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SOCIAL CHANGE COMMUNITY EDUCATION - WHERE ARE WE NOW?

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Abstract:

This article reviews the evolution of community education from its genesis in the 1970s to the present day. It begins by considering the contested meaning of the word 'community' and the origins of community education, before turning specifically to the case of Ireland and our domestic experience of community education. The author critically assesses Irish community education, observing that it has become depoliticised and de-radicalised in recent years and calls for a return to the radical voluntary activism that was the original initiator of community education for social change.

Keywords:

Community education, community services, State influence.

Introduction

On the face of it, community education has come a long way. From fledgling beginnings characterised by temporary premises, sparse materials and reliance on significant voluntary effort, contemporary practice is now typically State funded and is commonly housed within purpose built settings. Its importance has been firmly established within policy with chapter 5 of the White Paper *Learning for Life* (2000) dedicated to its understanding. More recently, its significance in encouraging economic recovery has been emphasised with the Minister for Training & Skills describing it as 'a cornerstone to meeting the targets of the National Skills Strategy'¹. The creation and continual reform of the *Further Education Training & Awards Committee* (FETAC) has strengthened community education's potential to formally recognise learning. This has allowed recipients to more readily progress to suitable employment or loftier heights along the ladder of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Community education is not only thought of as an extension of opportunity beyond traditional settings but is also commonly presented as fulfilling important civic functions. These include fostering positivity and community cohesion; both of which are in tune with visions of a pluralist, egalitarian social order, and the actualisation of a range of citizen rights realised through collective, praxis oriented approaches. The fulfilment of these political aspirations is through an ideological interpretation of community education; a 'second view' described within the White Paper as 'a process of communal education towards empowerment' and an action intrinsically linked to community development (Government of Ireland, 2000: 110).

Although not uncontested, this presentation of *social change community education*² as an approach to community development is not new (see for example Lovett, 1982, Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989, Connolly, 1996, 2008, Ledwith, 2005, Beck & Purcell, 2010). It is a collective, dialogic, democratic pedagogy that enables an analysis of subjective experiences undertaken in a way that encourages critical intervention in the social realm. Demonstrating its understanding in practice, the Community Education Network (CEN), which boasts over 130 member organisations, recently offered a definition of community education in tune with such social change ambitions describing it as 'a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness... grounded in principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness' and different from 'general adult education provision due to its political and radical methodologies' (Aontas, 2008 p.1).

By the White Paper's own admission, the inclusion of social change community education came about through consultation with a range of stakeholders including organisations from within *the community sector*³. It is hard to define exactly what the community sector is with some questioning whether a range of civil society groups can constitute a sector in itself (Ó Cinnéide, 1998/99, Collins, 2002, Powell & Geoghegan, 2004). Also problematic is the drawing out of community education as an entity in itself.

1 Cianan Cannon, minister for Training and Skills speaking at an Aontas community education conference entitled 'making a living, making a life' held in November, 2011.
<http://www.aontas.com/newsandevents/latestnews/2011/11/21/community-education-programmes-vital-to-meeting-ambitious-targets-of-national-skills-strategy/>
accessed 4 November 2012.

2 Throughout this paper the expression 'social change community education' is being adopted. Other terms that can be used include *radical community education*, which is sometimes used interchangeably, and *popular education*, commonly used in Scottish settings and borrowed from Latin American practice in particular.

3 Appendix 2 of the White Paper lists those who participated in the consultation process. These include a number of CDPs, Local Area Partnership Companies, The Community Workers Cooperative, The Combat Poverty Agency, the Irish Traveller Movement and the Irish National Unemployment Organisation.

Although the bulk of non-college adult education is delivered through State established Vocational Educational Committees (VECs), community educators within these are remitted to position themselves in local contexts. Their actions coalesce with an array of independently founded community sector organisations which emerged through bottom up community activism in response to a range of issues such as gender discrimination, poor housing conditions, unemployment and a lack of services for young people. Some community workers within this fold also consider themselves community educators and a number of organisations are sanctioned to deliver FETAC awards and/or university accredited programmes in partnership with the relevant institution.

