

An Cosán

Case Study

September 2023



Case Study – An Cosán

This case study showcases the work of An Cosán, providing community education and support to lone parents and women in general in the Tallaght area of County Dublin.

The research was funded by the Beachaire Fund. The Beachaire Fund is a charitable fund operating under the umbrella of the Community Foundation for Ireland (CFI). One of the objectives of the Beachaire Fund is to support early education initiatives with a view to improving access to education and affording the benefits of education to children living in Ireland. Households headed by a lone parent with low levels of completed education are amongst those at greatest risk of long-term unemployment and poverty in Ireland. The economic and social disadvantage faced by these households has potential lifelong adverse consequences for children from these households.

The fieldwork for the research commenced in summer 2022 and was completed in spring 2023. Thirty people contributed to this case study, including management and administration (7), tutors (9), and community education participants (14), past and present, all of whom had experienced parenting alone.

Participants shared stories of the ways in which their participation in community education has transformed their lives. The stories contain recurring themes of shared learning and support through community education, resulting in progression to further and higher education and employment for many. There is evidence of the wider impact of community education on the quality of life of participants and their families. This includes more positive feelings around parenting and the capacity to parent, enhanced mental health and wellbeing, a deeper sense of self, personal mastery, connection, and for some greater capacity to be involved in their local community.

1. The Story of An Cosán

An Cosán¹ is a unique community-based organisation located in Jobstown, Tallaght, County Dublin.

An Cosán was founded in 1986, known then as The Shanty, by Dr Ann Louise Gilligan and Dr Katherine Zappone purposefully to address the problem of poverty and disadvantage in the local community of Tallaght West.

The roots of community education in Ireland can be traced back to the concept of ‘no classes without creches’ and the emancipation goals of the women’s movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s. An Cosán played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in advocating for and providing integrated support services for children and families, recognising that this is a powerful way to address the intersectional nature of poverty.

¹ ‘the Path or pathway’ in English.

The work of An Cosán is based on the premise that intergenerational education can disrupt the cycle of poverty by raising up women and their families through community education.

The focus of the work is primarily on women and children as the most effective way to end intergenerational poverty, which is referred to as the 'One Generation Solution.' This is based on the premise that when we educate a mother, we empower her whole family to value and appreciate the benefits of education, and her family can disrupt the patterns of poverty. An Cosán places a particular emphasis on promoting skills for women and young mothers who are furthest behind.

An Cosán's mission is to empower women and children left furthest behind, through learning, leadership, and enterprise. The vision is a world where people can access education to achieve their full potential. The values underpinning the work are connection, compassion, and courage.

An Cosán is responsive to contemporary community needs and constantly evolving, as depicted in their strategy 2022-2026: Transforming Lives Together². Strategically, the organisation is placing an increasing emphasis on promoting inclusivity and influencing systemic change.



Services and Support Provided by An Cosán

An Cosán is a purpose-built resource centre located in the heart of Jobstown. The building includes classrooms, meeting rooms, therapy rooms, and a library.

An Cosán offers three core services:

- Early Years Education and Care
- Counselling and Family Support
- Adult Community Education.

² <https://www.ancosan.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/An-Cosa%CC%81n-Strategy-2022-2026-FINAL.pdf>

Services include an Open Learning Centre, Rainbow House early years' service, a counselling service, and a warm and welcoming coffee dock. There are seven early years centres across the city of Dublin, all under the An Cosán banner. Each offers the Highscope preschool curriculum³, which means that the children experience an excellent start in life through this evidence informed curriculum. There is also access to career guidance through the organisation's links with career guidance counsellors in the area. In terms of family support, the Life Start team makes monthly home visits to support families on their caseload.

The Community Education Centre in An Cosán offers a diverse range of programmes, including non-accredited learning and, in collaboration with QQI and the Southeast Technological University (SETU), awards spanning the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1-7. Programmes include Gateway courses and the Young Women's Education Programme funded under the Social Innovation Fund Ireland - Mná na hÉireann⁴, which is specifically designed for young lone parents.

In 2014, An Cosán began offering online community education and is making digital advancements in this regard each year. This opens access to community education and support for all.

