**Recognition: Changing the Approach to Mental Health**

**through Active Inclusion in Further Education and Training[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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In his *Memoirs* (2005) John McGahern tells of having survived a childhood of love and hatred in rural Ireland. He begins by talking about the “inch deep” soil of Leitrim where one can trace “the beaten path the otter takes between the lakes” and the “quiet places on the edge of the lakes…where the otter feeds and trains her young” (2005, p. 1). On the final page he returns to the otter, but also talks about his mother who died when he was eight:

She never really left us. In the worst years, I believe we would have been broken but for the different life we had known with her and the love she gave that was there like hidden strength.

When I reflect on those rare moments when I stumble without warning into that extraordinary sense of security, that deep peace, I know that consciously and unconsciously she has been with me all my life.

If we could walk together through those summer lanes, with their banks of wild flowers that ‘cast a spell’, we probably would not be able to speak, though I would want to tell her all the local news.

We would leave the lanes and I would take her by the beaten path the otter takes under the thick hedges between the lakes. At the lakes’ edge I would show her the green lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young.…

As we retraced our steps, I would pick for her the wild orchid and the windflower.

(McGahern, 2005, p. 271-272)

McGahern knew that his mother forged for him a secure childhood and he carried this security with him all his life. This is a recognition story – a story of recognition. Where his mother recognised and encouraged his inner life of feelings and communications – with her and with nature. This paper explores the ingredients of this security and explores the implications for lifelong learning and the interest in mental health and inclusion.

Recognition is widely understood and experienced in society today. It is a positive aspect of people’s everyday experience and involves the realization that other people are essential to us because of the ways they react to us. We rely on others for our self-image, even our identity. Without other people especially in our very young years, we might not survive at all. Other people’s beliefs, attitudes and actions confirm for us the concept we have of ourselves, they support us in realizing our own identity and help toward living a worthwhile life. This recognition is not just a conventional form of greeting, conversation or etiquette but ‘a vital human need’ (Taylor, 1992, p. 25). Honneth’s (1995) theory of recognition has theorized this phenomenon from within the critical theory tradition.

So what is so important about recognition?

Two things:

1. Without it we cannot develop when we are children. Unless someone actually acknowledges us we will not grow and our development is totally dependent on that experience. You know how our own children or nieces and nephews respond whwen they are praised, acknowledged and recognised for their talents, achievements and just being their own wonderful selves. Many times the child takes into themselves the affirmation and grows.
2. Our own history, including our educational system has a long and troubled history of not recognising, of misrecognitions. Slapping, put-downs, derogatory comments, ignoring, negative remarks of any kind are all examples of actions that undermine the legitimate desire and right that children have to be recognised as citizens, as unique, as people with rights. This is the way in which self-confidence is built.

Those who have studied G.H. Mead, Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby will know all of this already and anyone with children in their care and families will know this too. To a great extent we become that person who is recognised or misrecognised and we carry those early experiences with us throughout our lives in ways that support us, undermine us or support us as survivor with resilience in the face of life’s experiences. Many people as adults are fortunate to have partners and families that continue the lifelong pursuit and enjoyment of life enhancing recognition. To be heard; to listen to another; to have a conversation with a friend or partner is a continuation of this kind of recognition (or not).

But the story I want to tell does not end there. There is more. Yes! Our childhood experiences define us to a great extent. And childhood is not the end of the desire or need to be recognised and is not the end of the struggle for recognition. Family and other family relationships are the first sphere in which we are so recognised. The recent compensation plan for so called orphanages is a moment of recognition by the state on our behalf. This is not a childish or childhood kind of recognition but unfolds when we are recognised in two other spheres of adult life life:

[the first was the recognition in family and intimate sphere and leads to self-confidence]

The second of these is in the arena of public policy and law and leads to self-respect;

The third is in the arena of work and involvements in community, etc and leads to self- esteem.

Scholars and students will recognise this as not only the work of Axel Honneth (1995) but will see its deeper roots in Hegel – who wrote about the family, civil society and the state as three great institutions of society.

What is the big take away from this?

There is a well acknowledged need for recognition that is lifelong.