It would appear however that this bottom-up community sector, founded on principles of justice and equality, has dramatically lost its way and has become disconnected from many of the social change ambitions that defined its origins. Since its evolution in the 1970s/80s⁴, there has been considerable depoliticisation of practice with efforts to extend participatory democracy and realise social change often replaced by an assortment of local community services managing the shortfall in public service provision. For community education, there has been substantial vocalisation of practice and a renewed emphasis on individualism over collectivism with much practice conforming to State imposed demands to support the economic realm and manage unemployment. This has been exacerbated by the creation of *Seirbhís Oideachais Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna* (or SOLAS) charged with overseeing the merger of VECs into Local Education and Training boards (LETBs) and the integration of the training sector (formally FAS) within this. All accredited community education, including that which has traditionally been organised through independent community sector organisations, is likely to append to these revised structures in some way.

It is easy to present a rose tinted overview of a singular politically minded community sector with a storyline of unfettered incursion by the State. This is however not the case and, alongside externally imposed difficulties, there have been contributory factors from within the sector which will be presented as part of this paper. Before doing this, concepts of community education will be presented including a focus on the contested nature of the expression community itself. A brief history of sectoral evolution is then offered contextualising contemporary practice within wider politico-economic circumstances. Alongside a critical analysis of State involvement with the community sector, internal accelerants are discussed concluding with reflections on the current uncertain status of social change community education and possibilities for future actions.

I. What is 'Social Change/Radical Community Education'?

i. Deconstructing Definitions

Defining any type of education is an arduous task and attempts to do so elicit much debate. Some steer us away from agreeing perimetered definitions proposing to do so implies certain ideas and skills are indispensable and can be methodically transferred to others thus negating the contested nature of many of the concepts at play (Winch & Gengell, 1999, Aspin & Chapman, 2000). There is certain logic to caution when defining practice. A possible consequence of agreeing ring-fenced definitions is the potential to limit what is considered appropriate practice thereby excluding innovation.

4 It is difficult to exactly pin-point the origins of the Irish community sector. Internationally community it is commonly linked to post-colonial efforts to empower local decision making of economic and social reform. Ireland's story is commonly linked to Muintir Na Tíre, a rural based community enterprise initiative operational in the early 1900s. The contemporary community sector is more accurately linked to urban mobilisation movements contextualised within wider global movements of the 1960s/70s. The women's movement is considered particularly influential in its establishment.

Another pitfall is the way in which setting bounded frameworks can result in strenuous efforts by supporters to fit real world events within these. Further cause for concern is the ways in which multi-disciplinary fields of study that evolve around social phenomenon, (as is the case with community education and community development), can serve the development of academic discourse rather than influence the events they purport to understand. This situation is compounded by the absent voice of those living the realities under discussion (Lynch, 1999) and it is not unusual for theory-practice divisions to emerge.

ii. The Dubious Nature of Community

A common starting point in discussing the nature of community education is examination of the expression *community* itself, a word that has enjoyed considerable popularity for some time now. Usually signifying positivity, wellbeing and social cohesion, literal translations can be applied universally covering all elements of a particular geographical area regardless of the make-up of its population. Other types of communities presented are communities of interest, for example the Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA), issue based; such as rights and environmental awareness communities, and those linked by identity for example the gay or Muslim community.

It is important that we challenge many of the assumptions implicit in use of the word community most obviously the broad presumption of homogeneity that disregards micro-economic, political, cultural, and many other differences. Also problematic is the utopian historical visioning often evoked and memories of contented, cohesive neighbourhoods usually revolve around a domestic role for women. The existence of some communities in the first place, for example the aforementioned gay and Muslim communities surely indicate segregation from mainstream community in the first place revealing an underbelly of exclusion and even banishment. It is hard to consider the history of Irish communities without reflecting on historian Frances Finnegan's description of Magdalene laundries as penitentiaries for women considered 'unmanageable' for falling pregnant outside of marriage⁵. Also worth considering is the way in which the word is called on more readily to describe geographical areas occupied by the working and lower-middle classes where disproportionate numbers on welfare benefit reside 'sometimes with complex social difficulties', a situation perpetuated by poor government practices in the allocation of social housing (Drudy & Punch, 2005 p.157).