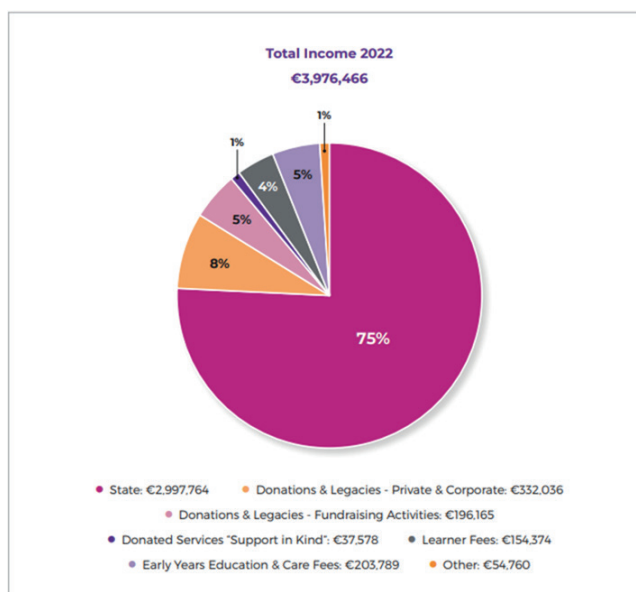
Sources of Funding

An Cosán owns their building in Jobstown.

The organisation relies on a range of grants and funding sources to support their work in service to their target communities, both locally and nationally. One of An Cosán's strategic goals for the period of 2022 – 2026 is to continue to diversify and increase funding.

An Cosán's funding supports Adult Education services at Access, Further and Higher Education levels, 7 Early Years Education and Care services, along with the provision of Family Support and Counselling services for members of the communities served.

Using 2022 as an example of the diverse nature of An Cosán's funding sources, the infographic below gives an insight into the variety of funding sources relied upon to carry out their work:



³ <https://highscope.org/hs-curriculum/>

⁴ www.womenmeanbusiness.com/2019/10/mna-na-heireann-women-of-ireland-fund/

While 75% of funding stems from state sources, this state funding comes from many different funding streams, including six government departments⁵ and a range of government agencies⁶. For example, in 2022, the state funding came from 27 individual funding streams, 25 of which have a maximum duration of 1 year. Multi-annual funding would free up the time for community education design and delivery rather than piecemeal administration and reporting on an ongoing basis. A multi-annual funding model would also expand An Cosán's capacity for long-term planning in response to ever-evolving needs.

Funding Learner Fees:

The majority of Access and Further Education courses are currently fully funded by Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB), with others funded by Community Foundation Ireland, Rethink Ireland, and the Solas ALL Collaboration and Innovation fund in 2022 - 2023, which helps reduce the financial barriers to education experienced within An Cosán's target communities. An estimated 80% of community education participants are experiencing financial hardship.

Higher Education programmes are currently self-funded by learners however, eligible learners have access to the An Cosán Bursary Fund, while others receive financial support from local development companies, Intreo, or St. Vincent de Paul. In some cases, employers may also provide financial support to their employees who attend programmes at An Cosán.

2. Methodology

The Community Education Lead shared information about the Beachaire Fund research and its purpose with her colleagues at An Cosán. They then identified community education participants who were lone parents and invited them to participate in the research. It was challenging to identify research participants because, although lone parents form a significant proportion of learners, they are not named as a specific target group.

The CES researchers visited An Cosán on three occasions and met with management, tutors/facilitators, a cohort of current community education participants, and a cohort of past participants. The methodology was qualitative and participatory, conducted through six focus groups - three online and three in person. The focus groups were semi-structured and around ninety minutes long. The research process was designed to encourage participants to share their journey through and experiences of, community education, including the benefits, enablers, and ripple effects on children and families.

All research participants were briefed about the nature and purpose of the research and assured that personal details would be held in a safe and confidential manner. All participants gave their consent to participate.

⁵ Including the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Rural and Community Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Justice.

⁶ Including Solas, Pobal, Tusla and Irish Aid.

The contribution of all participants to this research is appreciated. All received a voucher, funded by the Bechaire Fund, as an appreciation for their involvement.

3. Current Participants

People who were currently participating in community education at An Cosán were invited to attend a focus group on 8th December 2022. The focus group was held online in response to a request from the participants, and three participants attended on the day. A second focus group was held in person with a further six participants on the 9th of February 2023. A follow up focus group was scheduled for the 23rd of May 2023 and two participants attended.

This section sets out the results of the thematic analysis of the stories shared by participants during the focus groups. A selection of anonymized quotes portrays the voices of participants.

Profile of Participants

A total of nine women attended the focus groups. The women ranged in age from their mid-twenties to their early forties. Seven of the women were Irish; one was from Iraq, and another was from the Czech Republic.