1. In the sphere of public policy and law, individuals, groups, communities, projects, ideals, are recognised by passing laws and enshrining rights in constitutions and laws. Gay rights, civil rights, marriage equality, travellers as an ethnic minority, equal pay and the priority now emerging for housing rights and climate justice are all examples of how through its laws and policies the state recognises various possibilities and paths to being an Irish citizen. Throughout my lifetime women have struggled to have their equal rights recognised in Irish law, it’s not done yet! Contraception, divorce, workers rights, disability laws are all good examples. Laws that recognise people in their diversity and uniqueness. We recall the powerful moment when we voted for Marriage Equality that is now constitutionally guaranteed. The moment of recognition produced mass pride (not a pun) and validation for LGBT community, and just as importantly for parents and families. And it is not over yet. There are still too many tribunals reporting in recent years on misrecognitions.
2. I am old enough to remember reading Edna O’Brien in 1966 – banned; John McGahern – censored; we are only beginning to recognise the misrecognitions in our history and society. Only beginning to mend and heal the long term damage that was done to people’s identity. I trace this progress as the beginning of our willingness to hear and deal with the truth of people’s experience. Today we are more open to the inner pain, turmoil, stress, anxiety and sadness that seem to overwhelm some and prevent many more from achieving the life they desire to lead as free citizens in a democracy and a republic. Hearing the pain of exclusion, of inequality, of the desire to be treated well is a remarkable achievement and these three reports[[2]](#footnote-2) that I am launching today map those stories of resilience. They also show how the ETBI system wants to take into the core of its policies the task of recognising the experiences of learners in its programmes. I want to also acknowledge the work of AONTAS which in association with SOLAS is also offering a moment of recognition by amplifying the voices of learners and ensuring these voices are heard in the making of policy and practice in the Further Education sector.
3. My own modest contribution to this field is to discover through research (EU funded) that adults return to learning in pursuit of recognition (Fleming & Finnegan, 2010; Finnegan & Fleming, 2011). I can, as a result, say with some confidence that among the multi-layered and complex matrix that is the motivation for adult learning the pursuit of recognition is central. This involves recognition of people’s intelligence, their hard-won life experience, that innate knowledge about what is right or wrong, fair and unfair in society and schooling. But above all there is the recognition that they can dream dreams of becoming better educated, develop literacy skills, become qualified, articulate, valued, equal, free from the misrecognitions of all of these in their previous experiences. When adult learners speak of their increased self-confidence it is a result of recognition. One of the most liberating moment for students is the gradual realization that their school experience is not unique but shared with many more in their class and that the misrecognition they experienced is systemic and systematic. Above all, and completing the package, a recognition of their desire (irrespective of class or background) that life will be better for their children. These reports are a significant moment on the journey toward the recognition of peoples inner lives of mental health and exclusion. Children from the lanes had no chance.

*As I undergo the process of writing these words for this conference a range of thoughts and memories invade my mind. The one that will not go away is the clear memory of a dark (November?) evening walking up the steps of a local grocery store in Waterford city. I must have been about 5 years of age, as she was still holding my hand. It was raining. I say on the step of the shop Tommie H….. who was my friend at school – I remember his as a kind gentle boy. He was sitting on a stack of evening newspapers [Evening Hearld and Evening Press] selling papers. He had no shoes.*

*The demand of a child for answers, for understanding in these moments are the way in which ones’ views on inclusion and equality are formed. Whatever she said he continued to be my friend in 1952.*

1. But not all of us arrive well, secure, untrammelled by the experiences of living. There is an increased awareness of mental health as an issue. Even if life has left one untrampled on and relatively secure and in a good place there are current threats to our mental health that leave us vulnerable to being unable to recognise the recognitions we are offered! Covid-19 has been and continues to be a player in our mental health. Covid is not only a medical condition, a virus an infection. It is a social disease. The very people and facilities and even recognitions we rely on, family, teachers, counsellors, neighbours, grandparents are now a threat and a potential source of infection though we need them to be closer than ever. We will not google our way to intimacy, or zoom our way forward either – though it has prevented total isolation. The challenge for our mental health and the delivery of such care is to recognise the issues and hear the voices of students and deliver the care.
2. The delivery of recognition in this form is developmental – meaning that it contributes to our development and growth. Recognition is the precondition for relationships and for the ability to engage in critical reflection and in democracy. Recognition is the pre-condition for self-confidence.
3. More significantly, without addressing the recognition needs, the appeals for recognising student voices when they name their misrecognitions and distress, they will not learn and we will not teach them anything.

