to expecting deference or inculcating awe or dread. For many people, the 'street' interpretation with its roots in African Caribbean usage is closest to what they seek in their relationships and which is important in establishing a centre as a place they wish to be. The ingredients include an honesty in valuing people which means they know that they are hearing the truth: an approach which is without dissimulation, which feels real rather than assumed or false. At the centre interviewees felt listened to; their opinions and experiences were important. Professional responses to users presented models of good practice which were significant in terms of transformation. For the school non-attenders, the issue of the respect they experienced from professionals was central. They explained that, at school, respect was a one-way matter where teachers expected it but offered none in return. The respect they sought took the form of having their views, ideas and experiences listened to, not being ignored and being trusted. In return for respect and trust, people shared ownership and responsibility.

The centre's norms were a successful fusion for the interviewees, predominantly drawn from communities with their origins in Ireland and the West Indies but could be less acceptable to other groups. Where a culture values a more formal code of respect or expects professionals both to deserve and expect that their status will be recognised, the model could prove less satisfactory. The way in which informality, such as the use of first names, removes barriers for some people may present unacceptable and insurmountable barriers for others. This presents a further challenge when seeking to design alternatives to the professionally constructed problem - solution paradigm or introducing approaches based on concepts of transformatory education.

A central approach?

The gathering of provision within community premises makes economic sense. However, cultural differences and expectations limit the success which a single centre can have within a neighbourhood comprising many communities. Respect is not only culturally constructed but also extends beyond the individual to the group(s) with which individuals identify. Linking fundamental aspects of respect with rights, Downie emphasises the ultimate value of the human being, that 'persons' are 'alike in being ends in themselves' and that they are 'entitled to a minimum equality of consideration' (Downie 1971: 53). Banks incorporates the social work context and explores typical lists of users' rights which start with the right 'to be treated as an end' (Banks 1995 :96). Historically, however, 'persons' tended to be white, middle-class, heterosexual men: the apparent objectivity of the phrase 'respect for persons' is spurious. Our research uncovered a model which was distinctively different from the one which has been translated into clients' charters in welfare agencies because it was built on a humanist position rooted in moral philosophy in the context of an understanding of cultural difference. Whereas social welfare agencies build their work on the concept of respect for all persons, the centre's alternative paradigm included the concept of respect for the group(s) with whom people identified and with the shared and common ground. Such groupings included not only gender, race, sexuality and other core parts of one's being but also a wide range of aspects of current experience and life history. The naming of the groups of which one feels a part is also a facet of transformatory education through which one moves beyond being defined as, for example, somebody's mother to being defined in your own right, incorporating group identifications identified for oneself. The formula of 'accepting individuals as ends in themselves' is inadequate. Whilst some people may feel included, the lack of inclusion of the group context will result in other people feeling excluded. When dealing with social exclusion, the inclusion of the group dimension is important. Difference and diversity need to be celebrated as vital components of the respect which people need, want, crave - and to which they have a right.

Lifelong learning: a space for us?

In governmental reports, 'lifelong learning' has assumed a primarily vocational and training function. Payne notes its 'very clear and precise orientation in the economic' (Payne 1999). Defined around offering training orientated solutions to employment problems, it offers a further example of a discourse formulated within the problem / solution paradigm. Although Payne identifies several alternative models, these are secondary in influence: the predominant properties are domesticating. Furthermore, the 'learning age' hypothesised in the Green Paper appears to have pathologising tendencies: people and communities are seen as needing to respond to change, not to bring it about for themselves.