As is the case with all contested concepts, the most important consideration is the inclination of the user and Shaw (2008) alerts us to a range of adoptions across the political continuum from revolutionary socialist movements to deeply conservative traditions. Under neo-liberal conditions, manifestations encouraged are towards a siding with self-help suggestions that communities can themselves overcome a milieu of economic and social disadvantages with little regard for the social policies that created these conditions in the first place (Berner & Philips, 2005). This 'boot-straps' mentality absolves policy makers of any redistributive responsibility and allows for a blaming of the poor for the circumstances within which they find themselves.

5 The last Magdalene laundry closed its doors as late as 1996. In an interview published in The Irish Times in August of that year, Dr. Finnegan identified how whilst initially used to provide accommodation for women engaged in prostitution and experiencing problematic drinking, the laundries were increasingly used as a penitentiary for unmarried pregnant women with the consent of family and wider community members.

One useful model of community as a social system is that which is offered by David Clarke (1996). Considering the importance of people, place, relationships, beliefs and values, Clarke contends it is the presence of feelings of *significance* (I matter), *solidarity* (I belong) and *safety* (both physical and psychological), that are the hallmarks of a good community. Along with these three 'S's, Clarke (1996 p.48) proposes a communal dilemma as 'the problem of how social systems can become more open to one another without weakening their own sense of community or destroying that of others'. It is through engagement with this communal dilemma, communitarianism can be developed ensuring authentic connections with others that respect, nurture and strengthen diversity.

II. What is Community Education?

At its broadest, community education can be understood as localised, structured learning that happens outside of traditional institutions. In practice these can be within specialist adult education centres such as those managed by the VECs, community buildings, literacy support centres, community sector organisations such as Community Development Projects (CDPs), Family Resource Centres (FRCs) or Community Law Centres (CLCs), Local Area Partnership Companies, training centres, health centres, within schools, churches, unoccupied social housing, people's homes, and whatever other premises are available to groups and deliverers.

Alongside locational considerations, community education is also different in other ways. One such distinction is the way in which it is described as being not just *for* the people, but *of* the people (Connolly, 2008). Its intention is concern for process as well as content with a commonly evoked mantra being the idea of starting where the person is at. This doesn't just mean accommodation for many of the practical challenges facing adults as they return to education such as flexibility, affordability and child-care, it also means a cognisance for the knowledge, skills and values a person brings to a learning experience and a drawing from these in determining subjects and modes of delivery.

Another core feature of community education described in the White Paper, *Learning for Life* is its significance in 'reaching large numbers of participants in disadvantaged settings' (Government of Ireland, 2000 p.110). This refers to its relationship with aforementioned communities characterised by high density social housing, disproportionate unemployment rates when set against national averages, and a population where many underachieve at school when set against meritocracy's yardstick for progression to Higher Education. Aontas⁶ (2004 p.16) support this accolade describing community education as 'to the fore in tackling adult educational disadvantage for many years' and as events that 'have shown how successful community groups can be in acting as first point of contact for hard to reach learners'.

In maintaining these distinguishing factors, community education has re-negotiated traditional hierarchical teacher-learner relationships. A consequence of this more lateral approach has been a blurring of boundaries between *professional*, in other words qualified, and *lay* practitioners. This latter cohort is often past recipients and members of the communities in question who have crafted their trade on the job, often in partnership with qualified counterparts. Their ability to more genuinely empathise is thought by many to add a richness to community education which is absent from more elitist models of practice.

