

A black and white photograph of a globe hanging from chains, with a person's silhouette in the foreground.

Lifelong Learning and Social Justice

Communities, Work
and Identities in a
Globalised World

Edited by Sue Jackson

niace
promoting adult learning

CHAPTER TWO

Literacy, lifelong learning and social inclusion: Empowering learners to learn about equality and reconciliation through lived experiences

ROB MARK

Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between literacy, lifelong learning and social inclusion. It looks at ways in which learning from personal experiences can empower learners through an exploration of inequalities affecting their lives. The chapter draws from learner experiences which were recorded through a peace funded action research project in Ireland, The Literacy and Equality in Irish Society Project (LEIS: 2004–6), which sought to promote reconciliation and peacebuilding through an exploration of equality and social inclusion issues affecting the lives of literacy learners. Grounded on theories of literacy that focus on power relations and inequalities, the chapter describes how learners engaged with the process through exploring equality and social justice issues which affected their lives. Inspired by the post-conflict situation in Ireland, the project argues that learners can develop an understanding of conflicting or fractured relationships which have affected their lives. This can in turn promote a better understanding of the peacebuilding process and the need for reconciliation in Ireland. Through the promotion of learning for reconciliation and peace building learners can also be empowered to further participate in a process of critically engagement and citizenship. To enable

learners to learn from their experiences, the project experimented with the use of non-text methods of learning. The chapter argues that these approaches can be effective in enabling learners to improve their understanding of equality issues.

The discourse outlines the processes involved in reconciliation and peace building, examining a framework for dialogue and reflexive practice for adult literacy learning. Finally, it explores the potential role which civic education (whether formal, non-formal or informal) can play in overcoming barriers to learning (intellectual, attitudinal, cultural, physical) and in creating an environment where people feel comfortable and motivated to learn. Such an environment can in turn create the kind of opportunities which promote more sustainable, peaceful relationships and structures for promoting a culture of peace. The findings have a powerful message for the development of adult literacy education. The process and methodology are relevant not only for the development of literacy provision in areas of conflict, but also in all societies where there is a desire to promote improved inter-community relations and an inclusive citizenship based on democratic dialogue. The message arising from the research has local and global relevance. It demonstrates how learners can develop new knowledge and skills based on a greater understanding of inequalities affecting their lives. It also shows how creative approaches can empower learners to change their lives in different ways, e.g. through gaining employment, through engaging in learning for their own personal development or through enabling them to effect change in the everyday life experience at community level.

Connecting literacy, equality and creativity

Many writers in the field of radical literacy, most notably Paolo Freire (1985), have argued that adult literacy needs to be contextualised in a wider debate about struggle against injustice. As an integral part of the equality agenda, literacy becomes an important tool in the construction and development of a more just and equal society. This chapter focuses on the empowering potential of literacy and its ability to transform society through increased understanding of inequalities in learners.

If one examines the concept of literacy and what it means to be literate, very many different meanings are found. Popular usage of the term extends from the simple notion of the ability to read and write to a host of other ideas including the possession of complex multi-literacy skills

such as computer, technical, information, media, visual, cultural, financial, economic, emotional and environmental skills. A glance at the literature shows that there is no single universally effective or culturally appropriate way of teaching or defining literacy. Rather definitions of literacy can be seen as a function of social, cultural and economic conditions. In addition, different discourses may be dominant at different times and in different places.

Throughout the industrialised world, the problem of illiteracy has advanced to the top of the policy agenda, largely as a result of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS: 1994). There has been a radical rethink of the need to confront the issue of illiteracy in national policies, which now recognise the importance of improving literacy for citizens who wish to actively participate in modern, industrial, democratic societies. However, while there is almost complete acceptance that literacy has a profound impact on life chances around the world, there is somewhat less agreement on how adult literacy learning should develop.

