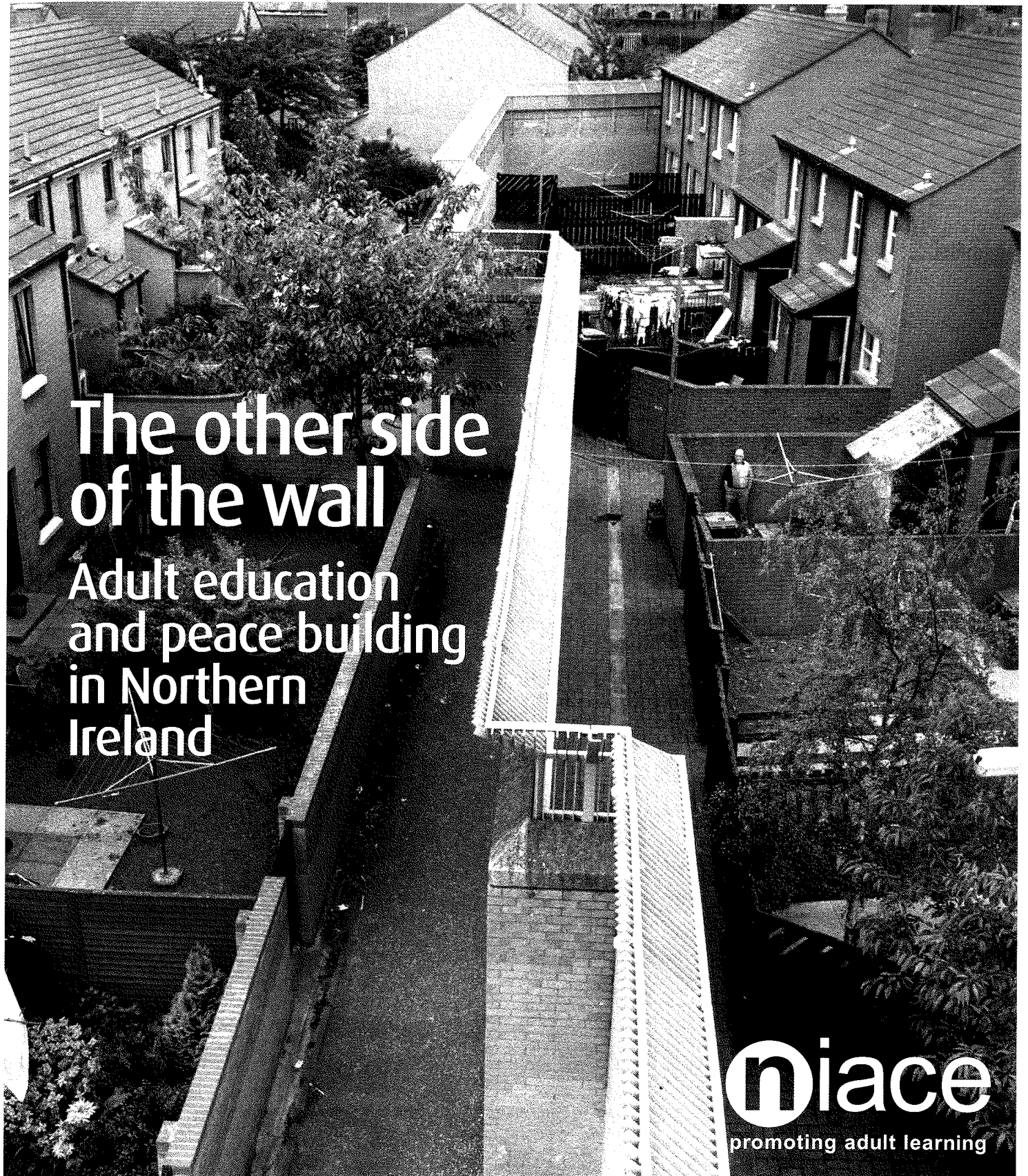


adults learning

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The other side of the wall

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and peace building
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Time to change: a participatory approach to inclusion

Hackney's Roma community is one of the most isolated in the borough, with few adults speaking English fluently or engaging with support organisations. A local authority adult learning project found that giving them the time and space to think about what they wanted to learn was critical in breaking down barriers. **ALICE ROBSON** explains

We want to learn to walk, then learn to run', a Roma learner told a meeting in Hackney in October 2011. The purpose of the meeting was to consult the Roma community on adult learning. The meeting was packed, with 14 Roma adults joining representatives of Hackney Homes, which manages council homes in the borough, the local authority's adult learning service and the Travellers Education Service to share their views on learning opportunities for Hackney's Roma community.

