

# Researching Perspectives on Adult Education Policy and Practice

## INTRODUCTION

Section I described the changing context surrounding adult education through a discussion of international developments in the field. It also described how these issues have been played out in adult education policies in England and New Zealand. Section II focuses on the impact of this changing environment on adult educators' careers, their professional identities and their practice through an analysis of the findings of research conducted with adult educators in England and New Zealand between 2011 and 2013. In this chapter I explain the rationale for taking a narrative and comparative approach to researching adult educators' work and outline how the research was conducted and how data were collected, analysed and presented.

### *A Narrative, Career History Approach*

A principal aim of the research was to explore adult educators' perspectives on their work and the impact of changing policy over the past 40 years through a narrative, career history approach (Middleton 1987, 1996; Goodson 1994; Bathmaker and Harnett 2010). Studies of teachers' work are important in the context of changing global and national policies. First, they offer a counter-narrative to the prevailing policy discourse; in this sense they provide a means by which educators' views can be heard above the policy noise. And if, as Goodson suggests,

teachers in the formal schooling system have tended to exist in the ‘shadows’ of policy prescriptions, this is perhaps even more the case in the non-formal sector. Adult and community-based educators tend to be casualised, marginalised, and often – because of the fragmentation of the field and its lack of employee organisation – they tend not to have a political voice as an occupational group. An investigation of adult educators’ perspectives places them, for once, *at the centre of the action* (Goodson 1994: 31). This may on the one hand help them to make meaning of and analyse their own experiences (Bathmaker and Harnett 2010). On the other, it may inform those who advocate, write and make policy around adult education, offering insights into the impact of policy at community and classroom level; such insights may be more informed than those offered by commentators who sit outside the day-to-day experience of adult education. Moreover, by listening to what adult educators tell us, those committed to a broadly framed view of adult education and learning may be able to discern the possibilities for challenging dominant ideological and policy perspectives.

The questions arising from a decision to explore the current landscape of adult education through the narratives of adult educators were therefore:

- How do adult educators perceive their identities as professionals and their prospects as workers?
- What philosophical perspectives and professional values guide adult educators’ work?
- What are adult educators’ perspectives on teaching, learning and the needs and aspirations of learners who are adults?
- How are adult and community educators navigating the changing policy landscape of adult education and training?
- What are the prospects for adult and community as a field of practice in the current policy climate?

### *A Comparative Approach*

There are two reasons why I decided to research the perspectives of adult educators in England and Aotearoa New Zealand, countries situated at opposite ends of the globe. The first is personal and professional. In 2006, I relocated to New Zealand leaving a post as a manager of a community-based adult education project in England. Like many such initiatives, this

project (whose staff were all employed on temporary or part-time contracts) had been sustained for the preceding 10 years by a series of short-term funding sources. Having been widely recognised as successful in encouraging the educational participation of under-represented adults, the project was, for the third time in these 10 years, on the verge of closure (it did indeed close later that year). The project was run under the auspices of an English university continuing education department which was itself in the throes of restructuring and subsequent closure.

In New Zealand I took up a post as a manager of an adult and community education teaching and research team based in a university continuing education department which, on the face of it, seemed to be in considerably better shape than similar contexts in England. In the wake of the election of a Labour coalition government in 1999, adult educators in New Zealand were relatively buoyant about the future although some were cautious about the prospect of improved funding accompanying government statements of commitment to community-based, non-vocational adult education. My prophecies of doom about the way in which discourses of training, skills, credentialisation and employability were coming to dominate the field of adult education were treated with some scepticism.

In making the move to a similar setting in a different part of the world there is a temptation to compare and contrast and to explore the extent to which global trends and ‘policy borrowing’ (Phillips 2009) may be mitigated or moderated by the particularities of national and cultural contexts. While comparison can be problematic if it results in over-generalisation, it can also be instructive (McLean 1992, 1995; Alexander et al. 2000; Phillips and Schweisfurth 2008; Teichler and Hanft 2009). In the wake of a general election in 2009 the policy and funding climate for adult and community education in New Zealand deteriorated drastically (as described in Chapter 3), prompting me to consider again the extent to which adult education policy and practice are influenced by global trends and internationally dominant ideologies as well as by national historical, cultural and political contexts (S. Ball 1998).

The second reason may be justified by academic and political, rather than personal, curiosity. It is widely agreed that globalisation is impacting not just on economic relations, but on almost every aspect of national life – political, social and cultural (Giddens 1990; Waters 1995; UNESCO 2001; Harvey 2005). Globalisation entails the contraction of time and space in such a way that ideas may be rapidly transported across great

distances and their influence brought to bear on local policies and practices. At the same time it is argued (S. Ball 1998; Rust in Alexander et al. 2000) that globalisation does not inevitably herald homogeneity across nations. As Rust suggests in relation to education, alongside increasing global uniformity in institutional organisation, curricula and the training of teachers, attention is also paid by national governments, local communities and extra-governmental organisations to local issues of culture and diversity. Hence it seems instructive to explore the impact of globalisation on the extent to which policy ‘migrates’ (Phillips 2009) to and from countries which share some aspects of a common heritage and history but which also have quite different historical and cultural antecedents. The questions which arise from a decision to explore adult education policy and practice in two countries are therefore:

- To what extent have national adult education policies and practices in England and New Zealand been influenced by global discourses?
- How have ideas, policies and practices which circulate around adult education touched down similarly or differently in England and New Zealand?
- What similarities and differences can be discerned in the values, perceptions, practices and prospects of adult educators in England and New Zealand?