Some writers have emphasised the need to move towards an understanding of literacy which encourages critical thinking about the conditions adults find themselves in. For example, Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* emphasised the need for conscientisation of adult learners and more recently, new paradigm shifts have emphasised the need for local everyday life experience to be included in our understanding of literacy needs. (Crowther *et al.*, 2001). Despite attempts of theorists and practitioners to locate literacy within broader sociocultural contexts, the functional view of literacy as a skill to be mastered, still appears to have currency within policy-making. Within recent literacy policy documents, there is little evidence of literacy being considered as a critical practice. In many countries, policies refer to the sociocultural relationships which frame literacy, couched in terms of family, community, citizenship and democracy, but there are few references to the need to examine issues of equality, power relations and identities.

Models of literacy

Street (1984) identified two models which can assist with understanding literacy which he referred to as the autonomous and ideological model. Each of these models has developed discourses which generate very different ways of thinking about literacy. The autonomous model postulates that literacy is a set of normative, unproblematic technical skills that are

neutral and detached from the social context in which they are used. The correct skills are defined or fixed (by a powerful group) and learning becomes focused on a mechanical reproduction of correct skills learned in the classroom and which it is assumed may be easily transferred to real life situations. The other alternative ideological model, sometimes called the social practices model, recognises the sociocultural, diverse nature of literacy. With this model, power to determine content and curriculum lies primarily with the learner and the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in their life-worlds rather than an educational organisation. The development of this model to include a critical approach adds a further dimension to an understanding of literacy by linking it to social and political issues in society. Shor (1999: 15) noted that a critical approach to literacy points to providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices.

Equality perspectives and lifelong learning policies

Lifelong learning policies in both parts of Ireland have emphasised the importance of literacy and basic skills as part of lifelong learning strategies, but with somewhat different emphasis. In Northern Ireland, the lifelong learning strategy stressed the development of basic and key skills in the context of skills, knowledge and understanding essential for employability and fulfilment (DEL, 1999: 1). In contrast, the White Paper on Adult Education in the Republic of Ireland (DES, 2000: 26) emphasised the need for social cohesion and equity as well as the skills requirement of a rapidly changing workforce in the emergence of an inclusive civil society.

The policy agenda could therefore be said to be significantly different between the two political jurisdictions in Ireland – North and South – with a particular focus on meeting the needs of the economy in the North and a greater emphasis on equality and social cohesion agenda in the South (Lambe *et al.*, 2006: 18). In addition, the emergence of a Peace and Reconciliation process in Ireland, not tied to existing funding structures, provided renewed opportunities to try out new ways of working in adult literacy practice.

The ideas discussed in this chapter emerged from one such peace project, known as the Literacy and Equality in Irish Society (LEIS) project. The project was one of a number funded by the European Union

(EU) Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (2006). The funding body, noted the twin objectives of the EU Special Support Programme as boosting economic growth and promoting social inclusion for those on the margins. A key objective of the LEIS project, was to explore the links between adult literacy and equality issues and to examine how creative/non-text methodologies might be used to enhance learners understanding of equality issues identified which have affected in their lives. The project adopted a social practices model of literacy development which acknowledged the social, emotional and linguistic contexts that give literacy learning meaning, and which includes a critical approach to literacy. It held the view that literacy programmes should be grounded in the everyday life situations of learners and should embrace issues of equality and social justice and brought together a range of people from the field of literacy practice with different types of expertise to promote dialogue about equality as an issue in adult literacy learner's lives. More than one hundred tutors and learners were involved in the project.

Peacebuilding and equality

Although peacebuilding is a commonly used concept, it is difficult to identify a common understanding of the term. The United Nations Secretary General Boutros-Ghali first used the term in the early 1990s to announce his agenda for peace and in general, definitions seem to vary – depending on the particular group who use the term – thus definitions for example, between community and voluntary groups and policy makers can vary. A distinction must also be made between peacemaking, which can be interpreted as a means to tackle some concrete problem in a process that generally begins with a difference of interests and has the goal of achieving some kind of agreement and peacebuilding which can aim at change the social structures underlying the conflict or change in the attitude of those involved in the conflict. The LEIS project was based on the view that peacebuilding and improvement of learner's literacy skills could be closely linked.

