Introduction

Learning Care lessons

> Learning means forgetting as well as remembering.
>
> (Tom Bentley, 1998:187)

This book gives an account of an ethnographic study of the literacy learning experiences of survivors of abuse in Irish industrial schools. The process involved extensive memory work over a three-year period, watching, listening and conversing with adults about their childhood education in state care institutions. As well as memories recounted in the day-to-day setting of the Lighthouse adult community-learning centre, some early recollections of learning literacy were sparked in the adult literacy setting. As part of the Centre adult learning programme where I occasionally acted as a voluntary tutor, an echo of some very specific childhood experience of school might surface that prompted new areas of discussion. Over the period of my sustained presence in the community, significant evidence of the care that supports us as learners was uncovered and it is this affective continuum from love to abuse, and its role in formal and informal learning that is the particular focus of the study.

The idea of memory in the quotation above is salient in that what follows reveals how recollection of past childhood abuses continues to interrupt contemporary adult learning experiences. At the same time, in the 'dangerous memories' of learning recounted by survivors of institutional abuse the comfortable hegemonic accounts of 'care' are disturbed and there is growing solidarity in a reframed collective identity (Zaviršek, 2006). Memories are at once individual, collective and political and the challenging and hopeful dimensions of critical ethnographic memory work, as a form of praxis, are sometimes activated (Zembylas and Bekerman, 2008: 127). Reflecting the Freirean process of conscientisation, reflection and action, the critical ethnographic process in the heightened context of intensive public debate, meant that many survivors of institutional abuse increasingly saw their educational neglect as both personal and political (Freire, 1972; 1973). This will be evident later in their analysis of the systemic nature of the injustices that were perpetrated against them.

As part of a wider public remembering of institutional abuses, this research articulated and highlighted educational neglect that was often overshadowed by

more shocking detail of corporal and sexual abuses. Survivors were adamant that their ongoing educational disadvantage merited greater recognition. As a critical educational ethnography the study involved not only several years of exploration within the community setting but also a conscious desire to contribute to the exposure of systematic social disadvantage that caused, and continues to cause and reproduce, educational inequalities. As Thomas (1993: 9), cited in O'Reilly (2009: 53) describes:

> Critical ethnography takes seemingly mundane events, even repulsive ones and reproduces them in a way that exposes broader social processes of control, taming, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviours over others.

The study began with the assumption that in educational terms, being excluded from literacy use is a gross inequality that effects not only individuals but also generations of families and communities. Literacy 'difficulties' occur in the context of wider economic, political and socio-cultural injustice and amount to a form of state care-lessness, although individuals, families and communities are often held to blame. Through the extreme context of institutional abuse, I want to magnify the role of affective aspects of in/equality in relation to learning literacy and to highlight the enduring impacts of a care deficit on immediate and future learning identities. The memories and voices of survivors of institutional abuse in Irish industrial schools are at the core of the text and the themes of literacy, inequality and care that they illuminate are universal and timeless.

Industrial schools

Industrial schools were first established in Scotland, operated throughout Britain under the 1857 Industrial Schools Act and were extended to Ireland in 1868. The schools were intended as a complement, and subsequently an alternative to the Reformatory School system. They had a remit to provide state care, education and vocational preparation for poor children whose family life was deemed no longer viable. It was thought that exposure to meaningful 'industry' would save young people at risk of following their adult family members into lives perceived as being of social, religious and moral deviation.

In Ireland, the industrial schools were part of a wider portfolio of institutional provision that included Mother and Baby homes, County Homes for the destitute and the infamous Magdalene Laundries. The latter forced many,

including some mothers of those in industrial schools, into unpaid labour in profitable laundries run by religious orders. The exposure of their harsh realities has been the focus of a recent Irish State apology (in 2013) and a plan to compensate the Magdalene women who are still alive today.

The institutional care system reflected and reproduced the class order of the day. Despite often being conflated, state-funded industrial schools were separate from privately funded orphanages, which catered for middle-class and upper middle-class children of the time. Orphanages were often run by the same religious orders as industrial schools but in a notably less punishing manner.

While the Catholic Church used the operation of industrial schools, and other institutions, to maintain strict religious, cultural and ethnic control, state structures ultimately enabled the system through the letter and practice of the law, the allocation of maintenance grants and the regulatory role of the Department of Education (Raftery and O'Sullivan, 1999). To this day, the uncoupling of the alliance between church and state, particularly in the Irish education system, is a live debate that has yet to reach a conclusive outcome.