## THE PROCESS OF RESEARCHING ADULT EDUCATORS’ CAREERS

The research began in early 2011. In the main it involved the collection of narrative data from interviews with adult educators working in diverse settings in England and New Zealand. It also involved gathering information about adult education policy and practice from publicly available sources in both countries.

### *The Adult Educators*

Defining adult education as a field of practice is not straightforward and has become increasingly difficult in the context of the policy shifts and cutbacks described in Section I. In New Zealand there is still a discernible

ACE sector whose activities encompass literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision, education for personal, social and community development and Māori language and culture. Its workers are likely to be found in community, voluntary and iwi-based (Māori tribal) organisations, Rural Education Activities Programmes (REAPs), schools, colleges and universities. While the boundaries of adult education are fuzzy, it is possible to identify a cohort of workers in New Zealand who identify themselves as adult and community educators. With the exception of a small number of practitioners in larger national organisations and tertiary institutions, they are likely to be employed on casual, hourly-paid contracts or as unpaid volunteers. In England, cuts in funding for adult education activity which is not skills-related, together with restrictions on local government and voluntary sector expenditure, have drastically reduced the field. The concentration of funding within further education colleges catering primarily for 16- to 18-year-olds has diluted the notion of adult education, confining it largely to basic skills and ESOL or re-naming it for funding purposes as ‘Personal and Community Development Learning’ (PCDL). Budget cuts in the post-compulsory education sector, both past and planned, have further eroded educational provision for adults. Many adult educators in England have been re-designated, dispersed or displaced. However, there still remains a group of organisers, teachers and tutors, many of whom are hourly paid or self-employed, working in local authorities, colleges, universities and non-government organisations.

Participation was sought from people identifying themselves as adult educators, regardless of their employment status or context. National networks of adult educators were identified in each country and participation was sought via email through these networks. Purposive sampling (Silverman 2000; Luttrell 2010) was utilised to ensure that, as a whole, the participants broadly represented the field in terms of age, gender, length of experience and work context. However, the gendered nature of adult education work (particularly in face to face teaching) means that women make up the vast majority of those interviewed. Furthermore, I did not specifically ensure representativeness in terms of ethnicity. A *snowballing* approach (Hall and Hall 1996: 109) was also utilised where there were ‘gaps’ in offers of participation (for example among male adult educators, educators newer to the field and educators who were not of European (Pākehā) heritage). Of 39 responses from England, and 41 from New Zealand, 31 interviews resulted in each country – a total

**Table 5.1** Research participants in England and New Zealand

		<i>New Zealand</i>	<i>England</i>
Gender	Male	3	7
	Female	28	24
Experience	0–5 years	5	3
	6–10 years	6	4
	11–20 years	10	10
	21–30 years	4	8
	31 years plus	6	6
Sector	Community/voluntary/trade union	11	4
	Local/central government	4	12
	Schools-based adult and community education (ACE)	4	0
	University/college	2	14
	Freelance/self-employed	10	1
Totals		31	31

of 62. Details of the participants, in terms of their country of work, gender, length of experience and employment location are tabulated below (Table 5.1).

A number of points are worth noting. First, the fact that women made up the overwhelming majority of those interviewed reflects the composition of the field of adult and community education – particularly those working as literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers. To that extent this is largely a book about women’s working lives. Second, of those males who were interviewed most were, or had been until recently, employed in full-time positions. This was in contrast to the women interviewed, the majority of whom were employed on a part-time basis (though frequently in more than one job). Again, this seems to reflect the status of women in the adult education field, and more widely in post-compulsory education, as over-represented among hourly paid, part-time or casual workers. Third, the majority of those who identified themselves as adult educators and who volunteered to be interviewed had been working in adult education for more than 10 years. It was quite difficult to locate participants who were newer to the field and who regarded themselves as adult educators rather than – or as well as – lecturers, trainers or teachers within a specific setting. This may be indicative of the shift away from the notion of community-based adult educator to that of teacher or trainer based within a large institution (particularly in England) or private company

(particularly New Zealand). It also reflects the general decline in adult education as a recognised field of practice.