The LEIS project was also based on the view that poor literacy skills can be viewed as a manifestation or symptom of inequality and it acknowledged the complexity of the task of helping tutors and learners understand the concept of equality. Baker *et al.* (2004: 47) noted that equality has a complex range of interpretations and like literacy, is a complex issue to define. In simplistic terms they noted that equality is a

relationship of some kind or other between two people or more regarding some aspect of their lives. The project set out to develop clearer links between theories of inequality and practical approaches to including equality issues through the development of creative and non-text methodologies using an equality framework developed by Baker *et al.* (2004), one of the project partners. The underpinning model outlined by Baker (2004: 34) is based on the belief that there are clear patterns in the structure and level of inequality experienced by individuals and groups.

To understand the implications of equality for adult literacy practice, the project used a contextual framework analysed through four key dimensions of equality. Proposed by Baker, Lynch and Cantillon (2004), the model is underpinned by the belief that there are clear patterns that structure the level of inequality experienced by individuals and groups. The framework identified four interrelated dimensions of equality namely respect and recognition, love care and solidarity, resources, and power relations. These dimensions of equality can be used to describe and analyse key patterns of inequality – the economic, political, cultural and affective systems in society are considered to be particularly important in generating equality and inequality, the affective system referring to the area of the emotions (Baker *et al.*, 2004: 227). These dimensions provided an opportunity to look at the economic, political and cultural dimensions of inequality as well as how the affective or emotional realm. The theoretical framework and its connections with the methodological approaches is discussed in greater detail in the resource guide (2006, Lamb *et al.*).

Even within this theoretical model, equality can be viewed through different lens along a continuum ranging from a basic concept of equality to a liberal or radical understanding of the condition of equality. The concept of basic equality focuses merely on the availability of goods and services. There is no particular concern for barriers experienced by particular groups, or the support they might need to overcome such barriers. On the other hand, liberal equality assumes basic equality moving beyond it to a concern for distribution of resources and to removing any legal impediments to accessing services which would include education. Rather than questioning competition which gives advantage, the concept of liberal equality focuses on regulating the competition for the advantages that society offers. The radical approach to equality focuses on equality of condition which seeks to eliminate the inequalities altogether or at least massively reduce the current scale of inequality. (Baker *et al.*, 2005: 33).

The dimensions of equality examined in the project are important in that they provide a framework for understanding equality and inequality and are discussed below. The first of these principles is respect and recognition. Underlying this principle is a commitment to social equality by recognising the unequal status of all citizens and of tolerating individual and group differences, so long as they respect basic rights. Every member has a right to the status of citizen, but social esteem has to be earned by achievement. Respect and toleration is based on the idea that recognition of diversity without critical dialogue allows for a sense of superiority of belief that the tolerated view is deviant. The dominant group are not open to having their own culture and ideas critically interrogated (Baker *et al.*, 2004: 34). This dimension therefore inevitably leads to inequalities. In adult literacy and learning, curriculum design, assessment methods and organisational structures are some of the areas where diversity of culture, experiences and learning style should be accommodated and embraced.

Baker *et al.* (2004: 37) noted that caring and being cared for are vital components of what enables people to lead successful lives and an expression of our fundamental independence. Emotions are central to the process of teaching and learning and so love, care and solidarity is an important principle of equality and of the framework adopted by the researchers in this study. Lack of love and care often are intertwined with insufficient access to resources and have in many instances contributed to adults not reaching their full potential. In Ireland, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) acknowledge that literacy encompasses aspects of personal development – social, economic, emotional (2005: 2). However, despite this acknowledgement, it must be recognised that the emphasis on the development of the curriculum has been on the cognitive to the detriment of the emotional realm. Much more could be done within the adult literacy field to help tutors and learners facilitate the development of emotional skills. Equality of condition requires that people have access to the care they need to feel included and respected in society, and have the right to give and receive love and care, and that the work involved in providing love and care is properly recognised, supported and shared. Resources is the third principle of the equality framework. Baker *et al.* (2004: 36) talk about the need to move beyond meeting basic needs and towards a world in which people's resources are much more equal than they are now, so that people's prospects for a good life are more similar. Within this context, economic redistribution is insufficient to address inequality and what is needed is a paradigm shift and a

