

CAN EDUCATION CHANGE SOCIETY? CURRICULUM, FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AND ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this article I reflect on the question posed by Michael Apple (2013), Can education change society? I argue that pedagogy and curriculum are inextricably linked, and feminist pedagogy has highlighted that traditional pedagogy and curricula leave a void that is filled with conventional and/or neo-liberal social agendas. I argue that critical and feminist curriculum development confronts these agendas, by highlighting the role that the hidden curriculum plays in education as a social institution and proposing alternative lens for critical reflexivity as the underpinning principle in curriculum development. I draw on my own experience of education in Ireland and connect with both Irish and international perspectives on curriculum and ideology. I presented the argument that feminist pedagogy and adult education are incompatible with set curricula, particularly when the set curricula are underpinned by social discourse that valorises meritocracy and inequality. The profound changes in the 20th century through campaigning and activism demonstrates that it is possible to change society, and education has a part to play in it.

Keywords: Feminism. Curriculum. Adult education. Critical reflexivity.

RESUMEN

¿PUEDE LA EDUCACIÓN CAMBIAR LA SOCIEDAD? CURRÍCULUM, PEDAGOGÍA FEMINISTA Y EDUCACIÓN DE ADULTOS

En este artículo, reflexiono sobre la pregunta de Michael Apple (2013): ¿Puede la educación cambiar la sociedad? Sostengo que la pedagogía y el plan de estudios están intrínsecamente vinculados, y la pedagogía feminista destacó que la pedagogía y los planes de estudios tradicionales dejan un vacío lleno de agendas sociales convencionales y/o neoliberales. Sostengo que el desarrollo crítico y feminista del plan de estudios se enfrenta a estas agendas, destacando el papel que juega el plan de estudios oculto en la educación como institución social y proponiendo lentes alternativas para la reflexividad crítica como el principio subyacente del desarrollo del plan

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de estudios. Utilizo mi propia experiencia en educación en Irlanda y me conecto con las perspectivas irlandesas e internacionales sobre currículum e ideología. Argumenté que la pedagogía feminista y la educación de adultos son incompatibles con los currículos establecidos, particularmente cuando tales currículos están respaldados por discursos sociales que valoran la meritocracia y la desigualdad. Los profundos cambios en el siglo XX a través de campañas y activismo demuestran que es posible cambiar la sociedad y que la educación tiene un papel a desempeñar.

Palabras clave: Feminismo. Currículum. Educación de jóvenes y adultos. Reflexividad crítica.

RESUMO

A EDUCAÇÃO PODE MUDAR A SOCIEDADE? CURRÍCULO, PEDAGOGIA FEMINISTA E EDUCAÇÃO DE ADULTOS

Neste artigo, reflito sobre a questão de Michael Apple (2013): A educação pode mudar a sociedade? Argumento que a pedagogia e o currículo estão intrinsecamente ligados, e a pedagogia feminista destacou que a pedagogia e os currículos tradicionais deixam um vazio cheio de agendas sociais convencionais e / ou neoliberais. Argumento que o desenvolvimento crítico e feminista do currículo confronta essas agendas, destacando o papel que o currículo oculto desempenha na educação como instituição social e propondo lentes alternativas para a reflexividade crítica como o princípio subjacente ao desenvolvimento curricular. Utilizo minha própria experiência na educação na Irlanda e me conecto com as perspectivas irlandesas e internacionais sobre currículo e ideologia. Apresentei o argumento de que a pedagogia feminista e a educação de adultos são incompatíveis com os currículos estabelecidos, particularmente quando os currículos estabelecidos são sustentados por discursos sociais que valorizam a meritocracia e a desigualdade. As profundas mudanças no século XX por meio de campanhas e ativismo demonstram que é possível mudar a sociedade, e a educação tem um papel a desempenhar nela.

Palavras-chave: Feminismo. Currículo. Educação de jovens e adultos. Reflexividade crítica.