6 The Irish National Adult Learning Organisation. For further information see www.aontas.com accessed 4 November 2012.

i. Theories of Community Education

Whilst this paper specifically concerns itself with *social change community education*, it is useful to extrapolate a wider understanding of community education considering it under three broad banners. The first of these is a universal approach open to all regardless of social circumstances and premised on a non-selective assumption of homogeneity (Martin, 1987). Dominant themes within this type of practice include lifelong learning, labour market re-activation and neutrality. A second type of community education that can be drawn out is a compensatory or second chance model of practice. This deliberately discriminates in favour of those considered disadvantaged as part of efforts to extend equality of opportunity. There is little doubt about the benefits for individuals which include greater job prospects and earning power, increased self-confidence (Bailey et al, 2010, 2011), and improvements in happiness and health (Field, 2011). For a community there can be falling unemployment and, in cases where people progress to higher education, a normalising of this pathway; something that might have been previously considered unattainable. However, whilst many well intentioned practitioners work tirelessly in providing for this, there is a contradiction at the heart of practice as, without a commitment to addressing the systemic causes of inequality of outcome from schooling; little more is being achieved than managing the symptoms of inequality.

Supporting these shortfalls, social change community education is a radical, politicised practice premised on a conflict model of society and concerned with the achievement of *equality of condition* (Lynch & Baker, 2005) where all in society can benefit regardless of whether or not they engage in a specific piece of individualised learning themselves. It is concerned with consciousness-raising where educators work in solidarity with community members evoking intellectual discovery through dialogue (Freire, 1972). Central to this Freirean approach is a belief that education alone does not bring about equality, what is required is *praxis*, a process of collective transformational action and reflection undertaken to effect social change. This can take many forms including dialogue and negotiation with power-holders, rights based campaign and lobbying work, and the establishment of additional supports to address issues and highlight shortfalls in public provision.

Crucially, this critical pedagogy also calls to account the structural and relational dimensions of knowledge. Notions of a fixed set of abstract ideas and indisputable facts, largely held by the teacher, are challenged in favour of a collapsing of objective/subjective boundaries as real world events are grounded within each person's sense of self. This doesn't mean uncritical acceptance of post-modern subjectivism as a set of unrelated circumstances; individual conjectures can and do vary immeasurably. However, when subjective accounts are validated through comparison with the experiences of others they accumulate into common or *generative themes* (Freire, 1972). It is these themes that create the starting point for a problem-posing analysis, enhanced by dialectic engagement with the theories and research of others, inquired into from a variety of angles. Academic contributions (such as this paper), are not presented as incontestable but are offered as codes where, through the optic of a person's own subjectivity, an authentic understanding can be built (Shor & Freire, 1987 pp. 39-40).

ii. The Development of Community Education in Ireland

Community education in Ireland can be particularly traced to the 1970s, unsurprising when one considers that before this date secondary schools were the preserve of sons of the wealthy whilst any schooling girls received was largely instructional and domestically focused (Cullen, 1987, Harford 2005). In addition, many thousands of children attended an industrial school sector where, compounded by institutional neglect and abuse, recipients left with 'a higher proportion of unmet literacy needs' (Feely, 2010).

Demands for education emerged from those who were unable to read, women, early retirees, and employers eager to improve skills levels in the workplace (Feehan, 1979). As the organisations charged with responsibility to provide 'a suitable system of continuation education in its area' (Vocational Education Act, 1930, s. 30-a), VECs were perfectly positioned to respond to these needs and the appointment of Adult Education Officers (AEOs) in 1979 followed the locally based evening courses of the 1970s described by Aontas (2004 p.9) as 'the backbone' in the advent of community education.

The VECs were not the only providers of part-time adult education and pioneering work was also initiated by religious orders, the university sector and the trade union movement⁷ (Carey, 1979 p.11, Government of Ireland, 1998 p.38). Where the VECs differed was by their already strong connection with working class communities through the provision of post-primary vocational education. Their centrality as community education providers was copper-fastened by the introduction of ring-fenced grant aid such as the *Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme* (VTOS), the *Back to Education Initiative* (BTEI) and, the appointment of dedicated Community Education Facilitators in the early 2000s.

Also important, particularly when considering social change community education, was the bottom up emergence of a range of self-managed community groups dissatisfied with the status quo and interested in bringing about systemic change. These included the Women's Movement, Freirean influenced popular educational initiatives many of which were underpinned by liberation theology, and grassroots movements concerned with tenants' rights, unemployment and anti-drugs initiatives. Government responses to this foray included the establishment of *The Combat Poverty Agency* in 1986 legislatively charged with the dissemination of information to the State on the alleviation of poverty, and the provision of analysis on its causes (Combat Poverty Act, 1986). Following intermittent development funding through both EU and domestic development initiatives, consistent funding was introduced to an original 15 Community Development Projects (CDPs) in 1991.

