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Participants As Texts: the critical consciousness development of informal learning facilitators

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by

Lee Matthew Rawlings

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Dedications

This thesis is dedicated to my family.

My twins, Ellis and Grace, and my wife Lisa. My parents who always have encouraged and supported me.

It is also dedicated to the people of Sanford and its informal learning groups.

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Thank you.

Abstract

In any meaningful form, critical literacy is absent in the neoliberal formal education system offered to the working class. This, at a time of austerity, growing inequalities, multiple news sources and fake news, is when critical literacy is needed the most. What this study set out to investigate are the possibilities of broader critical literacy learning in informal learning settings, in communities and public spaces, away from government intervention and prescriptive curriculums. As an ethnographic study, this thesis explores critical literacy learning amongst a range of informal learning groups from a northern working-class urban area known as Sanford and was conducted from September 2019 – until March 2020 (until Covid-19 intervened).

The key learning from this study is a previously unreported phenomenon in critical literacy research: the way people themselves may be read as texts. The thesis conceptualises the *Participants as Texts* (PAT) model demonstrating how this works in the context of informal learning. Here, facilitators of informal learning groups unconsciously read their group participants with results comparable to reading conventional text types, such as newspapers, posters, films in critical literacy education. This reading of participants exposes facilitators to hidden power inequalities they were previously unaware of, akin to critical literacy text reading in practice that disrupts the facilitators' worldview initiating the journey of critical consciousness development. The Participants as Texts Conceptual Model (PCM), developed within the thesis, details and explains this process, from the initial PAT reading onwards as learning thresholds and liminal spaces are navigated and transform how facilitators *read* and see the world.

This study also contributes to understanding how respite and solidarity play an important role within these groups situated in communities beset by austerity and spiralling inequality, as well as exploring the wider role they may have in the face of a changing adult education provision.

Keywords: "Critical Literacy" "Critical Consciousness" "Informal Learning Groups" "Communities" "Adult Learning"

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Chapter One – The Power of Our Lives

Introduction

In the context of 21st Century England, substantial evidence indicates formal learning has failed to provide the working class with adequate critical literacy education (National Literacy Trust, 2018a; Ashbridge et al., 2022). In the non-formal learning sector, there is a similar story, despite sporadic pockets of critical literacy education potential (and history) within Trade Union and Workers Education Association courses (Russell, 2010; Roy, 2016), both formal and non-formal education's utilitarian and prescriptive learning environments have largely become a 'financial sector' (Ball, 2012:27; Tuckett, 2017), creating 'compliant workers as opposed to exploring their emancipatory, political and aesthetic potential' (Zahid, 2021: para 2). This study therefore sidesteps these restrictive learning environments and instead investigates the potential for critical literacy education in the domain of informal learning groups typically beyond neoliberal education's grip of teaching to test, Ofsted pressures, curriculum expectancies and performative bureaucracy (Ball, 2010; Reay, 2017; Clarke et al., 2021). Thus, informal learning may provide an alternative setting where critical literacy manifests or even flourishes.

Informal Learning

Informal leaning is a broad spectrum that can occur in a whole manner of ways (Livingstone, 1991; McGivney, 1999), including planned learning activities as well as incidental and impromptu learning events (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). It can be seen as different to formal learning (for example education that takes place in schools, universities) and non-formal learning (for example education that takes place in adult and community education centres) (Werquin, 2010). Both formal and non-formal learning usually have curriculums, or a form of organised guidelines to follow and meet, whereas informal learning typically does not (Colley et al., 2002). However, there still can be forms of overlap and ambiguity between the types (Hodkinson et al., 2003; Ainsworth and Eaton, 2010; Czerkawski, 2016).

This study is interested in informal learning occurring in groups who meet regularly and face-to-face. This may allow for greater opportunities for critical literacy to prosper away from the tightly controlled learning spaces of formal and non-formal learning, occurring either in planned or unplanned aims and activities. Informal learning groups may offer working-class adults, in the face of an increasingly utilitarian driven education system (Tuckett, 2017), the opportunity to develop key critical literacy skills and resist the neoliberal hegemony that has power over their lives (Hall, 2011; Monbiot, 2016; Kochi, 2023).

Hegemony for the UK

Hegemony, a method used by the ruling class maintain domination with consent of the population (Gramsci, 1971), facilitates the power of neoliberalism, the dominant ideology in the UK (and beyond) since the 1970s (Soborski, 2018; Boyle et al. 2023; Kochi, 2023), although it can have different characteristics/localised variants in different countries (Hall, 2011). Surreptitiously, this power is typically hidden from view as the possession of those with influence is unknown and invisible to the majority, despite it pervading into all structures and mindsets of society. As Monbiot (2016) argues, 'its anonymity is both a symptom and cause of its power' and adds:

> *Imagine if the people of the Soviet Union had never heard of communism. The ideology that dominates our lives has, for most of us, no name. Mention it in conversation and you'll be rewarded with a shrug. Even if your listeners have heard the term before, they will struggle to define it. Neoliberalism: do you know what it is?*
> *(Monbiot, 2016: para 1)*

Gramsci's cultural hegemony theory (1971) offers a lens to view how neoliberalism uses consent and ideological persuasion to maintain and reproduce power. As Ledwith (2016: 71) argues, this involves convincing people of the naturalness of this power:

> Persuading people to *consent* to the dominant social order by embedding dominant attitudes and values in cultural institutions such as schools, the family, mass media, religious organisations and so on, involves a more subtle form of power that reaches inside our minds, convincing us to consent to life as it is, and unquestioningly slot into our prescribed place in the order of things (Ledwith, 2016:71).

Dominant attitudes become internalised and present as core common sense values, spread widely through public and private life (Harvey, 2007; Boyle, et al., 2023; Da Costa Vieira, 2023). For example, this 'common sense' can rationalise austerity as logical, simultaneously as vital services are reduced and people suffer (Alves de Matos and Pusceddu, 2021). Neoliberalism has had dire effects on education, epitomising Freire's (1970) framing of the process as the uncritical ‘banking’ of facts and teaching to test rather than a system of deep learning.

This study is set in an anonymised post-industrial urban area of northern England in 2019-2020, with the pseudonym of Sanford. Time was spent in a selection of Sanford’s working-class communities searching for informal learning groups and evidence of critical literacy education. The research area’s anonymity may also help this study from being determined as parochial or merely tied to local concerns only, as Sanford, an area suffering at the hands of neoliberalism, shares commonality with national and international urban centres of similar experience. For example, the societal problems emanating from austerity, which had a grave impact on Sanford, can juxtapose with similar areas and demographic types not just in England, but in Europe and beyond (Fishwick and Connolly, 2018), whilst also being mindful each will have its own unique history and context to add into the story. Neoliberalism manifests in Sanford in a range of policies such as deindustrialisation or austerity but its effects are not just limited to northern England, or Britain, its effects are present invariably across the global north (Gamble, 2009; Cepiku, et al., 2016; Kim and Warner, 2016; Davies 2017; Jimenez, 2019). The effects are seen in the decline of major job providing industries never replaced (Glaesner, 2011; Storber et al., 2015), in the pitting of the working class against each other (Moore and Forkert, 2014; Mondon and Winter, 2018), in the fatal cutting of funds to those public services already at the bone (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Wickham et al., 2020) and in the education system, that at best, can be viewed as flawed (Reay, 2017; Ali, 2019).

Life under the hidden flag of neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is the underpinning ideology shaping the political, economic and social dimensions of our lives (Monbiot, 2017; Rojo and Del Percio, 2019). Yet it is not foregrounded with a visible icon or flag, instead it has pervaded our minds and judgement - hidden away as simply a logic, a common sense (Hall and O’Shea, 2013). It is inherent and embedded into our everyday, both locally and globally (Ban, 2019; Rojo and Del Percio, 2019). As Metcalf (2017) argues:

> *In short, “neoliberalism” is not simply a name for pro-market policies, or for the compromises with finance capitalism made by failing social democratic parties. It is a name for a premise that, quietly, has come to regulate all we practice and believe: that competition is the only legitimate organising principle for human activity.*

Since 2010, the neoliberal response to the global financial crisis was the pursuant of austerity, causing significant impacts upon those most reliant on public services: working-class communities (Emejulu, 2016; Alston, 2018; Gray and Barford, 2018; Hitchen, 2019). Austerity policies, from 2010-2019, not only had an adverse effect on communities financially but with cuts to various services and provisions, there was a significant impact reported upon mental health, home life and essentially upon the entire fabric of the family and community (McKee, 2012; Alston, 2018; Cummins, 2018). These had manifold effects from rises in reported depression in adults (Alston, 2018; Cummins, 2018) to as stark as an increasing infant mortality rate and a declining life expectancy during 2010-2019 (Dorling, 2018; Alston, 2018).

Sanford is a northern, post-industrial, predominantly working-class urban area of England that has, as an entire area, experienced years of significant 'othering' from the media (Skeggs, 2004) – othering referring to the process of alienating groups that differ from the normative view and othering acts to reinforce the hegemonic structures (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1997). This shaming of the working class is a common feature of neoliberalism internationally (Open Society Foundation, 2014; Dunn, 2019) where framing peoples and places through stereotypes and portraying them as morally inferior serves to alienate them (Hall, 1997; Skeggs, 2012). Alienation, resulting from neoliberalism, offers a powerful explanation of the exploitative and divisive pitting of different factions of the working class against each other (Harvey, 2014). Migrants are scapegoated as 'job stealers' thus distracting the public from discussions of rapid deindustrialisation, gentrification or other economic processes that decimated such working-class communities (Lees and White, 2020). Power relies upon such division to rule (Alder and Wang, 2022) as 'solidarity between the British working class and immigrant workers would be an intimidation too great for the establishment' (Moore and Forkert, 2014). The hegemonic powers respond by seeking to erode working-class solidarity with strategies such as contrived and ongoing culture wars (McNeill, and Harding, 2021) and the attempted weaponisation of the white working class by the right (Treloar, 2021).

Sanford is an urban area bearing similarity to many other national and international areas devastated by neoliberal ideology - hence why this study can contribute to both a national and an international discourse. Like Sanford, other settings have experienced negative changes in how people live, how they work, and how they interact with each other (Monbiot, 2016). It has felt the dehumanising of its subjects with human requirements being calculated on a spreadsheet of efficiencies (Krásná, and Deva; 2019). As people transform into customers with the marketisation of public life wedded to a fallacy of a meritocratic reward system (Reay, 2020). This means those who try, fail, and some of those who ‘succeed’, are still subject to trauma, leading to depression, loneliness, anxiety, suicide and so on (Verhaeghe, 2014). A further means of the wider alienation from neoliberalism’s economic and societal places and spaces is pacification, as Kalekin-Fishman and Langman (2015: 919) describe a:

> …standardized escapist entertainment that can be seen as our social lives online, binge watching TV, gaming and all media that ‘keeps them deceived, distracted and powerless either to understand their lives or to mobilize for progressive change.

These are not just symptoms of an English variant of neoliberalism’s hegemony (Hall, 2011), its traces can be found from Sanford to across the global north as neoliberal policies dismantle communities and vital services with dire human consequences; here Giroux (2015: 1) describes an alignment in North America:

> Along with health care, public transportation, Medicare, food stamp programs for low-income children, and a host of other social protections, public goods and social provisions are being defunded or slashed as part of a larger scheme to dismantle and privatize all public services, goods and spheres.

Therefore, in places like Sanford – these unknowing vassals of the veiled neoliberal empire – analysis of everyday life demonstrates the existence of the neoliberal hegemony (Hall, 2011). Neoliberalism is inherent everywhere: education, medical care, local government and more (Monbiot, 2016). It is the seemingly logical explanation that crept into the public consciousness, both consenting with and internalising the oppressors (Freire, 1970). Neoliberalism’s market logic provides common sense and unconscious justifications for financial efficiencies over basic human needs (Harvey, 2007).

The English education system, legislated as a space free from discrimination (Equality Act, 2010), actively sidesteps the issue of discrimination towards the working class (Reay, 2012). Critiquing education, particularly literacy education (Berman, 1999; Shannon, 2002), also helps understand existing (often strained) relationships settled working-class groups have with education. This echoes Illich’s (1971) ‘hidden curriculum’ in schools that do not teach pupils to question what they see, hear and read, it teaches them how to recount facts and ‘crush pupils into accepting the interests of the powerful’ (Illich, 1971: 4). This is where ‘children know their place and sit still in it’ (Giddens, 2009: 837) as it is really the hidden part of curriculum being taught (Giroux, 1978). This hidden curriculum implicitly reinforces social class and inequality as pupils internalise normative structures and attitudes, for example as they classify and rank themselves against other pupils through test scores or other perceived abilities (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Reay, 2018).

Critical literacy: understanding and resisting the injustices of neoliberalism

Education in England is polarised between the classes (Reay, 2017). The banking of facts in state school children (Freire, 1970; Ball, 2012; Reay, 2017) are measured by high stakes testing (Stevenson and Wood, 2014; Reay, 2017). This being of increased detriment to working-class children in state schools who typically do not have access to the wider learning opportunities more affluent middle-class children often have (Reay, 2018). Creative subjects, such as art or music, are typically side lined or absent all together, as provision has utilitarian and functional goals (Tuckett, 2017; Reay, 2017). This schooling prepares the recipient for work, and consequently does not support the development of critical thinking as critical literacy is not sufficiently present in education accessed by the working class (National Literacy Trust, 2018a; Ashbridge et al. 2022).

The absence of critical literacy in England's schools is acknowledged in a recent study wherein 55% of teachers believe the national curriculum does not provide children with the necessary critical literacy skills (National Literacy Trust, 2018b:8). Additionally, around a quarter suggested the critical literacy skills developed in school are crucially not 'transferable to the real world' (p.6). Furthermore, as the Department for Education seeks to prevent critique of the capitalist system in its schools, then how could critical literacy '…informed by notions of critique, resistance and democratic participation – operate within these parameters?' (Ashbridge et al., 2022:1).

Critical literacy is practiced, in many forms, across the world with its differences partially shaped by the prevailing localised injustice (Giroux, 1983; Shannon, 1995; Apple, 1999; Luke, 2000; Janks, 2000; Comber, 2001; Lewison et al., 2002; Johnson, 2020; Nam, 2022). However, injustice and inequality have commonalties and shared experiences (Krauss et al., 2017). For instance, marginalised groups under neoliberalism across the global north together endure common and numerous structural inequalities (Koechlin, 2013; Ahlberg et al., 2019). Neoliberalism is a major cause of Sanford's problems today, and similarly is the case for the working classes of other westernised countries, such as Greece, or Spain for example (Verde-Diego et al., 2021). Critical literacy education thus supports the development of an individual's critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) to understand the world in which they live including its injustices. As Freire (1985: 19) noted: 'I always say to the students with whom I work: "Reading is not walking on the words; it's grasping the soul of them". The individual is supported in learning how to critically evaluate, analyse and reflect through the analysis of texts (Buckingham, 2007). A text, in this study, has a broad definition (Kress, 2003). It can be considered anything conveying a message. For example, a film could be a text (Fiske, 1987; Fairclough, 2003), as also could a social media message or a computer game (Kress and van Leeuwun, 2001). Critical literacy develops an individual's skills to reflect, evaluate and question texts for subtle and hidden meanings (Freire and Faundez, 1989). Its aim is to develop their own capability for critical judgement (Giroux, 2004) to not only reveal injustice but to collectively take action to fight it D(Freire, 1970).

Adult and community education, a potential agent in the means of resisting neoliberalism's systematic 'institutional violence' (Cooper and Whyte, 2017), has also suffered drastic public sector cut (IFS, 2018). Consequently, the means to support working-class communities has been seriously undermined by adult and community education's diminished presence, combined with its remaining funding dependent upon meeting utilitarian outcomes and targets (Bowl, 2017; Tuckett, 2017; Duckworth and Smith, 2019). Furthermore, the increasingly employment-focussed adult education courses can be problematic (Zahid, 2021), awash with 'coercive pressures' isolating creativity and measures the learner against 'criteria they have no chance of affecting' (Brookfield, 2010: 100). The void left by a contracted adult and community education further emphasises the need for informal learning groups to fill community spaces. Groups who are free to harness critical practices, such as critical literacy education, and can therefore build community resistance and solidarity. In this context, where critical literacy is arguably ever more important (Roberts, 2017), this study therefore examines informal learning groups' potential as sites of critical literacy education, solidarity and resistance. Importantly, it explores how they can provide a place for respite whilst celebrating positive working-class culture traits including humour and hope (Skeggs, 1997; Sveinsson, 2009; McKenzie, 2015) to challenge the external and internal 'othering' of the working class, rejecting the media caricatures painting them as stupid and xenophobic (Tyler, 2013).

Cultivating the individuals' ability to learn how to question (Freire and Faundez, 1989) is especially important in the face of an unsettled society accessing and drawing its news and beliefs from multiple, sometimes conflicting sources (Holbert et al., 2010; Hmielowski, 2012; Gelfert, 2018), exacerbated further through the added confusion of fake news impersonating ‘real’ news (Busselle and Greenberg, 2000; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2021). The growing use of internet-based news and information leads to a degradation of political literacy with instant access to social media sources leading to individuals losing (or never finding) the ability of critical thought (Coeckelbergh, 2012; Frischmann,and Selinger, 2018). Social media presents the echo chamber or the so-called ‘bubble world’ of ‘algorithms selecting news sources simply reinforcing existing prejudices thus compromising the capacity for moral thinking’ (Peters, 2017: 564). Examples of this are manifold, such as climate change denial spread through social media and other sources opposing scientific consensus (Benegal and Scruggs, 2018; Treen et al., 2020), or the pseudo-science disinformation spread of Covid-19 and its vaccines is another example how fake news stories can gain momentum (Dillon and Avraamidou, 2020; Puig et al., 2021). Limiting the development of critical thought strengthens neoliberalism’s hegemony as it limits questioning and critical voices.

Critical literacy and critical consciousness development

As the formal education system does not provide a basis for developing critical literacy skills, and non-formal education has been restructured to focus on vocational, utilitarian requirements, this study explores the domain of informal learning for its potential to engage in critical literacy education. It examines the role informal learning groups can play in the development of a critical mindset (Giroux, 2004), or developing a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Raising a person’s critical consciousness[1] (or to become conscientised) is the designated goal of critical literacy: providing the individual with ‘the ability to intervene in reality in order to change it’ (Freire, 2005:4) However, the current education system in England acts against this as Freire (1970: 54) explicates:

> The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.

Therefore, with a developed critical consciousness, an individual can *read the world* (Freire and Macedo, 1987). In the case of this study, for instance, an individual may be unaware of the interconnected and hidden mechanisms of neoliberal hegemony (Hall, 2011): including hidden agendas, internalised oppression, structural inequality and so forth (Freire, 1970; Gramsci, 1971). Through developing critical consciousness, these hidden mechanisms are revealed with the imperative to take action, typically collective action, to readdress power imbalances and change the world around you (Freire, 1970; Ozer et al., 2013).

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[1] Some sources use the term critical awareness instead of critical consciousness, or use both interchangeably (Shin et al., 2016). This study prefers critical consciousness but may cite sources that use the term critical awareness but with the same meaning as critical consciousness.

Various scales have since conceptualised critical consciousness changes, following Freire's (1970) work. New frameworks for measuring critical consciousness have used quantitative methods to create specific scales and progressions to define a person's levels of consciousness, and have been particularly prominent within the past decade, with works from Diemer et al. (2014), Thomas et al. (2014) and Shin et al. (2016). Rather than add to this 'scaled' literature by building directly upon it, this thesis explores critical consciousness development by presenting its own conceptual framework that utilises threshold theories from learning theory (Meyer and Land, 2005) to understand the potentially dynamic qualities and processes of critical consciousness development.

In learning there is a starting point, and as the individual learns, they cross from this starting point into the next threshold of the learning process (Turner, 1969; Meyer and Land, 2003). The part in between thresholds is the liminal space. This space is where transformation occurs before the next threshold is met and where critical literacy learning occurs (Schwartzman, 2010). This space can be dynamic as new learning begins to be integrated and transformative. But it can also be a space of uncertainty: feelings of unworthiness, confusion and doubt (Horvath et al., 2009). It can be a place where learning falters and emotions, such as anxiety, run high (Cousin, 2006) as the individual feels uncertain, lost or in limbo (Bamber et al., 2017). For the individual to progress, the learner must navigate this space onto the next threshold, or not reach the next stage in the learning journey (Irving et al., 2019).