INTRODUCTION

This article will reflect on the question posed by Michael Apple (2013), Can education change society? I argue that pedagogy and curriculum are inextricably linked, and feminist pedagogy has highlighted that traditional pedagogy and curricula leave a void that is filled with conventional and/or neo-liberal social agendas. I argue that critical and feminist curriculum development

confronts these agendas, by highlighting the role that the hidden curriculum plays in education as a social institution and proposing alternative lens for critical reflexivity as the underpinning principle in curriculum development.

I live and work in Ireland and I have been involved in education all my life. I've drawn on my experience in Ireland,

as a state that has undergone profound social change in the past sixty years, but at some extent, still hankers after the old certainties of the 1950s, when we all knew our places in society, not only in terms of class, but also in our binary gender roles, with our identities shaped by an Irish version of conservative republicanism, the Roman Catholic Church and Irish culture (Inglis, 1998). O'Reilly identified the 'masterminds of the right' and these included Christian Brothers and Catholic secondary school parents as well as medics, pharmacists, and other public figures, (O'Reilly, 1992). Fiction can depict these complexities in ways that history, social science and journalism cannot. Edna O'Brien was practically banished from Ireland in the 1960s when her novel, *The Country Girls*, (1960) was published. And more recently, with the benefit of hindsight and revelations, Black (2015) has delved into these intersections and the impact on the citizens in an accessible way in his novels, especially *Even the Dead*.

As in the wider society, globally as well as nationally, education plays a central role in maintaining the prevailing status quo, as Freire (1972) and hooks (1994) hold, in their exhortation for critical and feminist pedagogy, the pedagogy of oppressed people everywhere. In Ireland, education maintained the vision of Ireland that was set down at the foundation of the state in 1922, and these elements of Irishness as Catholic and conservative until the social movements of the 1970s and later (Connolly, 2003). While Higher Education may offer some level of critical curricula and critical approaches as Newman advocated in his pivotal lectures on university education at the time when he established University College Dublin in the middle of the nineteenth century, that

the purpose of a university education was to expand an outlook, a turn of mind and a habit of thought, to produce a knowledgeable, decent, socially sensitive, critically intelligent gentleman (*sic*) (Newman, et al, 1996, p. xv). His, perhaps unconscious, bias against women is obvious, but he was also biased against religions other than Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, the kernel of his aspirations is admirable and applicable to this day. However, this has not permeated schooling or Further Education, where examinations and certification prevail to the detriment of learning and development. Adult education is the only sphere where transformative, power-conscious, participative and emancipatory activist learning is promoted, valorised and advanced. Still, it is vital to show what is possible, and how the rest of education could be revised and reimagined, while ensuring that adult education remains conscious and reflexive within educational discourses that tend towards what Freire called, domestication in contrast to liberation (Freire, 1972).

I realise this perspective is specific to Ireland, but hopefully, readers may be able to analyse and reflect on their own locations and identities with a critical eye and a sense of solidarity, care and love (Lynch, *et al*, 2009). And in the spirit of the other critical voice, Michael Apple, I puzzle over the question, can education change society? (Apple, 2013). And in the spirit of Freire (1972), I include my own experience of domesticating education before I discovered liberating adult education, and tentatively suggest that yes, education can change society, but it really and truly depends on social movements, critical educators, and most of all, a real commitment to equality. First, I want to look at the parameters of curriculum within this argument.

CURRICULUM, PURE AND SIMPLE?

If curriculum is to mean anything to those participating in education, it must be transparent about the positionality of the progenitors, in curriculum development units. In addition, it must be clear and transparent about where those who implement it are coming from. These include the educators, the other actors in the education system. Apple asserts that the positionality of the educational institutions, the educators and the knowledge must be to the forefront any appraisal of education in this complex society (Apple, 2004, p. 11). Yet curricula are presented as if they were neutral and objective, a mere unbiased vehicle, providing the transport to convey knowledge to the students and learners. And further, a determined disavowal of the hidden curriculum mars that contention at a deeper level.

