

The Spirit Level or How I became a Literary Activist

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A Paper

Activism in adult education, as I understand it, is about trying to change things. In this paper I will show how a simple intervention in my own life led me towards a role as an adult educator where I became involved in a number of educational initiatives which brought about change. These ranged from the introduction of The Science National Curriculum in England and Wales; The Gifted and Talented Education initiative; the training of Teaching Assistants; and, most recently, the question of whether the Arts, specifically Literature, can improve our lives in the 'troubled world' of today.

In the book *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research* by Merrill and West (2009), the researcher, Penny Burke, is quoted describing how she has written herself into her book and says that she 'was drawn to the theories that resonate with my own experience' (2009: 111). I find this comment to be strikingly true of my own work as a teacher researcher in adult education. In the paper I will refer to how I taught the theory and practice of Primary Science and of 'giftedness' to teachers; and how as a WEA tutor, using theories like those of A.S. Neill in *Summerhill* (1923) I taught adults how to be teaching assistants.

I will then describe how working for the WEA I moved on to teaching Literature to adults. This is shown in the series of ESREA papers I have given over three years and has become a personal narrative journey such as Penny Burke describes. I will explain the further support I found for this approach in research studies such as *Adult Learning and La Recherche Feminine* by Elizabeth Hoult (2012).

We generally like the novels, poetry and plays which 'resonate with our own experience' and in my recent work as an adult teacher of the subject I have actively tried to engage students with the idea that reading does enhance and improve our lives both mentally and emotionally, contributing to our well-being. This is the *activism in a troubled world* aspect of the paper. Using the spirit level as a metaphor for my autobiographical and narrative journey, something encouraged by Merrill and West (2009: 96) I show how I searched for the good and beautiful

in my teaching. Drawing on references to *The Spirit Level* by Seamus Heaney, and both *The Spirit Level* and *The Inner Level* by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, I show that literature can give the educator a wide perspective in finding solutions to the problems of a troubled world, and can in effect enable them to become a *literary activist*. I explain this through the project, *Reading Can Enhance Your Life*, that I undertook with a group of WEA students in May this year and more recently with a project called *The Poetry of Climate Change*.

References:

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Wilkinson, R.G. and Pickett, K.E. (2018) *The Inner Level*, Allen Lane, UK