Not just literacy: affective inequalities at the heart of learning

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Introduction

- Empirical study of the role of care in learning literacy
- Perceptions of literacy
- Equality theory
- Affective focus
- Methods
- Findings
- Further questions

Changing perceptions of literacy

- Historic development of literacy
- "*Fundamentally letters are shapes indicating voices. Hence they present things which they bring to mind through the windows of the eyes. Frequently they speak voicelessly the utterances of the absent.*" (Clancy, 1979)
- Literacy and connection
- Literacy and inequality
- Neo-liberal discourses emphasising human capital
- Critical theory approaches focussing on agency
- New Literacy Studies that views literacies as situated social practice
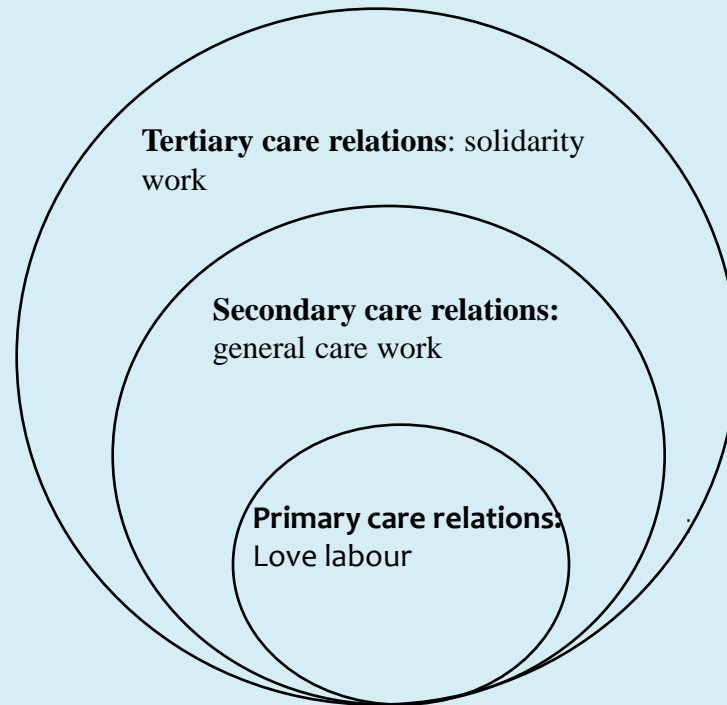
A care turn

- Egalitarian perspective that focuses on the unequal nature of social contexts
- Economic; Political; Cultural
- Something missing
- Relational/affective aspects of literacy within the equality framework

An equality framework

- *Resource equality*: money and associated issues of time, presence, environment and material resources
- *Political equality*: power, representation and a role in decision-making
- *Cultural equality*: respect for and recognition of diversity
- *Affective equality*: giving and receiving *love care and solidarity*

Concentric circles of care (Lynch *et al*, 2007)

Tertiary care relations: solidarity work

Secondary care relations: general care work

Primary care relations: Love labour

Research questions

- How might a focus on affective equality help to define adult literacy needs and practices with educationally disadvantaged groups in Ireland?

- What causal role do inequalities of love, care and solidarity have in the educational disadvantage of adults with unmet literacy needs?

- Do these affective factors explain the different literacy outcomes for individuals from similar groups?

- How therefore, might recognition of affective inequalities and an adoption of an ethic of care become transformational in work with those with unmet literacy needs in Ireland?

Affective equality and learning

- Care and the school curriculum (McClave, 2005; Cohen, 2006)
- Teachers' emotional labour (Hargreaves, 2000; 2001)
- The role of the affective in educational ideology (Lynch et al, 2007)
- A school ethic of care (Noddings, 1992; 2006; 2007)
- Mothers' care labour (Reay, 2000; O'Brien; 2005; 2007)
- Learner as care recipient in learning relationship

A relational method of enquiry

- A study of the role of care in learning literacy
- 3-year ethnography
- Adult survivors of institutional abuse in Irish industrial schools
- Practitioner research (Fowler and Mace, 2005) in Lighthouse Centre, Dublin
- State apology in 1999
- Cohesive, supportive community
- Opportunity for emancipatory process of reflection

A relational method of enquiry contd.