The working class could be perceived as being in a permanent liminal state (Szakolczai, 2000, 2014; Thomassen, 2012; Johnsen and Sorensen, 2014), trapped by neoliberal hegemonic structures holding power over social and economic life (Hall, 2011; Monbiot, 2016) in a void of instability and 'stuckness' (Nolan, 2005). Here they are confined by a dominant ideology. An ideology legitimising itself through the consent of its victims (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1980) and reproducing through the dissemination of fallacious concepts, such as meritocracy, designed to masquerade as fair and logical (Hall, 1960; Witt, 2019).

Fallacies and untruths become the norm, the 'common sense view' (Gramsci, 1971) and in turn uphold the hegemony (Crozier, 2018; Lawler and Payne, 2018; Reay, 2021). Here is where this study is located. However, before moving on to explicitly outlining the aims and research questions for this study, it is important to outline one more important contextual dimension for this thesis: my own personal rationale and motivation for the study.

Personal rationale for this study

My personal motivation and interest for this study draws from a series of life experiences, particularly my previous employment which provided the inspiration and ideas behind this research.

I worked in Adult and Community Education for around ten years in three different northern urban areas, largely supporting adults from under-served and marginalised communities, from both migrant and settled backgrounds. This provided a great insight into the damage the English education system, austerity and neoliberalism had caused in individuals and communities. What was most striking initially, was experiencing the learners' general lack of awareness of the oppression they face. This was a result of these learners internalising their oppression (Freire, 1970), embodied as a normative common-sense value they would have first learnt in their schooling (Harvey, 2007; Hall, 2011). As Bourdieu explains, they took their oppression for granted (Burawoy, 2019). This oppression or 'symbolic violence' as Bourdieu termed 'is the gentle hidden form which violence takes when overt violence is impossible' (1977:196). This symbolic violence is present in society's structures, and notably here: the education system which relates to the earlier discussion on hidden curriculums.

Disenfranchisement with education amongst those adults I encountered, who were educated in England, was normal. This also strongly echoed my own experiences as somebody from a working-class background who had left school at age 16 with only one GCSE. Commonalities could be found in their accounts of school experiences as elements of a shared working-class lived experience was apparent, from place to place. Most of the adults had contempt for their school experience, it was not for them, and many did not gain qualifications but still found work after leaving school albeit often without the chance to truly realise their creative potential. This is not unusual as many working-class children are typically written-off as 'low attaining' rather than 'underachieving' and are far less likely to achieve national benchmarks than their middle-class peers (Babb, 2005). This is a normalised notion within education and society (Dunne and Gazeley, 2008) as the education system prepares them 'for a life of temporary, dead end, underpaid, undignified and menial jobs' (McLaren, 2015: 116). Of course, there are exceptions to this as the working class is not a homogenous group and several do succeed in education despite the structural inequalities they face. Examples of success are often held up as showing an unproblematic meritocratic system that works (Reay, 2021). However, with the adults I worked with, they tended to attend the courses because their current qualifications were below GCSE level. Commonly, they internalised negative labels, consequently perceiving themselves as 'stupid' or as an educational failure, typically stemming from their experiences and 'low attainment' within formal education and school. I had experienced similar feelings at different points in my own educational journey. Despite this being a failure of the system, they, like I, generally placed the onus on themselves, that it was their fault, they had not worked hard enough or had wasted the opportunity to better themselves (Bourdieu et al., 2000; Gale and Densmore, 2000; Reay, 2006; Gorski, 2016). Occasionally lamenting this missed opportunity on 'their' part but accepted this as the natural order of life and common sense (Hall, 1983) – they were not meant to be successful at school (Blanden and Gibbons, 2006). This was an astute analysis and should instigate outrage, instead it confirmed their innate assumptions, what they were taught to embody in the hidden curriculum (Illich, 1971; Giroux, 1978) – they were not meant to 'do well' at school and they had a pre-determined place within school and society - reminiscent of Willis's seminal work '*Learning to Labour'* (1977).

During election periods, party politics would be discussed openly. Many would not vote, for a variety of reasons, but those who did, would typically declare support for the mainstream parties. Contrary to popular portrayals of working-class people, only a very small minority of working-class adults I worked with, argued for populist parties and their nationalist rhetoric (Mondon and Winter, 2018). However, a lack of developed critical literacy skills clearly impacted on the adults' lives. This was evident in their decision making but striking in how they would accept injustice uncritically; vulnerable to spin, diversions and unqualified stories (Zannettou et al., 2018; Vidgen et al., 2021). Inadvertently reproducing the normative voice and its power base (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1983).

As a teacher in adult education, I witnessed the sector change with funding contractions and stipulations (Tuckett, 2017). For political and existential reasons, the sector became dedicated to a heavier focus in delivering English, maths, and employment skills. Meeting new funding needs reduced the opportunity I partially had previously - to facilitate the opportunity to explore critical literacy skills through dialogue and debate contextualised to the learners' lives. During this time, I worked as a Family Learning Tutor, which offered the opportunity to potentially reach multiple generations as I worked with parents, grandparents and carers in working-class communities. Thus, I felt improving their critical literacy could impact positively on their children, but time to do this waned with funding and accreditation demands absorbed most of the opportunities to explore these avenues.

As I have alluded to above, I am of the belief that my own working-class background and experiences with the education system sensitised me to the experiences of those I taught. Furthermore, the injuries the adults had from their schooling (Sennett and Cobb, 1973), I also bore, manifesting in imposter syndrome when I attended university and this continued into teaching in adult education, and continuing now into my burgeoning career in academia (Crew, 2020). Feelings of not being a ‘real teacher’, or that I would be unmasked as a fraud, were constant fears throughout my teaching, and persist today, although I was not alone with these thoughts. Discussions with working-class female colleagues provided solidarity and a chance to rationalise, as they reported imposter syndrome doubts too, but additionally they experienced classed microaggressions from students and staff that as a male teacher I seemed to avoid (Crew, 2020).

These experiences therefore led me to reflect on my own history. My own educational experience was probably typical of many of my peers from a post-industrial city and a working-class background in the 1980s and 1990s. I attended a secondary comprehensive school in an area that has multiple indicators of deprivation and is surrounded by areas of similar poverty and attended by children predominantly from these areas. Upon leaving this school, I was part of a peer group of underachievement with less than 10% of the year cohort meeting the expected national GCSE standards corroborating many of our teachers’ expectations of being destined ‘for a life of temporary, dead end, underpaid, undignified and menial jobs’ (McLaren, 2015: 116). Whilst initially ‘doing well’ at primary school evidenced by my placement in the top sets, this did not continue into my secondary schooling. On reflection, my five years at secondary school were one of an almost unconscious disengagement with formal education itself, akin to sleepwalking through the time without much idea or control of a destination in terms of future prospects or attainment of any kind. Informally, I was however still being educated on my own terms, by books, magazines, film, music, history and innocent visions of an exotic outside world (largely through the lens of history, music and football).

My disengagement from education did not take on any form of active rebellion, not in the typical sense. It was an unconscious indifference to what was happening to me and the result of it, thinking back, was akin to a passive self-exclusion. The teachers themselves were seemingly mixed in attitude towards the children, many displaying indifference and to the job whereas others seemed to genuinely try to relate to the children’s background and provide a meaningful learning experience. Others displayed an open contempt which manifested in hostility, verbal and physical (I recall being prodded in the chest and saw others grabbed by the neck). There was an apathy perhaps stemming from an entrenched belief the children at the school were those working-class children who should expect low attainment and when they did, that was normality and there would be no recourse (Reay, 2017). Consequently, the bar was often set very low. I recall one teacher, in the build up to a modular GCSE exam, explaining that the class should aim for a particular target mark, as this mark was deemed ‘good’. Latterly it transpired this mark was equivalent to the old GCSE grade D/E. Low expectancy was inbuilt into the school, from being told ‘we’d never amount to anything’ (on more than one occasion by different teachers both calmly and in anger), to the ‘let’s face it, no one in this room will ever be famous’ with not a trace of the loaded class-based microaggression. I also recall one teacher, pre the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, gleefully telling the class that as soon at the Belgian and the German workers can freely come here, all whom are ‘educated’ and ‘work hard’ – unlike us, then we would have little chance of work. I left school with just one GCSE above the nationally agreed benchmark constituting a ‘pass’.

A turning point in terms of my own education was full-time employment, starting on Youth Training – YT at the age of 17 in 1994. I had completed GCSE resits and passed English and maths at Grade C at the local college but then stumbled into a YT scheme where I was quickly placed in an office-based administration and sales role in a mechanical engineering company. I completed vocational qualifications during a day-release and was soon taken on by the company full-time, even earning a pay rise to earn £6,000 per annum in 1995/1996. However, this job was a key part in beginning to understand how the world and society worked. Reflecting, my place of work felt steeped in a classic workplace class divide: the ‘them and us’ between the white collar workers (upstairs) and blue collar workers (downstairs) and this fascinated me as I tried to position myself between the two (I was a white collar worker). The blue collar workers largely came from cultures and backgrounds more aligned to my own, but the white collar workers, my immediate colleagues, who were typically skilled middle-class draughtsmen and mechanical heating engineers, were the ones who had a greater say on my destiny and in terms of a pleasant working-experience, my working day. There were suspicions of each from each group, however, identifying in many respects with the blue collar workers, I also recognised that I would never be fully accepted even with my junior position, as I sat upstairs with management and the engineers, wore formal clothing to work and importantly, rightly or wrongly, was seen as part of the decision making process that both provided them with work but also policed them, and policed them unjustly at times.

As I began to understand some of these dynamics and social interactions, the Conservative government of John Major was entering its final years. I, a person who took an interest in current affairs since childhood, felt apolitical in many respects and did not connect this government with my own life and how their decisions would impact upon me. My school very much practiced banking methods of education (to extremes as many lessons were copying from textbooks or the blackboard) (Freire, 1970) and perhaps unsurprisingly there was no critical literacy education, or any form of problem based learning to develop a questioning minds (questions in fact, were often perceived as trouble causing). Looking back, I saw some of the effects of neoliberal policies first hand with the privatisation of public services in the 1980s, and even how they had disrupted the families of friends at the time, but still never made the genuine connection. However, as my own cultural interests had begun to transform, chiefly through a growing interest in music, books and film, I began to feel a growing engagement with critiques on social history, politics and other social practices. This, as well as a desire to escape the cut-throat world of the private sector, led me to attend further education after being made redundant. I undertook three A-levels (all taken in one year) as a passport to getting to university. University was a mysterious place as this had never been discussed at school and I did not have any family members who had attended higher education. I recall whilst I was employed, a friend told me he was going to university. Why would you want to do that – was my first response. The idea seemed alien. Thinking back, I attribute my change in attitude towards attending university for two main reasons, firstly, as mentioned, experiences from friends who attended university and who relayed such a positive experience of it and secondly a growing interest in culture led me to areas that attending a higher education institution would give me a greater access to.

I attended university, away from home for the first time, to study history in 1997 when I was 20 years old. Notably, within the discipline of history, the importance of evaluating and understanding competing sources of information was also a perfect foundation for interest a study in critical literacy education as this is the premise of historical studies. Early in the degree, a lecturer described a fictitious bar fight with 20 witnesses. Each witness would have a different view and give a different (even if slight) account, each account affected by viewpoints, preconceptions, what they actually saw, biases, prejudices, how they view this or that etc. ‘Which version is the truth?’ he asked. This summing up the work of a historian started my own process of trying to understand the multiple viewpoints possible from multiple witnesses regarding one action (Mack, 2010). It made me question the concept of truth, it made me look for the position of a source, it made me question government and society, read between the lines and beneath the surface, and through uncovering positionality and bias within historical texts, I begin to realise that these skills were a necessity in understanding contemporary life as well as understanding my past, and my future. This was an important realisation and a stark parallel to my generic unawareness at school. University also provided me with a vast and interesting library to seek out the books my developing sense of cultural identity needed, as it contained texts I wanted to read but had no previous access to.

My history, including qualifying as an adult education teacher in 2008 and the consequent work within the community, as outlined, is important to note in understanding my positionality that underpins the ways in which I approached my research (see Chapter Five). I worked adult education role for circa ten years, only leaving to undertake full-time PhD study, resulting in this thesis.

Research aims and questions

This ethnographic study began with the aim of exploring the potential for critical literacy education within informal learning groups. I spent a total of six months in the field (curtailed by Covid-19, but partially continued online on a very limited scale – see Chapter Five for details) conducting fieldwork such as visiting and spending time in communities and community meeting spaces; interviews with informal learning groups facilitators, group observations, facilitating a focus group and other forms of networking and snowballing. These were carried out to explore the main research aim:

> To investigate if informal learning groups in northern, post-industrial urban areas have the potential for providing critical literacy education and what the effect of this might be.

Common themes became apparent in the early gathering and preliminary analysis of the data. As I began initially engaging and interviewing facilitators of groups, it became clear critical literacy education activities were taking place in informal learning groups. These included planned activities, such as reviewing and discussing a book; others were incidental or impromptu activities where, typically, neither the facilitator nor the group participants realised they were undertaking critical literacy activities. For example, one facilitator recalled during a gardening activity, the participants began discussing a political programme, and deconstructed one of the politician’s phrases. Significantly, in the early stages of the ethnography, I had an introductory meeting with facilitators from *Share and Read* (a project facilitating informal learning groups based around sharing poems and stories). As I was looking to recruit for the study, I met them, explaining the study's aims, and the concept of critical literacy. However, discussing the concept of critical literacy seemed to provoke a considerable reaction in some of the facilitators, as if they were experiencing a revelation at that moment. I recorded in my fieldnotes of their shock and discovery. Three of them spoke of undergoing changes in their worldview since undertaking the project. They reported they were now more sensitive to certain political and social issues and had a heightened social and political awareness. The reason they all identified for this individual change was their interactions with the participants of *Share and Read.* Participants were usually from marginalised groups who faced many challenges and barriers.

This was a finding I was not anticipating. But, as I interviewed and held other informal discussions with facilitators, I received, recorded and logged examples of how their interactions with participants, who were often from marginalised communities, had had a tangible effect on them and had even started a change in how they saw the world - echoing Freire (1970). A commonality was how this was being done – inadvertently (they had not set out to do this). This theme changed my discussion with participants, the questions and increased the time focussed on the facilitators' own development. This was the early developments of this study's original conceptual work: the participants as texts (PAT) model - which is fully presented and discussed in Chapter Eight. In typical critical literacy education activities, texts such as books or newspapers are used to delve beneath the surface and find hidden meanings. But in this case, inadvertently and unbeknown to the facilitators as it may have been, they were undertaking a form of critical literacy education with their 'readings' of the participants – hence participants became the text. The challenges and structural inequalities many participants were facing in their daily lives combined with their views and perceptions of their own reality, seemed to provide a rich text for the facilitators to unconsciously read, as one of the facilitators (Sarah from *Share and Read*) explained after interacting with informal learning groups participants: 'I'm a different person to the person I was before'.

Due to its significance and coming directly from the participants themselves, the participants being read as texts by the facilitators became the main focus of the research. As there was evidence of other critical literacy education benefitting the group participants, it remained a key area of the research. The communities of Sanford had been beset by austerity and had seen services, such as adult education, disappear as well as closures to other spaces where the community would meet. Yet, in early discussions, these informal learning groups were often being talked of as sites of resistance to the alienation and isolation caused by neoliberalism.

The research questions were refined and narrowed to reflect the impact of the significant early findings. This thesis therefore focuses specifically on the main research question as follows:

- How might informal learning group facilitators' critical consciousness develop through interactions with group participants?

The sub research questions are:

- What forms of critical literacy education occur in informal learning groups and what are their effects?

- What forms of resistance to the consequences of neoliberalism can be found in informal learning groups?

- Can informal learning groups fill the gaps left by adult and community education?

Thesis Contents/ Chapter Overview

This opening chapter presents the introduction to the thesis, briefly summarising its contents and explaining its intended purpose. In doing so it directly provides a gateway to initially understanding the issues tackled with the study, as well those entrenched in the research area, setting the multi layered scenario of the thesis. It also introduces the key themes/theories/concerns of the study, such as what critical literacy education is, and what constitutes as an informal learning group, and importantly, how they are used in, and how they relate to, this study.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, is a contextual chapter. This sets the scene of the study through discussion based around a range of sources: policy documents, online media, literature and reports. It includes discussion about the state of the working class in late 2010s England and the research area – whilst preserving anonymity.

Chapter Three is a critical review of the literature. Essentially, whilst it presents the current academic literature on areas at the heart of this study, it foregrounds key texts from the 20th

Century as their influence on field is still considerable. It also addresses what critical literacy is and its relationship with other areas of the critical family. It will establish critical literacy can be practiced in many ways, as it does within this study. It will also discuss the literature around threshold concepts – which is another key theory to this study in understanding the critical consciousness development of the informal learning group facilitators.

Chapter Four examines case studies from around the world of critical literacy related practices and models. This literature is also used here to position the thesis' query as both of national and international significance. This will be emphasised by looking at critical literacy education in international case studies, with examples from North America, Australia and South Africa.

Chapter Five sets out the methodology and methods utilised in this study. It addresses ontology, epistemology, explains methods used and why, such as snowballing methods when trying to gain access to communities. This chapter will also address my positionality as applied to the research and ethical considerations at the forefront of the research. The chapter also details the project's adherence to the University of Hull's protocols for ethical research and guidelines offered more broadly for educational researchers (BERA, 2018).

Chapters Six and Seven present the findings of the thesis. Split into two chapters which each address two of the four themes. Both commentary and analytical insights accompany the data. Chapter Six looks at the main theme of: 'Reading the participants as 'texts' – the raising of the facilitators' critical consciousness and related reflections'; and 'Critical literacy education and learning within informal learning settings'. The first theme introduces the key conceptualisation of this research: reading participants as texts (PAT). Within this chapter, the study participants explain the changes they experienced through reading PAT and the difference it has made in how they see the world.

Chapter Seven discusses the themes:' Respite and solidarity'; and 'Broken system and the decline of adult and community learning'. This chapter explores the forms of resistance informal learning groups offer against austerity where key services have been cut and isolation and alienation has been experienced by the communities. The facilitators also give their thoughts on the state of the education system and if informal learning could fill the void in adult learning adult education left.

Chapter Eight offers discussion and analysis of the main research question. In this chapter I argue informal learning group facilitators inadvertently read the PAT which forms part of the initial process of the development of a critical consciousness. The chapter presents original conceptual models that form part of the study’s contribution to knowledge in these fields, which include the Participants as Texts (PAT) model and the Participants as Texts Conceptual Model (PCM) which shows the facilitators’ journeys through their critical consciousness development.

Chapter Nine, the final chapter, offers concluding remarks. It summarises and reviews the arguments at the very heart of the research through answering the research questions. The chapter also identifies areas to expand and build upon this research.

Chapter Two – The working class and austerity: the national picture of the late 2010s and snapshots of Sanford

Introduction

This chapter will set the scene for the study, addressing the situation in Sanford at the time of the research period (2019-2020). The country had experienced nine years of austerity with damning effects and this chapter, through using a range of sources, will set out both the national and local picture.

Working-class Britain is broken

At the tumultuous time this research took place (2019-2020), literature was recording working-class Britain as 'broken' (Toynbee and Walker, 2020). The trope of a broken society is not a new one, for example, David Cameron utilised the trope in opposition to New Labour, and when in power, amplified this narrative to justify austerity measures that devastated communities like Sanford (Hayton, 2012; Hall, 2023). Therefore, like their working-class counterparts across the country, the working-class of Sanford had been pushed further to the margins of society and wilfully divided through a series of unsettling actions, events and trauma. Furthermore, those suffering the most through austerity measures, faced public opinion lending support for the cuts, exacerbating their sense of marginalisation from society (Mullen, 2018). For example, an opinion poll conducted by Survation for CLASS[2] in May 2018 (eight years into austerity), showed 44% of respondents believed that 'further cuts were necessary' – compared to 35% believing they were not.

The heart of these issues lay in the increasing economic inequalities of this period, which in turn exacerbated social, cultural and political divisions (Harries et al., 2019; Savage, 2021). From a reported growing distrust of neighbours and the breaking up of their established communities and workplaces (Forster et al., 2018; ONS, 2022), to severe health inequalities working-class people increasingly faced on a daily and graver basis (Marmot et al., 2020). Perhaps, sadistically, the only constant in their lives that decidedly re-strengthened during this period were the structures of the dominant ideologies designed to keep them marginalised (Cummins, 2018).

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[2] The *Centre for Labour and Social Studies* (*CLASS*) is a think tank established in 2012 to act as a centre for left debate and discussion.