In Ireland, the statutory body for curriculum development avoids engaging with education beyond upper second level, (NCCA, accessed 5th May 2020). Another agency was established in 2012 to oversee qualifications and programmes, Quality Qualifications Ireland, and this monitors curricula that practitioners and other educational agencies develop on the qualifications' framework (QQI, Accessed 5th May 2020).

In both these cases, curricula seem to hover in an uncritical dimension, with the monitoring eye on content and assessment rather than on the wider context of knowledge and society and the ultimate purpose of education. This article will interrogate these deficits and draw on my experience in feminist education to propose a model that can integrate the micro of curriculum development and the macro perspectives on power, inculcation and democracy. Firstly, however,

I want to discuss my own experience of the hidden curriculum in a theocratic society, Ireland in the 1950s and 60s.

IN THE BEGINNING

I was brought up in a very different Ireland to the country we see now in 2020 in the middle of the Covid 19 crisis, with our Taoiseach, that is, our prime minister, Leo Varadkar, taking a leading role in slowing the trajectory of the virus. Leo Varadkar is openly gay, and his partner attends social gatherings with him, in an open, unremarkable manner. Leo Varadkar's father is from India. He met Leo's Irish mother when they both worked in the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK in the 1960s. So, the leader of Ireland is the son of an immigrant, not only to the UK but also to Ireland. He is openly gay. He is a medical doctor. And he speaks with eloquence and assurance about how we, the population, will play a crucial role in slowing down the pandemic through personal hygiene, respect for our fellow citizens and taking responsibility for not spreading the virus. I don't agree with his economic ideology and some of his views on society, but I do admire his role as a politician and the quest to transform Irish society from the misogynist, homophobic, regressive state to the one we have today.

He was a key catalyst in the campaign for marriage equality which passed by two thirds of the popular vote in 2016. Before he was elected as Taoiseach, he came out to the nation as gay and this opened a deluge of others speaking about their own experiences, the experiences of their children or parents, embracing the LGBTQI+ community, who were dehumanised and treated so harshly in Irish society, based on religious education and sex education in particular, but also in the social institutions, overall.

And indeed, it was only in 1993 that homosexuality was decriminalised, due to the efforts of the decades-long campaigns by activists, and our first woman president, Mary Robinson, who represented the activists in the European Court of Human Rights (RTÉ, 1993, accessed 5th May 2020).

Again, Leo Varadkar in 2018 played a key role in shifting the perspectives on abortion from murder of the innocent to a key health-care concern for pregnant people, through a referendum with a two-thirds majority. This was a complete transformation to the Ireland before the women's movement of the 1970s. These seismic shifts were aided by the growth and development of adult education and emphasis on activism for women's equality (Connolly, 2014) as well as the LGBTIQ+ community, people with disabilities, and other marginalised and disadvantaged groups

The country I grew up in was practically a theocracy, with Roman Catholic teaching reflected in the constitution and in the law of the land. In school, we were taught that other religions were fatally flawed. We were taught that contraception and abortion were evil and if we were tempted to use them, that we would be sent to hell, which would also have to accommodate all other religions, and plenty of Catholics who broke the commandments and other specific rules, through word, thought, or deed. A bad thought was particularly odious, and we had to monitor our most private moments in case we risked a sudden death and the inevitable descent into hell.

This absolute control over our innermost thoughts was imparted through the overt curriculum, in religious instruction, but also in most of the other subjects. All were underpinned by the assumptions that the world was made by God and all human

endeavour was approved or not by Him – male, of course. Many of the readings in literature were stories of the triumph of good over evil, or the opposite, of course, told through that opaque religious lens. Science, home economics, history, geography, theocratic view of women's role in Irish society, from housekeeping skills to Christian teaching on divorce, contraception and so on. Even literature and mathematics had some level of gender discrimination. For example, there were only one or two women writers in our poetry, prose and short story anthologies. And higher-level maths and science were not offered, in contrast to the local boys' school, where most were offered honours courses.

The past was surely another country.

Simultaneously, in Northern Ireland, the hidden curriculum was also underpinned by a theocratic learning, but in that case, it was that Roman Catholicism was pure evil, and that Home Rule was Rome Rule. There was no redemption possible for Catholics.