Successful applications to the community development fund swelled over a ten year period and community education became interlaced with 185 CDPs, some of which were supported through VEC funded initiatives such as the *Adult Literacy and Community Education Budget*. CDPs operated alongside a structure of Family Resource Centres (FRCs) and youth groups and a range of addiction supports that emerged on foot of the Rainbow government's *First Report of the Ministerial Task Force on Measures to Reduce the Demand for Drugs* (1996).

These locally evolved, self-managed community groups were joined by a State introduced network of Local Area Partnership Companies initially established to administer European development aid. An original 12 Local Area Partnership Companies were charged with assisting re-entry to the workforce, promoting entrepreneurialism and business start-ups, and supporting existing community development projects in their area (Teague & Murphy, 2004). This pilot programme was expanded in the mid-1990s with partnership companies remitted to engage in a multi-sectoral process enabling community representatives to share management at board level with trade union representatives, State agencies, businesses and other local interests often including education providers.

7 University College Cork (UCC) established outreach centres whilst in Dublin the Institute of Adult Education was founded in 1940 (originally the Dublin Institute of Catholic Sociology). The Green Paper in AE also refers to the People's College (part of the trade union movement) and the Irish Countrywoman's Association Residential College.

As a whole, the community sector is commonly described as resting on values of equality and social justice, empowerment, participation and collective action with concern for both task and process. When enacted, these principles are thought to bring about a more diffuse distribution of power and enable an amelioration of community concerns (Poppo 1995, Twelvetimes 2008, CWC, 2008). Governmental commitment to community development has been enshrined in successive programmes for government and it has been claimed that over three decades, community development in Ireland has maintained its independent voice, contributed to the modernisation of rural Ireland, responded to issues arising from rapid urbanisation, and, 'succeeded in elevating the needs of the most disadvantaged to a level where the conditions affecting these groups could no longer be ignored' (Lloyd, 2010 p.43).

Writing some time ago, Martin (1987) proposed models of community education can be differentiated along historical inquiry when determining ideological intent. Such a trajectory would lead to assumptions that radical/social change community education is that which is practiced within community sector organisations with universal and compensatory models likely to be found within agencies such as FAS and VECs. This is however not strictly the case in an Irish setting and there are reports of radical practice from some VEC practitioners in collaboration with bottom-up community organisations, groups and networks (for example Fleming, 1989, Ingles et al, 1993, Cullinane, 2003, Brady, 2006,) and individualist, second chance models within independent community sector organisations (for example Bailey et al, 2011).

III. The Co-option of the Community Sector

There is however growing acceptance that this community sector has been considerably depoliticised. Its essence is not the initiation of civil society spaces to enable a more active citizenship, or radical ambitions of social justice through struggle; rather what has often emerged is a range of community services including child-care, health care supports, counseling, information provision, personal development and work-based training. These are welcome and necessary services for the communities in question and it is unsurprising that resources funneled into previously neglected areas were used to address the failure by successive governments to provide for basic needs.

For community education, there has been a considerable vocationalisation of delivery. The development of active citizenship through praxis has been relegated to the side-lines as lifelong learning, a concept originally conceived as part of efforts to debunk the frontloading of education to the beginning of one's lifecycle, has been commercially re-framed as a key requirement for economic renewal. At the 2012 Aontas AGM significant apprehension was expressed by both VEC and independent community sector employees about SOLAS. Concerns raised included a top-down rather than bottom up interpretation of educational need, a clinical use of community education to engage hard to reach learners in compulsory training linked to welfare payments, a quantitative rather than qualitative approach to measuring learning, an absence of focus on the immaterial benefits of learning, and fears for the independence of local community providers threatening their diversity, levels of support and political intentions. For those offering accreditation, anxiety was expressed about a lack of representation for non-VEC structures with the overall sentiment being that these top down landmark changes will considerably devalue social change community education due to a lack of regard for non-vocational, collectivised approaches.