Industrial schools were not a solely Irish phenomenon. Reports of comparable abusive systems of child-detention, directed and operated by Catholic religious orders during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have also surfaced in Scotland, Australia, the USA and Canada. The same Irish Christian Brothers and various female religious orders such as the Sisters of Mercy that are subjects in the data in this book, have been implicated in the histories of abuse emerging across many continents.

At the time of the creation of an independent Irish State in the 1920s, Britain was already moving away from the institutionalised, industrial school model in favour of more child-friendly approaches to primary care. In Ireland, although they were known to be exceptionally punitive, the schools were allowed to operate virtually without either challenge or sanction for over one hundred years. In 1970, the Kennedy Report (Government of Ireland, 1970) was highly critical of the system and the decades that followed saw survivors speaking out about their experiences so that the extent of their multiple abuses became increasingly public. In 1999, the State apologised to survivors, instigated a compensatory redress system and established an education fund for survivors and their families.

In his apology on behalf of the State to survivors of abuse in Irish industrial schools, the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) highlighted the importance of love and care in the lives of children and the detrimental impact of a loveless and careless childhood on later adult lives.

> On behalf of the State and all its citizens, the government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue… .all children need love and security. Too many of our children were denied this love, care and security. Abuse ruined their childhoods and has been an ever present part of their adult lives reminding them of a time when they were helpless. I want to say to them that we believe that they were gravely wronged, and that we must do all we can now to overcome the lasting effects of their ordeals.
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> (*An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, 11 May 1999 as cited in Health Board Executive (HBE), 2002*).

The physical, sexual and emotional abuses of children in industrial schools have understandably overshadowed the detail of the educational neglect that accompanied those atrocities. Nevertheless, survivors feel passionately about the lost opportunities that resulted from the paucity of their learning experiences and make a direct connection between reclaiming some of that learning opportunity and the long process of healing.

The ambiguity of 'care'

Throughout this work 'care' has emerged as an ambiguous term that simultaneously suggests both positive and negative experiences in the affective domain. Spending time 'in care' was a shameful, stigmatised and often hidden factor in people's later lives and connoted none of the relational benefits of being part of a loving and supportive bond. Survivors of institutional abuse in industrial schools rarely felt either cared for or cared about by those in the institutions and so the term 'care' is often met with understandable cynicism. Despite the ambiguities about care, I have persevered with the word in the hope that in association with 'learning', 'care' can be reclaimed, as a concept that describes all that is best in learning relationships.

Literacy and care

The quest to describe what I have named *learning care*, with those whose childhood was spent in industrial schools, is set in the context of adult literacy where the vast majority of learners have a lot of forgetting to do. They often need to move beyond their harmful memories and emotions associated with formal schooling, before they can start learning in adulthood. Most adult literacy

narratives include unhappy accounts of lost opportunities, care-lessness and failure to facilitate the development of human potential. In relation to unmet literacy needs[1], the participants in this research clearly highlight extreme, intricately interwoven inequalities including pivotal neglect in the affective domain. So, learning literacy is one part of the story and inequality of care is another and each element and its place in the study merits clarification at this early stage.

Literacy and me—an equality issue

After thirty years' work as a literacy tutor, organiser and manager, the conceptual framework of equality, developed in Equality Studies, University College Dublin brought a fresh perspective to my work.[2] The interdisciplinary framework illustrates how degrees of inequality of resources, power, respect and recognition and care interconnect to create and sustain disadvantage for individuals and groups in many dimensions of life (Baker *et al.*, 2004). Drawing from a number of fields including economics, political theory, education, sociology and law the framework adopts a multidisciplinary position in order to address the complex nature of inequality. The underpinning theory identifies 'equality of condition' as the ultimate objective of those who aspire to create a more socially just world (Baker *et al.*, 2004: 33-42; Lynch and Baker, 2005). This is the most radical form of equality and the only lasting way to change unequal social systems. An exposure to a multidimensional view of social injustice got me thinking about literacy from an egalitarian perspective and enabled me to link my knowledge and experience of literacy education with egalitarian theory (Feeley, 2005; 2007; 2010).