Kathleen Lynch, in her ground-breaking research in the 1980s, showed the ways in which the hidden curriculum was conveyed (Lynch, 1989). The next section explores this aspect of Irish education, with reflections on the impact on social progress.

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM AND THE REPRODUCTION SOCIAL INEQUALITY

One of the most influential critical thinkers in Ireland is Kathleen Lynch. As a sociologist centred on the sociology of education, her research has provided empirical evidence of the contention that education, far from being a force for egalitarian and emancipatory outcomes, is underpinned by discourses that perpetuate and reproduce inequality (Lynch, 1989). These discourses stem from

a number of sources, including the requirement that students commit to sacrificing their own time, attention, desires and experiences for the rewards of qualifications, for which they have to work very hard within a limited parameter of excellence. These theories emanate from a functionalist analysis of education as a social institution (Lynch, 1989, pp 1-2). In many ways, these functionalist perspectives support the meritocratic inclinations that saturated education in Ireland. This was the case in the past, but it remains the case in the present era with the incursion of neo-liberal ideology in particular into the educational system. This has profound impacts on the numbers who go to Higher Education as well as those who leave school with few or no qualifications and little prospects of benefits bestowed on professional graduates. That is, instead of inherited privilege, wealth and/or social status, meritocratic orientations shift inequality from structural systems, to individual achievement, provided that the individual reaches the standardized measurement of intelligence, hard work and effort. Thus, one form of inequality is exchanged for another, which appears to be fairer, more just and available for everyone with these qualities.

Lynch also examined the literature around the development of theories of reproduction with a critical theorists' analysis, particularly in the USA, with Bowles and Gintis (1976) Michael Apple (1979) and Henri Giroux (1981). Her main critique revolves around the dearth of empirical studies to demonstrate and support some of the claims that these theorists make, particularly around ideological transmission - through the overt curriculum, the practice of teachers, the prevailing cultures, and the structures of educational provision

(Lynch, 1989, pp 8-18). Sugrue's analysis of the revision/reform of curricula in Irish education, which was proposed and implemented in the 1990s, shows that empirical evidence is missing, as Lynch identified in her ground-breaking work, and that vested interests prevailed in the development of the 'new' curricula, from the philosophical positioning of the teacher training colleges, to the teacher unions, and most tellingly, to the political ideology and the neo-liberal discourses saturating social life in Ireland (Sugrue, 2004, pp. 201-204). That is, curricula, both covert and overt, remained in the power of centre-right neo-liberalists, rather than in the hands of those who were committed to a more just and equality society. And these overt and hidden curricula are supported by other social institutions particularly the media and politics, resulting in the reproduction of these attitudes, values and beliefs year after year.

And this was my education. Until ultimately, a key social movement for social progress and emancipation intruded in very transgressive ways.

FEMINIST EDUCATION AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

My 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 1996) came to me by accident when a few school friends and I went to Northern Ireland for a day out. Northern Ireland, though it was a different flavour of theocratic politics to the Irish republic, benefitted from the NHS and its provision for women's health. By co-incidence, our trip to Belfast was the 22nd May 1971, the day that the Irish Women's Liberation Movement decided to travel to Belfast to protest the (Catholic teaching) prohibition on the use of contraceptives (RTÉ, 1971, accessed 5th May 2020). This experience really opened my

eyes, because these campaigners, far from being evil acolytes of Satan, were journalists, trade unionists, lawyers, and so on, all of them educated and articulate. And contraceptives, for me, changed from being evil devices, to the means to gain control over our bodies. And from that day onward, I was able to view all my earlier education through a much more critical eye. And that is what feminist pedagogy is all about. Education intrinsically interlocked with social emancipation.

But it took many years until I encountered feminist educational practice, which, ironically, was in an adult education class that would be seen as belonging to a more traditional view of women's role in society.