Where FETAC qualification has been successfully moulded to meet the needs of social change community education, the upcoming amalgamation of FETAC with other accrediting bodies into the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance Association of Ireland* (QQI) is an additional worry.

Uncertainty abounds about whether the LETBs will be the only quality assurers of Further Education exercising power to appoint educators without consulting host community organisations. This increases the potential for an incursion of pedagogues unfamiliar with social change community education as a process of community development interpreting all education as either universal or compensatory.

IV. How has this happened?

i. The Janus-face of the State

Whilst some contributors argue the community sector's positioning *in* and *against* the State creates a tension that is good for democracy (for example Paterson, 1999, Chanan, 2009), the difficulty with this argument is its reliance on the State as non-aligned arbitrator. Instead there has been a Janus-faced approach; an extolling of the virtues of community development concurrent with an undermining of its viability. This has been done through unstable funding arrangements, non-negotiable service agreements and a deliberate discouragement of politicised activism; something that can lead to exclusion from State grant aid (Crickley & Devlin, 1989, Lee, 2006, O'Byrne, 2012).

Despite reluctance by Irish political parties to endorse neo-liberalism, their actions portray support for its political-economic doctrines. This model prioritises free-market economics and corporate interests over democratic politics and the public good, facilitates a transfer of wealth to an elite, and limits civil rights concealed in the language of liberty and freedom (Harvey, 2005, Giroux, 2006, Klein, 2007). The current crisis in neo-liberal capitalism has not brought an abandonment of this right wing ideology; rather it provides fertile ground for the deepening of neo-liberalism (Klein, 2007). Despite increased State interference at the top (contrary to espoused desires for State disbandment), there is a continued shrinkage of the public sector and welfare provision justified through the need to stabilise the financial sector and safeguard capitalism at all costs. Whilst some might argue prudence in social spending as timely given our international indebtedness, the tokenistic nature of equality commitments are not recent but rather a continuation of practice during the boom years. It was during the Celtic Tiger's artificially inflated property bubble and economic frenzy of foreign capital investment (characterised by the export of profits) that inequity worsened despite the alleged protection of national social partnership agreements (O'Hearn, 1998, Allen, 2000, Kirby, 2002).

The McCarthy Report (2009) paved the way for a business-type rationalisation of the community sector implemented through project closures, compulsory mergers, and funding cuts Harvey (2012) demonstrates as disproportionate to other publically funding entities. There has also been a State encouraged re-interpretation of what remains of the sector most notably through a eulogising of volunteerism through the *Task Force on Active Citizenship* and a deliberate alignment of its work with a larger, non-political voluntary sector (Lloyd, 2010). The non-negotiated absorption of CDPs into Local Area Partnerships not only led to a surrender of assets built up by community groups, it also has meant the dismantling of independent management structures and loss of local control. O'Byrne (2012 p.22) illuminates the experience of those on the ground when she quotes one CDP coordinator describing 'the heavy boot of the State on their neck through the use of economic violence'.

Increasingly, communities are provided for by over-stretched community workers and those in receipt of government return to employment benefits whilst demands for services increases as they deal with the symptoms of the disassembly of wider public service provision. The mood within the sector, be it real or perceived, is that the flick of a pen by an unsympathetic civil servant could be enough for a project to close, a job to be lost, a service to be shut down. It is little surprise that the option chosen by many is to stay below the political parapet.

ii. Co-option through Partnership

The community sector's involvement with national partnership agreements can be drawn out as a second contributing factor in its co-option. In 1996, community sector representatives took up a much lobbied for invitation to influence social policy by moving from a position of 'external critics to critical participants' (Larraghy 2006 p.375) through their involvement within the Community & Voluntary Pillar (CVP) of National Social Partnership. This pillar was never given equal billing as social partners, excluded from pay talks in particular, and the expulsion of the community platform, (a collective of community sector organisations that formed part of the CVP), for their refusal to endorse *Sustaining Progress* revealed power *over* rather than power *with* and the lack of leverage held by the community sector when set against trade unions and employers. Perhaps most concerning is the admission by those involved that the process was frustrating and unproductive, delivering little more than tokenistic gains and that its pursuit at times usurped attention to local concerns (Murphy, 2002, Meade, 2005, Lee, 2006).