As many adult educators have shown, education has the potential to equip people to engender change (see, for example, Lovett, Clarke and Kilmurray 1983). Currently, it appears that education's role in regeneration may be limited to accessing vocational training. For many living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, education has already failed to deliver the illusory promise of a job and income. Instead, it is associated in people's minds with failure. For some, exclusion from school provides an early experience of exclusion from society. Ironically, limited basic skills serve to exclude people from influencing the regeneration process. Large scale public investment in an area could be a critical moment, as local residents realise that their ability to influence what is happening depends crucially on their ability to express themselves, to understand budgets and to enter into dialogue with other people in their own community, elected politicians and professionals. However to seize this particular moment requires a number of things. First, local schools need to see themselves as part of the community and as gateways to a wide range of other services. Secondly, educators need to relate to the cultures of those they serve, identifying strengths rather than weaknesses. Thirdly, educational programmes are needed which identify and meet short-term goals, like the ability to organise a community group or get your point across in a public meeting, and build on successes like these to tackle educational under-achievement.

This is very different from the predominant model of contemporary adult education and the

vocationalism of NVQs. The FHE Act resulted in the fracturing of the continuum of 'cradle to grave' community education services which included adult education, community work and youth work. Youth work's presence is not implied within the phrase 'lifelong learning'. The ghost of a shared value base remains in the decision to name the sectoral National Training Organisation for adult education, community work, youth work and their Scottish equivalents PAOLO but, for many, the significance of the presence within the grouping of youth work is unclear. In fact, the shared epistemological territory has been identified and explored in previous SCUTREA papers (for example, Jarvis and Notley 1996, Jones 1996). However, youth work is not only located within an educational paradigm. The occupation is divided between those for whom it is built on the foundation of informal education and those who place it within a welfare paradigm. In support of the first, the definition which emerged from the ministerial conferences of the early 1990s stated:

The purpose of youth work is to redress all forms of inequality and to ensure equality of opportunity for all young people to fulfill their potential as empowered individuals and members of groups and communities and to support young people during the transition to adulthood (Wylie 1997: 51).

For successful collaboration which impacts on a holistically defined model of lifelong learning and develops truly innovative reflective practice, occupations gathered under the PAOLO umbrella need an expressed fundamental shared value-base as robust as that quoted above.

After years of increasing vocationalism, the opportunity clearly exists for educators to show how liberatory education grounded in Freirean principles has potential in working with people deemed socially excluded. At the time of writing, local authorities are being required to produce lifelong learning plans and partnerships. It is pertinent to establish transformatory education as having a significant role both in challenging the dominant paradigm and making a contribution to working with people and neighbourhoods defined as socially excluded. To adult educators, the impact of liberatory approaches is familiar ground. However education's role in addressing inequalities has not been demonstrated to the architects of social policy whose current problematising approach to social exclusion domesticates. If educators fail to communicate their understandings, presumably they have lined up with oppressors. To revisit Freire's work is to be reminded that educators' responsibilities lie with those labelled as socially excluded:

Political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the word, hence, action *with* the oppressed. Those who work for liberation must not take advantage of the emotional dependence of the oppressed - dependence that is the fruit of the concrete situation of domination which surrounds them and which engendered their unauthentic view of the world. Using their dependence to create still greater dependence is an oppressor tactic (Freire 1972: 42).

Educators need to think themselves into the minds of agencies involved in social regeneration and *sell* what they do. Opportunities actually exist to explore transformatory approaches to adult education in local communities.

Conclusion

Freire identified the fact that to attempt to be neutral in the conflict between the powerful and powerless is tantamount to siding with the powerful. Our research suggested that liberatory education provides an excitingly different way ahead which builds on these concepts in the battle against social exclusion. Radical approaches to adult education share with educationally focused youth work the potential to get into community contexts, into the available spaces emerging from the FHE Act fallout. The liberatory, transformatory educational paradigm has the potential to oppose social exclusion from an alternative angle which does not pathologise or have social inclusion as its aim. Its distinctively different approach refuses to 'dramatise the evil'.

Government calls for greater levels of democracy, inter-agency, inter-disciplinary responses will mean

little to people who are experiencing social exclusion unless community educators seize the moment. There is potential for us to operate where innovatory and challenging practice are feasible. Those of us located in higher education institutions are well placed to engage in action research projects located in the context of current social developments and, through the emphasis on change, have a significant impact on the issue of social exclusion.

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