



Parsimonious Motivations, Educational Dogmatism and Political Folly: Contextualizing Cuts to Adult Community Education

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 6, Issue 1, 1-2, 2009

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New Zealand has a long and internationally acclaimed history of Adult and Community Education (ACE). From humble roots in rural communities, collective organisations (such as the Workers' Educational Association), community centres attached to secondary schools (such as the Feilding Community Centre), Carnegie Corporation sponsored library initiatives and university college courses, ACE has developed into a nationwide powerful movement that supports the broader life-long educational aspirations of New Zealand people in their local contexts.

Dr Pita Sharples, the Associate Minister of Education, outlined in a speech to the Australian Community Colleges Conference (20 May 2009) that over 250,000 people are currently involved in adult and community education in New Zealand with over 160,000 (65%) of these being enrolled in school community education through a range of night school, day classes, seminars and weekend workshops regularly held in 212 secondary schools nationally. The remaining approximately 90,000 (35%) people are enrolled in programmes at tertiary institutions (these include seven universities, twenty polytechnics, seven private training establishments, and wānanga).

In the 2009 Budget, the National government signalled that it intended to cut the 2010 funding for adult and community education in schools from 16 million to 3 million dollars. The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) has published an Adult Community Education Budget 2009 Fact Sheet that more precisely outlines the cuts and their rationale. TEC argues that the tertiary education system is a 'key national strategic asset' and the cuts are part of a yet to be released new tertiary education strategy that will refocus government expenditure on 'investments' that offer 'higher-value provision'. Specifically, ACE has now been reconceptualised as a more formal 'stepping stone for learners across the tertiary education system' and that investment in ACE is being reduced and redirected to areas that are more closely aligned with its adult literacy and numeracy priorities and as 'a path to higher levels of education'. In sum, 'The Government no longer intends to subsidise hobby and personal interest courses (e.g. arts and crafts courses, home maintenance ACE, etc)'.

From 2010, the remaining 3 million dollars of school-based ACE funding will be refocused on literacy and numeracy and directed to only a small number of schools; CPI adjustments will be removed, and the ACE Innovation and Development Fund and the Community Learning Aotearoa New Zealand Fund will be disestablished.

The reaction of secondary schools has been one of shock while local communities are dismayed at the proposed shift to a user-pays model of funding in order to retain the sorts of ACE courses people had traditionally attended.

What can we make of this? The relatively minor cost savings of 13 million dollars that the Budget cuts take from school-based ACE will directly affect the education of over 160,000 adults, result in up to 212 Adult Education Coordinators and 15,000 tutors losing their positions, and reduce the funding of many participating community groups from 2010. In effect, these relatively small-scale cuts (in relation to the overall education budget) are a major attack on the spirit of every local community in the country.

These changes to ACE funding (and other cuts across the education system in general) signal a change in educational thinking at the highest levels. While there may be parsimonious motivations (although quite how reducing this ACE 'investment' in adults from approximately \$100 per year per person to \$20 will save a lot of money in the long run is questionable) these changes are economically, ideologically and educationally dogmatic. The conception of 'adult education' that is now being signaled is not that of supporting life-long individual aspirations or building community spirit. Instead, it appears to be built on classical liberalism and a narrow economic rationality. The latter conception implies a conflation of life-long education with training and the needs of the workplace coupled with a 'free choice' narrative that involves user-pays, targetting and minimal state support or oversight. History has shown that this does not create a sounder education system, a stronger, more peaceful community or happier self-actualized citizens; nor is it likely to in the future. Instead, it will further undermine the notion that the State should have any involvement in the creation of a better society.

With the signaling of these Budget cuts, many in the community are now asking why the current Government feels that around \$100 per adult per year is too much to pay to support the aspirations of good citizens (who are also taxpayers) when many times that amount is spent on punitive sanctions and remedial solutions for those who don't feel a part of society, and on underwriting irresponsible, white-collar market speculation. Disenfranchising over 160,000 taxpayers and citizens – who are most all voters – for a relatively small sum of money is not only illogical but also political folly.

Adult education should be an ongoing journey (both informal and formal) that continually prepares one for 'life' – not just for the workforce but whatever directions a citizen might wish to follow to grow themselves, their local community groups and society. The State should not be withdrawing from these broader purposes of education, but rather, it should be fostering such pursuits with much greater vigour for their intrinsic and citizenship benefits. The consequences of not doing so may well be catastrophic.

REFERENCES

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