There was also considerable effort expended at local level where pluralist engagement with State and semi-State structures is where community sector presence has been 'most evident, widespread and sustained' (Nexus, 2002: 46). This is despite some researchers reporting concerns about their democratic legitimacy and the quality of community representation (Sabel, 1996, Walsh, 1996). More recently, community workers engaged with local partnership structures reported having little say in decision making (Powell & Geoghegan, 2004). Also problematic were dichotomous interpretations of what constitutes community development with partnership companies commonly viewing it as an extension of support services into a community rather than as a process of individual and collective transformation undertaken to influence systemic change.

iii. Ideological Divisions Within

A third contributor in the cooption of the community sector lies with its own failure to develop into a recognisable, cohesive sector with little knowledge of its existence or relevance held by those not directly involved. Part of the reason is a significant theory-practice divide and it is likely that discussions on concepts of practice that appear on the pages of academic journals are not engaged in by many community workers on the ground. Particularly telling, Powell & Geoghegan (2004 p.156) reveal community work in Ireland '*not* to be rooted in a discourse of radicalism' (original italics) with practitioners motivated by a range of sometimes competing factors and often not seeing their work as about implementing social change. Also discussing theory-practice divisions, Sayer (2008) draws our attention to the range of disciplines community workers are drawn from including teaching, social work and healthcare emphasising the way in which this influences an assortment of approaches adopted.

Also contributing to ideological heterogeneity, there is no over-arching ethos of community education presented by VECs and the most significant factor in determining approach is likely to be the ontological outlook of each individual community educationalist. This sentiment was captured by Lovett et al (1993) when they chronicle a range of responses to bottom-up, self-managed, radicalised community groups from VEC workers. Some of these groups cite considerable participation by AEOs including involvement in set-up and ongoing contribution; others believed some AEOs were an oppositional hindrance.

There has also been persistent ideological tension through the life-span of the community sector which pre-dates State involvement (Thompson, 1989, Lovett et al, 1989, Crickley & Devlin, 1989). At the root of this is disagreement between radical, conflict-oriented propositions (such as those presented in this paper), and pluralist approaches that rest on an analysis of power as something that can be successfully negotiated within civil society spaces.

These tensions have not gone away and a comprehensive review of literature by Motherway (2006) reveals continual disagreement along understandings of power, interpretations of tokenism and thoughts on future directions, clashes that persist even after the State implemented disassembly of some independent structures.

Also problematic is the deference paid to State funders by representative bodies and the continual public embracement of State reforms. Notwithstanding the efforts by Aontas to involve community educationalists in consultation with civil servants about changes taking place, their initial endorsement of SOLAS and interpretation of it as 'a key watershed in the development of a coherent Further Education and Training Sector in Ireland' (Aontas, 2012 p.4) is regrettable given Aontas's representative role for all models of community education and the lack of leverage this starting point allows in future negotiations given the concerns raised in this paper.

iv. De-radicalisation Through Professionalisation.

A final factor in the de-radicalisation of the community sector is its seemingly progressive, virtually uncontested process of professionalisation. An anti-professionalisation stance can often be interpreted as an anti-standards perspective. This is simply not the case as how else can social change community education be effective? What is challenged is the way in which standards of practice are determined and by whom. As a sector professionalises, MacDonald (1995) emphasises the centrality of a recognisable elite the functions of which are:

- ▶ to develop professional ideology;
- ▶ agree characteristics that form the basis of membership; and
- ▶ negotiate the realms of practice and levels of autonomy from the State.

Again, implicit in this is an assumption of the State as impartial and neutral mediators between professionals and their benefactors (MacDonald, p.134).

Towards Standards in Quality Community Work (CWC, 2008) is the most tangible proposal by an elite of acceptable professional practice, endorsed through particular educational pathways. It commits the sector to a consensus model, despite its failures thus far, with one of the many pre-requisites for acceptable standards being towards 'networking, solidarity and engagement with all of the stakeholders, including central government and local authorities (CWC, 2008 p.13). This leaves little room for maneuver for conflict oriented, radical models of practice marginalising them within their own sector.