Eight of the women were in the first year of a two-year course, either Community Development or Business Administration and Digital Skills (Level 5). One woman had previously completed the Business Administration and Digital Skills course, and another had completed several shorter personal development courses. Another participant was in the second year of the Community Development program. Therefore, while all the research participants were at the beginning of a course, it was not necessarily the start of their community education journey with An Cosán.

Awareness of and referral to An Cosán

Participants found out about An Cosán in several ways, including fliers that they happened upon locally and word of mouth. One participant was referred to An Cosán by a family support worker at TULSA- Child and Family Agency, and two were referred by Business in the Community Ireland as part of the women@work programme⁷. Others found out through another community organisation or local charity. For example, one participant shared how she had been encouraged to go to An Cosán by a volunteer at St. Vincent de Paul, which was contributing funding towards her education. Most participants spoke about attending an open day that was hosted by An Cosán, experiencing the warm and welcoming environment, and feeling a sense of possibility from the outset.

Starting Point

Participants shared the starting point of their community education journey and what had stirred them to begin. The results point to several different factors, including psychological readiness, inner drive, career and personal motivating forces, life stage, and/or life situations, some traumatic, that prompted people to come to An Cosán.

Some participants spoke about how they were drawn to community education because they felt ready. This psychological readiness was due to the stage of life that they were at, particularly

⁷ <https://www.bitc.ie/business-action-programmes/business-action-on-employment/are-you-a-jobseeker/womenatwork/>

relating to the age of their children and whether they had access to childcare. Participants described making a conscious decision to engage in community education, knowing that it could fit with their lives and their caring duties. Parents whose children were attending primary school could attend community education while their children were at school. For those with younger children, the creche was a necessity and made it possible for them to return to education. Without the creche, they would have to wait until their children were attending school before they could have the time to participate in community education.

Four participants shared experiences of trauma, including addiction, homelessness, domestic violence, and fleeing a war-torn country. They described being attracted to An Cosán as a safe place where they could be supported to recover and find themselves again. One woman spoke about the safety of routine and how important the routine and structure of community education were to her sense of personal safety and wellbeing.

'After I had my youngest child, I felt quite lost because I was going through homelessness, and I had nowhere to go during the day while my child was in school.'

'I was just so lost; I had nowhere to go; nothing to do. I felt like I was a burden to other people, being homeless.'

Participants shared how the feelings of safety that they began to experience in An Cosán enabled them to become steadier and more open to the possibilities for learning, training, and preparation for employment. The associated potential for creating greater earning power and financial stability by bettering their education was also a strong shared sentiment.

Participants discussed the impact that parenting alone has had on their lives and their feelings of losing their sense of self. They expressed the desire to connect, belong, and feel good about themselves through opportunities for social contact and personal development in An Cosán.

'It was really about finding myself, starting to talk to people normally again.'

'The cup of tea and scone helps. Just to be take a break from being a mam.'

'It's just really important to find who you are as a person other than a partner, or mother, or friend, or you know.'

One woman shared how she was attracted to community education as a way of creating a better life for herself and her children. Another woman built on this theme of role modelling, adding that she wanted to show her children what is possible when you take charge of your life.

'The real drive was to show my child that it doesn't matter what barriers are in front of you; you can do whatever you want to do, and you are in charge of your own life.'

Another participant reflected on how she was preparing to return to work and wanted to build her CV by gaining qualifications to open more career options for herself. The theme of work and finding paid employment was peppered through the discussion with an awareness that community education was a step in this direction.

'I came here because I am looking for work, I need to build my CV and qualifications – I don't really have much, and that's what brought me back to An Cosán. I want to have these qualifications, put them in my CV, and show that I can do the job.'

'I think sometimes you can get bored of being a mam. I want to get back into employment and back to education. I want to get out of the house. I want to meet new people.'

'I really wanted to work because I felt useless.'

Enablers of participation

Participants were invited to reflect on the different supports that have enabled their participation in community education. The results show that access to free childcare, flexible learning options and class times, and the wrap around support, including one to one mentoring and student support offered in An Cosán, are the main enablers.

The strongest and most consistent enabler of returning to education, as cited by participants, was childcare. The results indicate that childcare opened the door to education and gave participants an opportunity that would not have been possible otherwise.

'Without childcare here, none of us would be here.'

