**Poverty and Adult Education[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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I am honoured to be invited to talk this morning not only because I hold An Cosán in high esteem but because so many here are colleagues for many years and so long working in adult education.

So what do I know? I do have a long held belief that things are connected. The mind and the body are connected, though you would be hard pressed to get many medical people to admit to this. Work and living are connected. Above all for my purpose to day the social and the personal are connected. The women’s movement gave us the idea that the personal is political and I add to that today that the political is personal. I hope it will be clearer in a moment what I mean by this. The political and the personal are connected.

A good example of this connection involves the way people think of cancer. People ask if cancer is a result of genetic, biological and hereditary factors or is the environment a factor. The or is deceptive in all these kinds of questions. You might also wonder if addiction is a result of one’s genetic makeup or is it the result of experiences in the family, in one’s life or in society. What I have come to know over a long life is the either/or type answer is too simple and more often wrong. The question itself may be wrong. Instead of asking is it A or is it B, it is almost always a more interesting question to ask how do the social and the personal interact; how do the genetic and the environmental interact?

I could look at Seamus Heaney for some support here! For example, in *Terminus* he describes life in his childhood home;

Two buckets were easier carried than one.

I grew up in between.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 295)

And again in *Mossbawn 1 Sunlight* referring to baking scones in the kitchen as a child;

Here is a space

Again, the scone rising

To the tick of two clocks.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 94)

Heaney made this in-between space his own. Filled it with possibilities. He occupied the space in-between North and South in Ireland; between Protestant and Catholic; between Irish and British (and indeed a broader global world). He found a space between the chants and rhetoric of each polarity and saw the possibilities of the view from in-between.

I am not going to even begin a discussion about what we might mean by poverty or even its causes except to say that it is about access or absence of access to the resources that are needed for a healthy fulfilling life. Education is however implicated in the story of growing poverty and also sought as a way of addressing the same poverty. Too often the educational experiences of children made things worse for them, yet many also see education as a way of addressing inequality and poverty.

The other assumption I am making is that the most important work we do in society is about the having and rearing and educating children. It is also the most satisfying and too often, compared to economic activity, under-valued.

What I really want to do today is introduce an example of a growing body of research that looks at childhood experiences. The example is the *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study* (Chapman, et al., 2004; Felitti, et al., 1998). This study came up with a ten point list of adverse childhood experiences and the more of these one experiences the greater the likelihood of having ill health (physical or mental) later as an adult. The experiences in summary are:

1. Physical abuse regularly;
2. Being hit, grabbed or hurt at home often or a lot;
3. Any inappropriate sexual touching or fondling as a child by a person at least five years older;
4. If one is often or very often unloved or unprotected and feel that someone did not have your best interests at heart;
5. Not having enough to eat or clothes to wear to school or work and not taken care of when ill;
6. Were your parents separated?
7. Did you witnessed physical violence between parents;
8. Was there a drink problem or drug user in the home?
9. Was there depression, or mental illness or suicide or attempted suicide in the family?
10. Was anyone from the home in prison?

The more yes answers one gives to these questions the higher the chances of adverse adult outcomes. This is not about understanding causes or about blaming but about understanding connections that are strong predictors of outcomes. This led me to think that there are probably adverse educational experiences as children that would be good predictors of adult life chances. Though many of these experiences are difficult to remove we could do some real interesting work if we tried to remove as many as possible so that as many children as possible would have more positive childhood experiences in families, in schools and in community. Adults look to An Cosán for this.

This leaves one to think that some of the resources (and not always about money) are linked to the inability to create, value, sustain nurturing and caring and secure relationships between adults and between adults and children.

My most powerful ally in exploring these issues is the English psychologist John Bowlby. The parent creates a secure base for the infant by being aware of and responding to the need the child has for security in the face of a perceived threat. Most parents do this intuitively and naturally having been the subject of such careful rearing themselves; others are aware of doing it possibly having been taught its value. In these moments the parent acknowledges the feelings of the child and this positive experience of being heard becomes the internalised map of how the child experiences and understands interpersonal relations. If these childhood feeling are full of anxiety, or neglected or ignored or expressed in chaotic environments the child is more likely to develop violent, or anxious or chaotic models of how relationships work and act accordingly. Though this a condensed statement I just want to state this as simply as I can without adding nuance or complication (which it has) to the story. In these experiences of parenting the child grows and develops or not.

These moments when done well are moments of recognition and can be done by the main carer and/or someone else such as a granny or uncle or carer or teacher.

My big idea for today is that these moments of recognition are developmental and are also necessary for adults. And the ability to give such recognition at work or in community or in society or receive them at work, in family or in society are excellent indicators of healthy life enhancing environments in which all can grow.

The desire for recognition is not just a childhood or childish desire and need but a lifelong pursuit. The recent referendum on same-sex marriage is both a struggle for a recognition and a giving of that recognition in return. It is personal in that many benefit and find it affirming and developmental. It is political too, as a referendum and the resulting legislation are exactly that – a decriminalizing of such behaviour. Many other laws and rights are way of granting recognition to disabled, for instance, and other minorities and gives to those previously misrecognised a right to which they are entitled. In these moments there is growth and development by all – a win/win.

But for us educators the big benefit and payoff is that adults look to education and adult education and training and higher education for this recognition of their intelligence, recognition of their desire to be engaged, ask questions, train for a job and be better able to deliver the parenting that they want to deliver and the parenting their children need and deserve.

The problem in our neoliberal society is that the state has opted for a two tier society with no taxes for multinationals and low taxes for business and at the same time it shreds the community education and community development sector as well as those on low income. Austerity is the single biggest transfer of money from the poorer classes to the higher classes in the guise of ‘doing the right thing’. The education that this kind of state supports is too often defined tightly and narrowly and functionally as if there is only learning for jobs, as if redemption is through work. There is so much more to be learned and all adults must have full access to all the learning and knowledge they desire in order for them to grow, mature, and work and understand society and participate in community, and family, and in democracy and maybe, just maybe, we can all learn our way forward so that we can teach and rear the next generation in ways that are less violent and more democratic and inclusive and equal.

I am, as you can see earlier, taken with our own Irish authors. So many were banned and censored for the truths they wrote about. It is worth wondering what they knew that had to be silenced. Edna O’Brien and *The Country Girls*. Our authors are a rich vein of insight and understanding of the way we were. The authors sometimes suggest or we can imagine how we ought to be.

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 lake 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. 271­272)

McGahern knew that his mother forged for him a secure childhood and he carried this security with him all his life. For many, maybe most of us, need to learn how.

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1. Paper presented at United Nations International Day for Eradicating Poverty Conference at An Cosan, Dublin, September 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)