A second important event for community educators who interpret themselves as community development workers is the upcoming involvement of the Teaching Council. Although still not fully clarified, it would appear that from April 2013, those delivering FETAC accredited programmes⁸ will need to register with the Council, the standard requirement being graduate and post-graduate qualification. Although Teaching Council regulations do allow some room for maneuver through *recognition of prior learning* and potential to accredit extensive on-site supervision (The Teaching Council, 2009), it is unclear how or by whom these will be monitored and the absence of effective systems that recognise *prior experiential learning* across the adult education sector remains problematic.

8 With the exception of literacy and leisure pursuits.

These developments, both Towards Standards and the involvement of The Teaching Council, endorse dependence on certain specialist knowledge validated through university recognition, a customary feature of professionalisation (Larson, 1977, Houle, 1980, Cevero, 1988, MacDonald, 1995). The paradox this presents is that as bodies of knowledge develop around equality, social justice and the eradication of poverty, the professionals that circumvent these become dependent on the continuation of these circumstances for their own academic and professional survival often emitting a sense that theirs is the only true understanding of a particular situation.

Professionalisation can be presented as affording greater advantage for the community worker than the community member s/he is positioned to serve (Larson, 1977, McDonald, 1995) with that which is practiced by others considered un-professional and therefore unvalued. This is regardless of the legitimacy of community connections. Linking professional status to university qualifications also takes their acquisition out of the reach of many residing in the communities in question, less likely to have the educational requirements required to attend college (O'Connell et al, 2006). This perpetuates the internal cooption of practice by 'outsider community workers', potentially valuable in their role as ally, but also guilty of contributing to capitalism's *cultural invasion* (Freire, 1972) through the unwitting hegemonic incursion of middle-class norms. When they take up representative roles, as has often been the case, the quality of this representation is questionable given that those negotiating do so from their own lens of experience and not from lived experiences.

Conclusion

Despite its pessimistic overtures, this paper is committed to the promotion of radical community education viewing it as symbiotic with a type of community development that is practiced to challenge the status quo. Whilst the extent of the State enforced annihilation of the sector and the ease at which this has happened can seem overwhelming, a potential phoenix from the flames might be a return to some of the radical voluntary activism that initiated social change community education in the first place. A consequence could be a re-adoption of conflictual relationships with the State, bringing practice away from consensus models that have underpinned so much of Ireland's recent history and in line with new social movement theories forcing practitioners to consider whose side they are on.

Some examples of this approach are identifiable; *The Spectacle of Defiance and Hope*, a broad based alliance of community organisations, artists and trade unionists and linked to the *occupy movement*, is committed to creative resistance to community sector cuts and economic injustice. Its actions to date have not only culminated in the mobilisation of 1,000-2,000 community members and workers, in colourful street protest on three occasions, but in a Freirean influenced process of *conscientisation*, initiated through locally based workshops politicising communities and those who work within them. A second collaboration between the community sector and trade unionism, the *Communities Against Cuts Campaign*⁹ has also mobilised support, most significantly through a rally of 12,000 people opposing cuts to the community sector. Recently re-convened, it is working to support praxis influenced local activism to a range of issues alongside building for a national rally at budget time.

One cannot deny the failures of these actions to substantially influence the political establishment, a further reminder of the lack of leverage held by the sector. Mobilisations do however ensure visibility for a cause and builds solidarity within. The community sector could also form wider alliances across social movements such as environmental, anti-austerity and anti-capitalist campaigns and link with adversarial political parties and independent TDs. Again it is unclear what the outcome of such alliances might be but this reticence can be countered with an assertion that pluralist actions have not thus far succeeded in improving the lot for many and perhaps it is time for a different approach. For social change community educators, the creation of critical learning spaces that encourage a questioning of the status quo is an important counter-hegemonic action that, true to its principles, encourages each of us to consider ourselves as social actors and to ask how we might become an agent for change.

9 For more information see <http://www.inou.ie/campaigns/siptucommunitie.html> accessed 4 November 2012.

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