Othering to horizontal violence

Inter-class divisions strengthen dominant ideologies with the othering of the working class (Moore and Forkert, 2014; Tyler, 2020). Firstly, by other social classes, and then, perhaps more disturbingly, othering by other members of the working class (Hall, 1996; Ingram, 2009, 2011; McKenzie, 2013; Patrick, 2016) through various forms of what Freire terms as ‘horizontal violence’ – an inter-class hostility borne from internalised oppression (1970; Warnecke-Berger, 2020). This compels the oppressed to internalise the will of the oppressors to do their bidding (Freire, 1970). This can be seen in cases of othering (for example working-class attitudes towards the working-class in receipt of unemployment benefits) seemingly incited by a national media that is easily accessible, popular and available on a range of platforms (Chauhan and Foster, 2014; Okoroji et al., 2021). In particular, the instigation of the casual othering of working-class groups by working-class groups plays a significant role in reinforcing dominant ideologies (Hall, 1997). The ‘them and us’ - with the ‘them’ at the foot of society and viewed as a ‘feral underclass’ (Heffer, 2008 in Jones, 2011: 22). Divisions between settled and migrant communities are also a focus of the media, with migrants portrayed as ‘dangerous’ or as job stealers (Moore and Forkert, 2014; Carter, 2016). This othering would also be espoused not just in the media, but by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, with his descriptions of ‘swarms of migrants’ coming across the sea (Elgot, 2016).

As the othering of the working class demonstrates, they are far from a homogeneous group despite their shared experiences (McKenzie, 2017). They are a myriad of a mosaic’s parts/tiles (Diamond, 2007) but, like a mosaic, its coterminous pieces are largely stuck (Reay, 2005), but still beautifully amalgamate to construct pictures of their rich social, cultural and ethnic diversity. The backdrop is a common theme of their ‘shared inequalities’ (Reay, 2017) in income (Dorling, 2018), representations in the media and popular culture (Hall, 1997; Jones, 2011; Lockyer, 2014) as well as in possessing cultural capital that often sits outside which is valued (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Crucially, it is many of the individuals and groups within this social class that tend to suffer the most at the hands of neoliberalism (Cummins, 2018). It is important to note here that this is why the term ‘the working class’ rather than ‘working classes’ is used throughout the thesis. It is this recognition of the commonality of backdrop, the main subject and casualty of austerity and the brutality of neoliberal reforms whilst not diminishing the fact it is a class made up by a richness and diversity of communities. It is also important to acknowledge that class has long been a widely contested and debated concept in both the research literature (e.g., Goldthorpe, 1987; Wright, 1997; Savage, 2000; Savage et al., 2001; Crompton, 2008) and populist political rhetoric from both the main political parties (White, 1999; Chakelin, 2023). It is not the intention of this thesis to add to these debates, nor to add to any understandings of what class is, is not and who belongs where. Rather, class is acknowledged as a real, relational and structuring force for people's lives that has both a socio-economic and a cultural basis that includes but transcends income, education and occupation (see Bennett et al., 2009; Skeggs, 2013; Savage et al., 2013, Reay 2005).

The working class are schooled to be liminal, stuck in between and peripheralised by society (Reay, 2017), or at best, trained and prepared to be a ready-made work-force (Illich, 1971; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1979; Ball, 2008; Giddens, 2009; Zahid, 2021). Across neoliberal countries, they are consistently portrayed as a comic distraction (Lockyer, 2010; Eriksson, 2016; Jontes, 2018; Vasquez, 2020), an entertainment genre in itself with the slew of so-called 'poverty porn'[3] TV shows of the 2010s which were criticised for voyeurism and exploitation of working-class people (Gilbert, 2018). TV programmes not only othered working-class lives and culture but also were vehicles ingrained with neoliberal hegemonic notions of common sense to justify austerity (Jensen, 2014). This moralisation of poverty revives the well-worn Victorian trope of deserving and undeserving poor which not only legitimises welfare cuts but also acts as an agent to divide the working class (Jowitt, 2013; Romano, 2017; Tihelková, 2019). Here the feckless and recidivist working class are positioned by much of the media as the barometer of indecency and there to absorb the shock of society's falls and ills (Tyler, 2020), bearing the brunt of the mainstream crises like the financial crash and its aftermath; or there to take the 'blame' for ideological misadventures such as Brexit (McKenzie, 2017; Dorling, 2018; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). Within the Brexit case for example, they were different working-class caricatures portrayed, although typically negatively (Tyler et al., 2022). Types generally ranged from depictions of a working-class who were old and racist; to a working-class who were young and racist (van Deurzen, 2021) with a common theme of voters too ignorant to understand what the implications of their vote as they were manipulated by populism (Calhoun, 2017).

Discussing the working class in deficit terms extends beyond culture, for example, mainstream political discourse frequently portrays the working class as 'lacking' in areas such as levels of education, morality, and employment (Jones, 2011). This deficit discourse sustains stereotypes, reproducing inequality contributing to the discrimination experienced in many sections of society (Savage et al., 2013) with political discourse blaming the individual for their poverty (Skeggs, 2004). The Marxist concept of false consciousness can also be problematic in deficit terms, as challenged by Gramsci (1971). Gramsci stressed that the working class were not passive victims of false consciousness waiting to compliantly amplify power, instead Gramsci argued that the working class possessed the capacity to develop their own class consciousness (1971). Gramsci demonstrated how false consciousness could be perceived in deficit terms, and therefore outlining the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding power and consciousness.

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[3] 'The term has been used to critique documentary television in post-recession Britain which focuses on people in poverty as a-political diversionary entertainment' (Jensen, 2014)

Similarly, Bourdieu and Passeron's cultural capital (1977) has faced criticism for its potential to frame marginalised communities in deficit terms. In contrast, Yosso explores the notion of community cultural wealth, which underscores the valuable contributions of marginalised working-class communities across six dimensions: Social (fostering collaboration and cooperation within communities), Navigational (possessing skills to navigate life's challenges), Linguistic (proficiency in verbal and nonverbal communication across diverse audiences), Resistant (capacity to overcome systemic obstacles), Aspirational (nurturing dreams and aspirations as motivational forces), and Familial (the supportive networks within these communities) (Yosso, 2005).

Rather than dwelling on perceived inadequacies, it is essential to recognise and appreciate the positive attributes of the working class across diverse spheres. While Marx and Engels (1845) did not envision false consciousness to be utilised in a deficit-oriented manner, nor did Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) intend for cultural capital to be misrepresented in a dismissive manner towards marginalised groups. However, it is evident that when employing concepts like false consciousness and cultural capital, due consideration must be given and they should be used carefully within their appropriate contexts.

The old new normal

Austerity in the United Kingdom is a set of wide-ranging policies initially implemented by Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010-2015. Borne from neoliberal fiscal logic, it was presented to the public as the 'only' solution to a national, rather than global[4], financial crisis resulting from the global-banking crash of 2008 (Jones, 2014; Cummins, 2018).

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[4] Evidence suggests that the UK's pursuit of austerity measures hindered recovery as opposed to other large economies in the world who abandoned 'austerian' policies (Krugman, 2015; and others)

Contrary to former Conservative Prime Minister May's proclamation of austerity ending in 2018, it still persists (Inman, 2018), increasingly hidden in plain sight due to its logic being adopted as the standard (Irving, 2021). The ideology, policies and effects of austerity have (and continue to be) the catalyst for much debate, as its policies and baselines have become a new normal (Ortiz and Cummins, 2019). As a public discourse, it is often understandably focused on funding, such as the National Health Service (NHS) (Campbell, et al., 2022), and subsequently the use or misuse of funding figures can provide a cover to hide the continuation of austerity measures (Gray and Barford, 2018). Austerity measures should not be seen as purely fiscal policy, but in fact should be grasped as a 'multiplicity' of sections of the social, the economic and the cultural (Ortiz and Cummins, 2019). In addition, it must be remembered effects are unevenly experienced in everyday life with certain demographic groups or geographic areas being more acutely affected than others (Gray and Barford, 2018; Hitchen, 2019).

Destitution is clustered around northern cities

To gain a fuller picture of life in working-class communities at the end of the 2010s when this research began, Phillip Alston, special rapporteur for the United Nations, published an independent report into poverty in the United Kingdom in late 2018. His report included observations on social isolation, the drop in health and life expectancy, breadline-to-getting-by poverty and destitution: with the choice for some being stark 'between feeding their families or heating their homes' (2018:16). In 2018, 14 million (a fifth of United Kingdom population) lived in poverty despite the UK being the fifth largest economy in the world (p.1) – highlighting the amount of the population at the wrong end of the economic gulf between rich and poor. Furthermore, some 1.5 million of the UK population were classified to be living in destitution at the start of the research phase (JRF Destitution UK, 2018). Destitution in the UK is 'clustered around northern cities' and some 365,000 children were deemed destitute in 2018 (p.2). The Trades Union Congress also published research in March 2018, powerfully claiming 3.1 million children, with working parents, are in poverty (a rise from 2.1 million from 2010) (TUC, 2018) which, somewhat contrasts with the implementer of austerity's hard-working family 'trope' of an 'independent', 'self-sufficient' entity that 'does not rely on the state for its survival' (Runswick-Cole et al., 2016: 257). If the trajectory remains the same, powerful new data portrays an even bleaker situation for the poorest in society. According to a projection by Resolution Foundation[5], child poverty is likely to increase from 2018 levels by six percent in 2024 (RF, 2019).

The Victorian retrospective

In considering the state of England in the death throes of the second decade of the 21st Century – a period from the incumbency of the coalition, followed by three elected Conservative led governments (2015, 2017 and 2019), there was a series of concerning reports, with grave findings concerning the health of the poorest in the nation – those hardest hit by austerity (Marmot et al., 2020). Parallels were drawn to an apparent recurring theme of Victorian England remerging in terms of not just in the attitudes towards the poor in this country but with alarming figures illustrating this thematic interpretation of a rise in the reappearance of 'Victorian' illnesses (all heavily interlinked with poverty exacerbated by austerity): from falling life expectancies to increased infant mortality. In children, recorded rises in scarlet fever, mumps and gout (NHS, 2019) shockingly combined with a recorded '284,901 admissions for scurvy, vitamin D deficiency (rickets) and other maladies familiar to the pages of a Dickens' novel – up 24 per cent on the year before' (Matthews-Kings, 2019: para 2). These illnesses are generally linked to food poverty and malnutrition with NHS data also showing '101,136 admissions last year where vitamin D deficiency was a primary or secondary factor in the admission, a rise of 34 per cent in a year' (para 4).

This situation is also further emphasised by the sharp rise of foodbanks that are reminiscent of depression era soup kitchens (Dorling, 2018) but insouciantly defined by the former Deputy Prime Minister, Dominic Raab, as mere manifestations of 'periodic cash-flow problems' (Agerholm, 2017: para 1). Reports in the late 2010s also highlighted the poor, but 'in work', with the reported majority of those using food banks actually being in employment.1.3 million 'Three day emergency parcels'[6] being given out by Trussell Trust Food Banks in 2017/18 – a 13% increase on the previous financial year with a significant number of these being distributed in the research area (Trussell Trust, 2019). Additionally, in Sanford, with regards to food and diet, concerns were raised in a 2018 report that areas within the Sanford urban area were classed as a food desert (Kelloggs, 2018). The report defines a food desert as an area whose residents lack access to healthy and affordable food combined with characteristics such as low incomes, lack of transport, disability status and use of online groceries (Kelloggs, 2018: 4). The report's data, collected by the charity The Social Market Foundation, also states 1.2 million people in England live in deprived food deserts and have limited access to fresh food (p.3).

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[5] An independent think-tank focused on improving the living standards for those on low to middle incomes.

[6] Accessible by referral only and contain enough food for ten meals (Trussell Trust, 2016)

Vulnerable people as guinea pigs

Alston's report (2018) also highlighted the UK government's apparent lack of a duty of care for its citizens in administering a new benefits system, explaining the government themselves admitted they were haphazardly taking a "test and learn" approach to the rolling-out of Universal Credit (p.7). The report castigates the government for making no acknowledgment of the questionable morality of treating 'vulnerable people like guinea pigs' that will likely 'wreak havoc' in the lives of those entitled to receive Universal Credit (ibid) thus offering no considered response to these shortcomings to protect the needy. This was further amplified by actions of government ministers who openly demonstrated either a lack of awareness of the impact of these policies, or just a severe lack of compassion. For instance, in the controversial rolling out of Universal Credit, the then Work and Pensions Secretary, Esther McVey, told the BBC that moving onto this benefit meant many of its recipients are significantly worse-off financially than the previous system (BBC, Oct 2018).

Austerity is a political choice

With regards to Sanford, the place of this study, figures make difficult reading. Featuring in the top ten urban areas being the hardest hit by austerity, with the local authorities' spending being reduced significantly (Cities Outlook, 2019). The English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (2015) states many of Sanford's neighbourhoods are 'highly deprived'. Other indicators of deprivation include the area ranking highly in terms of premature deaths (JSNA, Feb 2018). The cuts to the central government grant meant local authorities had to delve into their financial reserves to meet some of the shortfalls and whilst percentage terms of cuts were broadly similar, each authority had a differing dependence upon this grant – very similar to the experience of the demographics' uneven austerity experience (Gray and Barford, 2018). Sanford, for instance, had a significant proportion of its income from this grant (Cities Outlook, 2019). These shortfalls meant many urban areas facing a significant depletion to their financial reserves, leaving them 'little cushion' against further cuts' (p.26). Perhaps the most striking comment from Alston's (2018) report was the damning conclusion: poverty in the UK is a 'political choice' (p.22); perhaps then it could be more explicitly known as a direct 'war on the poor' (Cummins, 2018: 2). Whichever is the best nomenclature, the decision to implement austerity was not merely financial (Jones, 2014; Krugman, 2015), as Alston tellingly concludes: ‘Austerity could easily have spared the poor, if the political will had existed to do so’ (2018: 22).

A working-class home, community and workplace

In the last quarter of the 20th Century, the typical working-class workplace had begun to shift (Edgerton, 2018). From being a visible hub of life often situated alongside the tight-knit urban communities, and the heartbeat of local social networks (Ramsden, 2016); to a 21st Century post-industrial now. Now working-class work is often a place of individualised, fragmented or pro-rated systems of employment with a prevalence of low wages being potentially subsidised by benefits (O’Hara, 2015: 104). Before this apparent shift, certain industries and workplaces had often been more than a place of employment, they had been centres that brought working-people together through not only work, but leisure, sports teams and work social clubs (Burke, 2005; Snape, 2022). In many cases, residential areas were built where the workers lived alongside each other in walking distance of their work - sharing communal facilities (Ramsden, 2012). However, from the mid-1970s, circa 2,000 of these social clubs that provided communities across the country with a meeting place and leisure opportunities that strengthened worker unity as well as numerous other social and health benefits, have now closed (Bloodworth, 2019).

Death of the village within the city

In the recent past, Sanford saw strands of its industries that typically offered employment to the working class gradually reduce and disappear in the final decades of the 20th Century - as was also the case in many similar economic urban areas across the country (Edgerton, 2018). These jobs would all too often be partially replaced in the local economy, in each case, by a variety of low-skilled, piecemeal often zero-hour contract jobs. Accompanying this shift in employment type, reports emerged of employers starving workers of working hours if they complained about pay or conditions; or were unionised (Bloodworth, 2019), as the retail parks and the call centres replaced the docks, the pits and the steelworks in post-industrial England (Gilbert, 2018).

In Sanford itself, for example in one such instance, it did not just see a loss of its main industry (and its connected and dependent industries), it in turn, saw the staunch communities built around such work – 'the village within a city' begin to dissipate and its residents spread (or in some cases removed) to newly built housing estates (Gill, 1986; Yelling, 2000; Jones, 2010; Murie, 2018).

In terms of how importantly the workplace was perceived as part of local life, a 2011 study of 'low-income neighbourhoods' from across the UK revealed working-class people consistently made a clear connection between a decline in local industry with a decline in the local community (Batty et al., 2011: 32 in Ramsden, 2016) or even perceived its decline as a death of a 'culture' - dying alongside the former industries (Bloodworth, 2019).

Archipelago economy model

Perhaps then in such a landscape, it is unsurprising research identifies these areas as hotspots of unemployment (Jones, 2011) and notes their economic destitution (Alston, 2018). The archipelago economy model (Veltz, 1999; Dorling and Thomas, 2005 in Hall, 2008) seeks to explain the economic geography of post-industrial England. It situates the large provincial cities outside of London, (such as Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool or Leeds) as largely prosperous but scattered islands (archipelagos) of economic growth (mainly due to their unequal transition from the 1960s onwards, from being a manufacturing base of the past to the knowledge based economy of now) and these islands are surrounded by 'seas of economic stagnation or decline' (Hall, 2008:12). However, these areas are not free from the woes of deprivation, low waged jobs, unemployment or marginalisation of their working class (RF, February 2019). They contain a paradox of prosperity (Hall, 2008) – with typically marginalised younger white working-class men struggling to adapt to the new economy and jobs, but with a prosperity of jobs for young 'in migrants' who have graduated from the city universities and those who commute from the surrounding suburbs or village areas (p.12).

Deindustrialisation to retail parks

With industrial and technological advancements, such as increased forms of mechanisation, increasingly superseding the capitalist case for many factory jobs, workforces were scaled down accordingly as well as the ongoing de-industrialisation (Boehmer and Davies, 2018). This left, in most cases, areas of consistently high unemployment in the 1980s in such places, typically only tempered now by a growth in low-wage insecure jobs and adults undertaking education or training (Jones, 2011). Retail jobs, although still a large sector of employment for the working class, became fewer over this period, with an estimated 70,000 lost in 2018 alone (British Retail Consortium Report, 2018). Furthermore, online retailers benefitting from centralised and financially prudent centres of distribution, contributed to the closure of swathes of smaller competitors as they became places to buy formerly specialist-shops only goods at previously unobtainable prices (Burns, 2002; Hall et al., 2003).

The growth of new retail parks of the last 30 years, which centralise the bigger retail companies into one space draws consumers from the city centre, threatening the decreasing spectrum of small or independent shops dependent upon footfall a centre brings. Along with the decline of the grand department stores (a melting pot of working-class and middle-class work, culture and life) and other recognisable brands closing, all of these were places the working class could, for decades, find secure permanent work (Rudlin and Falk, 2009). As well as the recent job losses in this sector, it is unsurprising to find research from this period also suggesting workers in retail are the most under threat from redundancy or unemployment in 2019 (RF, Feb 2019). Recent figures also suggest within this sector and other ‘gig economy’ areas, four million UK jobs are classed as ‘insecure’ meaning these workers are at a high risk of being made unemployed. The figures also include zero-hour contract work, temporary contracts and low wages (Inman, 2019) meaning even at ‘record employment’ there are still 14 million people in poverty (Alston, 2018). As per many post-industrial cities of England, in the past few years Sanford has also seen reported economic growth decline since the Brexit referendum result, unlike London and the South East which has by contrast, grown (RF, May 2017; ONS, 2021).

End of communities? Slum clearances, right to buy and the bedroom tax

The physical landscape is now far removed from that of past working-class communities: sharing clubs, streets, backyards or even lavatories. Slum clearances displaced communities (Tunstall and Lowe, 2012) as did government schemes such as *Right to Buy,* initiated in the 1980s – broke up notions of community from within (McKenzie, 2017) - seeing nigh on two million council houses being sold since then (Murie, 2018). This could be seen as a deliberate action in the 1980s by a Conservative government to undermine solidarity in the working-class heartlands (Jones, 2011) as these new homeowners with their individual investments now potentially saw their loyalty to

Thatcher (Evans, 2013) and increased the notions of individualism within the working-class areas and thus ending class collective politics (McKenzie, 2017). As the slum clearances continue during this decade, changes to welfare reform by the Coalition government of 2010 also forced families to move. The withdrawal of the spare room subsidy, colloquially known as the Bedroom Tax, sought to cut housing or universal benefit claimants' benefit receipts by up to 25% (for two spare bedrooms in property) (DWP, 2013) affecting around 660,000 social housing tenants (Moffat et al., 2015). This meant eviction for many residents, or mental health decline from the threat of it (Nowicki, 2018) therefore increasing the stress (Cummings, 2018); paranoia (Hitchen, 2018) and the further dislocation of individuals and communities. Entire families moved to alternative housing arrangements to avoid such penalties – naturally, not everyone could do this as alternate 'suitable' housing for all did not exist (Moffat et al., 2015). Furthermore, recent ONS surveys illustrated significant breaks in attitudes towards community and neighbours during this period, with many no longer speaking to, knowing their neighbours or trusting their neighbours (Forster et al., 2018; ONS, 2022), a far cry from past notions of the village within the city (Gill, 1986).