Another important enabler was flexibility in terms of the timing of sessions and the choice to learn online or in person. The online option gave one participant, who was caring for a child with additional needs, the flexibility to keep up with course work and stay engaged. Another woman shared how the option to learn online made community education possible for her as the commute from her home would be too far and too costly to come to class in person. On the other hand, the in-person option provides an environment where participants can interact socially, which was noted as important to some participants.

'Coming here, having the childcare here for my baby gave me the space to come here in person. I learn best in person, I'm very interactive, I need to be able to be asking questions on the spot, and so they offered the childcare, and it's free.'

Participants expressed appreciation for the supportive environment within An Cosán, as characterised by the one-to-one support from tutors, connections with peers, the pace and incremental nature of the learning, and access to personal counselling on site. Many participants described how they relied on their peers for support, met online to do assignments together, and learned from each other. This sense of a learning community was generated by the culture of encouragement that prevails in An Cosán.

'When I heard the programme was a level 5 over two years, the thoughts of one module at time. I can do that. That's something I can do.'

'No matter what, if you have a question or anything, there's always somebody to turn to here; there's always somebody on your side.'

'I felt comfortable. I felt safe. I can ask; there's no such thing as a stupid question, so I can ask.'

Participants noted the practical one-to-one learning support with academic assignments, laptop loans, and additional IT training.

'The support that An Cosán gives - the one-on-one support is amazing.'

'If somebody's under pressure to complete an assignment and life gets in the way with uncertainty or circumstances that you didn't expect, there is learning support there to help you get yourself across the line.'

Impact

Participants were invited to reflect on the difference that participating in community education has made in their lives.

All participants reported noticing a shift in their self-confidence since coming to An Cosán. One participant described how critical her experience with community education has been for finding her sense of self again after feeling very lost. Participants also spoke about how community education has given them a sense of purpose and a good routine to their days.

'It has been life changing for me.'

'For me, it's routine. My routines now are set around it, and I'm used to waking up with the day in mind, and I look forward to it.'

'This course gives me a sense of achievement and shows them how I can achieve, and it feels good to achieve something other than just being somebody's mammy.'

'It encouraged me and helped me find who I am as a person other than a mother, or as a worker, or anything. Community education is very empowering, and I would encourage anyone to do it.'

'It was important to find who I am as a person other than a partner, or mother, or friend, I could start fresh and be someone new.'

Participants described how they felt a desire to give back and wanted to help others in a similar situation to theirs in the future. They recalled how they themselves had been inspired by the stories of other women who had been through community education and progressed onto further education and employment. This has instilled hope and shown real life examples of career paths that are possible for them and others. Hope brings resilience through an understanding that life evolves, circumstances change, and with support, they can alter the path of their life.

'I'm interested in how I can benefit people like me, and so I'm doing my work experience in An Cosán because this is a community project, and this place is helping so many women and so many children.'

'If you start on the wrong path, or if you start something and you think that's not for you, you can change. You can change; you can go to a completely different path; and you will succeed in it.'

Ripple Effect

Participants were invited to share the difference they believe that community education in An Cosán has made to the lives of their children.

Many participants spoke about the positive impact this has had on their lives and the knock-on effect this has on their children. One participant shared that she and her child are happier.

'There is a lot more laughter and joking in our day to day. Before I came to An Cosán, I was down in the dumps and stressed as a parent.'

Participants also spoke about the positive impact on their children in terms of the structure and routine that are brought into their lives. They shared how they believe that their return to education is an important way to be good role models for their children. The results indicate that they were purposeful in their intention that their involvement in community education showed their children that they could achieve too. One participant spoke about how she wanted to encourage her children to go onto third level education and felt her example would support this. Another participant described a wish to show her child, who is living with a learning disability, that there are opportunities to achieve beyond the formal education route. Participants discussed how their interest in their children's education and the options for this were strengthened through their own community education experience in An Cosán. There was also a sense that this might give their children confidence in their mother's abilities and, in turn, their own. Their children's sense of pride in their mothers was important to participants. One participant recounted how her child tells all his friends that his mother is in school.

'My son proudly tells people about how his mammy goes to the school and that his baby sister goes with her.'



4. Past Participants

People who were past participants in community education at An Cosán were invited to attend a focus group on 11th October 2022. One of this group of participants also attended a follow up focus group on the 23rd of May 2023. The focus group was held online in response to a request from the participants.

This section sets out the results of the thematic analysis of the stories shared by the women during the focus group. A selection of anonymized quotes portrays the voices of the women.