In particular, the salience of the affective domain of equality struck a chord with my own literacy work. In some ways it was stating the obvious to describe the learning of literacy as an affective concern. Nevertheless, as in wider society, care is a vital, often gendered and voluntary, but largely invisible component of adult literacy. As I reached the end of this study, a number of literacy students with whom I had previously worked, came back to my mind. There was the young man, Jack, who was referred to me in the 1980s by a psychiatrist because he had severed his index finger at the second joint. Jack explained that he was fed up inventing excuses for why he could not fill forms and satisfy other public

1. I use the term 'unmet literacy needs' to avoid the implication of individual deficit in phrases like people with literacy difficulties, essential skills deficits … and so on.
2. The equality framework will be described in detail in chapter two.

demands on literacy. Now he need only show his finger and the demand was withdrawn without him suffering any further indignity. What was fascinating was that he was left-handed and had damaged his right hand so that he always had the option to learn literacy at a later date. He subsequently told me about his childhood in institutional care that had resonance with the findings in this study.

I also remembered a literacy group in West Belfast where it emerged over time that five out of the eight adults that I worked with had been sexually abused, as children, in their own community. Yet again there was the narrative of a man in a rural border town who had been brutally beaten by a teacher who favoured the children of the wealthier people in the town and vented his frustrations on those who were powerless. All these and a host of other adult learners had been talking about care inequalities all along and I had not the consciousness of affective equality to hear them accurately.

Generally, such lack of recognition has meant that the care associated with learning literacy (and other things) remains neglected both in theory, research and to some extent, in practice. In turn, this has led to an affective void in literacy policy considerations, resourcing and practitioner training. So, this empirical study sought to explore the links between care and literacy with a view to increasing the capacity and reach of those who work to meaningfully address persistent levels of unmet literacy needs.[3]

Caring about profit before people

Literacy has increasingly become a matter of corporate concern for business and Lankshear and Knobel (2003) suggest that it is this, rather than care for the educationally disadvantaged that accounts for growing focus on adult literacy in the past few decades. As far back as 1992 it was estimated that $40 billion was lost annually to US business because of people with unmet literacy needs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD) 1992). At the same time, the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation report (1992) argued that fifty per cent production development in the US economy

3. An estimated 500,000 adults in Ireland have not been given access to functional literacy and only eleven per cent of them are involved in adult learning (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2011). Currently, over thirty per cent of children in disadvantaged Irish primary schools have not acquired the literacy level needed to cope with transition to secondary education (Department of Education and Science, 2005). Similar numbers of adults in other countries with universal primary and secondary education have unmet literacy needs. The data about other countries will be discussed in chapter two.

could be attributed to on-the-job training and learning. This was twice as important a contribution as that made by new technologies at the time and began a trend of workplace learning and measuring gains from increases in human capital. The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) report also led directly to the International Adult Literacy Studies throughout the 1990s and prompted some to argue that the *crisis* of the literacy gap was not so much a fall in educational standards as a rise in demands on literacy in modern economies, primarily out of a concern for profits (Hamilton and Barton, 2000; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). Such critique of dominant, positivist understandings has done much to problematise literacy and spark debate in the field (Brandt and Clinton 2002; Kim, 2003; Reder and Davila 2005; Street, 2003). Nevertheless, although the ideological and socially situated nature of literacy is now more widely accepted, the equally important location of literacy in the affective domain is largely ignored.

Learning care

The impetus for the research was a desire to shed new light on persistent, intransigent levels of unmet literacy needs and to increase our knowledge of the intricate role that care (both in attitude and action) plays in supporting learning. Hence, the text explores how a focus on affective aspects of equality, making a robust form of pedagogical care central in our work, may help refine our understanding of adult literacy learning practices so that the generational cycle of unmet literacy needs can be broken. Working from an egalitarian perspective, these twin threads of literacy and care are woven throughout the study.

Both literacy and care are important considerations in the research. As a pivotal area of childhood and adult education, literacy is recognised as a site of major learning inequalities. Literacy provides the backdrop for the study of affective aspects of learning and as such is explored in the literature and the empirical data. Nevertheless, in terms of providing a new perspective on literacy inequalities, care figures as the primary research focus with the hope of producing a model of literacy *learning care* that could then be applied to more diverse learning contexts.