Informal learning groups as sites of resistance

Austerity's effects are disproportionately experienced by the marginalised in society (Crossley, 2016; Cummings, 2018; Gray and Barford, 2018). Striking deep into the heart of working-class communities, rupturing their fabric both materially and emotionally (Toynbee and Walker, 2020) after thirty years of Thatcherite and Blairite neoliberalism that already saw their work, schools and neighbourhoods transform, and in many cases, wither (Williams, 1989; Scott-Samuel et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2021). Communities, across England and beyond, tellingly share similar structural inequalities manifesting in social markers consistently associated with poverty and systematic neglect, for example: high unemployment levels; low levels of educational attainment, low levels of adult skills; high pollution and many others (Feldman, 2019). These effects have created social disconnection within communities, reducing their opportunities for beyond basic human interaction (Becker et al., 2021). Furthermore, austerity has also reduced the services of respite in working-class communities, from social health care (Hoddinott et al., 2022), to the multiple health benefits that can be gained from basic human interactions with people of your community (Haslam et al., 2019).

Resistance against austerity through direct action was visible throughout the 2010s in countries across the world, with publicised demonstrations in major cities, and attacks on establishment and capitalist symbols and centres (Baumgarten, 2013; Della Porta and Mattoni, 2014; Street, 2015). Despite many instances of this rising opposition to austerity through mainstream news, resistance to austerity is often considered futile, particularly as austerity measures persisted (Worth, 2013, 2019). Violent opposition to austerity changed little, not just because of the mass ranks of police and military defending the neoliberal hegemony by force, but also because violence is a natural part of the neoliberal logic (Springer, 2016). However, even if the anti-austerity protests are not 'effective' in ending austerity, or overthrowing a regime, what is difficult to measure is the legacy this leaves for those who protest. This form of protest can increase political consciousness, perhaps creating politically resilient and radical protesters (Valentim, 2021): agents for the struggle for a socially just future (Craddock, 2019). Neoliberalism can violently put down protest, and both infiltrate and misappropriate social justice campaigns as it can 'hijack critique' (Arfken, 2018: 689). Thus, in the face of the neoliberalism hegemony, and its societal omnipresence, a question is raised as to what is a realistic and effective resistance (Willmott, 2013).

Furthermore, Arfken (2013, 2018) explains how resistance itself can become 'neo-liberalised', he summarises the self-protective measures neoliberalism undertakes, as it re-appropriates 'economic struggles as cultural injustices' which insulates itself 'from critique' (Arfken, 2018: 689). In Chapter Four, several international critical literacy case studies are discussed where the neoliberalisation of these movements are also discussed. Sportswashing and greenwashing are examples of the strategies employed, that aptly describe neoliberal institutions reconstructing their public image (van den Berg, 2016; Boykoff, 2022). In terms of health, and its decaying system, there is the paradox of social prescribing (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2022): for example, the funding of schemes targeting the social isolation caused by neoliberalism (Zeira, 2022). Neoliberalism can therefore divert attention from power or normalise the abuses of large centres of its power (Fruh and Archer, 2022).

Resistance to neoliberalism does not have to be direct action, activism or explicit political collective actions; resistance to neoliberalism and austerity can take different forms, from the individual to the collective (Almeida, 2022). Informal learning groups, in the respite from isolation they can provide, and the solidarity they may help build in the face of oppression, is resistance (Miquel et al., 2016). Respite can be defined as a short break, such as a rest from being a carer for example (Breneol, et al., 2019; Min et al., 2021), or in a broader context '…a short period of rest or relief from something difficult or unpleasant' (Cambridge, 2022). The meaning of respite here, is that it can be a short break for a carer for example, but it can also mean participating in an informal learning group as relief from the alienation of neoliberalism and the hardships of life under austerity. A substantial body of evidence demonstrates being part of a group benefits an individual's health and mental health (Becker et al., 2021).

The very existence of an informal learning group at least imagines a community in a place where community may have been dislocated previously (Tuckett, 2016). Furthermore, informal learning groups may provide opportunities for emancipatory pedagogies such as critical literacy education, that leads to critical consciousness development and collective action. Resistance can be fostered within groups, in the form of everyday actions that passively disrupt the dominant structures (Huke et al., 2015; Purcell, 2016; Bailey et al., 2017), by refusing to acquiesce with individualism and its alienating ideology (Monbiot, 2016). With the individualism of neoliberalism dividing working-class communities and increasing isolation, solidarity is likely to have been eroded (Wilson and Pickett, 2009; Becker, et al., 2021) as the opportunity for individuals to practice or reaffirm solidarity is being lost, and neighbours grow distrustful of neighbours as communities individualise (ONS, 2022). Solidarity is the antithesis of neoliberalism (Lynch, 2020). It is emotional (Boltanski, 2012), political (Hardt and Negri, 2009) and can be described as the quality that binds a collective through their shared interests and needs (Rorty, 1989). It is a '…politicized form of love' (Lynch and Kalaitzake, 2018:1) and a '…reciprocal sympathy and responsibility amongst members of a group which promotes mutual support' (Wilde, 2007:171). It is solidarity in working-class communities across the global north that has also been attacked by the individualism of neoliberalism (Stjernø, 2004:2; Lynch and Kalaitzake, 2018:1) and the devastation austerity inflicted on communities. However, as solidarity is political (Hardt and Negri, 2009) and emotional (Boltanski, 2012), its collective can unpick the cold financial logic of neoliberalism (McKean, 2020). Therefore, solidarity can also be seen as a reaction of resistance towards this oppression (Sangiovanni, 2015) and respite from the everyday life of social isolation (Becker et al., 2021). Therefore, this study explores the possibilities of informal learning groups fostering solidarity and being a site of resistance.

Informal learning groups can be sites of resistance, promoting counter discourses to the dominant narratives through education and action (McLaren, 1993), where power can be questioned and defied (Williams, 1977; Tett and Hamilton, 2019) and the isolation of neoliberalism can be resisted.

Social isolation

Social isolation, a condition exacerbated by the alienation of neoliberalism, has unsurprisingly been reported as rising during the time of austerity in England, particularly in working-class communities (Kearns et al., 2015; Becker et al., 2021). Neoliberalism itself promotes individualism that seeps into all aspects of community and society (Monbiot, 2016; Boyle, et al., 2023; Da Costa Vieira, 2023). This individualism, along with reduced social care and services, has a devastating effect on the most vulnerable amongst the marginalised. Refugees (Christodoulou, 2014), the elderly, carers, those who are cared for (Babudu, et al., 2016), and other vulnerable groups saw an increase reported social isolation in the 2010s. For example, as vital services and respite centres closed and became scarcer, carers' alienation typically increased: feeling powerless, alone, and systematically trapped (Boudioni et al., 2018; Petrie and Kirkup, 2018). As the facilities for social interaction in working-class communities decreased during this period, the basic human connections people need in their lives to counter isolation, and forms of alienation naturally reduced (Martino et al., 2015). These include adult and community learning opportunities, with centres closing and participation from adults from marginalised groups also falling too (Mali et al., 2018; Mersinoglu, 2020). Furthermore, nationally, the working class tend to have lower participation levels in informal learning than their counterparts (Colley et al., 2002; BIS, 2014).

Chapter summary and conclusion

This chapter set the context for the study looking at the effects austerity and neoliberalism had upon the national and local contexts. It used reports and statistics to illustrate the harsh realities that nearly a decade of austerity had on life in the UK, discussing changes communities had been through with a process of deindustrialisation changing work and life landscapes. The next chapter will provide a critical approach to the literature and examine key theories underpinning this research: critical literacy, critical pedagogy and threshold concept theories.

Chapter Three – A critical review of the literature

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the local and national scene at the time of the research (2019-2020) using a range of sources. It contextualised Sanford's working-class communities as part of the broader social, economic and cultural condition of England in the 2010s (the time period of this study). This chapter therefore moves into presenting critical perspectives and analysis from the relevant literature. It explores the theory and practice of critical literacy and critical pedagogy examining their potential for critical consciousness development. This review requires the synthesis of a broad range of historical and contemporary literature as the theoretical models are explicitly and heavily influenced by works from 20th Century theorists, such as Freire (1970); Giroux (1983) or Luke (2000). The chapter also addresses the concept of texts used within critical literacy education. Importantly, these are not seen here in a traditional sense: a book, a newspaper or a poem for example, here they are seen as not being a fixed object (Lim, 2021) and what a text is, will be appropriated by the reader (Wilson, 2012). The chapter then discusses thresholds concept theories that can deconstruct the complex processes involved in critical consciousness development. It concludes with exploring informal learning in the context of this study - those of informal learning groups. This discussion will also highlight gaps in the literature the thesis will address in its research findings.

This study sets out to explore critical literacy education in informal learning groups within the research area of Sanford. The main research question focusses on how informal learning groups facilitators' critical consciousness develops through inadvertently 'reading' the group participants. This concerns a form of implicit critical literacy education that is triggered through the facilitator 'reading' the participant to a similar effect a conventional text would have after being read in typical critical literacy practice. To the best of my knowledge and work in this field, there is no similar literature to draw from to explore in this literature review, so this section of the literature review will look at the literature of critical literacy education and critical pedagogy to explore how critical literacy has been practiced as a reaction to oppression in different contexts and environments. This is relevant to the story of Sanford, as it is throughout the global north, with its working-class communities besieged by austerity (Emejulu, 2016; Alston, 2018; Gray and Barford, 2018; Hitchen, 2019) and suppressed by the structures of neoliberalism (Hall, 2011; Monbiot, 2016; Kochi, 2023).

Therefore, this next section will explore a brief history of the origins of critical literacy education and critical pedagogy, as critical literacy can be seen as a tool that can be used in critical pedagogy environments (Daly-Lesch; 2019). Then the chapter shall establish what it means by the term ‘texts’ and look at current discourses around literacy. This will lead into introductions of Chapter Four, which examines several international case studies concerning the growth of critical literacy in different contexts and counters different forms of oppression.

Critical literacy

Shor (1999) explains critical literacy ‘challenges the ‘status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development’ through ‘questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane’ (p.2). Broadly speaking, even though consensus on much of critical literacy does not exist, the aims of critical literacy practices can be seen as seeking to improve our understanding of the world and our place within it (Luke, 2000; Janks, 2000; Lewison et al., 2002; Johnson, 2020; Weng, 2023). This is achieved through promoting agency to change the world around us (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2000). Therefore, improving social conditions and working towards a liberation, as Shor (1999) suggests, but ultimately a non-retaliatory liberation of both the oppressed and the oppressors (Freire, 1970; Bomer, 2004). To achieve these aims, there needs to be a process of critical awakening in the subject, a development of the individual’s critical consciousness (or as the term Freire used: conscientisation[7] - *conscientização*) from a state of being unshakably in the hands of the will of power (magical consciousness) towards an eventual awakening of a critical consciousness leading the subject to make interventions in their reality (Freire, 1970). Therefore, the individual develops a new, or enhanced form of social awareness aided by the study and discourse of ‘texts’ through various methods promoting analysis and criticism, ‘looking’ beneath their surface and reading between the lines, to discover the underlying agendas at work in its real message(s) and its ideological workings (Shor, 1992; Baynham, 1995; Luke and Freebody, 1997; Wray, 2004; Jones, 2006; Paul, 2023).

However, Comber (2001) argues in trying to define critical literacy it is important to not only consider the values, characteristics or dimensions it can comprise of, but it is also important to recognise its theoretical and contextual origins. This is to gain an insight into not only how it was initially conceived or implemented, but also an insight into the factors that initially shaped, and continue to shape, critical literacy as an attitude, stance or pedagogical approach[8] (Luke, 2000). In analysing the origins and practices of critical literacy from different places and contexts, including what influences its particular shape in that region, it is envisaged this will allow for a greater opportunity to understand critical literacy practice may manifest diversely in informal learning groups. It is also possible critical literacy education may occur due to organised and intentional pedagogical practice within informal learning groups, or alternatively, perhaps it has developed unintentionally, and could even be spontaneous, incidental, hidden or simply practiced in unconventional ways (Pandya, 2012; Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, this may act as a basis of understanding to examine the inadvertent reading of people as texts that is explored in this research. Anderson and Irvine (1993) suggest that many factors can be considered important in shaping what critical literacy is, such as power relationships and language, inequalities within social structures; and generally the social, political and economic conditions in different areas, regions, states or countries. However, Comber (2001) argues critical literacy is not typically universal in form, thus defining it as a mimetic and transferable set of rules, values or practices is difficult (and potentially erroneous) due to these differing and often distinguishable reasons for existence. Therefore, examining critical literacy's history and its local environment is potentially the most illuminating method to attempt to capture its values or themes of a particular time period, or era, in a particular place, because it is continually changing and evolving due not only to the important aforementioned factors, but also in combination with new theorists and practitioners offering new or sometimes diverging perspectives (Kirylo, 2011). These perspectives, due to it being a product of its locality and dependent upon its conditions, also mean its natural (and often locally dependent) intersectionality is a crucial component to understanding its emergence, its actions and agency at its particular source (Luke, 2000).

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[7] For clarification, in related discourse, the term conscientisation is used interchangeably with critical consciousness, critical awareness or critical awakenings (Shin et al., 2016).

Critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical literacy

Without losing sight of the critical literacy education discourse important to this research, observations regarding its academic roots are helpful to not only understand its background, which has its own importance, but also how its emergence and state of being lends itself to the malleability, or non-conformity, that will be potentially useful to understanding the critical literacy of this study. Critical literacy has naturally strong relationships with other critically based concepts and disciplines that could arguably claim influence (and continuing influence) upon it. But, to maintain focus, this chapter will mainly examine and refer to: critical theory and to a greater extent, critical pedagogy, as they are explicit in their critique of society, power and education – which are of course paramount to this study. Critical literacy, critical theory and critical pedagogy are interconnected. As critical theory examines power relations and systems of oppression it has a significant influence over critical pedagogy's stance (Beck, 2005; Ng et al., 2022). Critical literacy also 'owes a striking debt' to critical theory (Willinsky, 2007: 1) and as a form of education, is naturally regarded as grounded in critical pedagogy practices (Giroux, 2012a; Bishop, 2014). Critical theory of the social sciences is a part of the post-1917 Western Marxism[9] of the Frankfurt School (ibid) and is an approach which 'studies society in a dialectic way by analysing political economy, domination, exploitation, and ideologies' and is based upon the idea that domination is at the crux of the problem (Fuchs, 2016: 399).

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[8] This is meant in the broadest of terms as the study acknowledges it can vary from a stance or approach, to a life orientation

Liberation, power and critique

Liberation is at the heart of critical theory (Horkheimer, 1972; Jaramillo-Aristizabal, 2022), and thus represents values that are also prevalent within critical pedagogy and critical literacy (McLaren, 2003; hook, 2003; Giroux, 2007; Saunders, 2020). Critical pedagogy takes on these concepts of transformation and liberation into the sphere of education (Beck, 2005), and within this, education (or knowledge itself) is viewed as inherently political and cannot be considered neutral (Freire, 1970; Sant, 2019; Giroux, 2020; Pimentel Júnior, 2023). Just as critical theory is a framework for questioning an unequal society (Zajda, 2022), critical pedagogy encourages the questioning of unequal educational practices, mutually in both learners and teachers/facilitators/practitioners, in order to challenge the unequal distribution of power in education, the inequity in achievement (Luke, 1994) and the reproduction of social hierarchies and inequalities (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1984; Crew, 2020). In short, critical pedagogy itself can be seen to draw influence from critical theory but applied to an educational setting, where it uses elements of critical theory to examine how education can reproduce disadvantage through systematic inequalities (Beck, 2005; Duckworth and Smith, 2018). Critical pedagogy seeks to 'expose how relations of power and inequality… are manifest and challenged in the formal and informal education of children and adults' (Apple and Au, 2009: 991) and, as stated, begins from the elementary premise: teaching is not neutral (Freire, 1970). It inherently carries fundamental questions such as who controls the means of educational production, who is being taught to whom, and why (Giroux, 1997) – which catalyses the dialogue between these fundamental points. The aim is to re-address imbalances of power and inequity to reshape teaching practice and environments through a continuous and evolving process (Apple, 2009).

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[9] 'Born from the slaughter of WW1 and the magnetism of the Russian Revolution' – (Broder, 2018)

Symbolic Violence, Hegemony and Consent

Symbolic violence offers insights into hegemony and its invisible methods of power and control (Gaventa, 2005). It is a form of violence because it constrains and dominates; and is considered symbolic because its violence is enacted implicitly and indirectly (Connolly and Healy, 2004; Rahayu, 2021; Schneck, 2022). Importantly, symbolic violence 'is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 167). This means its victims are not forced or coerced into an important part of the reproduction of social class inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990; Connolly and Healy, 2004). Complicity is a key concept here, as neoliberal discourses are internalised by the individual, symbolic violence is perpetrated through tacit complicity between its agent and victim (Bourdieu, 2001). Complicity, or consent, differs from Gramsci's (1971) hegemony as Bourdieu (1998) describes it as a gradual and almost natural process due to symbolic violence's organic qualities, as opposed to consent being engineered or manufactured as Gramsci described (1971). Manufactured consent sees society subject to hegemonies which dominate everyday life, and as Hall (1996) argues, is beyond coercion but employs contradictory consciousness (Gramsci, 1971) to gain consent and thus, like Bourdieu and Passeron's symbolic violence (1977), reproduces itself through consent being the taken for granted natural order. Connolly and Healy (2004) describe symbolic violence's complicity process in people: 'through their experience of the social world…come progressively to develop taken-for-granted ways of thinking and behaving that reflect this lived experience' (p.14). This can be seen to describe the gradual almost natural way neoliberalism pervades into everyday life as Harvey (2005) acknowledges.

Neoliberalism's symbolic violence is at the heart of this thesis, its agenda, described by Bourdieu as 'mental colonisation' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004:4) is deeply embedded within society, meaning the violence it enacts on the oppressed is hidden and/or normalised (Connolly and Healy, 2004). For example, the neoliberal education system enacts symbolic violence on state school children by 'schooling' them, or as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue, pedagogy is 'the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (5). Cultural arbitraries also play out in how austerity is publicly framed, as cuts to vital services affecting the most vulnerable are justified through financial logic and a counter narrative of a deserving and undeserving poor (Atkinson et al., 2012; Cooper and Whyte, 2017). In the 'deserving and undeserving' trope, blame is not only placed on the victims themselves (Bourdieu, 1998) but those who are blamed are also convinced into blaming themselves for their own suffering (Bourdieu et al., 2000). Hall (2019) also argues hegemony sustains instability or attacks to such an extent it can act to reinforce its power, as the attacking opposition can appear to be attacking common-sense views. Power embodied as common sense (Gramsci, 1971; Hall 1983, 2019; Bourdieu, 1991) can adapt or seamlessly change as it will still be accepted uncritically (Bourdieu, 1998). Neoliberalism presents a good example of how hegemony can seamlessly change as it spreads from place to place adjusting to local contexts (Ong, 2007). The process of the reproduction of neoliberalism's hegemony is the battle for being common sense (Carvalho, 2022).

Discourse and questioning processes

Critical theory is acknowledged as a 20th Century reaction to Marx, Hegel and Weber in the setting of the social and political climate of western Europe in the 1920s (Antonio, 1981; Willinksy, 2007), whereas others have understandably recognised critical pedagogy's traits in the critical thinking practices of Plato and Socrates – largely due to the shared importance of a dialogic process to rationalise (Guilherme, 2017). Therefore, its discourse and questioning processes can be seen to differ from critical literacy practices which focus upon revealing hidden themes and the ideologies that oppress or maintain the status quo (Lewison et al., 2008). It also can be argued both critical pedagogy and critical literacy take critical theory into new territory as they can lead to the individual or collective into putting theory into action, whereas critical theory is a theory that 'did not seek its fulfilment in practice' (Willinsky, 2007:11) and '…analysis without action does not produce tangible change' (Watts et al.; 2003: 186). Other well documented historical examples can arguably share ideological lineage with critical pedagogy and critical literacy include, the work and discourses of Dewey or Bauman (McLaren, 1989; Giroux, 2011); the Cuban Literacy Campaign (McClaren, 2009; Waller, 2022); the Highlander Folk School - integral to the Civil Rights Movement (Degener, 2002; Slate, 2022) or the examples of community learning that emerged for black Americans in the 1950s (Luke, 2012: 4). In the British sense, critical literacy connections can be seen in the works of Hoggart, Williams and Hall (Luke, 2012) for example- again, different phenomena dependent on where, when and how it emerged.