- 28 adults aged 40-65 years
- Age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and learning ability
- Met and unmet literacy needs (15 met/ partially met/13 unmet)
- Semi-structured interviews
- Triangulation – 10 interviews with tutors, counsellors, solicitors and Centre staff (Denzin, 1997)
- Collective memory (Olick and Robbins, 1998)
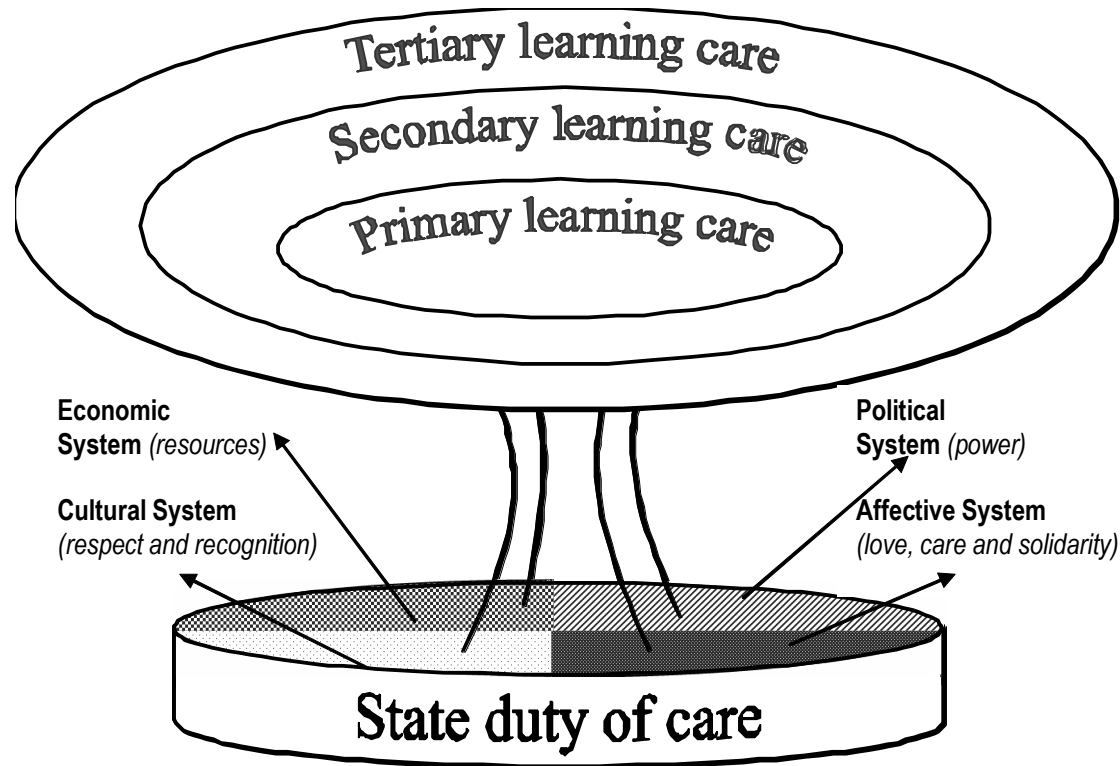- Critical case sample (Patton, 1980)

Learning care

- In the context of the study *learning care* became defined, mainly through its absence, as - the complex affective attitude and effort involved in enabling the acquisition of literacy

- Degrees of *learning care* impacted on participants capacity to absorb and retain new knowledge and skills

Findings: 4 types of learning care relationships

- Primary learning care relationships experienced within the family or alternative primary care centre

- Secondary learning care relationships in school

- Solidary learning care experienced in civil society, with peer learners and communities of interest

- State learning care defined as the attentiveness given by the state to ensuring structural equality (equality of condition) across all the contexts that influence family, school and community capacity to support literacy

The underwriting care of the State/State harm

Findings: Primary learning care relationships

- Home – 'natural' locus of learning care where nurturing relationships promote and model all aspects of human development , including literacy
- Industrial school – intermittent family contact – foster care
- Quality and continuity of care; in-family differentials
- Deep interface between learning literacy and being cared for/about
- 87% with met/partially met needs had family contact
- 85% with unmet needs no/no consistent family

Findings: Primary learning care relationships

- Institutional 'care' – care-less – authoritarian – regimented - punishing – child workers – antithesis of affection
- Ethos of control, production of docile, obedient manual and domestic labourers in religious enterprises or wealthy families
- Even small amounts of care made a positive difference
- As adults, parents and grandparents, survivors are reminded of what they lacked
- Abandonment and separation – even from siblings
- Withdrawal in the face of abuse

Findings: Secondary learning care in school

- Schools and other places of learning need to be recognised as 'affective enterprises' deeply and variously concerned with relationships of care and interdependence (Lynch and Lodge, 2002:11)
- Borne out by default in industrial schools
- Tense, fear-full, violent
- 'Inside' and 'outside' school
- Hierarchies of care – within and between institutions
- Children held responsible for 'sins' of parents/adults

Findings: Secondary learning care in school

- Robotic, adversarial, hope-less and violent approach to learning

- Individual difference ignored or vilified – lisp; left-hander

- Auditory methods predominated

- *'It was harsh the way they taught you how to read and write. They didn't know any other way. You have to understand they didn't have any concept themselves of anything done at a level of decency or kindness. I mean kindness was alien to them. Utterly alien.'* Martin, man aged 64

Findings: Solidary learning care relationships

- Relational route back into learning
- Children, partners, peers, counselling
- Ethos of care in (most) adult learning
- Long memories – deeply ingrained learning patterns
- Practitioner research – observations
- Learning literacy and making new relationships with others and the past
- Patrolling the borders between past and present
- Retracing primary learning patterns

Solidarity

- I think that there is actually a lot of <u>solace</u> for people who maybe have <u>felt quite alone</u> that they come into a place and realise that people do have <u>some form of shared history</u>, <u>some sort of shared continuing difficulties</u> and that actually <u>binds them together as a group</u>. One of the features of the <u>groups</u> is that <u>they do very much look out for each other,</u> especially new <u>members of the group</u>. They <u>try to welcome them in</u> and a <u>lot of support</u> is <u>actually peer-to-peer support</u>. *Lighthouse Centre Worker*

Findings: State's role in ensuring learning care

- *'Despite the fact that orphanages were designed to educate us and protect us from the ills of society, we received only minimal education and most of us were illiterate. Lack of education deeply affected every aspect of our lives, leaving us unprepared for and fearful of the world outside the institution.'* (Fahy, 1999:54)

- Both their original disadvantage and their subsequent neglect were attributable to state care-lessness.

- State legislative and policy decisions constitute choices about learning care equality

- 'We are all part of one another'

Conclusions

- Caring relationships have a pivotal role in successful literacy learning

- Survivors of institutional abuse were treated care-lessly at a range of levels: primary, secondary and tertiary

- The state failed in its duty of care

- Learning care, even in small amounts, made discernible differences for child and adult learners

More questions

- How does an 'equality' lens help us view literacy matters more clearly?

- Can a 'care' theme explain pervasive unmet literacy needs?

- Are unmet literacy needs a form of state harm?

- Might elaborating an ethos of care transform literacy work… and the world?