Profile of Participants

A total of four women attended the focus group. The women ranged in age from their mid-twenties to their early thirties. Two of the women were Irish, born in the local community, and two were from Africa (Kenya and Cameroon). All were lone parents, caring for their children.

Two participants completed the Level 5 Business Administration and Digital Skills course, and two participants completed the Young Women's Education Programme (YWEP). All participants started and completed their courses between 2019 and 2022. One participant had started a course a couple of years ago but withdrew due to bereavement.

Awareness of and referral into An Cosán

The main way that participants became aware of An Cosán was through word of mouth, usually a friend or person within the local community. One woman was told about community education at An Cosán by a friend whilst they were both in Direct Provision⁸. One participant had grown up knowing about An Cosán as her mother had participated in community education and completed a level 6 course. From their first point of contact with An Cosán, the women reported feeling a sense of encouragement and being warmly welcomed.

| *'The first person I met when I walked into the building was so welcoming.'*

Starting Point – Attractors

The women shared what initially attracted them to community education. The motivating factors were the desire to return to education and specific skills acquisition, with valid certification, to progress in their careers. They were all supported by tutors in their transition into the programme. This was particularly true for participants who had come to Ireland from other countries.

| *'I wanted to go back to school, but I had no childcare.'*

| *'I knew it was going to allow me to have job opportunities, and everything will open up for me when I have papers that show I have studied here [in Ireland] and I have the skills.'*

⁸ Refers to the accommodation, foods, money, and medical services that people seeking asylum in Ireland avail of whilst waiting for their application for international protection to be processed. <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/moving-country/asylum-seekers-and-refugees/the-asylum-process-in-ireland/applying-for-refugee-status-in-ireland/>

Enablers

The women were asked about the supports they received that helped them complete their community education programme. They shared a range of factors that enabled their participation in and completion of community education. The dominant theme was their experience of encouragement, through psychosocial support, one-to-one from tutors and within a group, and the peer support offered in An Cosán.

All participants expressed appreciation for the wraparound support they received from the tutors and fellow learners for their coursework and personal development. They described receiving all the technical equipment they needed to take part in the programme, including a laptop and Microsoft 365 software to successfully research and complete their assignments. They appreciated receiving academic support from the Student Support worker. The tutors were understanding and responded to the varying needs of the participants.

'I live far away, so the tutors posted all the materials that I needed to my house.'

'They gave me a laptop and provided so much wraparound support.'

'We got additional sessions with a Student Support worker, if you missed a class or didn't understand what was taught during the class.'

Participants described the access they had to services such as counselling and childcare, which eliminated the mental and physical barriers to participation in community education. They were offered career guidance as part of the programme as well as job and internship referrals to enable them to take the next step into the world of work.

'I have benefitted from the counselling services which I would not have been able to afford.'

'I used the childcare services from when my child was 8 months to 3 years old. They were the best, and my child loved it.'

'I had the opportunity to do an internship for two months initially, which got extended for another 6 months.'



Participants also spoke about the support they received throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The support from An Cosán made up for the shortfalls of COVID, as they provided the technical support that the participants needed. They also delivered food hampers for the participants' children while schools were closed or moved online.

All participants were enthusiastic and spoke positively about their time at An Cosán. All attested to the warm and welcoming atmosphere that encouraged them to begin, stay, and complete the course, even as they encountered challenges.

'It was amazing; it was the best course ever. There were struggles because I did it during the pandemic, so it was really hard, but we got there.'

Impact

All participants reported experiencing a boost in their self-confidence and a feeling of empowerment as a result of their participation in community education. They described feeling a renewed sense of hope in their lives, as they now felt that they could do anything and had room for growth.

'The most notable benefit was empowerment. As a young mum, I felt like I had failed myself, and I now feel more empowered. My knowledge of certain areas has progressed. My self-worth has gone up.'

Participants shared that they experienced a sense of belonging through community education as they integrated into society and felt a spark of passion to give back to the community. Their knowledge of the course content had been advanced, which enabled them to look forward, with confidence, to their next steps, whether in further education or career.

'I am not afraid to mentor others now and to give back to the community. I feel more included when we are grouped together, and I feel that I can do anything.'

All four participants shared that they have progressed to further or higher education or towards paid employment. One participant had progressed and achieved a place at a Dublin university to complete a Level 8 degree. Another participant is planning to progress to further education and is exploring ways to fund this next step. Of the other two women, one was continuing an extended internship to get a better job she enjoys, and the other was preparing for community work.