My first experience of feminist education was in an arts and crafts adult education programme, delivered in a conventional classroom in a typical second level school. So far, so traditional. But underneath the establishment appearance, there was a beating heart of transgression. Firstly, the traditional classroom was disrupted with piles of materials, equipment and disorder in the middle of the space. All of us participants were asked what we wanted to learn in the class, from techniques and the use of materials to completed projects and products. In other words, we developed the curriculum - without knowing that was what we were doing. Secondly, the tutor, as she was identified in the publicity blurb, or Mary (not her real name) as we called her, pondered over what we asked for and organised it to our satisfaction, but with plenty of opportunity to chop and change as we went on. That is, the curriculum was flexible and responsive. Finally, as we worked through the physical materials and equipment, Mary started where we were at, helping us to get to know and learn from one another, listened to our

stories, added to our knowledge and experience and encouraged us to use the arts and crafts for wider social as well as personal expression. It was wonderful fun. But it was also a crucial experience for me. I made my project, Celtic embroidery on a traditional undyed fabric called Báinín, expressing something like *The Personal is Political*, or something similar, I can't exactly recall, this happened nearly forty years ago, and my handiwork is long gone. But I never forgot what my colleague, Anne B. Ryan framed as *feminist ways of knowing* (Ryan, 2001) which characterised my work as an adult educator. That is, I brought my raised consciousness into the learning environment, alongside an approach underpinned by those crucial qualities that Mary, our tutor, demonstrated. These included listening, knowledge, facilitation, ease, encouragement, analysis, connecting the micro and macro, the personal to the political and back again.

After that class, I went back to college to study to become an adult educator, inspired by this experience, but also exhilarated by the possibilities and power of the women's movement, from which I was benefitting, in complete contrast to the lives of my mother and even my older sisters. Real life had changed fundamentally for women, shaking off the constraints and limitations of the traditional, by the raft of legal and attitudinal measures in the early 1970s, arising from the Commission on the Status of Women, and the progress that emerged alongside as the women's movement gained momentum (Connolly, 2003). And as I studied the discipline of adult education, I realised that this was not a style unique to Mary, but it was congruent with feminist pedagogy and women's studies (Rowland, 1982), within which I developed my academic voice, however tentative and unsettled.

FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Feminist pedagogy can be understood as a critique and response to traditional pedagogy, in that it is underpinned by feminist theory and practice, first and foremost, with the intention of providing an alternative educational experience in the learning environment for everyone, as bell hooks discusses in her *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994). It is also an approach to education which interrogates power in the relationship between educators and learners, and as such, feminist pedagogy values the experience of the participants and women as a group, and reflects on these experiences in the light of feminist perspectives on traditional disciplines, from psychology, sociology, law and politics, that is, the Social Sciences to the cradle of misogyny in the humanities. But it must be recognised that education has been the cradle of all kinds of inequality, class, race, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. Education has been responsible for social engineering in its entire history, from the liberal arts for the upper classes and vocational and technical for the working classes, to cooking and cleaning for women, and Western education for those colonised and post-colonial societies. That social engineering has been conveyed through pedagogy of course, but also through the curriculum.

Feminist pedagogy takes into account the lives of women intersected with class, race, sexuality, ethnicity and other social categories that permeates these experiences. This necessarily entails that feminist educators are clear and open about their position, without the intention of indoctrinating the learners, but rather encouraging critical engagement and reflection that transforms perspectives and of course, to learn from the experience and knowledge of the learners.

Feminist pedagogy probably developed in parallel to Freire's critical pedagogy, depending on where we look. Certainly, when I started to study adult education in the 1987, I was familiar with a lot of Freirean concepts such as conscientization and horizontal dialogue from my experience in women's groups and within women's studies programmes from 1985, where consciousness raising was a crucial aspect of women's liberation and learning.

I remember facilitating my first women's studies class in a local village close to where I lived at the time. I was nervous and shaking after I got over the huge effort of turning up, and this all showed on my face and in my voice. There were no hiding places. But I did have a lot to say and so did everyone else in the group of about 15 women from all walks of life, particularly 'stay at home' mothers and homemakers, the unpaid workers who kept and continue to keep society nurtured and treasured. The 1980s was a tumultuous time in Ireland, with very high unemployment, very high emigration, poverty and deprivation (O'Hearn, 1997, pp 106-112).