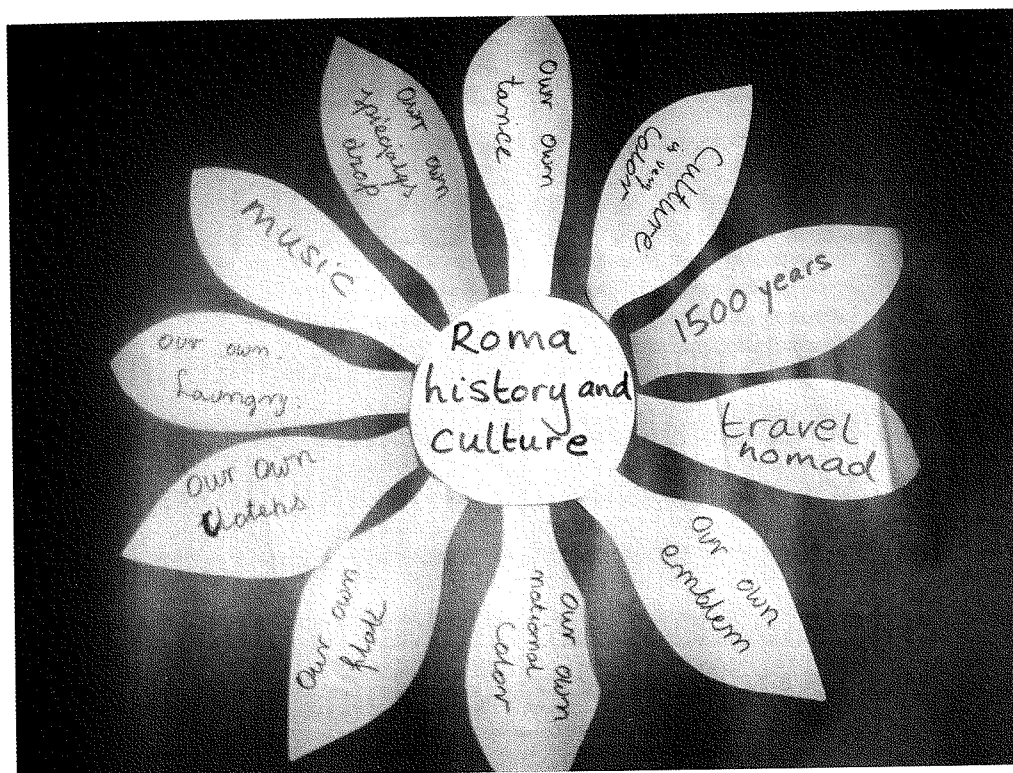
A few months earlier, advisory teachers from the Travellers Education Service had approached Hackney Council's Adult Learning Services about running some targeted provision to engage families from Hackney's Roma community. The advisory teachers had been working with an increasing number of Eastern European Roma pupils (currently 52 children aged 0–19) whose parents did not have English amongst their expert languages. Engaging parents and other adults in the community was seen as one way to build closer links with Roma families and help support their children's access to education, particularly at the early-years stage. The Travellers Education Service had existing links with Hackney Homes, who then had a dedicated Roma support worker. Some Roma residents had expressed an interest in improving their English, and the support worker felt this would help reduce the reliance they had on her for filling in forms and speaking to the council – all the more pressing as her contract was soon to end.

Adult Learning Services were keen to be involved. The service's ESOL team had begun a targeted course for adults from the borough's Yemeni Orthodox Jewish community the previous year and had seen the benefits of this approach for initial engagement. This had given us strategies for progressing learners from the

initial closed group to a mixed group which we could draw on with the Roma learners.

Most Roma people in Hackney are from Poland, with smaller numbers from Bulgaria and Romania. They speak Roma as well as their 'national' language. The Roma community here, as elsewhere, live in bricks and mortar accommodation rather than on sites. Travelling was banned in Poland in the 1960s and Roma people were forcibly settled. Of the eventual group, only one learner had travelled. Living in a house, rather than on a site, makes the Roma community less visible. As newer arrivals than Hackney's Irish Traveller community, and because many do not speak English, they do not yet have such close links with support and advocacy organisations in the borough. Alongside this, their experience of racism means that under-asccription is an issue, as people often say they are Polish, Bulgarian or Romanian rather than Roma.