The results indicate that community education gives participants space to be themselves, to connect with other women, attend courses and experience an opportunity to focus on themselves. The women shared how their participation in community education at An Cosán, expanded their mindset and understanding that other people are facing and experiencing similar struggles. The sense of shared experiences and being with people who understand was empowering for participants.

'It's great to meet different people that have the same struggles as you, because I know when I started the course a lot of us did not realise that we all have the same struggles.'

Ripple Effect

Participants were invited to share the difference they believe coming to An Cosán has made in the lives of their children. This opened a discussion about how their own personal development and growth, with the support of An Cosán, has positively affected their lives.

Participants described how they noticed improvements in their mental health, such as feeling calmer and having a stronger sense of self which they believe have influenced the way they parent their children. Several participants described how their participation has had a positive impact on the wellbeing of their children, both through the direct support provided for children and through their improved capacity to parent.

One participant shared how her participation had supported her child become more sociable, while another shared the pride that her children have for their mother since her graduation. This promoted a sense of achievement in the family as the children looked up to their parents.

'The ripple effect of the wraparound supports is immeasurable for me and my children.'

'For my children, it has supported my daughter to be more sociable. When I received my award at graduation, my daughter was there, and it will be something that she can be proud of when she's grown.'

'When my son found out about that I was doing the course, he was so proud, and our connection grew because he felt we were both going through school together.'

Participants were also mindful of their children's education and wanted more educational opportunities for them. They felt better equipped to parent and help their children, especially with their digital skills.

'For my children, I now think about my son's education, and I don't want to leave it the same way I had it.'

'I feel more equipped to help my children with their digital skills (with the growth of the cyberspace activities).'

One participant shared how advice and discussions with other participants has strengthened her confidence as a parent.

'My understanding has grown, and other learners have given me amazing advice that has helped me with my children and parenting.'

Participant Feedback on the research process

Participants were invited to give their feedback on their experience contributing to the research. Participants said that they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and to listen to each other's experiences of community education.

'I am happy to be asked and to be able to contribute to the research.'
'I feel valued to be a part of this research.'

'It has been good to reflect on how lucky we are and to listen to everyone's story.'

There was a strong sense of appreciation for An Cosán and the encouragement and support received from tutors and facilitators.

'I don't think you could say enough about An Cosán; they are amazing.'

5. Management Perspective

The CES researchers facilitated a focus group with seven members of the management team in An Cosán on 20th July 2022. The purpose of the consultation was to discuss community education in practice, its meaning and ethos, the design and development of programmes, accreditation, wrap around support, and the impact of community education. The challenges associated with delivering community education were also considered.

Community education distinctive features and values

The management team highlighted the distinctive features of community education, including its accessibility, ethos of inclusion, flexibility to be participant-led, and encouraging participation through a range of wrap around supports. Childcare is a vital support, and the onsite creche is available to community education participants. Other supports offered in An Cosán include personal counselling, access to the family support team, laptop loans and digital literacy, student support, and career guidance.

'Learners are at the heart of all that we do, and community education is designed to fit their needs.'



Community education values and draws on the life experiences of participants. In practice, this involves talking with learners, exploring their experiences, discerning their learning needs, and incorporating these into the curriculum.

'It is about how we stay connected with the community and relevant to the community that we are working with, and in the case of lone parents, that informs what we do. It is important that we constantly query and seek feedback to inform what we do.'

Community education is underpinned by feminist approaches (Bell Hooks, 2014⁹) and experiential and reflective learning, whereby learners become active agents in their own learning as informed by the theory of Paulo Freire (1970).

'We meet the learner where they are at, but do not leave them there; we set a challenge for them to go on – this is how we build confidence, which is a central part of community education.'

The content ranges from unaccredited courses in topics such as wellbeing and health and the right to work for refugees through to Level 8 accredited programmes delivered in partnership with the Southeast Technological University (SETU).

'Community education is participatory, which means we are constantly asking the learner and not assuming that we know, each community is different with different challenges; for example, people in direct provision bring many different experiences to community education.'

The nimbleness of community education in terms of responding to the needs of society and the local labour market was noted.

'Community education is flexible in approach and adaptable; conversations are important; respondent to the needs of the individual; the sectoral needs (e.g., post covid and new and different jobs arising); and regional employment needs (e.g., Centre Parks in Longford).'