These social conditions took a huge toll on women, deepening the feminization of poverty, particularly in the private domain but also with lower paid work (Combat Poverty Agency and Equality Authority, 2003, pp 38-39). Social welfare was tricky for women, as it was set up on the model of the male breadwinner and female unpaid labour in the private sphere. 'Women's work' was scarce and it was soured with an assumption that women would take men's jobs at lower wages. And with the high numbers of men emigrating, many women stayed in Ireland to keep things going while men sought work in England or the USA.

But these were the conditions that underpinned my first women's studies class-

es and they provided very fertile ground for learning, reflection and, consciousness raising. When I enrolled on the Higher Diploma in Adult and Community Education in Maynooth University and was introduced to Freire for the first time, my eyes were opened to how powerful critical pedagogy was, and how my own brand of feminist pedagogy was part of a wider social process in the education of adults. The key question at the centre of my studies was *could education change society?* I grappled with the individualism that sorted people into professions or vocations, depending on the individual talents or dispositions of individual students. I mused over the practice in the classroom, the curriculum that we followed, the assessments that I had to complete and the practice on which I was appraised: how could these small steps become the giant leaps of social movements? This was the mystery. It was perplexing to re-evaluate the ways in which revolutions brought about profound social change, independence and self-governance, which is a crucial part of our history in Ireland, and the slow, developing transformations that adult education augured. I knew a deeper analysis was needed.

EQUALITY STUDIES AND THE CRITICAL CURRICULUM

Alongside my work in adult education and women's studies, I opted to study for a Masters in Equality Studies in the 1990s. I was very interested in developing a theoretical base for the more ephemeral conscientization (Freire, 1972) and consciousness raising (see, for example, Rowland, 1982 and Hearn, 1997). This programme was offered in a renowned university, whose graduates were very influential in Irish politics, law, media, and other facets of public life. However, the director of the programme was,

and remains, a prominent critic of inequality and injustice that characterises Irish society, Kathleen Lynch. Her academic work includes critical social analyses on hidden curriculum (1989) equality in education (1999) and equality and power in schooling, (2002) And the Equality Studies programme was underpinned by these and similar critiques of media, democracy, economics and so on. The content of the programme was astounding. I realised that my consciousness was limited to information and knowledge that related to my interests and experience, while the new bodies of study on the programme introduced me to wildly different spheres of theory. This was my direct experience of a critical curriculum. It was completely open about the positionality of the educators, expressed through their wider academic work including books, articles, presentations, media and public service.

However, to return to the equality studies curriculum, it was a radical agenda, without a doubt, with a clear intention to raise awareness with 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 1996). That is, we were introduced to alternative analyses of poverty, democracy, economics, class and so on, which transformed the way I saw the world and opened vistas for changing the status quo, particularly with regards to developing solidarity and commitment to social justice. However, it was delivered in a very traditional way, in long lectures, with students trying to keep up with furious notetaking. No time for engage with the content and certainly no time for groupwork, dialogue and reflection.

I've thought of this many times since. I understand why the curriculum was so specified, as it had to earn and justify its place in a conservative university. However, I know in adult education, it is possible to attain that master' level scholarship, by

co-creating the programme in collaboration with the participants.