Several of the texts used with the informal learning groups this study visited were intentionally provocative aiming to disrupt the commonplace of the group member (Lewison et al., 2002; Nam, 2020; Brown and Savić, 2023) by deconstructing social and cultural stereotypes and linking them to the group members' contexts and lives. From this point they can also seek to make new meaning from these texts. Hall's (1997) representation theory considers how representation is a production of meaning from texts – with texts being considered, like this research, a broad range. This meaning, which like all meaning is not fixed and can be contested (Jhally, 2005), is subject to power imbalances and inequities leading to social and ethnic groups being othered or stereotyped (Hall,1997). This process where the learner deconstructs texts to establish power inequities is similar to critical literacy practices as described by Janks (2010); or Nam (2020).

The Freirean tradition

Typically, and somewhat understandably, critical pedagogy is generally attributed to the continuation of the work of Freire in the 1960s and then further developed by theorists within their own environments and contexts. However, in positioning Freire as a starting point there is due care as the idea of a leader (of any form) in such emancipatory practices seems paradoxical. Although it was Giroux (1983) who is credited for first using the term 'critical pedagogy' (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014), he rejects the notion of a 'father figure' or progenitor of the movement, explaining by doing so 'devalues' the collective movement and struggle (Giroux, 2012). Furthermore, citing prominent Canadian critical pedagogy theorist Roger Simon, he explains 'a set of founding fathers implies that an authentic version could somehow be found in a patriarchal vanishing point' (ibid).

The key themes between...

In terms of published research and theory, the key themes shared between critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical literacy emerge discursively through the work of a variety of theorists (for example Marcuse, 1969; Freire, 1970; Gramsci, 1971; Giroux, 2004; and others). Essentially their work relates to key themes of social justice, redistributing power, addressing inequality and challenging the dominant ideology in differing societal domains where power imbalances are oppressive. Essentially, critical literacy can be seen as a tool to be used within critical pedagogy to support development of critical consciousness (Daly-Lesch; 2019). However, both critical pedagogy and critical literacy have two distinct characteristics that are important to note within the approach of this study's fieldwork. Firstly, neither has a set practice or methodology. Secondly, critical pedagogy, like critical literacy, has a broad definition and is used in 'multiple ways' (Salter, 2023; Suhardiana et al., 2023), from examples of co-operative teaching such as practiced in youth work (Ledwith, 2015), to a reinvention of teaching and the facilitation of empowerment (Apple and Au, 2009: 991). The differences in approach and the evolution of ideas help maintain critical pedagogy's explicit and intentional radical agency (Smith and McClaren, 2010; Giroux, 2020). Critical pedagogy seeks to challenge the status quo through change to educational practice, whereas critical literacy is a tool to transform how the individual reads the word to read the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Critical literacy practices promote the use of critical thinking beyond the place of learning, be that a school, community centre, church hall and so on. (Beck, 2005). These characteristics are very useful in beginning to understand how critical literacy education may manifest in informal learning groups. Critical literacy education should lead to a growing interest in social justice that can take on many forms within its participants (Morell, 2008). In looking at a study of critical literacy methods being used to encourage active-citizenship in communities for example, Comber (2001) discusses a case study of disadvantaged primary school schoolchildren in Australia developing an increased awareness of the world around them (their community and space) through the conservation of local community areas. This demonstrates just one of the many outcomes critical literacy can promote as it can 'offer more than acquiescence or resistance to the status-quo' (p.463). It may also be possible for these individuals/groups to develop critical consciousness but still be selective in choosing which collective actions they participate in as they withhold from 'subordinating themselves wholly to an ideology or dogma' (Morrell, 2008: 209). In other words, if a greater critical consciousness gives them greater control over their own lives (Hall et al., 2008) perhaps it may be possible they decide to only resist the oppression directly impacting upon their own lives (Getzlaf and Osborne, 2010).

Critical Consciousness

Freire developed three stages of critical consciousness development from his work teaching marginalised peoples in rural Brazil (Freire, 1970; 2005; Diemer et al., 2016). These stages sought to explain the process of critical consciousness development by demarcation which would allow for an understanding of the individual's actions and beliefs under oppression (1970). Furthermore, within the final stages of developing critical consciousness, Freire explains the cognitive practice of praxis is crucial as it concerns a continuous process of learning that builds from theory, reflection and action. Within the past decade, a range of theorists from a variety of disciplines have attempted to scientifically define critical consciousness and its stages Diemer (2014); Shin et al., (2016); McWhirter and McWhirter (2016). These theories offer insights into the question - can critical consciousness development be accurately mapped.

Freire's Critical Consciousness Stages and Praxis

Freire (2005) argued developing an individual's critical consciousness is vital for them to be able to both expose and challenge injustices and oppression in their own lives (Rapa and Geldhof, 2020). The individual becomes critically literate: increasingly able to critically analyse inequity and injustice within their reality (Freire, 2005; Watts et al., 2011). From this ability to critically analyse, they can take critical action, either individually or collectively – for example as part of their communities (Freire, 1993). Freire (1970; 1992; 2005) described three different types of consciousness: magical, naïve and critical. Magical consciousness sees the individual as resigned to their fate (2005). They possess a 'magical belief in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor'[10] (1970:64). Magical consciousness does not provide any form of critical thought. It is accepting of power and the status quo as it transfers their oppressed state to the will of God (ibid).

Naïve consciousness, according to Freire, is higher than magical consciousness as the individual recognises inequality but does not see it as a structured or even wilful act (2005). The oppression is taken for granted and is part of life. The individual is therefore does not perceive the greater landscape of how inequality, oppression and injustice is structural (1970; 2005). Critical consciousness, as already explored within this literature review, is the zenith of Freire's levels of consciousness. According to Freire: to be able to attain critical consciousness '…can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform' (1970:51). Therefore, the individual who attains critical consciousness uses both reflection and theory to take action and intervene in real life (1970). This is an iterative process with theory, reflection and action acting as endless cycle and producing meaning and knowledge (Orsini et al., 2022). For Freire, the individual reaches the level of critical consciousness, but from here, there is an ongoing process of learning and development (1970). Therefore, like praxis, critical consciousness can be seen as a continuous learning process (Campbell and MacPhail, 2002; Watts et al., 2011).

Post Freire examples of Critical Consciousness Mapping

In recent years, disciplines outside of the field of education have contributed critical consciousness measurement scales to the critical consciousness literature. Typically, however, these have lacked consistency in terms of how they conceptualise critical consciousness (Watts, et al., 2011; Diemer et al., 2017). To gain an insight into these contributions, this section briefly summarises three studies from the field of psychology that developed critical consciousness scales based on their own empirical research. The following summaries are followed by analysis of their contribution to critical consciousness research and value to the research undertaken in this study.

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[10] From Freire's interview with a peasant (1970)

McWhirter and McWhirter (2015) created the Measure of Adolescent Critical Consciousness to evaluate critical agency and critical behaviour of Latinx adolescents. Using a 17-item standard of measure to draw responses from statements such as ‘It is important to me to contribute to my community’ and ‘I am involved in activities or groups against racism and discrimination’ (p.548). Study participants select from a choice of responses most aligned to their own feelings to draw relational links between critical behaviour, community activity, and critical agency of their respondents to ascertain levels of critical consciousness of the participants. Shin et al. (2016) developed their critical consciousness scale from two studies into exploratory and confirmatory factors concerning the intersectional effects of racism, classism and heterosexism. The researchers used a 19-item self-report measure to assess critical consciousness with participants recruited from the Mechanical Turk via Amazon (p.5). Participants also responded to statements in this study, which included ‘Poor people without jobs could easily find work but remain unemployed because they think that jobs like food service or retail are beneath them’ and ‘The overrepresentation of Blacks and Latinos in prison is directly related to racist disciplinary policies in public schools’ (p.6). In 2018, Shin et al. expanded this scale to incorporate sexism and transphobia. Diemer et al.’s (2017) critical consciousness scale was validated using high school participants from a range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants answered questions and statements, to ascertain their ability to critically reflect (on how they perceived inequality and egalitarianism) and critical action. Diemer et al. (2017) identify a causal relationship between critical reflection and critical action as fundamental to understanding critical consciousness development. Research prompts inspired reaction based on these two areas, such as: ‘Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead.’ and ‘It is OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others’ (p.465). Their responses used a five-point scale (p.472) that measured each participant’s ability or likelihood to engage in critical reflection and action. Importantly, Diemer et al. (2017) envisage these scales can support qualitative researchers’ understanding of critical consciousness.

The three studies identified qualities to quantify to measure critical consciousness. For example, Diemer et al. (2017) collected data concerning the relationship between critical reflection and critical action to understand levels of critical consciousness. In terms of this study’s focus, the use of quantitative methods has auxiliary potential for qualitative research into critical consciousness development as Diemer et al. (2017) posits. However, this quantitative work is missing the vital presence of the participants’ voice (Austin and Sutton, 2014) and its complex nuances that is, for example, imperative for this study of informal learning facilitators (Denzin, 2001; Di Cicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; Austin, 2014). In contemplating emancipatory concepts, it is this study’s view the participants’ voice must be foregrounded. Their voice, albeit mitigated by questions and interpretations of the researcher, provides latent, complex and ambiguous meanings that is difficult to quantify and remain representative (Denzin and Giardina, 2007). Therefore, quantitative approaches to critical consciousness development without qualitative depth lack important contextual meaning and it is not clear if the participant who selects from a fixed choice of answers truly understands each question (Boynton, 2004). Closed questions restrict the opportunity for rich and nuanced meaning from participant responses that are supplemented by the researcher's fieldnotes and observations (Richards, 2005). Conversational semi-structured interviews can reassure the participant, allowing both interviewee and interviewer to clarify and can give the participant a vested interest in responding fully, as opposed to a survey, although, unlike the works by Diemer et al. (2017), qualitative studies can be subject to greater influence of the researcher than the quantitative approaches of the three studies (Galdas, 2017).

In understanding how oppression and agency are perceived by individuals, each background and position, beyond statistical demographics, must be taken into consideration when contemplating their responses (Flick et al., 2004; Manstead, 2018). Importantly, as critical consciousness concerns the taking action against oppressive forces, measuring it with fixed questions and closed responses seem to conflict with its emancipatory Freirean premise. However, in tandem with qualitative research, that provides a safe space for discussion and where misunderstandings and clarifications can be discussed, these scales could offer an insight into the starting point/or end point of participants' critical consciousness that could enhance such research.

Texts

'Texts' traditionally present the idea of the written word alone or words accompanied with a form of illustration. This could be a book, a poem, an article in a newspaper, magazine or journal. However, due to the increased and differing ways people read, observe, communicate and access different forms of media; or how they interact with 'literacy' and new 'literacies' in the 21st Century per se, what constitutes as a 'text' arguably has a broader meaning (Kress, 2003). For example, a text could be audio rather than written (a radio programme/broadcast for example). it could be visual: a film or a television programme (Fiske, 1987; Fairclough, 2003). Texts can be onscreen from the huge range of online resources (perhaps an online-community or a form of social media), or it could even be a video game (Kress and van Leeuwun, 2001; Roswell and Pahl, 2015). Semiotic texts: a sign, a picture, songs (Kress, 2003), adverts, public information, instructions, even personal shopping lists could constitute as a text - as they communicate a message or messages

(Fairclough, 2003; Janks, 2010). A text can therefore be simply defined as any communication that intrinsically has a critical question of who and why it has been constructed (Morgan, 1997). A text may also be multimodal - a combination of modes together communicating a message or messages, for example a web page containing text, imagery, audio and video (Jewitt, 2006). Multimodality has also become prevalent in mainstream education, with teachers and practitioners using multimodal resources to enhance learning and convey meaning (Kress and van Leewun, 2001; Jewitt, 2006). In terms of this study, the real importance is in the critical approach to texts that can be multi-layered, ambiguous and hold both explicit and implicit messages. It is important in critical literacy terms to be able to analyse multimodal forms of literacy to better understand today's society (Bull and Anstey, 2005) as all forms of mono or multimodal communication are social and political acts that can be used to disseminate explicit and implicit messages (Comber and Simpson, 2001). This outlines the various possibilities for what can be considered as a text within the potential critical literacy practices within the informal learning groups of Sanford.

Importantly, with specific regard to this research, the concept of people and their lives being read as a text has no equivalence within the literature. But, as Lim (2021) argues, a text is far from being a fixed object, it can be anything that can present a message to those who examine, take meaning from it and that can be critically questioned. Furthermore, as Wilson (2012) explains, a text's 'textuality' is '…assigned by the reader and by wider cultural processes which constitute the very possibility of reading' (p.346). As this research demonstrates participants were read as texts by informal learning group facilitators. Therefore, in terms of the main research question of this study, it raises the possibility of the reader, even inadvertently, assigning the textuality of the person it is reading.

Literacy and multiliteracies

As the idea of what constitutes as a text has taken a broader meaning (Rose and Meyer, 2002), it is logical to think that this may be part of a change in how literacy is viewed, and how people's interaction and their uses of literacy have also developed. Traditionally, literacy and to be literate, had previously been regarded to have had a fixed definition: to refer to uses of reading and writing; or to be proficient in the ability to read and write (Luke, 2009; Sangster et al., 2013). Although, this definition of literacy has been challenged, as literacy and literacy practice have always been dependent on its circumstances, time and place, it is pragmatic even and open to change (Mackey, 2004). Casting aside this discussion, over the past few decades, the ways literacy came to be interpreted responded to not only critical pedagogies that position literacy as a social practice (Street, 2003), but also to developments in technology and modes of communication leading to both a greater linguistic and cultural diversity (Cope and Kalantzis, 2015; Whyte and Schmid, 2019). Meaning literacy, even if it was once regarded in the raw definition described, can no longer be perceived as isolated or a 'concrete set of skills' (Sluys et al., 2006:199) with the 'dominance of writing being replaced with the dominance of the image; the dominance of the book to the dominance of the screen' (Kress, 2003: 1). Literacy may now be considered as an evolving, dynamic number of practices regarded as multiliteracies (New London Group, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis, 2015) with multimodal ways of expression and communication (Kress, 2010; Mills and Unsworth, 2017) and is representative of skills and texts beyond what was conventionally considered (Sanford, 2005).

The multimodal, as opposed to the monomodal: for example, a book without illustration (Kress and van Leewun, 2001) utilises two or more of these aspects in their modes of communication: the semiotic, linguistical, visual, audio, spatial, and gestural which allows the learner to make meanings of a greater capacity rather than just the written word (Harste, 2003; Gee, 2008; Cope and Kalantzis, 2015). The New Literacy Studies is a non-unified body of interdisciplinary work that began in the 1980s (Gee, 1987; Street, 1997; Pahl and Roswell, 2006; Graff, 2022) and views 'literacy as a set of socially and culturally situated practices, rather than simply as a range of technical academic skills that operate at an individual level' (Foley, 2017). It therefore can be found in synchronous forms across differing forms of media and arts encompassing the digitally-based, the physically based and also the online communities (Chester and Gwynne, 1998) this study's participants might encounter within their own social and cultural interactions with literacy (Beattie, 2022). These multimodal forms arguably enhance traditional literacy skills (Gee, 2003) and provide an interaction dependent on varying 'spatial forms and social processes' from differing and diverse people's worlds (Shannon, 2002: 416).

New Literacy Studies

The New Literacy Studies research examined literacy practices and makes distinctions between two key models of literacy learning: the autonomous model and the ideological model (Street, 1985; Duckworth and Tett, 2019). The autonomous model essentially views literacy learning as neutral and its practice can be uniform. This model claims to result in positive effects on the individual's economic situation, and/or or their cognitive ability but makes no consideration for the individual's own situation, condition or importantly, the reasons to blame for their low levels of literacy or be illiterate (Street, 2003). It is considered to be a traditional form of literacy learning, decontextualized, and devoid of political or social discourse (Larson and Marsh, 2005) – which can be considered to be a political act as education is never neutral (Freire, 1970). Lynn and Tett (2019) argue the autonomous model is symbolic violence reproducing inequality as it embraces standardisation, such as in testing, which can be seen as not only 'inappropriate, but largely unethical as they privilege particular contexts, identities and knowledge, but marginalise others' (Carter, 2008: 2). In a dichotomy, the ideological model's premise is literacy is not neutral. It is 'embedded into a social practice', such as an educational or vocational context, as well as being 'embedded into social and epistemological principles…the ways people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being' – these meanings can be challenged hence it being 'ideological' (Street, 2006: 2). This model is underpinned by the need for contextualised learning with the understanding literacy is always 'rooted in a particular worldview and a desire for that view to dominate others' (Gee, 1990).

A review of the literature on the thresholds of learning and the liminal in between

Threshold concepts are utilised by this study to magnify the dynamic processes at work within critical literacy education activities. This is intended to illuminate the individual's potential for transition towards developing a critical consciousness (Roberts, 2017) which is naturally of significance to answering the main research question. This section notes parts of the literature uses terms such as 'liminality', 'liminal' and 'threshold' interchangeably (Turner noted this was due to the translation of the root word 'limen' from Latin 'signifying "threshold"' (Turner, 1964: 94). Depending upon the literature, both are found, to mean the same, as both terms can be interpreted as describing the status of dislocation - of being on the cusp of, or of being between states. O' Donell (2010) describes the erratic terminology in whether it is discussing a theory, a model, concept or an approach; with regard to how to label the threshold workings. This study, as theorists such as Turner (1964), and more recently Meyer and Land (2003), define liminality as being in between thresholds of learning. Therefore, each threshold of learning, which must be passed, is reached through traversing a liminal phase and so on (Cousin, 2004). Therefore, this study utilises works such as the threshold concept theory (Meyer and Land, 2003) to help illuminate the processes of the informal learning group facilitators' development.

As a defined concept or process, in the terms this study regards it, threshold concepts appear to have emerged from the discipline of anthropology, with folklorist van Gennep's (1960) early 20th Century analysis of the processes involved within tribal rites of passage. This, in turn, after van Gennep's work was translated into English in 1960, began a rekindling of interest in this concept (Thomasson, 2016). Although a 'thorough or general' resurgence did not take place (p.28), Turner's 'discovery' of this work helped signpost van Gennep's theories to a larger field. Turner (1969) used van Gennep's liminality model to not only explain the stages of initiation rites in the Ndembu tribe in Zambia but applied it to perceived transitional occurrences universally – which gave a legitimacy to those disciplines who sought to interpret and augment these theories into their own respective areas. Turner (1969) drew upon van Gennep's (1960) contention that 'all rites of passage or "transition" are marked by three distinct transformative phases: 'separation, margin (or limen…) and aggregation' (Turner, 1969: 94). To briefly digress from this important conceptual background, Turner's interpretation of 'margin' also corresponds with the societal positionings of the heterogeneous working class, in terms of the status of those marginalised/ existing on the margins by structural design (Illich, 1971; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Reay, 2017). As this review will discuss further, this tripartite process can be viewed as a starting point for resulting threshold concepts used and developed in other disciplines.

To analyse the particularities of change within these areas, the threshold characteristics are examined relationally through a pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal journey (Flanagan, 2014). These three distinct phases form a logical and sequential progression to analyse a transformative action which, as Turner (1969, 1974) suggested, could be superimposed onto a variety of societal or cultural transformations, or plainly speaking - any 'situation or object' (Thomassen, 2009: 16). This understanding provided a form of implied consent for the wider use of these ideas in other disciplines. In discussing the study of social change in the 1960s, Turner (1969: 125) identifies those within its margins from a variety of social standpoints as '*an ill-assorted bunch of social phenomena…Yet all have this common characteristic: they are persons or principles that (I) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs*." It is these so called 'lowest rungs' that are of the greatest interest here. Turner further outlines the stages and attributes the first stage, separation, as one of 'detachment' from a previous set point in the social structure (Turner, 1969: 94). Next is entry into a 'liminal period' before exiting the liminal state and 'reaggregating' after the passage is complete and becomes:

> …a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-a.-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (ibid)

Liminality, hegemony and the 'stuck' working class

This study also considers liminality, or the state of being liminal, as an experience that can be applied to a wide social and cultural spectrum, for example from individuals and social groups, places, space, and time (Thomassen, 2009; 2012). Therefore, there lies the possibility of a social class, or part of it, becoming liminal by structure. Additionally, by also examining the complexities of a structural liminality affecting social-class groups, meaning a liminal state that might be imposed and hidden, and/or imposed against the will of those subjected to it, by social, economic and cultural structures, this concept could be used to foreground the 'stuckness' (Nolan, 2005) of a social group (Turner, 1969). This would then allow the exploration of a paradoxical contention, that is one that does not leave the liminal state and is therefore of a permanent liminal state (permanently in between) (Szakolczai, 2000, 2014; Thomassen, 2012; Johnsen and Sorensen, 2014). Therefore, if their situation is fixed and determined by structures, is being stuck in a permanent flux of uncertainty a 'generalizable experience', perhaps similar to what Deleuze calls 'post-disciplinary societies' (Johnsen and Sorensen, 2014: 322). In post-disciplinary societies, or the 'societies of control' 'one is never finished with anything' (Deleuze, 1992: 5) and is always 'in between' (Johnsen and Sorensen, 2014: 322). This links to Gramsci (1971) and Hall's (1997) work on cultural hegemonies as this concept demonstrates the working class kept suppressed and dulled. It also demonstrates the possibilities that if working-class lives can be considered liminal in a typically linear sense as described, the opportunity of critical literacy education is to be part of the 'reaggregation' that restores the individual after leaving the liminal state (Turner, 1969).