⁹ Bell Hooks 'Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Pedagogy' (2014)

The management highlighted the quality of tutoring/facilitation as central to community education and the personal development components that are threaded through the content and process. This involves group work, circle time, mindfulness, conversation, and reflection together.

'Personal development is woven throughout community education, and tutors are really good at bringing out the best in people, bringing out confidence.'

Attention was drawn to the innovation and development that are distinctive to community education in recent years at An Cosán. This includes digital advancements, the provision of digital skills courses, and widening the access to learning through online delivery. Collaboration, for example, with the third level sector through SETU and the corporate world through the JP Morgan funded programme for young women in business, is also a hallmark of community education at An Cosán. The organisation has forged partnerships with community organisations in every county in Ireland and some in Northern Ireland.

An Cosán also works in partnership with QQI to manage and ensure the accreditation of courses.

Impact of Community Education

The impact of community education was discussed with a particular emphasis on personal development, progression to further and higher education, and paid employment. An Cosán tracks progression, and the results indicate significant progression to further and higher education.

'Community education helps people become more agentic in their own life, become more able to take charge whether to continue education, and improve their relationship with the jobs market.'

One person reflected on community education specific to lone parents and how important it is to bring people together to offer a safe place of connection and belonging. This is both a precursor to and part of the learning experience.

'One of the things that strikes me most is I recall a lone parent in rural Ireland who spoke after class saying the online class was the only opportunity in her week that was a conversation that was not about her children or directly tied into her identity as a mother — very often lone parents their whole identity consumed by looking after their children — some of the learners that I have spoken with that are very appreciative of An Cosán brings people together — creating a space where they can be someone else and claim space as adult learners — this holds through whether through unaccredited provision, further or higher education, a big part is using adult community education methods, whether accredited or unaccredited.'

Challenges

The management drew attention to some challenges that An Cosán is encountering in the context of community education provision.

The first challenge is to reframe community education as a valuable form of education in contemporary Ireland. Community education historically has been undervalued at a policy level. An Cosán believes that this is at odds with community education's power to influence positive change both at individual, family, community, and societal levels. The research indicates that participants experience community education as valuable. It supports personal development and progression to a range of next steps, including further and higher education and employment.

A second challenge is digital inclusion, which An Cosán has noticed has become a major issue for a cohort of their learners in recent years. The organisation is working to address this by enhancing the learning experience through digital literacy, assistive technology, outreach, and technical support.

Gateway Courses are offered as preparation, both for personal development and digital skills, to facilitate access to further and higher education. This is an intensive return to learning experience that works best with smaller class sizes. The optimal number is 12 to 20 to allow space and time to support participants during class time. The challenge is to achieve this optimal balance, given the demand for courses.

Sourcing funding in the form of grants and bursaries for further and higher education as participants progress from community education, continues to be challenging.

6. Facilitator/Tutor Perspective

The CES researcher facilitated a consultation with tutors/facilitators in An Cosán on 20th July 2022.

Nine tutors/facilitators of community education attended, including those involved in Business Administration and Digital Skills, computers and digital technology, the Young Women's Education Programme, the BA in Addiction Studies and Community Development, the BA in Leadership, learner support, and digital inclusion.

The tutors/facilitators have been involved in community education for many years. Five out of the nine were previous participants in community education at An Cosán; one came through the community access programme; and all progressed to degree level. The tutors/facilitators bring a wealth of qualifications and are highly committed designers, deliverers, and advocates of community education. The passion and enthusiasm for their work were evident. In terms of lived experience, the group estimated that fifty percent of tutors/facilitators are themselves single parents and show, through their own journeys, what is possible with the right support.



'It is my pleasure daily to interact, and support, and nudge people in the right direction – I have walked the walk.'

'I started as a student. I would never have believed back then that I would be a tutor; absolutely no way, I tell all students this. I love that I was a student here and that now I am a tutor.'

The consultation focused on discussing their understanding of community education; their approach, ethos, and values that they bring to their role, their views on the benefits and barriers that participants encounter, and their vision for the future of community education.

Terminology and unique features of community education

The tutors/facilitators noted that the distinctive features of community education are its inclusivity, accessibility, and flexibility to be participant led, offering a space for participants to feel safe and supported as they learn. The importance of wrap around support was highlighted, including access to childcare on site, one to one academic and digital support, and counselling. The opportunity to engage online or through blended learning is a recent and very significant development that has increased access.