ADULT EDUCATION CURRICULUM CREATION

In formal education, the curriculum is based on a set of principles and decisions on what is important to learn. The word itself comes from the Latin for racecourse. As I discussed in *Adult Learning in Groups* (Connolly 2008), I always imagine this as a sort of racetrack with clear boundaries and a beginning and a very well-defined finish line. This is very specific in formal schooling with prescriptive aims and outcomes set out for teachers, and the finish lines, ultimately, are the national examinations. The curriculum is designed to bring students to that line, and it has the effect of ‘teaching to exams’, or ‘teaching to the tests’, the phenomenon whereby students learn only answers to exam questions rather than a more holistic, critical, nuanced body of knowledge, the foundation for complex adult life. It undermines teachers’ skills, and limits learning for both learners and educators. Indeed, all that is required for both educators and learners is to remember the answers, which may be very useful for employment as a quizzer, but certainly not enough for critical citizenship, creativity and imagination. Further, a key problem of standardised testing is that learners are gravely disadvantaged if they fail these tests or exams, and the learning environment is considered to have failed too. This is a huge problem when examination results determine qualifications, professional competence and indeed, entrance into the upper income bracket and the social status associated with all these indicators of expertise and influence. And all this stems from the prescriptive curriculum, high-stakes standardized testing and blind faith

in a form of meritocracy: delayed gratification plus application plus talent plus ‘good’ schools equals deserved reward (adapted from Young, 1961)

When I worked with adult learning groups, delivering a women’s studies programme, the first session was always spent getting to know the participants and to developing a programme with their input alongside my own. This provided the basis of the programme. Participants’ contributions focused on what they wanted to get out of the programme and how they wanted to achieve it. That is, they identified their own learning needs and the tutor’s role was to facilitate the process to meet those needs. Sometimes these contributions amounted to mere headlines, for example, reproductive rights, divisions of labour, parenting, education, building confidence, personal development and so on. Sometimes, they were much deeper and nuanced, for example, overcoming the trauma of earlier education or family life, or an exploration of schools of thought on the organisation of society. Thus, the curriculum was generated out of the interests of the students (Freire, 1972) which would change with each group or context.

This meant that I learned more about sociology, the law, economics, psychology, biology and the like, in order to work in a positive way with the students, and to open new sources for them to pursue themselves. My own background was in philosophy, which was perceived as the foundation of all knowledge. But while it equipped me to develop reasonable arguments, based on abstract concepts of justice, aesthetics, reality, existence, it was oblivious to its own blind spots. The Wise Man was the archetypal philosopher, but where were the women? And where were the practical applications of these abstractions, when they were used

to reinforce the status quo? The Wise Man could lecture on the nature of justice, but the application of the law was frequently biased in favour of other Wise Men: educated, privileged, rational. Not everyone had these advantages. Yet many of the disciplines which study society and humanity, start with the assumption that Wise Men are typical of humanity, that our behaviour, attitudes, relationships, interests and motivations are based on rational thought and decisions. And deviation from these rational processes are considered transgressive.

Adult education is transgressive. It must be. It has monumental work to do, in order to redress the impact of social engineering that is the most characteristic outcome of formal education, where people are streamed into their adult lives and attendant social status, from professional to vocation employment, to lack of qualifications and intersectional stratification, even within the framework of social mobility and the meritocracy. And adult education starts from the perspective that however rational humans can be, our individual fates are tied in with social forces greater than our efforts, intelligence, experience and backgrounds. It always had to tread the delicate line between prior knowledge and experience with critical knowledge and analysis which may challenge people fundamentally, albeit the challenge is conveyed in the most democratic and emancipatory way possible. That is, through critical, feminist curriculum development and pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I endeavoured to draw on my own experience of domesticating education in Ireland and connect with both Irish and international perspectives on curriculum and ideology. I presented the argument that feminist pedagogy and adult education are

incompatible with set curricula, and particularly when the set curricula are underpinned by social discourse that valorises meritocracy and inequality. The profound changes in the 20th century through campaigning and activism demonstrates that it is possible to change society, and education has some part to play in it, including the progress of feminism, the emancipation of the LGBTQI+ community through legislation, though not always in the public area and not everywhere; the addressing of literacy issues and girls' education; the highlighting of poverty and disadvantage, and so on. Of course, there is a backlash, which is the only way to see the rise of the right and the hankering for the inequality of the past. And yes, feminist pedagogy is capable of changing society, as Michael Apple poses, but it is dependent on clear and strong commitment to equality, developing curricula that address that and revealing the underlying hidden dimension. That is the only change that is desirable.

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