

Learning care lessons: Literacy, love, care and solidarity

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Learning care lessons: Literacy, love, care and solidarity, by Professor Maggie Feeley of University College Dublin (UCD), is must reading for researchers, programme planners, service providers and policy analysts who care about social justice, equality and adult literacy outreach. This highly textured ethnographic study bears significantly on the design and funding of adult education and workforce skills programmes for very low-skilled adults – in Ireland, in the USA and elsewhere.

Feeley argues that equality and literacy are interlinked. She worries that today's heavy emphasis on employability and workforce issues is giving short shrift to literacy for social equity purposes and to the affective domains important for good programme design and professional development for the lowest-skilled adults. She challenges the “systems of privilege” that keep people of lower socioeconomic status down and deprived, often intentionally. Her study focuses on one under-recognised barrier to learning and achievement, the severe emotional damage done to survivors of prolonged daily childhood abuse and the consequences in terms of adult behaviour and countering unmet literacy needs.

Learning care lessons aims to increase understanding and make the case for additional resources to meet the literacy needs of emotionally vulnerable adults. Over a 3-year period, Professor Feeley took extraordinary measures to earn the confidence of and interview extensively a cohort of 28 adults enrolled in an unidentified community counselling and adult literacy centre in Dublin, which she calls the “Lighthouse Centre”. Feeley is herself a respected and trusted tutor at the Centre. The interviewees were all survivors of the state-funded Irish Industrial Schools (more about these below). Today, the Irish government finances this and other centres to compensate for the severe deficits of these adults as a result of the abuse they suffered

throughout childhood at the hands of the religious orders operating the state-funded schools, especially the Catholic Church.

Feeley documents in vivid detail the childhood sexual and physical abuses in the lives of these individuals. It is hard to imagine a childhood as bleak as revealed in this book – made worse through constant humiliation, inferior schooling, neglect, unjust punishment and other cruelties, racial and gender discrimination, lack of love or caring, and destruction of personal identity. Deeply scarred by their experience, it is not surprising that so many of the children from Industrial Schools grew into dysfunctional adults with poor job prospects, a high crime rate, a high incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, poor health, lack of self-esteem, complete distrust of others and of education, a sense of hopelessness, and, at the core of much of the dysfunction, *unmet literacy needs*.

The Irish Industrial Schools thrived in the 19th and 20th centuries in Ireland. Only recently was it learned that Australia, Canada, the USA and other countries have histories of similar institutions and childhood abuse. In 1999, in a major speech to the nation, the Irish Prime Minister publicly stressed the “importance of love and care in the lives of children and the detrimental impact of a loveless careless childhood on later adult lives”.¹

The Lighthouse adults were mostly lower-class children, thought to be inferior and worthless, and treated accordingly, in schooling and in every other conceivable way, by a staff not properly educated itself. Most of the children came from impoverished families and many were already traumatised by removal from their parents and homes. But factors other than poverty and removal from the home combined to create further hardship and disadvantage for them.

A major issue treated in *Learning care lessons* is “resource inequality.” *The financial assets of parents! Level of state financial investments! Visible commitment through strong public policy statements and goals! Understanding about the affective results of childhood abuse and suffering!* Too little in all of these areas virtually guarantees the continued existence of a large deprived underclass and is a primary cause and consequence of confinement in the Industrial Schools and similar settings,

¹ Speech by An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, 11 May 1999, announcing government measures relating to childhood abuse, Breaking News, *The IrishTimes*, cited in HeBE 2002.

then and now, in Ireland and around the world, with serious implications for adult learning.

The Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) presents powerful data showing that developed countries – especially the USA, which ranks highest in inequality – need to invest far more in adult literacy, education, English as a Second Language and workforce development (including distance learning and professional development) if we are to give more than lip service to helping the lowest-skilled adults.²

Learning care lessons is a call to action of a different sort – not only in terms of investment, public policy, strong social equity commitments, and with more attention to affective barriers, but for design of more positive “learning care” environments for adults with traumatised backgrounds.

The book offers some model programme approaches. It considers it essential to recognise and treat such adults with sensitivity and respect and to customise programmes and settings suited to their needs. Among many simple measures suggested are using well-lighted, even windowed classrooms to avoid reviving feelings of entrapment from childhood, and not frightening learners fearful from past experience by approaching them unexpectedly from behind with corrections.

Reference

HeBE (Health Boards Executive) (2002). *The national counselling service for adults who have experienced childhood abuse. First report: Executive summary*. Dublin: HeBE. Accessed 11 February 2015 from <http://lenus.ie/hse/bitstream/10147/42567/1/1978.pdf>.

² See www.oecd.org/site/piaac and www.piaacgateway.com.