From the start, it was agreed that the project would be designed with the learners, particularly pertinent given the role the state education system may play for them and the historically low status of their first language. At the focus group meeting, they were asked questions about previous learning and barriers they experienced, why they wanted to study English, what they wanted from a class, suitable times and other needs. This informed decisions such as the type of class (an adult-only ESOL class), the venue (a Hackney primary school where a third of the learners had children) and the days and time. They also wanted a Polish-speaking teacher. This wasn't possible, but we felt confident it would not prove an insurmountable barrier. They believed that once an initial group was set up, others would join, one attendee declaring that 'we are the bravest; we can help other people to



Material for display produced by learners from Hackney's Roma community

come'. When asked what their hopes were, another said that she wanted to make her Christmas wishes in English. We didn't quite manage that, but following initial assessment sessions, the class began in January 2012.

During the project, 12 learners accessed some form of adult learning. The age of the learners ranged from 19 to 62, and almost half were men. Most of them had been in the UK a number of years, having migrated here following discrimination in Poland – which, in all cases, meant difficulties in finding work, and, in some, included the experience of racist violence. A core group of six attended consistently and successfully completed the course (a RARPA-based Entry 1 ESOL class). A further six came for an initial assessment and were either referred to literacy provision, did not start the course, or attended for only a few sessions. Of the learners who completed the course, attendance was good, but retention was affected by ill-health or travel within the UK or back to Poland. The Roma support worker played an important role in the early stages in encouraging attendance.

Planning the curriculum

The most crucial area for learner involvement was in the planning of the curriculum itself. My interest in participatory curriculum development, initiated by reading Elsa Auerbach's *Making Meaning, Making Change* during my teacher training, had been deepened through my recent participation in a practitioner-research project, part of Action Aid's Reflect ESOL project. Reflect ESOL is an approach which adapts the pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire for the ESOL classroom, fusing it with techniques taken from Participatory Rural Appraisal projects in

international development. Reflect ESOL lessons start from learners' existing knowledge and experience, allowing critical reflection on the realities of their own lives and the contradictions within them, a process intertwined with language development. Action may follow these reflections.

The research project extended the use of the Reflect ESOL approach to the process of curriculum planning, providing alternatives to predetermined models of planning through capturing and developing themes and language emerging from learners. This kind of participatory approach, as Auerbach writes, 'demands a fundamental reconceptualization of curriculum development'. Instead of covering predetermined objectives taken from an externally defined body of knowledge, a 'collaborative investigation of what is important to students is at the heart of the instructional process'. This involves a shift in traditional roles, away

from the teacher as transmitter of skills and knowledge and the students as recipients, towards a more collective learning process. Following this approach, the scheme of work for the Roma ESOL course was not pre-set, but emerged over the course. After each session, I noted down emerging themes (topics which came up, whether during sessions, during informal chats at the start and ends of sessions or through concerns learners brought to the class), emerging language (language which learners needed to express their needs and opinions) and emerging action.

From the life and work of the great Roma poet Papusza (there was a particularly inspiring start to one lesson when one of the women in the group read us one of Papusza's poems) to discussion of the high levels of unemployment amongst Roma people in Poland, many sessions reflected the learners' interest in discussing the history and contemporary situation of Roma people. In other sessions, we worked on developing the language and skills to deal with situations they found challenging, such as getting a doctor's appointment at a suitable time and dealing with phone conversations with their children's schools. The scheme of work contained topics commonly found at Entry level 1 (such as health care, the local area, leaving phone messages) alongside those far less likely (such as fairs and markets, Roma music, Roma civil rights activism). Whilst I tried to be as responsive as possible to what was emerging from the group, I did not always plan from session to session. Drawing a hard contrast between a 'traditional' and 'participatory' approach is an oversimplification, and this programme, as others, involved sessions directly responding to language and themes from an earlier class as well as occasional blocks of sessions which were pre-planned. When health

emerged as a concern of the group, I taught a series of lessons on appointments, the chemists and understanding medicine instructions. This was both the result of my judgements about useful language for learners, and the need to ensure my own workload was manageable.