recognition that adult literacy learners require access to a wide variety of provision. Much educational research points to inadequate resources as being one of the primary explanations for poor educational attainment. While income and wealth are clearly important, resources including leisure time, safe environment, access to public facilities and cultural and social capital are also paramount. In adult literacy practice there is therefore a need to think about resources not just in terms of resources to set up provision, but also in terms of providing provision at suitable times and places and in surroundings which will enable and empower learners. In addition, imposed curricula and inflexible assessment methods all contribute to resource inequality for literacy learners. The understanding of various forms of power relations which sustain inequality between privileged and oppressed groups is also said to be an important factor to take account of in promoting equality. Power is not a characteristic of individuals in isolation, or something they possess, but is exercised as a result of social relationships within institutional structures. These structures provide meaning to their actions and also constrain them. Unequal power relations between tutor and learner have sometimes been addressed in literacy education, through for example, the adoption of Freirean approaches. Adult literacy provision needs to ensure that adults views are fully represented in decision making at all levels. Decision-making structures should facilitate learner participation especially in relation to decisions affecting their lives. In this way, provision is best able to respond to learner needs, empowering them to learn by taking control of their own destiny.

Understanding equality and inequalities through creative approaches

In keeping with the empowerment and inclusive focus of the framework, the approach used to all development activities was based on an emancipatory research approach. (Baker *et al.*, 2004). This involved an inclusive, participatory approach in which tutors and learners were invited to engage as equal partners with the project development team at all stages in the project. A particular inequality in adult literacy education could be said to be the privilege of using text-based work. There is a constant struggle to have other non-text creative methods recognized as having validity in themselves as opposed to acting as a support or lead into text-based work. The use of alternative methods is in itself an issue of equality in an

area where there is acceptance of, and reliance on, text-based teaching and learning. The project therefore focused on the use of a range of creative methodologies to create spaces for the exploration of equality issues within adult literary practice. The methodologies were also intended to empower tutors and learners to engage with equality issues relevant to their lives, in particular those arising from the experience of conflict in Ireland.

Non-text/ creative methodologies can enable learners to develop an understanding of equality through involvement in a participatory process involving critical thinking and problem solving. Fegan (2003: 2) notes that these methodologies can provide a sense of identity and purpose which can be used to promote greater equality, social justice and mutual understanding. He also notes they can transform individuals, neighbourhoods, communities and regions. Greene (1988: 125) claims the passivity and disinterest prevalent in classrooms, particularly in the areas of reading and writing, is a result of a failure to educate for freedom. Instead she argues that we should focus on the range of human intelligences, the multiple languages and symbol systems available for ordering experience and making sense of the lived world. Her theory provides a pluralistic view of intelligences and a holistic picture of how humans learn and can be taught, thus providing further justification for the development of non-text approaches to adult literacy education. Tisdell (2003) also emphasises the need to take a more holistic view of education arguing for culturally relevant approaches to adult education, which outline the value of power of symbol-making and symbol-manifesting activities and the importance of these cultural experiences through creative activity. In a similar way, Mary Norton (2005) suggested the use of music and visual arts in adult literacy education as a way of providing an alternative way to engage learners.

As the project unfolded, the need to explicitly emphasise the value of the creative process within each person through access to multiple forms of education became clear.

The methodologies included Image Theatre, Music, Visual Arts and Storytelling, used as codes to explore equality issues. A participatory approach, where tutors and learners engaged as equal partners was used. Through stakeholder dialogue, equality issues seen as important to learners were raised.