Introducing: Threshold Concepts

As already established in this review, this study's focus on threshold concepts places its conceptual roots in the work of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969), but also acknowledges, and perhaps is more indebted, to the burgeoning work that has followed in the disciplines across academia that have practiced their own bespoke threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003; Rodger, et al., 2017; Heading and Loughlin, 2018). To explore this in greater detail, this study will employ threshold concepts, and in a similar vein to the above, adapted to suit the critical consciousness development of the informal learning group facilitators in this study, to illuminate the potentially dynamic qualities to unpick this form of transition, or 'liminality' that exists between spaces (Shields, 1991). As referenced so far, 'liminality' is a transformative state (Bain, 2003; Schwartzman, 2010) of relative uncertainty (Cousin, 2006) that is 'ascribed to places/spaces which enable users to move beyond their previously circumscribed horizons or ways of behaviour' (Buckingham et al., 2006: 899) and this is a central premise of critical literacy education processes.

The Threshold Concept Framework (TCF) (Meyer and Land, 2003) is a form of critical learning theory heavily influenced by Turner (1969) which, based upon his tripartite threshold model, augments Turner's transformative processes and places them into the lexicon of critical learning theory. This being an attempt to explain the dynamic characteristics of learning, as doing so 'deepens our understanding of critical learning experiences' (Tucker, et al., 2014: 151). The hypothesised benefit is that if teachers or facilitators adopt and work within these frameworks, it may benefit their own pedagogical practice as well as possessing the potential to importantly maximise the learners' own understanding of their own learning journey (Flanagan, 2013; Rodger, et al., 2015). This is through establishing objectives or processes that are key to the subject or topic's area (Tucker et al., 2014) which could allow for a streamlined, targeted 'less is more' (Cousin, 2006, 4) approach to curriculum design. In the field of TCF, developments suggest focus is moving beyond merely identifying threshold concepts but is shifting to how they impact on learners (Cousin, 2008; Rattray, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Felten, 2014). It is evolving, not just as a reaction to critique, but through collaboration with threshold theorists within the broader realms of learning theory, but also importantly for this study, evolving through co-construction with learners. This development is particularly pertinent to this study as one of its concepts, the Participants as Texts Conceptual Model (PCM) illustrates the dynamic interaction of learning thresholds with the learners (in this case facilitators) journey towards critical consciousness development. Furthermore, the trigger for this journey, and other thresholds within the journey, are co-constructed as it involves the facilitators reading of the participants and other dynamic interactions and collaborations.

The TCF, in some cases, has evolved to be co-constructed between those writing about and/or practicing threshold theory and those experiencing it and now reflecting on it (Rodger, et al. 2017). This co-construction is of course reminiscent of learner-led, democratic teaching (Apple, 2014) akin to Freirean critical pedagogy and that it might be held commonplace within a participatory critical literacy education setting. The TCF is generally applied and adapted in formal education settings and using this framework as a basis to explore informal learning and critical literacy education is an area, as far as this study is aware, that is potentially unexplored. Furthermore, its use to explore critical consciousness development, as this study does, is also absent in the literature.

The Transformative

A central theme of this study is the idea of the transformative and a threshold concept is ‘fundamentally transformative’ and can be compared ‘akin to a portal’ (Meyer and Land, 2003 :1). Its transformative nature is the ‘superordinate and non-negotiable’ characteristic (Land, 2014: 2) and in the context of critical literacy education, the transformative is how the individual increases social awareness by potentially encountering a ‘previously inaccessible, and initially perhaps ‘troublesome’, way of thinking about something’ (Meyer and Land, 2005: 373). With discernible comparisons to Freire’s Easter experience (Freire in Taylor, 1993), Land (2014) citing Ross (2011) depicts a transformation akin to a rebirth in regarding individuals (who have emerged, transformed, through these conceptual portals) experiencing a ‘reauthoring of self’ or through ‘undoing the script (Land, 2014: 2) that may also have led to a ‘change in use of discourse’ or a ‘profound identity shift’ (Tucker, et al., 2014 :152).

To observe the potential transformative learning in informal learning groups and explore if critical literacy education is taking place, even if in an impromptu sense (Livingstone, 2001; Baker et al., 2002), the study utilises concepts from the TCF. The framework also importantly characterises the in-between: the messy nature of learning (Cousin, 2006) in which a learner ‘may oscillate between old and emergent understandings’ (4) and may need a number of ‘takes’ before the concepts are understood and embedded (Meyer and Land, 2006: 202) as cited in Cousin (2006: 5). This is particularly interesting to the work in informal learning groups, as the critical literacy education, if incidental, may involve sporadic, spontaneous and inconsistent dialogue on a critical literacy education topic. This means the liminal phases, the transformative state (Bain, 2003; Schwartzman, 2010), may differ. For example, the crossing of thresholds in critical literacy education within informal learning groups may behave very differently to more structured or formalised learning settings that prominent TCF theorists (for example: Meyer and Land, 2003, 2005; Cousin 2006; Flanagan, 2014), have practiced or conceptualised in. This may be due to the inadvertent or impromptu nature of the critical literacy education in informal learning (Marsick and Watkins, 2001), and how sporadic or spontaneous it may be especially if the informal learning groups is set up for another purpose than critical literacy. It is also possible the liminal space between the thresholds may need further attention or a form of recalibration as the increments, advancements or thresholds within thresholds may need to be reconsidered or re-evaluated to best suit a potential ad hoc learning environment (Hansman, 2016).

Threshold Concepts Framework: from critiques to characteristics

The TCF is part of the movement of the spread of threshold concepts through a growing body of disciplines. The opening up of this ‘energising’ and ‘pedagogically fertile’ discussion (Meyer and Land, 2005: 374), has seen peers broadening the discourse throughout disciplines. In terms of applying this to learning theory, as discussed, it has been an on-going process that has seen development since the creation of the TCF and the creation of its initial five threshold characteristics[11] (Meyer and Land, 2003). Ongoing conceptual work informed from practice (Barraddell and Pesseta, 2017; Timmermans and Meyer, 2017; Davies, 2018;) as well as in response to critiques of the TCF (Rowbottom, 2007; O’Donnell, 2010; Delany, 2012; Barradell, 2013; Walker, 2013) has built upon the initial five stages (Meyer and Land, 2003) with an additional three characteristics added in 2005 (by Meyer and Land) to make a new total of eight. These characteristics have been defined in greater detail over time, synthesising contributions by threshold conceptualists (Meyer and Land, 2003, 2005; Cousin 2006, 2010; Perkins, 2006; and others) and have been concisely summarised (Flanagan, 2017)[12]: offering interdisciplinary examples across the conceptual field to add currency as well as cogency and relevance.

As previously discussed in this literature review, the *Transformative* characteristic is fundamental to this study as it illustrates the transformations of how the learner now relates to the learnt subject (Meyer and Land, 2005) – ultimately marking an ontological shift from the old to the new (Flanagan, 2014). The transformative characteristic within critical literacy education learning is potentially the pathway to emancipatory, life-changing, awakenings (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1981; Apple, 2013). The characteristic of *Troublesome*, is a particular interest within a critical literacy education context. If this knowledge, or mode of consciousness (Freire, 1970), is difficult to master beyond mimicry (Cousin, 2006), which is a possibility as critical literacy education concepts, material and approaches could well be perceived as initially ‘alien’ or ‘counter-intuitive’ (Meyer and Land, 2003) to those who have traversed through an education system purported not to facilitate critical literacy adequately (National Literacy Trust Report, 2018a). The dangers of being stuck within the liminality of this characteristic and the anticipated oscillation through troublesome or difficult knowledge

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[11] Transformative; Troublesome; Integrative, Bounded; Irreversible (Meyer and Land, 2003)

[12] The eight characteristics: Transformative, troublesome, discursive, reconstitutive, liminality, irreversible, integrative and bounded; are seen as key gateways within an individual’s progress (Davies and Mangam, 2005) but by entering a learning threshold, it is usual to not experience all of these characteristics (Flanagan, 2014).

(Cousin, 2006), could lead to the fear of freedom where emotions overtake reason and inertia takes hold (Freire, 1970) which result in the critical literacy education not activating its regarded agentic qualities (Lankshear and McClaren, 1993; Comber and Nixon, 1999; Shor, 1999).

Here are Meyer and Land's (2003) characteristics set in relation to this study*: Discursive* – engagement with critical literacy education has potential to develop questioning and dialogic skills (Freire and Faundez, 1989) which can lead to an increased lexicon (Flanagan and Smith, 2008; Flanagan, 2017) particularly in the vocabulary of learned abilities and awakenings of critical literacy education. *Irreversible* – due to the transformation that has taken place, they are unlikely to forget or unlearn (Meyer and Land, 2003), particularly with an ontological shift taking place in the individual. However, as a caveat, this is also interlinked heavily with the *troublesome* characteristic with oscillations, the back and forth and the struggle to progress (Cousin, 2006). *Integrative* – the integrated nature of concepts, how interconnected, or interdependent the ideas are of each other and 'mastery…allows the learner to make connections that were hitherto hidden" (Cousin, 2006: 4). Critical literacy education and its ability to provide reflection upon life may allow the participants to make linkages between their own and a broader social situation (Freire, 1970; 1989). For example, a greater understanding of how policy or structure impacts and how it has shaped their lives (Provenzo, 2005). *Bounded* – any concept will be bounded by 'terminal frontiers' (Meyer and Land, 2006: 200) on the borderland of 'new conceptual ideas' (Flanagan, 2014). For instance, this may be how the lexicon used in critical literacy education may, at times, be distinct and different to meanings used in everyday life therefore bounding its specialist vocabulary within its discipline. *Reconstitutive* - several key questions will be aimed to measure the results of these transformations and the PCM (as discussed in detail in Chapter Eight) demonstrates the facilitators journey to being reconstituted with a developed critical consciousness. In considering the TCF, in relation to the potential critical literacy education learning in the informal learning groups, consideration must be given to the oscillating nature of learning 'the learner just as adolescents often move between adult-like and child-like responses to their transitional status' (Cousin, 2006: 4) and whether a full reconstitution has been fully transformative. Furthermore, the PCM envisages a framework of iteration and the back and forth. *Liminality* – a characteristic already explored within this literature review, although during this in between period of learning is considered a careful balance of certainties (Walker, 2013) and where mimicry can mask false understanding (Meyer and Land, 2005).

Informal, formal and non-formal learning

Informal learning is an umbrella term for a vast spectrum of learning types existing outside of the parameters of formal learning’s aims and typology (Livingstone, 1991; McGivney, 1999). It can present in a whole manner of ways: planned courses or programmes, regular meetings, sporadic meetings, work-based incidents or events, unplanned events and so on. It usually does not have a curriculum or formal accreditation (although it can sometimes provide forms of accreditation outside of formally recognised qualifications). It can occur incidentally anywhere, including, seemingly paradoxically, within formal education (Allaste et al., 2021), perhaps triggered by a conversation or an observation, as an impromptu form of informal learning (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Allaste et al., 2021).

The distinctions between informal/formal/non-formal learning are not absolute as they intersect (Eddy, 2022). This is dependent upon what the informal learning is and where - as informal learning is dependent upon its place, space and who is involved (Filippoupoliti and Koliopoulos, 2014). To briefly offer definition to the terms used, formal learning is planned and intentional (Yeasmin et al., 2020) with learning objectives with summative accreditation and qualifications (Pienimäki et al., 2021). It is usually structured, uses a curriculum (Alnajjar, 2021) and is typically heavily scrutinised and evaluated in terms of measuring learning and success (Ball, 2010; Alnajjar, 2021). Examples of typical places of formal learning in England could be a school, college or university. Non-formal learning has visible tenets of formal education, as described above, in terms of planning, and qualifications and so on, but usually takes place outside of typical formal education spaces, reducing barriers to those disenfranchised by formal education (Gee, 2015). Adult and community education in England could typically be seen as non-formal learning particularly prior to its overtly utilitarian reshaping in the 2010s (Bowl, 2017; Tuckett, 2017). Distinguishing non-formal education from informal learning is not always clear, for example, many informal learning groups may have specific learning aims and objectives that formal/non formal education may have (Colley et al., 2002). Therefore, although various distinctions can be made to separate informal learning from formal and non-formal learning’s spheres - there still exists a comfortable ambiguity between the types as forms of recognisable learning are taking place, and forms of organisation, pedagogy are present, (Hodkinson et al., 2003; Ainsworth and Eaton, 2010; Czerkawski, 2016).

Informal Learning Groups

In terms of the current literature, there appears to be no other ethnographic studies into informal learning groups investigating critical literacy education within an English (or beyond) context, therefore, there is no directly relational literature to discuss within this section. Furthermore, as informal learning is a vast spectrum of many variations, this study is specific in its interests relating to a certain type of it, rather than exploring the context and literature around the entire area. This study is interested specifically in informal learning groups (for example books clubs, gardening groups, and so on) that meet in person on a regular basis, based in working-class communities or that are accessible by working-class people.

Within these groups, possibilities exist not only for different forms of learning to take place, but also a place for where the learning is linked to socialisation (Ivaniushina and AlekS&Rov, 2015; Johnson and Majewska, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2022). This not only extends possibilities for emancipatory learning such as critical literacy, as a change in realities and world views may change perspectives and cultures within the group (National Literacy Trust, 2018a). This may develop as the participants then instinctively form collectives, set their own cultural values and norms and inspire collective actions (Gavrillets and Richerson, 2017).

Incidental impromptu informal learning

As the informal learning groups are based around many different themes, the concept of incidental or impromptu learning is of great interest to this study of critical literacy education. Informal learning groups, such as ones themed around discussion or analysis of texts (book clubs, reading groups and so on), may knowingly or unknowingly practice critical literacy education as part of planned learning activities (although this planned learning is typically informal and usually different from formal and non-formal education as the planning is not guided or prescribed from a curriculum). Forms of unplanned, incidental or impromptu learning may also play a significant role in critical literacy education within these groups, as learning opportunities diverge from the intended learning or social purpose of the group (Livingstone, 2001; Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Allaste et al., 2021). Impromptu learning can occur at any point and with specific regard to the informal learning groups, at any point during, pre or post, session through various stimulus (Jefferies and Nguyen 2014). Central to the research questions of this study, instances of impromptu learning can act as a mechanism for disrupting the commonplace (Lewison et al., 2002; Nam, 2020; Brown, and

Savić, 2023) whereby the recipients' worldview is disrupted or disorientated – a starting point of critical literacy education and critical consciousness development (Lewison et al., 2002).

The implicit learning of critical literacy has many possibilities in such an environment as it is a 'process whereby learners construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge through conversations' (Baker et al., 2002: 51). This expands informal learning's potential for critical literacy education as it can also include groups without an explicit critical literacy learning theme. Group dialogue may possess embedded critical literacy discourses, or impromptu 'off tangent' conversations may border cross into critical literacy domains (Polayani, 1967; Eraut, 2000). Implicit learning in dynamic learning spaces contribute to discourse of unconscious threshold crossing that is of interest to this research.

All over the world people must meet and part: international case studies

Since Freire (1970), the spread of critical pedagogy and critical literacy practices throughout the world, including much of the English-speaking world, has produced a variety of conceptual developments and discourse (for example from; Apple, 1999; Giroux, 1983; Luke, 2000; Janks, 2000; Lewison et al., 2002; Shannon, 1995, 2002; Johnson, 2022). This spread and uptake of critical literacy practices, which as stated, have produced regional and localised variations in concept and application, allows distinctions, as well as similarities, to be identified between them. The type of critical literacy applied in practice is dependent upon the basis of its creation: the social history, context and climate, amongst other things, of geographical areas (Luke, 2011). This notion is important within this study as it examines explicit and implicit critical literacy practices in Sanford that can be found elsewhere, particularly in places that suffered oppression, but also the inadvertent critical literacy practice of the facilitator reading the participant. So, considering this, whilst a consensus exists there is not a unilateral or 'correct' form of critical literacy (Comber, 2013), amongst the differences and ambiguity there are identifiable similarities and overlap with emancipatory concepts and critical literacy practices across the spectrum (Lankshear and McLaren, 1993; Rosenblatt, 2004; Luke, 2011).

Acknowledging the variations in versions or models of critical literacy education lends weight to the argument it is typically regionally shaped or localised (Luke, 2011), but also within these models, approaches and attitudes, there may be commonalities crystallised to sensitise interpretations to the themes and findings of this study (Lankshear and McClaren, 1993). Critical pedagogy aims to redress inequality within and through the education process to challenge the discourse between teaching and learning through an on-going process of praxis (McGloin, 2008; Magill and Salinas, 2019). Naturally, despite the consensus critical literacy cannot be neatly defined, attempts have been made to establish the common ground and the ‘overlapping components…[of] core principles for the “transformative elements” in critical literacy pedagogy’ (Bishop, 2014:55). These identified principles include: mobilising for action; establishing which issues are important to learners’ lives; researching, questioning and analysing these issues; deciding upon action and undertaking action; and reflection to inform future action (ibid). To highlight many of the conditions affecting how practices emerged in different regions in recent history, four short case studies will follow in Chapter Four that will briefly discuss regions where its development has been arguably most notable over the past few decades: South Africa, Australia and the USA (Vasquez, 2017). The final case study looks at England and its relationship with critical literacy education.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a background and theory of critical literacy, critical pedagogy and their potential for critical consciousness development. Forms of measuring critical consciousness were examined with Frere (1970) and his qualitative approach; and more recent works who favoured a quantitative approach to establishing levels of critical consciousness (McWhirter and McWhirter, 2015; Shin et al, 2016; Diemer et al., 2017). The chapter also addressed the concept of texts – and that texts are not fixed objects (Lim, 201) and it is the reader who assigns what is a text and what is not (Wilson, 2012). The next chapter, as already introduced, will look at case studies of critical literacy and its journey across the world.

Chapter Four – Applying theory to practice: critical literacy themed case studies

Introduction

This chapter explores critical literacy practices in a range of countries enabling insight into critical literacy education in different contexts. Examples of critical literacy education rising as a resistance to oppression, and as a respite to oppression's damage, in a variety of community and learning environments are explored. Examples are also provided of thriving cultures of critical literacy education being carefully extinguished by the smothering hands of those who benefit least from a critically aware population (Giroux, 2004). However, whilst this discussion is not in any form attempting to crassly compare oppression or offer reductionist regional histories of oppression, exploring localisations can shed light on reactions to the devastation caused by neoliberalism and austerity in the research area. Oppressive actions, by definition, can stimulate and create resistance to an oppression that has changed the landscape of working-class England within the past few decades (Featherstone et al., 2015).