The community emphasis is important, as is how it translates into practice in terms of being based in the community, listening, and responding to the needs of learners. The tutors/facilitators believe that the choice of terminology and language matters, and they pointed out that the term community can refer to communities of identity as well as geographical communities and localities.

'We work with the community for the community to include everyone in the community, to provide opportunities, and digital equity is important.'

In discussing the terminology, there were mixed views in that some of the tutors use the term community education and others use the term adult education in the course of their work. Tutors on the degree programme shared that they use the term community education all the time, and it is a core component built into the programme. It is about social justice and systems and structures that affect the lives of people in their community.

'We use the term community education all the time. It is built into the degree programme – we teach about community education on the degree. It is part of what we do. It is higher education being delivered in a community education setting, which is quite unusual.'



'Community education is education in the community for the community, led by the needs of the community; it is about transformational change; it is not just about the mature individual learner gaining a qualification and the impact that this has; it is about the impact on the children, the family, and the wider community and learning about the issues that they are facing; it is about the systems and structures that they are part of, and we use the term community education all the time.'

The tutors/facilitators drew attention to the person-centred nature of their community education work. It draws on the life experience of learners and brings this into the learning through discussion, journalling, and reflection. This is an important feature, particularly in responding to the different life experiences, including trauma, that participants bring into the classroom. This can be particularly pronounced for lone parents when the circumstances by which they became lone parents involved domestic violence or direct provision, for example.

Empathy and compassion, as well as skill and courage to work with what arises in the room, are key qualities necessary for community education tutors/facilitators. Staff are alert to and understand the lives of learners who have experienced trauma. They work to create a safe space where learners feel comfortable being open. One way this is created is through the open circle.

Other qualities that tutors/facilitators apply to their work include listening, facilitation, and counselling skills. The work can be challenging, and therefore, it is important to be resilient and role model resilience to learners. Being aware of boundaries and knowing how to work within them is vital for self-care. Continuous professional development is a necessary resource for tutors/facilitators, and many engage in CPD in their own time. Many are on contract and paid for tutor hours only, and in these instances, it can be challenging to engage in CPD¹⁰.

Impact

The tutors/facilitators believe, based on their experience, that the main benefit to lone parents participating in community education is that it is transformative. It impacts their lives in so many ways, including enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem, gaining more knowledge, skills, and qualifications, which open opportunities to progress to further education and employment. The shared experience and coming together through community education builds a support network for participants that lasts long after they have finished their studies. The fact that community education is community based and easily accessible online helps draw lone parents in. By participating in community education, lone parents are showing their children that education is important and possible. For some participants, the exposure and experience in the community education setting raises awareness of social issues and motivates an interest in community development and advocating for social change.

¹⁰ Since this research was conducted the Access and Further Education tutors have had CPD and Administration hours built into their contracts. An Cosán have also hosted free monthly Community Education related CPD sessions for tutors at all levels since September 2022. (2014)

Challenges

Several challenges were highlighted during the discussion, including continuing to advocate for lone parents and dismantling any negative perceptions or stigma that still surround lone parents. The evidence from the work of An Cosán is that lone parent's access, participate, and complete their community education, and the recent statistics show that all graduated.

Community education has the capacity to generate rich and useful data, mainly qualitative, and there is an opportunity to conduct more research to advance the practice, create, and innovate. Resources and funding are a challenge in this regard.

Childcare continues to be a challenge, even though online access has opened opportunities for participation in community education.

7. Overall Message

The overall message arising from this case study is the transformative power of community education in terms of the impact that it has on the lives of those who engage and advance on the journey. This includes a wide range of lone parents varying in age, background, and ethnicity, all coming together to participate in community education. The results indicate that many participants have lived through challenging life experiences and trauma, including addiction, homelessness, domestic violence, and war. They are attracted to community education through their trust in the reputation of An Cosán, the safety of the setting, access to childcare, one to one support, and options to learn online.

The effects of participation in community education can be seen across a range of policy domains, including social and digital inclusion, health and wellbeing, mental health, education, the labour market, and family support. Attention is drawn to the holistic nature of community education and its subtle power to draw people in and gently activate, inspire, and support personal development and progression. The small incremental building blocks matter and can have a huge impact on the lives of lone parents and their families in terms of mental health and progression to further and higher education and employment. The results indicate that community education can hold and steady people safely and productively on their pathway to further education and employment.

The power of the warm welcome, wraparound supports including digital and learning support, counselling, tutor qualities and dedication, and community development ethos is evident. The importance of childcare is a recurring theme.





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