I should say from the beginning that 'learning care' is not some kind of nebulous good intent but rather a skilful, respectful, empowering approach to facilitating learning. At the outset, *learning care* was understood to mean the attitudes and the actions, both paid and unpaid, that support individuals and groups on their learning journey. The core purpose of the research was to further

explore the experiences of learning care of a specific group and in the context of learning literacy and thereby to define learning care a little more clearly.

I coined the term *learning care* to capture the idea that affective aspects of learning are not incidental but rather a central and consistent element of the learning process. This is the case even when the degree of learning care is at the extreme, negative end of the care continuum and expressed as harm.

Some aspects of care and emotion in education have been well-researched and written about and are discussed below. This study looks at care in the learning of literacy, both in childhood and adulthood, from the perspective of the learner rather than the educator. In this, it is novel both to the field of literacy and care. In the case of research about institutional abuse, the study highlights the often overshadowed area of educational neglect that has a lifelong impact on those for whom childhood was care-less.

Why 'learning care' matters

Despite continued state complacency about the provision of all aspects of care in wider society, others have illustrated that care is an inescapable feature of our lives (Baker *et al.* 2004; 2009; Engster, 2005; Fineman, 2004; Gheaus, 2009; Lynch and McLaughlin, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000; 2001). We are interdependent but not always relationally adept and so we need to be more conscious of developing an ethos of care in interpersonal encounters of all kinds (Baker *et al.*, 2004; Engster, 2005; Nussbaum, 2001). The availability and quality of care in every aspect of our lives has much significance in terms of our ongoing development and self-actualisation both individually and collectively. This suggests that we need to learn about care and how to be more proficient at care giving and receiving. The universality of care also means that to be fair, care responsibilities and care work need to be equally shared and the benefits equally experienced. In reality, care slips under the radar and that allows affective injustices to persist virtually unnoticed or unchallenged.

As well as its pleasures and rewards, care has gendered, burdensome and costly aspects to it that are often disregarded but that nonetheless require recognition and resourcing (Darmanin, 2003; Fineman, 2004; Kittay, 2002; Lynch, 2007). This is true also of the care that supports learning where complex inequalities operate to determine the extent to which individuals and groups are enabled to reap the benefits of educational provision. Maeve O'Brien has analysed the way in which mothers' capacity to support children's learning and overall educational well-being is influenced by a complex range of factors. She maps the mix of

economic, social, cultural and emotional resources demanded of mothers in the support of their children's education and describes how disparities in these resources contribute in turn to persistent educational inequalities (O'Brien, 2005). Others have focused on care and the school curriculum (Cohen, 2006; McClave, 2005); teachers' emotional labour (Hargreaves, 2000; 2001); the role of the affective domain in educational ideology (Lynch *et al.*, 2007) and the need for an explicit ethic of care in schools (Noddings, 1992; 2006; 2007). Building on the work of Noddings, Rebecca Powell (1999) suggested that a pedagogical ethic of care (what she called *agape*[4]) was needed if school literacy in pluralist societies was to be truly empowering and transformative. In the context of schooling in the US, Wendy Luttrell's photovoice studies with young people have shown how children are challenging dominant discourses about the importance of care in their lives (Luttrell, 2013).

> The children's counter-narratives suggest an alternative economy of value within school that reach beyond performance measures and test scores that have become the sole calculus of learning and success.
>
> (Luttrell, 2013: forthcoming)

In this book, the affective focus takes a different turn towards the field of adult literacy. In particular, the perspective moves from the more widely considered role of the teacher or parent as caregiver, to focus on the learner as a care recipient in a learning relationship.

The location of the empirical study

The research design and methodology required careful consideration and lengthy preparation because both literacy and care are sensitive areas not readily opened up to outsiders. I explored a number of possible research sites and volunteered for a year as a literacy tutor with a range of youth and adult groups. I wanted to build relationships of trust and to observe and discuss the potential for empirical research in these different settings. It became clear that detailed reflection about their care and literacy biographies was inappropriate for a number of groups and individuals. Many were already limited in the time they could devote to literacy and participation in research was one time demand too many. Others had life stories that were too harrowing to pick over without risking further hurt and

4. *Agape* is the term used to denote Christian love as distinct from erotic love or simple affection. It has its origins in the Greek word agape connoting brotherly love.

damage. Despite their extremes of neglect, those who call themselves 'survivors of institutional abuse' were open to the opportunity to relate their experience, to be believed and to find healing in the process. 'Survivors of institutional abuse', was favoured as an alternative the term 'victims', by ex-residents of industrial schools who attended the Lighthouse Centre. A range of abuses had been reported by them including emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Neglect, including educational disadvantage was also recognised by the Residential Institutions Redress Act (2002) as a form of abuse eligible for compensation under 'loss of opportunity'. All those who attended the Lighthouse Centre experienced one or many forms of abuse and many were working to improve their level of literacy.