International case studies have been selected to provide insights into their differing critical literacy experiences due to their individual evolution and setting. In South Africa, critical literacy arose in the end years of state apartheid combined with the emancipatory promises of a burgeoning democracy (Janks, 2000; Mathebula, 2018). In Australia, pockets of critical pedagogy and critical literacy education practice are observable in 20th Century adult education, and a wave of prominent critical literacy theorists and practitioners promote its practice in mainstream schools – albeit set against an ever-increasing amount of political and bureaucratic opposition (Morgan, 2002, Luke 2011). In the USA, the development of culturally responsive teaching which forefronts contextualised learning for ethnically or culturally marginalised groups has clear links to critical pedagogy and critical literacy theory (Lopez, 2011). Culturally responsive teaching has radical antecedents, as it can trace its roots back to Civil Rights Movement (Vavrus, 2008), particularly with the progressive work of The Highlander Folk School in the 1950s (Ladson-Billings, 1996). Case studies from: Australia, South Africa, USA and England are utilised to analyse regional variations, commonalities and barriers to this practice. Including a range of experiences, from state organised critical literacy programmes, to radical and organic interventions. They contribute to discourses of a common critical literacy experience, despite diverse variables that could be seen to separate cases as individual and regionalised (Gamble, 2009; Cepiku, et al., 2016; Kim and Warner, 2016; Davies 2017; Fishwick and Connolly, 2018). This reiterates the study's significance beyond the northern English post-industrial experience, as international case studies demonstrate how critical literacy education can be stifled by neoliberal hegemonic institutions across the global north and global south (Giroux, 2009; McClaren, 2009), as well as being part of a response and resistance to oppression (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, each case study describes the oppositional forces these movements were met with, including ways neoliberal ideologies can co-opt resistance movements (Arfken, 2013; 2018).

Following the case studies there is also a brief discussion regarding influential resources used in critical literacy practice in each of the countries. However, the case studies are not meant to piece together a holistic world overview of critical literacy education development. Nor are they attempting to provide a detailed history of such in each country, case or situation, or make the complex agents and conditions in each country seem somewhat simplistic, or somehow to underplay them and potentially misrepresent their history. It is this notion that is also important to this study, critical literacy experiences may not always be published, recorded adequately or may have been somehow disregarded, unwittingly or not. It is however hoped this research will uncover some of Sanford's own stories of critical pedagogy and critical literacy practice that have previously been unreported. From this discussion of different critical literacy development and resources, it may offer a valuable insight into how critical literacy education has developed and is practiced in different cultures and learning environments.

South Africa: the rise from apartheid

Resistance groups, in 1980s apartheid South Africa, made a commitment to emancipatory concepts becoming a fundamental part of a new educational ethos post-apartheid (Kruss, 1988). It was apparent that in striving for a new progressive state, it would need a new adult education programme to readdress apartheid's legacy of illiteracy (Kruss,1988; McKay and Romm 2010). With calls for 'people's education for people's power' (Mathebula, 2013: 5), the People's Education Movement helped coordinate the protests against state apartheid education (Kruss, 1988). Chetty (2015) explained this involved a series of boycotts, demonstrations and disruptive actions, with resistance demanding not only greater access to education for all, but a greater equality and democracy within education within a future 'counter-hegemonic education strategy' (Kruss, 1988: 8). McKay and Romm (2010) additionally argued for the need for functional skills to allow wider economic participation, this new education system was initially intended to also contain the development of a critical capacity to enable wider political and social participation. At the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee conference in 1985, The People’s Education decreed future education would include fostering active participation, collective action, critical thinking and analysis as it readied the people for ‘total human liberation’ (Mkhatshwa, 1985: 14).

Prominent South African critical literacy theorist and practitioner Hilary Janks (2000), who ‘cut her critical literacy teeth against apartheid’ (p.175), synthesised critical literacy concepts from practice across the world. She recognised that despite the varied conceptualisations of critical literacy, a primary concern touching each is the relationship between language and power – arguing with each ‘foregrounding one or other of domination, access, diversity and design’ (p.176). However, these conceptualisations are considered ‘interdependent’ and are not to be seen as ‘separate enterprises’ (p.178). McKinney (2009) proposes this approach, clearly developed in an environment oppositional to the apartheid state, was grounded in and centres around the development of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2009). Janks (2013) identified its use to deconstruct and then reconstruct everyday texts that are contextual to the learners’ lives and the world around them, it analyses broad themes such as racist imagery, to ‘water elitism’ - concerning the marketing and consumption of bottled water (p.6). Interestingly, Janks’ idea of deconstruction to reconstruction also reflects the social and political history of the country – with the collapse of apartheid and the nation’s rebirth post-apartheid. Within this discourse around contextualised texts, the critical literacy education participants also emphasise the importance of understanding identity by how they are themselves ‘positioned by the texts under study’ (McKinney, 2009: 66). Janks’ approach sets about the ‘deconstructing the language of the oppressor’ and seeks ‘an emancipatory discourse’ (2000:176). Therefore, returning to the process reflecting change in South Africa, critical literacy education in this case can be seen as attempting to, intentionally or not, uphold the decreed values of the People’s Education and contribute the transition of South Africa from apartheid onwards with the reconstruction of individuals in a new South Africa (Janks, 2000).

The Kha Ri Gude

As Janks’ work primarily concerned young adults and children, various initiatives began to tackle low literacy levels in adults in South Africa, such as The Kha Ri Gude (Let Us Learn) and Adult Literacy Programme (KGALP). Established in 2008, it not only promoted basic literacy skills but also used contextualised learning based around the important social or economic contexts of the learners (McKay, 2015). Literacy learning is embedded into topics that may affect low-income South African adults in everyday life, such as AIDS/HIV, racism, race relations and issues of human rights. Furthermore, the programme set out to use active learning methods, be culturally responsive to local languages and values (McKay, 2015; Wagner et al., 2016) and promote the Freirean idea of 're-envision' – for the learners to envisage and construct their own futures (Romm and Dichaba, 2015). However, the success of KGALP is contentious amongst commentators, despite recognition from UNESCO, literacy levels are reportedly still relatively low as the programme did not reach pre-determined targets (McKay, 2015). The programme was phased out in 2017, however, research also suggests that increases in political, civic and community participation were apparent in several of those who attended the scheme, as were other cultural benefits (such increased confidence for cross-cultural communication) with increases to economic prospects and self-esteem also reported (McKay, 2017).

Forgetting Freire

Despite programmes such as KGALP concerns were voiced that access to such educational opportunity was limited in traditionally disadvantaged areas (Chetty, 2019). Adult education is still perceived as underfunded and a low priority in the South African education system (McKay, 2015), evidenced by problems encountered by KGALP, with a reported lack of, or belatedly supplied, resources being provided for the course, as well as high levels of learner absenteeism (Dichaba and Dhlamini, 2013). Furthermore, fears were raised of the Freirean principles that informed the educational reform movements of the 1980s and 1990s were being increasingly forgotten (Chetty, 2015) as the education system became neo-liberalised (Sebake, 2017; Mathebula, 2018). After the ANC were elected in 1994, there was, in terms of policy and direction an 'unravelling of the revolutionary dialectic' (Murray, 1994 cited in Narsiah, 2002: 29) with the government moving from leftist policies to those of the capitalist, neoliberal (Sebake, 2017). Discussion of how this volte face happened so quickly varies, however, the influence of the World Bank (who had interests in much of South Africa's elites and infrastructure) coupled with international concerns about the Marxist leanings of the ANC – led to pressures from powerful institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund for South Africa to reject Marxism and adopt neoliberal policies (Fourie, 2022). Others have seen deemed it a more pragmatic move towards neoliberalism, with South Africa facing massive budget deficits and the risk of further global isolation pursuing socialism, the government changed in ethos – although this change in direction hit the poorest the hardest (Sebake, 2017).

As evidence of a return to traditional literacy learning methods are becoming more apparent (Chetty, 2015) the radical ideals and promises the resistance declared in the 1980s, such as the ‘people’s education for people’s power, are apparently increasingly diluted and gradually replaced by the tools of democratic elitism (Mathebula, 2013, 2018).

Australia: the rise and fall…

In Australia, calls for a literacy approach in schools beyond the functional can be traced back to at least the 1980s, with approaches to critical literacy being instilled with the common belief reading and writing are instruments of social power (Luke, 2000). Critical pedagogy and critical literacy practices flourished during this time with English teachers (of all sectors), influenced by British Cultural Studies’ take on post-structuralism (Mellor and Paterson, 2004), were granted an autonomy to decide how they interpreted the curriculum, and largely did so using a range of resources and social discourses (Morgan, 1997). This, alongside influential critical literacy practitioners growing in prominence in the country (such as the afore-cited Luke), influenced the growth of critical literacy and critical pedagogy practices into the mainstream curriculum (Morgan, 1997). This was not without controversy and criticism, with increasing calls from politically right-leaning agendas for a return to more ‘traditional approaches’ to teaching literacy (Turner, 2007), eventually leading to a recent shift away from critical literacy education practices in the curriculum (Luke, 2018; Pandya, 2019).

State-run critical literacy – an oxymoron or a tool of the state?

With critical literacy education being brought into the mainstream in the late 20th Century, an unease was voiced regarding whether these approaches may be diluted, convoluted or lose their critical spirit. Or, to put it another way, ‘is critical literacy in a state-based educational system an oxymoron?’ (Luke, 2000: 448-449). Issues were also raised about its increasingly prescriptive nature becoming akin to a dogma (Misson and Morgan, 2006) as well as a noted concern of a lack of praxis in Australian critical literacy. Fears not only included concerns of the closeness of the state to critical literacy practice – but also a perceived culture of teachers not necessarily seeing the practice as being transformative (Morgan, 1997). Therefore, this critical literacy education was largely not considered to be oppositional, as per, for example the origins of South African context, due to the ‘systematic means of maintaining a modified, de-radicalised critical literacy…through a complex ensemble of social discourses, institutions and practices’ (Morgan, 1997:25). Instead, it was perceived by critics to be a tool to carry out the government's notion of social justice (ibid). It also must be noted that through the 1980s/1990s/2000s, Australia was governed by the Labor Party until 1996, followed by successive conservative Liberal headed coalitions – which reduced state intervention, cut back public spending and had grave implications for social equity (Reid, 2011). Also, in addition to this, the conservative criticisms of 'post-modern' critical literacy education approaches were growing into the new century (Morgan, 1997; Donnelly, 1998) with critical literacy education approaches receiving the blame for poor standardised test results through their 'mumbo jumbo' approaches to English (Luke, 2008). Perhaps an observation could be made that the conservatives were attempting their own future-proofing by denying the young generation a critical mind and voice.

Critical pedagogy and critical literacy have not always been perceived to be a part of state apparatus in Australia. In the 1940s, the Australian Communist Party opened working-class education centres across major Australian cities (Boughton, 2005). These centres (known as Marx Schools) were unsurprisingly, considering the environment of the time, largely vilified. This was not just for the explicit political dogma associated with these schools that aimed, amongst other aspirations, to raise class consciousness, but also through an evident class prejudice, largely from the middle-class academic elite, outraged by working-class pedagogues teaching Marx, Hegel et al. to the working class (Boughton, 2005).

Australian adult education

Also, at a similar time to the start of the UK's Adult Literacy campaign in the 1970s (Haviland, 1974), the Australian adult literacy programmes offered the opportunity for exploratory emancipatory ideologies to be practiced, with suitably-minded individual educators/organisations incorporating Freirean pedagogies into their literacy teaching (Black and Bee, 2017). There was a reported informality in this learning (although qualifications could be attained) with student-centred democratic practices being at the forefront (ibid). However, in the late 1990s, market needs began to take precedence and in turn reshaped the format and purpose of adult education courses, including literacy, into having a utilitarian focus and outcomes. Funding of adult education reflected this change, meaning organisations became subject to regulation and scrutiny in the form of audits to establish how funding was being used and were accountable for its product: results (Black and Reich, 2010). In a strikingly similar vein to English adult education, and adult education across much of the global north, neoliberal ideologies began to take hold of education policy and spending (Black and Yasukawa, 2014). Meaning since that change, adult literacy in Australia has been perceived as ‘as not so much as an intrinsic good, but as integral for individual job success, the profitability of enterprises, national productivity and international competitiveness’ (Lo Bianco and Wickert, 2001; cited in Black and Bee, 2017: 187).

Indigenous programmes

However, there have been examples of individual programmes in recent times that have used critical pedagogies embedded into the teaching of literacy. For instance, the adoption of the Cuban Literacy Campaign model in a literacy-based programme for indigenous Australian students in outback Australia had reported great successes in both raising literacy but also supporting cultural heritage issues and social justice issues (Boughton and Durnan, 2014). Furthermore, indigenous controlled community colleges began to offer specific educational training to meet the disadvantages faced by indigenous peoples. These colleges seek to develop literacy skills, alongside increasing social awareness, with many colleges based around promoting social participation and mobilising social change (Schwab and Sutherland, 2001). Additionally, with the Australian case it is also important to acknowledge throughout the late 1990s and into the new millennium, post-colonialist and critical race theories were increasingly becoming important prisms for reflecting Australian societal constructs and its colonial history in academia (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). In view of this, Morgan (1997) identifies three connected strands that ‘emphasise Australian critical literacy’ firstly, the feminist and post-structuralist works which have offered teachers a language and concept base for critical literacy; secondly Australian Cultural Studies work which has provided ways for educators to view and analyse media; and thirdly, the socio-linguistical work, including Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis, which has had a great influence on Australian critical literacy education (p.23).

USA: responding to culture and class? Culturally Responsive Teaching

In response to evidence of stark inequity that demonstrated African-American children were consistently behind their white peers in terms of school achievement and attainment (Brown-Jeffy and Cooper, 2011), culturally responsive teaching[13] is practiced in certain areas of the United States (Gay, 2010). Developed and influenced by critical pedagogies and critical race theory (Decuir and Dixson, 2004), culturally responsive teaching seeks to challenge the social and cultural inequalities of education by contextualising learning according to the learner’s culture and own cultural reference points (Stoicovy, 2002). This is to break down cultural barriers and enhance learning by making it relevant to the cultural lens of the student/learner, which in turn, is hoped to increase the effectiveness of their learning as well as also seeking to empower the learner emotionally, socially, intellectually and politically (Ladson-Billings,1994; Moje, 2007; Au, 2015). As critical pedagogy and critical literacy are viewed as continually evolving, or being of not one single form (Comber, 2013), culturally responsive teaching is also a process of perpetual development as the teacher learns with the learners in mutual collaboration (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive teaching utilises constructivist methods, as it builds upon a learners’ existing knowledge to situate themselves in relation to their history and social world, whilst supporting the construction of new knowledge and understanding with new ideas from this viewpoint (Epstein et al., 2011: 5). The identified characteristics of culturally responsive teaching include liberation, transformation and the facilitation of empowerment (ibid; Lipman, 1995; Gay, 2010) share commonality with critical literacy and critical pedagogy practices as it arises from a critique of the status-quo (Lopez, 2011). It is seen to build upon the Freirean practice of using a learner’s own culture and experience to enhance their learning, how they ‘read the world’ but also to make learning relevant and effective (Bowers and Flinders, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

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[13] Alternatively referred to as ‘culturally responsive education’ or ‘culturally responsive pedagogy’

Closing the achievement gap

Culturally responsive teaching also aims to reduce the racial and ethnic achievement gap in literacy results, particularly with students from Afro-American, Latin or indigenous minority backgrounds (Cheeseman and De Pry, 2010) without the need to culturally align with the dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). There is an array of statistics that in particular demonstrate black American marginalisation in education, from much higher rates of expulsion from high-school, to black children being over-represented in special educational needs groups (Blanchett, 2006). As the teacher is often the embodiment of the dominant culture to a learner, this increases the notions of alienation and distrust between the teacher-learner relations, which can further deteriorate through cultural ambivalence or misunderstanding. For instance, the ways the individual has learnt to communicate from within their own cultural practices can be problematic: a direct style of communication, that is a norm in some African- American cultures, can be judged to be lacking in respect or even be perceived as aggressive in the classroom by the dominant classroom culture (Shade et al., 1997).

Gay’s five elements of culturally responsive teaching

To support the adoption of the culturally informed approach, theorists/practitioners have provided guidelines for practitioners. For instance, Gay outlines five basics of culturally responsive teaching which are essential for those who are practicing (2002). Firstly, cultural competence: this must include an understanding of the ‘cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups’ (p.107). This can include how children/learners interact with adults/teachers in these cultures, gender roles, and attitudes towards cooperation and learning. Essentially, respecting different cultures may hold different values (ibid). Secondly, designing a suitable curriculum and using cultural competence to make this accessible for learners and without avoiding ‘controversial’ topics such as racism, power imbalances, historical injustices et cetera (p.108). Thirdly, ‘demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community’ - creating a positive learning environment and uses ‘cultural scaffolding’ to enable learners to build upon existing knowledge and expand their horizons (p.109). Fourthly, cross-cultural communication – learners need to be able to communicate effectively with their teachers/practitioners/facilitators to learn (p.110). Finally, cultural congruity – the teaching facility/delivery must be multi-cultural and deeply embedded – learning objectives, instructions should be modified or adapted to suit the learners’ culture (p.112). These are perceived as increasingly important, as the simplification of CRT methods heightened by an alleged lack of research into its achievements, raises a difficulty in resisting its marginalisation in a neoliberal education system that is based on results (Sleeter, 2012).

Part of the neoliberal machine?

Culturally responsive teaching has also been accused of succumbing to, or being part of, the globalisation of education, which indicates the power of ‘neoliberal ideology in overriding and undermining critical education projects’ (Zachary et al.; 2013: 54) as part of neoliberalism’s self-protective nature against critical dialogue as Arfken (2013, 2018) argues. The primary discussion centres around embedded neoliberal structures in culturally responsive teaching’s operation that are synonymous with effective classroom management systems, especially in terms of a belief culturally responsive teaching is driven by ultimate functional ends: to improve results which thus serves the neoliberal marketplace (Zachary et al., 2013). This classroom management also sets out focus on managing learners with ‘expectations on behaviour’ (p.52) which is accused of lacking authentic democracy. Questions are raised about its pedagogical practice, in particular the contrast between employing effective classroom management with utilitarian ends and supporting a learning environment of social justice. There is also emphasis of the doubts concerning the legitimacy of the anti-racism message within culturally responsive teaching's practice with the 'impossibility of neoliberal anti-racism' (p.51) and underlying problems of culturally responsive teaching's goal of being practiced in the mainstream – as mainstream 'often means white-stream, neo-liberal, individualism' (p.52).

The Highlander Folk School

The available research and practice of culturally responsive teaching appears to have been mainly made in formal education for children and young adults, only limited examples of culturally responsive teaching research and practice appear to be available within the adult education sector in the USA (Rhodes, 2015). However, The Highlander Folk School which began in the 1930s (currently known as The Highlander Research and Education Center), still offers training to adults based around social justice principles and critical pedagogy practices. Although since relocated from its original site, it still seeks to use education to support people in empowering themselves, using participatory methods to bring adults together from different backgrounds to discuss issues that are important to their lives – with the ethos being based around collective working, learning about others' opinions and lives (Baker, et al., 2008). The school's focus has changed over the period of its existence, typically moving in response to social justice needs – for example, in the 1950s, it centred around the Civil Rights Movement (ibid). The concepts practiced at the school were very progressive for its time as well as risky, considering the environment of racism, racial tension and fears of the spread of communism in post-war America. The school advocated radical democratic teaching methods; working towards collective action and a radical acceptance that disturbance and conflict is necessary as a political means to an end (Clark, 1978). Attendees of school included Rosa Parks and the school was vilified in sections of the media for its role in the Civil Right Movement and its supposed 'subversive' or 'communist' teachings (Horton et al., 1990).

Highlander aimed to develop leadership qualities in attendees so they could return to their communities to awaken the oppressed and begin their own liberation (Morris, 1991).The learners/participants ranged in backgrounds, some were former participants who would share their experiences, others were perceived as having 'leadership potential' and were there by invite of the centre, others attended ad-hoc which was sometimes permitted (Horton, 1989). With no physical learning resources (such as textbooks) and no specific plan of discussion, seated in circles, many participants often unwittingly (and sometimes unwantedly) found themselves as the speakers/teachers, with the centre staff sometimes not wanting to appear to force their own beliefs on the learning group (Horton et al., 1990). The role of the 'teacher' was perceived as that of a stimulus, with the notion being that the oppressed know about their oppression best, as well as the solutions to it, so the stimuli was there to catalyse the critical reflection necessary to take action (Ladson-Billings, 1996). Thus, the Freirean value of mutual learning was emphasised in practice here, as participants acted as both learners and teachers (Thayer-Bacon, 2004). Highlander, for many different reasons has changed physically, still shares many values of its past.

