

COUNTERING SOCIAL EXCLUSION: LOCAL SOLUTIONS THROUGH ADULT EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Abstract

This paper will present case study evidence from a four-year community education development project. The project aims to counter social exclusion by increasing participation in higher education.

The discussion will highlight the crucial significance of long-term community based education programmes of development and delivery. It will show that indicators of social exclusion are only the starting points for developing participation in adult continuing education. Evidence will be presented suggesting that in negotiating learning adult educators must consider the social/economic circumstances that people are compelled to 'live-in.'

Introduction

This presentation is an account of some of the significant processes that happened during the period of a community education development project in an area of high social exclusion, which used community development methodology to raise participation levels in education. Some of the conclusions of the project will also be presented particularly with reference to the use of indicators of social exclusion as starting points for adult educators.

Why do it anyway?

Social and educational policies, developed in Britain in the eighties and early nineties, denied a relationship between poverty and access to learning. Free market ideology acted to reduce opportunity to those who were not able to make a strong financial case for participation in post-compulsory education. (Walker 1997:286). There are many examples of this, across the whole educational spectrum, including the imposition of student fees and a reduction in maintenance grants. In several ways, this thinking is still prevalent in Britain and impedes access to education. When the higher education system began to expand dramatically in the late eighties and early nineties there was a refusal to accept that more opportunities were being created for the same groups of people and that mass higher education was not changing its student class profile. Any analysis of the social origins of the student group was sacrificed to elitist concerns about any loss of quality that expansion of the system might cause.

Earlier concerns about the lowering of quality, as a function of increased numbers in education, have not been substantiated. Achievement levels in students from non-traditional backgrounds are as good and in some areas better than those from traditional backgrounds. (Woodrow 1998). Exclusion from higher education is almost

traditional in the poorer social classes. Despite the equal spread of ability across the population and the emergence of welfare policies that ostensibly allow access to institutions, there has never been any structural equity of access in the education system. Financial and qualification barriers, combined with a lack of confidence, an anti-education culture and an absence of knowledge of the system, have acted to exclude large numbers of the population from fulfilling their potential.

How to do it?

The Department of Adult Continuing Education (DACE) already had a growing partnership delivering modules of a part-time degree scheme in the Community University of the Valleys (CUV) in Banwen, an ex-coal mining community in the Dulais Valley, South Wales (Humphreys 1998). That scheme is based on a compact with an independent community education centre, which had hosted a community-based access to higher education programme. Success at Banwen has grown in a climate of detailed local knowledge and student support with an element of negotiated curriculum. On the basis of this experience funding was sought for a development project that would aim at community-based higher education in the setting of large urban public housing estates in the North of Swansea. A key factor of the funding bid was the partnership with communities and the essential acquisition of local knowledge. The partnership that was planned to emerge from the educational development work would be one that gave a sense of ownership to the local people involved. One of the notable features found in the development work, that served as a feasibility study for the Penderry Project, was the absence of ownership these communities displayed for education in many guises (Trotman and Pudner 1998). Analysis of social statistics for the area built a picture of low participation rates in education, high unemployment and alienation from the formal education systems that surrounded them.

It was apparent from the beginning that for educational initiatives to flourish, a positive climate had to be fostered. People had to be convinced not only of the trustworthiness of the institution involved, but also of the function of education as a tool for improving the quality of their lives. Higher education had no evident place in the lives of the people in the ward and would have to earn the respect that it was automatically awarded in other settings, by other social groups.

It was considered that the use of a community development methodology would facilitate a situation whereby there would be a framework of equal power relations and understanding between the various partners in the community. As a result of previous negative experiences of the formal education system it was thought that potential participants/partners were not going to surrender themselves once again to what they would see as similar, unfulfilling and perhaps even humiliating assessed schemes of study.

Ownership of the educational process was seen as an objective of effective community-based adult education development work.

What has worked?

The key elements of the success of the project have been –

- Partnership
- Ownership
- A Long Term Perspective

The keynote of the project activities in Penderry has been the ‘long view’ on the developments, which was made possible initially by the four-year funding. There has also been a conscious attempt to build sustainable elements into the work and to try at all costs to avoid ‘project culture.’ As recently noted by a Resident’s representative from this community when being consulted on regeneration policy by the Welsh Assembly, ‘*there’s a lot of money to be made out of poverty.*’ Funding initiatives such as the European Structural Fund require partnerships and expect communication between groups when bids are constructed. However this does not necessarily result in equal power relations between large institutions and the voluntary sector, and can lead to cynicism and disillusionment in communities. The Department of Adult Continuing Education has worked previously in communities where residents are aware of funding initiatives and feel abandoned by projects when they eventually finish. These experiences helped to build an approach that resulted eventually in shared curriculum planning and progression routes.

One of these is a University part-time degree scheme based in a community education centres and planned with access routes from a local further education college. There has also been a sense in which the project has acted outside any previously defined strict boundaries of educational development work in order to contribute to the groundswell of civil society in an area of social exclusion. A large institution such as a University has access to resources, services and people not available to a poorer marginalized community. The flow of support and resources has contributed to the sense of equal power relations in the work and has consisted of a range of activities from supplying surplus office furniture to access to the library for funding information.

Reasons for success

There has been a political will within the project team that has developed an ethos towards working in partnership! This is not simply the result of political correctness by the educational institutions involved, it was also seen as an unalienable right by the community groups and was to be seen in their practice as a part of their motivation to become organised on behalf of their wider communities.

However the most significant factor may be the willingness of the institution to attempt to structure a meaningful working relationship with very small groups of people and with other educational partners!

Delivering Continuing Education at the correct level is also of significance in relation to encouraging participation. Therefore, provision has ranged from introductory to more challenging levels.

The usefulness of education for practical and personal satisfaction purposes is at the heart of the analysis! The fundamental question to ask (apropos Shanahan 1997) is:

‘Does the educational development work enable excluded groups to define their own problems... to lead their own struggles and campaigns’?

This style of self-assessment is taken from the community development of approach expounded by Peter Shanahan at Magee College, University of Ulster (see appendix 1). Shanahan suggests that a crucial assessment is the application of ‘key competencies’.

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KEY COMPETENCIES

Does the work:

1. Enable excluded groups/communities/people to define their own problems and or lead their own struggles and campaigns?
2. Support groups or people with research that is based on agendas that belong to and are owned by excluded groups/communities/people themselves?
3. Analyse and narrow the power relationships between the excluded groups/communities/people and statutory bodies?
4. Question exclusion and power relationships critically at the personal, professional, statutory, state and global levels?
5. Adopt a reflexive mode of practice and embrace new and challenging approaches to community participation and empowerment?