Learning from an intra-cultural research process

The creative learning methods employed encouraging learners to express feelings which were often too difficult to put into words. Images sound and stories were used to highlight real experiences and to construct meaning around them. Learners told stories about past experiences – for example, their inability to access jobs and training due to what were described as discriminatory practices or the effects of political and social unrest. They also recounted experiences of discrimination arising from their religion, gender and sexual orientation. Often these experiences had given rise to feelings of great hurt and resentment which had been difficult to deal with. The opportunity to recall and open them up a safe learning environment provided for many the first real opportunities to acknowledge hurt and losses and to discuss a shared understanding of such issues. Old prejudices were confronted, thus providing the opportunity to build positive relationships and to create real change. The participants also spoke about the methods as being inclusive, encouraging imagination, improving self-esteem, creating a bond between groups and leading to improved listening skills. Through the use of non-text methods learners began to question previously held assumptions on a range of equality issues affecting their lives as a result of low literacy skills.

Various forms of artistic representation were also found to be good ways of introducing experiences and feelings to difficult to express in words alone. The use of sculpture was also found to be a good stimulus to discussion, with learners using the art of sculpture to tell stories about hurtful experiences. By talking about their experiences through artistic representations, learners were able to get right to the heart of things and reported that they were able to speak honestly about experiences. Some learners used collage to encourage representing their views about inequalities in their lives. The collage provided a means for them to think deeply about issues that had affected them, without being inhibited by the need to write down their thoughts. They used collage to talk about their individual experiences as a media for the discussion. Issues discussed included lack of education opportunities, feelings of powerlessness in creating change, and a lack of understanding arising from the religious and political division in society. Participating in making the collage increased the learners understanding of equality and enabled them to talk about themselves honestly without having to put pen to paper. Enhanced understanding of the causes of conflict resulted from linking their own

lives as well as the lives of others and to resolving conflicts. The workshops also provided spaces for groups from both communities to explore equality issues impacting on their lives which lead to a common understanding of how a lack of literacy skills can create inequalities.

Evidence from the use of creative/non-text methods revealed both educational and social benefits. The methods provided opportunities to develop increased understanding about inequalities, their causes and effects on individual's lives. They also challenged learners' assumptions about what literacy is and showed how learning can arise through examining so many individual situations and through so many different media and in particular non-text modes of knowing, being and doing. The methods also enabled learners to develop new skills as well as creating greater levels of co-operation and understanding. Responses from learners showed that many had learned new skills in communicating and felt more confident talking about the issues affecting their lives. Comments showed that adults with low levels of reading or writing literacy were able to actively participate in learning, thus contributing to the broader goals of social inclusion and citizenship in lifelong learning.

Exploring equality issues in adult literacy education

Some learners expressed criticism of the creative methodologies indicating that activities were childish, while others questioned the value of activities. For some, education and learning was perceived as a serious activity and it was not always easy to equate this as synonymous with a high level of enjoyment associated with the creative methodologies. The new methodologies placed less emphasis on skills of reading and writing and more on the ability to express views in an open and non-judgmental way, shifting the balance of power between tutor and learner in a new direction and creating a new power dynamic in the learning process. The workshops helped learners embrace equality issues through examining these issues in their own lives. By challenging a 'literacy as skills' approach, the framework helped learners understand and articulate a non-deficit perspective for understanding inequalities in their everyday lives. Through the advocacy of creative methodologies, learners' understanding of literacy were widened to include visual literacy, oral literacy and situated learning within creative processes (storytelling, drama, music and visual arts).