The final location for the study therefore emerged organically and the Lighthouse Centre for adult survivors of institutional abuse in industrial schools became the ethnographic research site. The Lighthouse Centre is a pseudonym for an adult education and advice centre established in Dublin by and for survivors of abuse in Irish industrial schools. The Centre provided a range of adult learning opportunities including literacy, anger management, art therapy and personal development. Advice was also available about family tracing, counselling, and legal matters. The Centre functioned as a community centre and at the time of the study was attended on an average day by eighty people.

Ethical issues

Access to the community was through an identified 'gatekeeper' with whom the ethnographic process was fully discussed and agreed. She in turn required me to be interviewed by the local literacy providers to establish that I was in a position to provide voluntary literacy support to community members. My presence in the community as a researcher was entirely transparent and all those who shared their memories with me were fully informed about the study and any possible future use of the data. They were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and their right to withdraw from the process at any time. Each aspect of the process was negotiated and indeed, on hearing their allocated pseudonym, some asked for it to be changed to something of their own choosing. For those who were called by a number rather than a name this aspect of the research process took on added significance. Because many participants had literacy issues, consent forms were read aloud and signed as a mutual agreement by both the researcher and the participants.

Findings and limitations

The findings of this study suggest that unequal literacy distribution is synonymous with intricate and interconnected inequalities. In the context of learning, facilitating literacy becomes care and a failure to do so is akin to abuse. Unequal literacy outcomes have therefore both a real and symbolic value in articulating individual experiences of care-related in/equalities. They also exemplify the failure of a state to care equally for and about the learning needs of all its citizens. In this sense, unmet literacy needs may be viewed as a form of state harm[5] that merits further attention from a zemiological perspective (Hillyard *et al.*, 2004).

The project described here is novel in the literacy context in that it has adopted a critical ethnographic and practitioner research paradigm. This has meant engaging with a specific community of interest—survivors of abuse in industrial schools—over a period of three years. A protracted investment of time was necessary to build enduring relationships of trust that would enable in-depth discussion of the dual stigma of institutional care and unmet literacy needs. A critical case sample was chosen so that the findings might hold relevance not only for the community of interest but also for other adult literacy contexts and learning in general (Patton, 1980; 1990).

The study makes a number of innovative contributions to our knowledge about both care in/equality and literacy. Literacy is redefined from an egalitarian perspective, building on the work of New Literacy Studies to expose the injustices in the social context where literacy occurs. Because this context is socially constructed, unmet literacy needs are therefore construed as a form of state harm. With the objective of carrying out a care-full inquiry, an emancipatory, ethnographic, practitioner research process was designed and deployed. Unless otherwise stated all the words quoted are those of survivors of institutional abuse and they form the backbone of the study.

Limitations are inevitable and I chose to concentrate on the experience of literacy learners and the extent to which their care biographies impacted on

5. The idea of studying social or state harm also known as Zemiology has been developed to draw attention to the way in which certain damaging acts become criminalised while others escape that judgement. This is even though their detrimental consequences can, like unmet literacy needs, be far reaching. Proponents of Zemiology suggest that harm may be physical, economic/financial, emotional and psychological and related to cultural safety. This perspective will be elaborated in chapter three.

their capacity to learn. In that sense this is unapologetically a one-sided view. Exploring learning care from the care-giver's perspective, and indeed beyond the field of literacy, was outside the scope of this study and is the work of another day. Despite these limitations, the overall goal was to extract a model of literacy learning care that will support the current literacy care-giver's role and this has been accomplished.