Fourth, differences in employment settings between New Zealand and England are apparent, reflecting historical differences in the structuring of adult and community education, as well as the more recent policy developments in the two countries. The majority of those adult educators interviewed in New Zealand were employed in the voluntary or community sectors or in schools or were working on a freelance basis. Schools-based adult education (which had been one of the strongest areas for ACE practice) was in decline as a result of government cuts in funding (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)). A number of those interviewed had recently moved from the schools sector to self-employment. Moreover, in New Zealand the majority of ESOL and literacy provision was organised by two major non-government organisations (Literacy Aotearoa and English Language Partners). In England ESOL and basic skills provision is now mainly based in further education colleges; schools-based adult education has been a rarity in recent years. At the time of the interviews some local education authorities were still offering adult education provision, but were in the throes of reorganisation and retrenchment as a result of local government funding cuts. While any claims for the generalisability of the findings from interviews with these adult educators are made with considerable caution, every attempt was made to ensure a spread of participation across the sectors in both countries, and the interviews are illustrative of what appeared to be the situation at the time they took place.

### *The Interviews*

Wherever possible audio-recorded face-to-face interviews were conducted. However, for reasons of availability and geography (particularly in New Zealand where distances are often long and travelling by public transport can be a challenge), it was sometimes necessary to conduct telephone, Skype or email interviews. The interview questions were broadly similar in all cases and participants were invited to discuss:

- Their career trajectories as adult education practitioners – how they came into the field of adult education, what training they had undergone, what work they had undertaken in the past and how they were currently employed

- Their philosophies and values as adult educators – how they viewed themselves as teachers, their relationships with adult learners and what they saw as the aim and purpose of their efforts
- The ways in which their practice had changed over the course of their careers – the extent to which changing policy and funding impacted on their philosophy and values, their relationships with adult learners, their colleagues, their employers and their approach to their work
- The perceived challenges and opportunities for adult education in the next 10 years – how they saw themselves as adult educators in the future and how they saw their career prospects

The interviews took place over the period between May 2011 and January 2012, during which time different policy changes were impacting on the adult and community education sectors in the two countries. In England, changes to the funding of ESOL provision and a dispute around the enforced ‘professionalisation’ of the post-compulsory sector (discussed in [Chapter 4](#)) were ongoing. In New Zealand, widespread cuts and changed priorities and targets in the adult and community education (ACE) sector were still being worked through on the ground. The preoccupations of the adult educators in the two countries reflected the specifics of the local policy contexts.

### *Analysing the Interview Data*

Data were analysed for recurrent or contrasting themes across contexts, lengths of experience, and other factors differentiating between adult educators, and for cross-country differences and similarities (Wolcott 1994). The themes which guided the writing of [Chapters 6–9](#) were:

- The idea of a career in adult education: how adult educators entered into and trained for their careers, how they viewed their work and their career prospects.
- Adult educators’ philosophies: how beliefs and values guided their practice and the extent to which they felt their practice was informed by adult education theory.
- Adult educator agency and resistance: how experienced adult educators accommodate or resist policy directives which conflict with their beliefs about the purpose of adult education.



- Strategic responses to changes in the structure and funding of adult education: how adult educators and the organisations advocating for adult education respond to changing policy and increasing financial stringency.

In [Chapter 6](#), I focus on portraits of early-, mid- and late-career adult educators in both countries to illustrate the impact of career uncertainty at different stages in the working life. In [Chapter 7](#), I use extracts from a number of the interviews to demonstrate the range of philosophical positions among, and the differences in emphasis between, adult educators in England and New Zealand. In [Chapter 8](#), I focus on the narratives of particular individuals, this time four experienced adult educators, as their stories suggest how adult educators work with or against policy which they see as hampering their work. In [Chapter 9](#), I use short extracts from a number of interviews to illustrate the strategic considerations of adult educators in the two countries.

In presenting the analysed data I have considered the ethics of portraying the feelings and perspectives of others, and taken as my ‘acid test’ Sikes’ (2010) question – how I would feel if my own narrative were portrayed? I have therefore removed hesitations and digressions where they have seemed to be irrelevant to what the interviewee was trying to say. I have also removed identifying information as far as possible, without changing the individual’s narrative.

### *Documentary Sources*

Adult educators’ identities are shaped by social and political contexts as well as by their personal biographies. Another aim of the research was to explore adult educators’ experiences within these contexts (Jephcote and Salisbury 2009). During the period when the interviews were being conducted policy in both countries continued to change. In the period since the interviews were conducted, the policy landscape has continued to shift in ways which have not favoured the recognition and funding of non-vocational and non-accredited adult education. Publicly available documentary sources on developments in adult education policy and practice in England and New Zealand have therefore been accessed. These include published and unpublished reports, policy documents, conference proceedings, campaign briefings and newsletters which have been analysed to illustrate the context in which adult educators consider their work, their careers and their futures.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has described my personal, professional, political and academic reasons for undertaking research with adult educators in two countries which have close ties, but different geographical, cultural and historical contexts. It has also explained why a narrative, career history approach was taken to examining the working lives of adult educators. The chapters which follow are based primarily on data gathered from semi-structured interviews with 62 adult educators – evenly split between the two countries – working full-time, part-time or in a voluntary capacity and in a variety of settings. They also draw on published and unpublished documentary material which provides information about the context for adult educators’ practice. The remaining chapters in this book are informed by themes emerging from the research and seek to offer an account which foregrounds the perspectives of adult educators on the state of adult education in England and New Zealand and their work within it.