The equality framework was used as a tool to initiate discussion about inequalities. In the ensuing discussions tutors also raised issues around

structural and institutional inequalities that create barriers to using creative approaches, such as the difficulties in working within rigid curricula and the privilege of learning through text-based work. The project also explored the potential to examine and discuss power relationships through the use of non-text methodologies. A range of issues such as health, housing, welfare and family were all discussed. By introducing tutors to non-text methods, learners were able to open up spaces to question previously held assumptions in the area of politics, economics, religion and culture and also empower them to challenge and question the deep structural societal inequalities that have contributed to the inequalities in their lives, including those related to literacy. The use of creative methods allowed for the development of what Freire (2004) calls generative themes, which raise issues that are important to different groups or individuals within the group and lead to discussion of conflict or social problems in people's lives (Degener, 2001: 36).

The findings from the study showed that complex issues could be discussed and represented through creative methods such as drama, storytelling, image theatre etc., giving literacy learners to opportunity to understand the dynamic of the society within which they live and read their world. (Freire, 1972)

Understanding inequalities through a process of reconciliation and peacebuilding

A central aim of the research was to examine how a focus on equality and social inclusion could contribute towards a process of peace and reconciliation. Hamber and Kelly (2004) have conceptualised a process for peace and reconciliation which highlights different strands involved in such a process. They suggest that a reconciliation process generally involves five interwoven and inter-related strands as follows:

- development of a shared vision of an independent and fair society;
- acknowledging and dealing with the hurts, losses, truths and sufferings of the past;
- building positive relationships following violent conflict by addressing issues of trust, prejudice, intolerance and accepting commonalities and differences with individuals accepting and learning from it in a constructive way and embracing and engaging with those who are different to us;

- developing significant cultural and attitudinal change through developing a culture of respect for human rights and human difference;
- creating substantial social, economic and political change by identifying reconstructing and transforming existing structures.

Peacebuilding is considered a process at the level of community, individual and polity, and reconciliation is considered as a component of peace building.

The research acknowledged that forcing groups or individuals to enter into joint activities can be counter-productive, as co-operation and integration cannot be enforced. Attention was given to providing safe spaces for groups from both communities to explore equality issues which they consider to have had particular impact on their lives with a view to raising awareness of the commonalities that exist in relation to literacy and equality (such spaces took account of neutral venues for discussion maintaining confidentiality of information and identities providing appropriate support for individuals when dealing with hurtful issues etc.)

Through the process, individuals from both the Roman Catholic and Protestant communities in Ireland were able to open up and talk about hurtful experiences and issues and through addressing these issues they were able to build more positive relationships which lead to attitudinal changes. The research showed that participants appreciated addressing these issues in safe environments which also included participants from different communities. They indicated that by meeting and sharing their experiences and points of view on divisive issues which, they had come to understand better the different points of view of others. They also indicated that as a result they had developed a much better understanding of issues which divide communities.

The workshops also enabled them to understand better issues of equality and inequality which had affected their own lives and through a process of mutual understanding they developed more positive relationships towards each other's points of view.

The innovative methodologies were found to have assisted learners to engage and talk about past experiences experienced during a period of conflict in a way which was often difficult using standard text-based approaches. The non-text/creative methods were found to serve as codes to explore issues for initiating reflection and discussion on equality issues, followed with more critical thinking and action. They provided a way for participants to introduce a problem or issue with a purpose of promot-

ing critical thinking and action. The methods, which can promote socially or emotionally related responses, were also found to lead to a deeper understanding of a range of equality issues affecting learner's lives.

While the research showed that it was possible to effect change in the lives of individuals, which in turn might assist with creating change at community level, wider social, economic and political changes were also needed to reconstruct and transform society and the lives of individuals and communities. While individuals could have some effect in creating changes through participation in democratic processes, for the most part individuals felt powerless to bring about real change and transformation of social, economic and political structures which give rise to estrangement and conflict.

Conclusion

In summary, the research has shown that adult literacy can provide a valuable role in supporting the process of peace and reconciliation, e.g. in breaking down fear and mistrust, creating a space where individuals can hear and be heard and creating a context where each citizen becomes an active participant in society and feels a sense of belonging. In addition, the innovative methodologies employed had helped engage and empower marginalised literacy learners, from both Roman Catholic and Protestant communities who had been deeply affected by years of conflict. The development of new approaches and methodologies are therefore to be welcomed for supporting and enhancing the process of reconciliation and peace building in Ireland.