I am proposing that Recognition has also been taken on board in adult education literature and is an important construct that is useful for understanding why and how adults learn (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021; Fleming, 2016a, 2016b). Learning processes always involve an exercise of power and ‘knowledge is mediated and acquired through often invisible processes in which not all are accorded equal power, recognition, and esteem’ (Walker, 2017, p. 25). Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2021) elaborate a theory of adult education and lifelong learning that would reduce inequalities of recognition. They propose that adult education be recognised as a

Separate sphere of recognition; and that sociological analyses of adult education require taking into account both aspects of recognition – recognition as a matter of self- realisation and identity formation and recognition as a matter of justice*.* (p. 146)

It is important to say that recognition, as outline in the intimate spheres of the family, law and community, is not private experience. Recognition is where the personal and the political come together. The experience of being recognised is both profoundly personal and equally political. We can be misrecognised not only by a partner in the family but also by the state. Recognition is not only way of seeing how the personal is political, but also to see that the political is personal. This is most clearly seen in the ways that the neoliberal economy as we know it today. The neoliberal culture and economics wants to define education by reducing it to teaching the kind of learning and researching the kind of knowledge that is useful not just for work skills but that affirms and supports the status quo. And all the while ‘our’ multi-nationals received tax-breaks and sweet heart deals from a succession of right wing governments. It is politically unwise but not impossible to name the enemy and the threat to inclusion and equality.

We are used to talking about the importance of tax incentives for inward investment or even being a member of the EU as the crucial ingredient in our economic and social success for the past fifty years (since Investment in Education, 1968 – the first OECD report in Ireland). I would add to this the success of all parts of the educational system, including adult and further education and especially higher education. The FE sector is the gateway to higher education progression and for many not the second chance but the last chance, and this is why a full acknoweldgement that we bring not just all citizens into the desirable possibilities of HE but that we bring all of the citizen, strengths, weaknesses, …

All of this may sound like part of the ‘soft skill’ agenda of adult learning courses or the soft skills that play a subordinate role to the hard skill agenda (and therefor more important?) that is the primary outcome of courses for adults. Of if more traditional minds see in this either a retelling of the Sermon of the Mount or the Marx and Engels *Communist Manifesto*. But it is a statement that mental health is learned and is also a lifelong learning project.

Mental health is a lifelong mental health issue, as are equality, diversity and other now legal entitlements. This is a slight or even a significant jolt to the priority given to skills training and such economic imperatives. There is more to lifelong learning than supplying (a deeply flawed economy anyway) with a skilled workforce with salary and career opportunities. The more is in face a pre-condition for learning. It is an integrated part of the package, not an add-on, not an optional extra but a fundamental element of lifelong learning. What we do know is that adults respond to recognition. They have told us this.

There are training requirements emerging from this too. Resources.

Finally, covid has taught us a great deal and though we have not time to unpack it all let me suggest one learning outcome – unpredicted maybe – but total understandable now. How we dealt with Covid, how some ignored it, some rejected science, others wanted to continue making money as a top priority, how pressure groups it seems wanted to influence policy and not be concerned about the numbers who died. Other were nurses, carers, others prepared food and cared for those in need. We know now that this is the way climate change will be faced. The approaching challenge I suspect is to how we face the approaching existential crisis of climate change in which the threat to inclusion, equality and mental health will be amplified

In *Daring to Dream* Ana Maria Freire says that the neoliberal economy;

Speaks about the need for unemployment, for poverty, for inequality. I feel it is our duty to fight against such fatalistic mechanical forms of comprehending history…if we allow ourselves to fall for the trickery of neoliberal economic discourses, which affirm realities of homelessness and poverty as inevitable, then opposition for change becomes invisible, and our role in fostering change becomes absent. (Freire, 2007, p. 4)

In conclusion, I want to leave you with this poem by Patrick Kavanagh about his brother Peter.

Remember well your noble brother  
Whose constant heart embraced no other  
But you, and when love's arteries harden  
Evoke the image of the Front Garden,  
Yellow with sunlit weeds, and there  
You are the hound and he the hare,  
And round and round you run and laugh.  
This moment is immortal stuff.  
Name his name, beloved name Peter  
And only regret that words must fail  
To tell that marvellous brotherly tale….

This reminds me to say that in education we can only hope and teach so that when our students recall their times with us as teachers and providers and counsellors they will remember it in poetry too.

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