History and culture

During the course, I was approached to see whether the group could produce a display for the launch of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month in Hackney. We discussed as a group whether this was something we wanted to participate in. Despite learners' fears about their level of language and literacy, there was consensus that it was important for the history and culture of the Roma community (a community smaller and less well represented than the borough's Irish Traveller community) to be prominent at the launch. The weeks that followed involved much discussion about what they wanted to include in the display, generating ideas for writing, planning and drafting, revising work, writing final texts and selecting images to accompany the written work. Language and literacy development was woven into this process. This often went far beyond what the published curriculum expects of Entry 1 ESOL learners, including different past tenses, paragraphs, compound sentences and specialist vocabulary, and was not always predictable.

There has been much discussion among teachers using Freireian-inspired pedagogy about what constitutes 'action' (a crucial stage in Freire's educational process). Expecting discussions about, say, poor housing conditions to lead directly to learners' participation in housing campaigns outside the classroom, would lead to disappointment. Much 'action' that takes place is indirect, slow and may not be visible during the course of the programme. Changes to social relations within the classroom may be a very first step towards thinking about change beyond it, or indeed an important end in itself. Action may also take the form of individual changes that come about as the result of collective reflection in class. During the course, learners became more confident in expressing their opinions on the learning process, such as telling me what they wanted to learn, wanting a system for recording new vocabulary and choosing to draft work in their own language first. They gained in confidence inside and outside the classroom. This was captured in their comments during the end-of-course evaluation about how they felt at various stages of the course, which showed the move from 'little understand and stress' to 'now more understand', 'feeling good - can call doctor, make appointment, leave message for teacher' and 'no stress'.

Producing the display was also an action of sorts, as it involved learners acting to increase knowledge of their community among Hackney residents, and in them making collective decisions about how they wanted that community to be represented. (Indeed, I was reminded on more than one occasion that there were things that outsiders were not supposed to know!). All the learners attended the launch and talked to others about their display, highlighting this event as a landmark during the evaluation. Talking about their own lived experience meant that politics could not be left at the door – issues of racism, discrimination and immigration controls, ill-health as the result of working conditions and the

difficulties in getting a doctor's appointment were all discussed during the course.

The participatory approach had an impact on the learners' feeling of ownership over the course. This helped with recruitment – they felt they could invite others to 'their' course. The difference in approach between this course and their school experience was strongly felt. In the interview with the learners that formed part of the externally carried-out project evaluation (where they were supported by an interpreter) they commented that the class was relaxed, and that they did not feel there to be a barrier between them, as learners, and the teacher. They were pleased by their own progress, and commented that they felt it had helped them to use language in the contexts they needed it. He was impressed by their 'uncompromising sense of purpose' in approaching their learning. They are certainly more confident now in asserting their educational needs. Progression onto 'mainstream' ESOL courses was always a key aim of the project, and when they received their progression letters this September and wanted to change centre, the Travellers Education Service Co-ordinator and myself were met with a delegation of two learners who clearly articulated their views on our choices!

Partnership work

Another crucial element in the success of the programme was partnership work. There was a high degree of communication between Adult Learning Services, the Travellers Education Service and Hackney Homes during the setting up of the project, including a series of face-to-face meetings. Being able to draw on the expertise of advisory teachers in the Travellers Education Service, the experience they and the Roma support worker at Hackney Homes had in working with the community, and the relationships they had with the community, was hugely important. This helped us to build trust within the group. The loss of the Roma support worker in the first term removed one link with the community, which had been particularly important when learners stopped attending or when new learners showed an interest in the course. Though it has also seen a reduction in staffing levels, there has continued to be a close relationship with the Travellers Education Service. This has helped a great deal with our continued engagement with the community, as the teachers in the service have contact with many of the learners due to their work with their children. The relationship was symbiotic, with the Travellers Education Service Co-ordinator commenting that the course had helped change the views the parents had on the relevance of education.

Above all, the success – indeed the very existence of the project – illustrates the importance of time in adult education. Time to build and maintain partnerships; time to discuss ideas; time to listen to learners; time to plan in a responsive way; time to develop relevant materials; time for learners to develop language, without the pressure of an exam, until they are ready; time for learners' achievements to be recognised and celebrated. Spend time on the walking, and it seems the running follows.

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