The equality framework provided a mechanism for talking about equality issues though offered a more democratic process which is also relevant across national and global networks. While it offers an opportunity to enable learners to engage as citizens, it also offers an opportunity to improve their skills and competences and to contribute not only socially but also economically to their own and societies betterment. Ultimately, through personal and community engagement, it provides a way of changing how learners understand inequalities in their lives and the lives of others.

One of the project's lasting achievements was building greater insight and understanding of the causes and consequences of inequalities and the possibilities that exist for change.

The action research model used has challenged the widely held view

of deficit among learners and instead focuses on people's ability to do what they want in their lives.

The work was based on the premise that literacy is far more than a set of basic skills, but rather, are a set of social practices. Adult literacy education is in itself an issue of inequality since adults with low literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed, be living on low incomes and experiencing poor health and early morbidity (Brynnner and Parsons, 2001; Hammond, 2004; Raudenbush and Kasim, 2003). Using a social practice account of adult literacy means that instead of literacy being viewed as a de-contextualised, mechanical, manipulation of letters, words and figures, literacy can be located in social, emotional and linguistic contexts. Literacy practices can be seen as integrating routines, skills, and understandings, that are organised within specific contexts and also the feelings and values that people have about these activities. By focusing on equality and creativity, the LEIS project has shown how theories of equality and non-text creative methodologies can be used to develop new skills and understanding for adult literacy learners. It has empowered adult learners to critically examine some of the many issues affecting their lives. Finding ways of addressing these inequalities has no easy answers, but this should not be seen as a reason for denying learners the opportunity to examine and discuss these issues within literacy programmes and practices. The research has shown how a focus on both equality and creativity can develop new skills and understanding that can empower learners through promoting understanding of inequalities which affect their lives.

Speaking about this Shor (1999: 1) argues:

This kind of literacy . . . connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical . . . A key dimension of literacy is that it reflects wider inequalities in society. In the past, political, cultural and religious elites, as well as the wealthy business classes, have all used literacy to assert their dominant positions and maintain the subjugated positions of those with low-level literacy skills.

Today, a lack of access to literacy is an indicator of widening local, regional and global inequalities, mirrored in inequalities of gender, race, employment status and so forth. The impact of unmet literacy needs is acknowledged in national and international studies and is part of the accepted wisdom that underpins policies on education, poverty and social exclusion. Much less clarity exists in relation to casual and transforma-

tional aspects of unmet literacy needs. Illiteracy is not something that occurs in isolation, without any recognisable pattern or root, and research has pointed to the need for a more holistic, contextualised approach. A major challenge in the future, not just in Ireland but in other areas of conflict, will be to find ways of aligning literacy policies and practices to the wider goals of promoting reconciliation, through equality and social justice.

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Lifelong Learning and Social Justice

Sue Jackson

The current policy focus on lifelong learning ensures a gendered and class-based skills-driven agenda, with lifelong learners expected to become neoliberal subjects rather than empowered members of communities. What complexities and challenges arise from attempts to align lifelong learning with social justice? What are the costs of a focus on learning which rests on economic imperatives?

Lifelong learning is at the forefront of the educational arena, both nationally and internationally, although what it means is highly contestable. In recent times, lifelong learning has increasingly come to mean vocational education and training within a globalised knowledge economy. This important book, presenting UK and international dimensions, argues that there needs to be a sharp re-focus to an alignment of lifelong learning with social justice.

Timely in its call to turn the debate to social issues, this volume offers a valuable perspective encompassing sustainability and community; learning and work; and identities. With both a policy and practitioner focus, and an international aspect to each section, readers will find the book invaluable in broadening their understanding of the field, offering alternative ways of developing and enhancing learning opportunities through enhancing understandings of the intersections between lifelong learning and social justice.

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