Outline of the book

Following on from this introduction, the book has seven chapters. chapter one outlines the organic process of exploring and developing an ethnographic literacy practitioner research study where the role of researcher overlaps with that of literacy facilitator and reciprocal learner. Learning relationships were both the focus of the study and key to all stages of the process and the rich, diverse care biographies of participants allowed for comparative as well as descriptive analysis. This was a lengthy and at times arduous research process with enormous ethical dimensions in relation to the vulnerabilities associated with both adult literacy and institutional care. An ethnographic approach allowed for a respectful, unhurried immersion in an adult learning community with vast expertise, albeit by omission, in the affective dimensions of learning. The participants' narratives were gripping and the level of analysis already carried out by survivors in relation to their experiences was extensive and shared with me with boundless generosity. chapter one describes an ethnography of care.

The second chapter sets the educational context for the study by exploring the different theoretical perceptions of literacy and locating these within an equality perspective. The changing nature of literacy and the way that unmet literacy needs function as a barometer for inequality is explored. Functional (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), critical (Freirean) and cultural, socially situated understandings of literacy (New Literacy Studies) are outlined and their implications for egalitarian social change are considered. The conceptual framework of equality (Baker *et al.*, 2004; 2009) that underpins the whole study is introduced and the argument for an egalitarian theory of literacy is proposed.

Chapter three looks at why affective inequality matters. With a focus on the particular element of affective equality within the equality framework (Baker *et al.*, 2004; 2009) the possible interaction between literacy and care is explored. A 'dynamic cycle of care' is proposed that depicts learning care playing an important intermediary role between contexts of equality (economic, political,

cultural, affective) and literacy learning. This chapter illustrates the neglected agency of love, care and solidarity in literacy learning and considers the concept of harm—the counter face of care. Borrowing from the field of criminology, the notion of adopting a social harm perspective is explored in the context of literacy (Hillyard *et al.*, 2004). Here, unmet literacy needs are associated with the negative end of the social care continuum and the implications of a state duty of care in relation to basic education are discussed.

There are three findings chapters. In the first of these—chapter four the interface between resources and literacy learning care are explored through the data. Resources are understood not just in terms of financial assets but also the whole portfolio of carer capitals that support literacy learning. Learning care is described as a form of labour that involves a range of temporal, physical, emotional, material and cultural resources. Inequalities in all these resources are shown to have impacted on the degrees of learning care available to individuals and their subsequent literacy outcomes.

Cultural aspects of learning and in particular status-related inequalities are examined in chapter five for the way that they impacted on learning care and literacy outcomes. They show that even within the harsh circumstances in the industrial school, further hierarchical divisions were created that influenced literacy learning. Ethnicity, disability status, class and other aspects of diversity were seen to create additional inequalities within an already disadvantaged community.

In the third findings chapter, chapter six, we turn our attention to literacy and the affective/power interface. Both state and institutional power were significant determining factors in the lives of survivors of abuse in industrial schools. The degree to which power was affectively distributed and enacted in the institution, and in particular in the classroom, was crucially important in whether literacy was acquired or not. The data articulately describe the lived experience of power-related care inequalities and their relationship to the learning of literacy. Here care is most starkly illustrated through its absence.

The findings about learning care are summarised and discussed in chapter seven both in relation to the immediate research context and the wider contemporary literacy sector. A model of learning care is elaborated. The findings suggest that four strands of learning care are significant in learning literacy: primary learning care in the home, secondary learning care at school, tertiary learning care with peers and a fundamental, underwriting state duty of care.

The implications of each form of learning care is explored in relation to the field of literacy today and hopefully these interwoven strands of care will help point to the transformational potential of recognising the affective dimension in all literacy work. However, it is worth noting that it is in the state duty of care that the weakest and most damaging link emerges.

State responsibilities

The impetus for this study came from over twenty-five years' experience as a practitioner and a manager of adult literacy provision in Northern Ireland. This community-based educational work coincided with the most intense period of political dysfunction and violent conflict and I became familiar with the stark and complex lived realities of those at society's margins, in the hardest of times. It was in these misrecognised, disrespected groups that unmet literacy needs were then, and continue now to be located. My experience led me to view literacy inequalities as, both literally and symbolically, an expression of state-sanctioned, if not state-constructed social injustice. At the same time, a persistent, deficit discourse constantly held educationally disadvantaged people responsible for their own unequal life outcomes. For a literacy practitioner who knew this to be untrue, it was an increasingly frustrating and unhopeful context in which to work. I wanted to have more effective arguments that accurately and authentically identified the structural genesis and reproduction of educational and wider social disadvantage. My hope is that this book relocates primary responsibility for learning inequalities in the failure of the state to honour its own part in relation to a duty of care.