Culturally Indigenous Pedagogy

As culturally responsive teaching looks to address cultural inequalities for the education of black and ethnic minorities in the US, a further adaption of Freirean critical pedagogy has been developed to focus specifically on the cultural repression and educational inequalities experienced by indigenous minorities in what is known as critical indigenous pedagogy (Garcia and Shirley, 2012). As literacy learning is typically only offered in the dominant language and culture, critical indigenous pedagogy was developed in response to concerns that this undermines and potentially destroys aboriginal or indigenous people's culture and language (Kee and Carr-Chellman, 2019). The basis of critical indigenous pedagogy is informed by research, initially through an ethnographic study of American youth who ethnically identify as American Navajo. Critical indigenous pedagogy uses minorities' own culture as well as their personal and collective colonisation traumas and experiences, including their internalisation of Western culture (ibid). These are used as the foundation to support the development of a critical consciousness, agency and the potential restoration of their culture and knowledge (Kee and Carr-Chellman, 2019: 94). In discussing Freirean pedagogy itself in relation to indigenous groups, it has been accused of reinforcing colonialist ideologies. It has been claimed that Freire posits rural indigenous cultures as uncritical, naïve and waiting to be transformed into a class consciousness based on Leftist European ideologies, which contributes to destroying indigenous cultures (Bowers and Apffel-Marglin, 2005; Kee and Carr-Chellman, 2019). Furthermore, that any liberation designed outside of the indigenous groups reinforces the paternalist view: culturally subordinate, lacking in agency and action - they are not able to produce their own emancipation (Blackburn, 2000 cited in Kee and Carr-Chellman, 2019). However, if Freire's discourse of liberation can be accused of this, it should also be acknowledged that Freire is also clear that his work should not be imported (Ayers et al., 1998) and that the oppressed need to liberate themselves and cannot be liberated by others (Freire, 1970). Freire also is explicit about the banking of educator's knowledge into learners making the case for the importance of valuing learners' culture, knowledge and experience, and not to dismiss it (ibid). Specifically here, in practice, Freire also discusses the importance of the educator learning and using words that were important to the learners' culture and experience, he referred to these words as 'generative themes' which would help unlock the learning of new words (Freire, 1970).

England: a view from the inside

In England, where this study is situated, there have not been any comparable schemes or plans to explicitly adopt meaningful critical literacy as part of the national curriculum, or within formalised adult literacy provision, as there has been in other countries discussed in this study, such as Australia for example. The influence of the British Culture Studies is accepted to have been central to the development of critical literacy elsewhere in the world, notably in Australia (Turner, 2002; Mellor and Patterson, 2004). In discussing the impact of the 'Birmingham School' (The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham), Hall (2007) claimed that '…without Richard Hoggart, there would have been no Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies…without The Uses of Literacy, there would have been no Cultural Studies' (p.4). The Birmingham School's context was post-war Britain with its numerous youth subcultures, visible class conflict and moves towards a mass consumer society (Carrabine, 2017). Hoggart's (1957) *Uses of Literacy* forewarned of the objects of alienation and distractions that was to come, with the mass culture, media and entertainments pacifying the masses, leaving them vulnerable to the mass persuaders of today: Farage, Trump or Johnson (Hanley, 2017). Cultural Studies envisaged culture and cultural production as a means of working towards social change (Turner, 2015). For example, in becoming director of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Hoggart attacked the 'narrowness' of how English literature was taught in schools, thus anticipating a reduction in opportunities for working class children to develop criticality (Schulman, 1993). British Cultural Studies also played an important role in adult education with the university extra-mural teaching – including Hoggart in Hull (Steele, 2020). The opportunity to provide a space for critical development was not wasted as Williams points out that he saw adult education as the chance to provide 'politics by other means' (Williams, 1979: 69).

Right to Read

The identification of the poor literacy levels of conscripts in World War Two lead to various adult literacy initiatives within the armed forces during the war, making it the biggest provider of literacy in England at that time, but only accessible for serving adults (MoE, 1950; Jones and Marriot, 1995; Crang, 2000; Lavender and Tuckett, 2020). Despite these findings in conscripts, it was after decades of pressure (Limage, 1990; Jones and Marriot, 1995; Lavender and Tuckett, 2020) before a national campaign for adult literacy began in 1975 for civilians, with the Right to Read campaign (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). This was not part of the government's formal further education offer, instead funded by local authorities for just one year (Lavender and Tuckett, 2020). Right to Read was largely volunteer led, with its facilitation open to practitioner interpretation and gained national coverage to recruit learners through BBC programming, with the 'On the Move' series (Jones and Marriot, 1995; Taylor, 2008; Ade-Ojo and Duckworth, 2017; Jones, 2021). This was part of a three-year BBC strategy to improve literacy of adults, which also provided training for potential adult literacy practitioners in the form of radio programming (Bugler, 1975). Right to Read in practice was informal, non-didactic and facilitated in a range of community spaces (Hamilton and Merrifield, 1999) that bears similarity to the informal learning groups of Sanford. Therefore, with interest to this study, practitioners involved in Right to Read, influenced by recently translated work of Freire, practiced forms of critical literacy education in informal settings: using texts to question normative ideologies, highlighting power relations and marginalised groups (Lavender and Tuckett, 2020). This was not without difficulties, particularly in the practical sense, as confusion in how to apply Freire's approach for tutors who were often from a formal school background, however using Freire's liberation theory[14], helped a group of practitioners create their own pedagogical model 'a language learning approach' (p.34). This emancipatory approach, much like Freire (1970), utilised the adults' own knowledge and experience and foregrounded their voice.

From Right to Read to the rise of neoliberal reforms

From Right to Read, with the dawn of Thatcherism, the political and emancipatory potential of adult literacy was a threat to the new neoliberal government, and adult literacy in England began to become more formalised and directed towards utilitarian purposes (Papen, 2005; Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). This reframing of adult literacy towards employment was an attempt recalibrate it with neoliberal financial logic, whilst also neutralising its political agency

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[14] Freire explains that the interests of the oppressors must be replaced by the interests of the oppressed

(Ade-Ojo and Duckworth, 2015). The former learner-centred approaches towards adult literacy significantly reduced in this period as content and aims became increasingly underpinned by funding demands (Taylor, 2008), which is a trend that intensified in the 2010s (Tett et al., 2012).

The Skills for Life agenda, launched in the first term of the New Labour government of 1997, with a provision of 1.5 billion pounds in funding to increase its remit across England and Wales (Hamilton and Hillier, 2007). Its aim was to reduce social exclusion and adult illiteracy across the country for economic and political ends (Lucas, 2018). This, underscored by the Leitch Review (2006), demonstrated its neoliberal underpinnings with the drive linked to the country's competitiveness on a global scale (Tett et al., 2012). The Skills for Life programme prescribed an adult curriculum to be taught and embedded in all teaching, thus taking more control of what was happening in adult classrooms across the country (Taylor, 2008).

Learning in the 2010s

During the time of this research, England's state schools are set up to provide rote learning, or what Freire described as 'banking' (1970). This uncritical approach banks facts and actions rather than learning to critically question (Micheltti, 2010). This learning is then measured by high stakes testing that places stress upon the student and a huge amount of pressure on the teacher (Reay, 2017; Tuckett, 2017) without providing the means to intellectually develop the learner beyond functional means (Reay, 2020). Furthermore, the accountability faced by its teachers means acting beyond this type of pedagogy is beset by multiple barriers (Reay, 2017). These include prescriptive curriculums, internal and external policing and ingrained performative labours that both occupy great swathes of time of the teacher whilst inbuilding the need to meet targets (Ball, 2003). Unquestionably, this is not an environment where one can develop as a critical thinker (Zahid, 2021) and recently a table compiled by the OECD placed England's school children near the bottom for critical thinking skills (2021).

The National Literacy Trust Report

Prior to this study commencing, a report by The National Literacy Trust raised concerns regarding critical literacy skills in English school children (2018b:4):

> Only 2% of children have the critical literacy skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake.

> Half of children (49.9%) are worried about not being able to spot fake news.
>
> Two-thirds of children (60.6%) now trust the news less as a result of fake news.
>
> Two-thirds of teachers (60.9%) believe fake news is harming children’s well-being, increasing their anxiety levels.
> Half of teachers (53.5%) believe that the national curriculum does not equip children with the literacy skills they need to identify fake news.

This report made a series of recommendations to address the above areas (see National Literacy Trust, 2018a), with none of these, to the best of my knowledge, in 2023, notably addressed. The report rightly questions the role and responsibilities of the media in validating fake news stories, but inevitably falls short of explaining or even addressing why the media might validate ‘fake news’ stories. Here, it also reveals its own attitude towards critical literacy as it tends to treat critical literacy as an additional skill that can be bolted on, like mathematics for example, rather than the change in attitude, stance, reality that becoming critical literate should ultimately provide (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Naturally, these issues do not just present for school children, in adult and community education, changes towards a narrower utilitarian outlook with adult courses being limited in many cases to English and maths, or other work-based training and qualifications (Bowl, 2017; Duckworth and Smith, 2019). The austerity measures of the 2010s also saw funding cuts to budgets allotted to adult education provision, which also meant localised adult education centres being closed, especially those that were at the heart of the community, serving communities in many ways beyond education and qualifications. Where it remained, it had moved away from much of the community learning where people could learn, meet, and find respite from the hardships of austerity and alienation, increasingly moving towards creating individuals for the labour market (Freeman, 2020).

Decline of adult and community education

The decline of adult and community education in the 2010s can be seen to accelerate in the ideological onslaught of neoliberalism (Lucas, 2018), with the logic of austerity reckoning little tangible benefit in the broader life-skills courses and curriculums offered by adult education. The symbolic violence of austerity in England and across Europe catalysed the reshaping of adult education towards vocational and employment skills with the dominance of an economic agenda in adult education, characterised by an emphasis on individual responsibility and market-driven operational decisions, has led to significant disparities in participation in adult education and training (Wallis et al., 2022). Adult education thus began to increasingly mirror typical neoliberal ethics with the deflecting of the responsibility of life chances to the individual rather than being a state responsibility (Boeren and James, 2019; Walis et al., 2022). As symbolic violence perpetuates ideologies justifying structural inequalities, it reinforces the dominance of certain social groups while marginalising others (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Austerity measures reshaping adult education is symbolic violence against the working class, as communities lost an opportunity to commune and resist neoliberalism, whilst simultaneously losing access to the creative arts opportunities that foster critical thinking. Furthermore, the stigmatisation of the working class intensified as the working class are themselves blamed for lacking employment skills deemed necessary by neoliberalism, with an underlying belief that the working class only require employment skills not the development of the arts. All of these further contribute to the normalisation of inequality, which is characteristic of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Moreover, austerity measures cut funding by £1.9 billion over the decade of the 2010s (Shand et al., 2019) not only diminished the quantity of adult education provision but also compromised its quality and accessibility, particularly in educational avenues away from English, maths and employment focussed opportunities. This, almost inevitably, redrew adult education as a narrower curriculum geared towards the labour market (Brynner, 2017) with particular emphasis on younger people than all adults (Clancy and Holford, 2018). Thus, marginalising communities like Sanford further as adult participation in adult education significantly fell over the decade (Stevenson et al., 2021). Meaning the opportunity for local communities to meet and engage in all forms of learning became fewer, as adult education centres and spaces became inaccessible due to this reshaping (Tuckett, 2017). This was compounded by adult education centres and spaces that were based in local communities were replaced by centralised adult education centres (Bowl, 2017; Lucas, 2018).

With fewer opportunities to practice the arts, focus turned to stringently funded and heavily scrutinised English, maths and vocational courses, with measurable targets: individual learning plans, destination outcomes and attainment statistics (HCEC, 2020). In addition, many vocational courses were to be self-funded by the over 24s, with loans akin to those taken out for higher education needed to pay for the courses (Fisher and Simmons, 2012; Lucas, 2018). As local adult education groups disappeared, including many of the public and voluntary organisations providing opportunities for communities to meet (Forster et al., 2018) the general working-class community, and its tools for developing agency and resistance, were depleted (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Forster et al. (2018) elucidate that this symptom reflects the relative poverty experienced by these areas due to austerity, drawing upon Wolff et al.'s definition of relative poverty, which denotes the inability to participate in the customary or encouraged activities of one's society (2015). Isolation, intensified by austerity measures, restricts communal opportunities, a characteristic feature of austerity, along with feelings of powerlessness (Fox et al., 2016). Additionally, according to Fox et al., indicators of a healthy society primarily encompass agency.

Adult and community learning, rooted in working-class communities, offered resistance against neoliberalism by providing spaces for collective gatherings to discuss emotions, inquiries, and perspectives that challenged the dominant ideology (Williams, 1977). For adult learning groups to facilitate resistance there needs to be space for creativity and critical dialogue, where human perspectives forefront the sessions (Freire, 1970; Tett and Hamilton, 2019). An example of the absolute juxtaposition with that of the rigid, costed, neoliberal classroom.

This further emphasises the need for community spaces that can allow organic, informal learning groups to potentially fill gaps left by adult education. In a similar vein to Right to Read, where participants can potentially cross liminal borders into critical practices, these spaces can support the rebuilding of community resistance and solidarity that have been devastated under austerity and neoliberalism.

Critical Literacy resources and related model examples

To follow from the case studies, this section shall briefly examine examples of critical literacy education practice from the case studies. Janks' critical literacy resource developed strategies of breaking down the ways to critically 'read' a text into three parts: 'decoding' – that is being able to competently read the text; 'reading with the text' – comprehending the text within the individual's own experiences and world view; 'reading against the text' – viewing the messages the text is conveying and its ideological foundations and questioning it (2010: 21). In response to the growing critical literacy education practices in Australian formal education, Luke and Freebody (1990) posited a four-tiered model of approaching texts (four resource model) that was widely 'adapted' across much of federal Australia (and latterly revised by the authors through practice) for use in Australian curriculum (Luke, 2000). This model shares similarities with Janks' approach to reading critically – including coding; comprehension and critical competence. However, they also add a 'pragmatic competence' (prior to critical competence) – functional literacy – reading instructions, filling out forms et cetera. In terms of a critical literacy education resource from the USA, Lewison et al., (2002) presented a reading strategy (with one aim being to reach new teachers) as a four-tiered process, each is referred to as dimensions. The final dimension – that, in this case, being a summative dimension – is dependent upon the first three dimensions: disrupting the commonplace – 'seeing everything through new lenses' (Lewison et al., 2002:382-3); 'interrogating multiple viewpoints' – empathy and 'standing in the shoes of others' (383); focusing on socio-political issues – recognising our own setting. In terms of culturally responsive teaching resources, Callins (2006) produced an instructional guide specifically for literacy teachers (different to Gay's (2002) guide that aimed at teaching per se). This resource differs from the first three examples as it offers holistic advice to practitioners on how to facilitate culturally responsive teaching rather than explain a method of analysing texts. According to this paper, the key tenets: encouraging a practice of active learning; reshaping curriculum to represent the culture of the learners; provide culturally mediated instruction; promote discourse and cooperative learning (Callins, 2006).

Points from the case studies and resources: what they mean to this study:

- Critical literacy and critical pedagogy can be a response to, and offer resistance to, oppression. In Sanford's case, this is neoliberalism's multi-faceted oppression.

- This resistance can start from the grassroots up as the examples in apartheid South Africa and the USA demonstrate.

- The resistance is typically localised: for example, Janks' water elitism resources in South Africa, or critical indigenous pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching in the USA.

- This localised and contextual aids understanding and relevance to people's lives – see Right to Read's practitioner method.

- The neoliberal hegemony will counter this resistance through consent. In South Africa, the intervention of the World Bank and in Australia the swing to the right, began to challenge the need for critical literacy education and bring the teachers' credibility under question (Bronwyn and Davies, 2007).

Chapter Five: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

This study employed a critical realist ethnography as its methodology to help understand the complex nature of reality. Critical realism offers an approach and a theoretical framework to understand the seen and unseen realities key to this study of research participants, as well as my own reality and interpretations (Pawson, 2013; Fletcher, 2017). This is particularly important as the study concerns critical literacy, with its transformational qualities, developing the individual's own perception of reality, or as Luke (2018) explains: 'Critical literacy approaches view language, texts and discourses as the principle means for representing and reshaping possible worlds' (p.18). The chapter is set out into several sections comprising of key areas: the philosophical underpinnings of the research drawing on the ontological and epistemological considerations contributing to the theoretical framework for the study, methods, participant recruitment, thematic analysis, ethics and limitations.

Anonymity: ethical concerns in reporting the setting

The research participants sometimes shared sensitive information, such as personal details concerning informal learning group participants, under the proviso of anonymity being maintained as best as possible in this study. Hence, using the actual name of the research area, or the groups, ran the extra risk of the participants being identified through secondary means, especially as the research area might only have had one informal learning group associated with a particular cultural interest, making identification much more likely. Therefore, the research area is known (for the purpose of this study only) as Sanford. Consequently, the groups, facilitators and participants' names were also replaced with pseudonyms. Additionally, maps and photos are presented within this chapter, but care has been taken to remove local sites and signs that could help identify it.

Covid-19 Impact on Study and Research

Covid-19 had a significant impact upon this ethnography, essentially halving the data collection period. It naturally made contacting the participants difficult and had various effects on myself and my family, which resulted in the University of Hull extending the PhD by six months with the writing-up period extended until September 2023. As the research phase began in September 2019 (apart from three online interviews rearranged from April to July 2020) the research ended in March 2020, as the national lockdown began. At that point I had spent six months in the field. This had involved an approach that could not have been realistically continued in any meaningful way during the national lockdown. The ethnography meant travelling great distances to the research area on a weekly basis, consistently spending time in different communities and areas, with in person and face to face conversations. This involved repeated visits to various communities within the research area and time was spent scoping amongst Sanford's communities, talking to people, familiarising, networking, observing and interviewing. The time spent in various communities was a key part of this ethnography, in some ways, perhaps reducing my outsider status thus potentially giving me greater access. In support of this view, at the time of the national lockdown, my access to groups was snowballing, and if the national lockdown had not occurred, I had numerous interviews planned with facilitators and several new group observations booked in for the April and May 2020, with more leads to investigate.

It is important to acknowledge by March 2020, I already had collected a sizeable sample of data from informal learning groups facilitators. I had intended to interview and observe more informal learning groups from this point on, particularly observing the groups attached to the facilitators I had already interviewed. However, the global pandemic acted as a form of arbiter, refocussing the research towards exploring the facilitators' data which much of the interview data related to. A few months later, with the country still in Covid-19 restrictions, three interviews were rearranged to be conducted online, via Zoom. Naturally, caution and extreme sensitivity was required in re-contacting facilitators as their circumstances in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was unknown. Carefully worded emails were sent assuring no response was required to decline my request for an interview or conversation.

Finally, Covid-19 impacted upon me as the researcher and author of this thesis. I have detailed how this effected my data collection, but like millions of others, the pandemic effected my physical and mental health, it meant home schooling my young children for months, it meant caring for family and extended family members and, within the regulations of Covid-19, helping them with basic needs such as food shopping or medicines.

Philosophical underpinnings of the research

In terms of ontology, the nature of reality and being (Cohen et al., 2000), this study draws on critical realism to understand ways of being relate to the working class and their reality. Cultural hegemony theory (Gramsci, 1971) and associated theories of how power reproduces, are the fundamental point of this study's understanding of the nature of reality of the day-to-day lived experiences of the working class. Dominant ideologies reproduce power and inequality in hegemonies, such as the neoliberal hegemony, manipulating culture and cultural production to maintain power over all aspects of life (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1997; Monbiot, 2016). Hegemonies, a name deriving from the classical Greek for absolute command or supremacy (Wilkinson, 2015: 120), influence everyday existence and practices through cultural institutions, but importantly do so with the consent of the population (Gramsci, 1971). Therefore, power is maintained through consent as the dominant attitudes are reproduced through culture (Gottdeiner, 1985). Through this control of cultural production, the dominant ideologies can shape how the working class perceive their own reality - essentially here, their 'truth' is maintained and managed (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1980). However, as this form of hegemony is imposed by a largely unchallenged dominant discourse (Spears, 1999), it can be modified when necessary to suit changing times to increase or consolidate power (Harmes, 2012). Thus, demonstrating it and its realities are not fixed or static, as Hamilton and Ramcilovic-Suominen (2023) explain, it can 'expand by claiming and assimilating the elements of other discourses into their own frameworks' (p.738). Consequently, as reality is shaped by hegemonies which change to expand or consolidate power, hope can be seen within the despair, because if reality can be changed, then it can be resisted (Giroux, 1981; Jackson Lears,1985), through the development of critical perspectives (Ledwith, 2001; Fenton, 2018). Importantly acknowledging more than one reality exists (Patton, 2002): those realities created by the hegemonies of the dominant ideologies and power, and the realities of those resisting and challenging hegemonies (Sayer, 2000)

Consent

Concepts of hegemonic control and reality draw from the work of Gramsci (1971) and further developed by Hall (1980; 1983; 1997). Concepts not only provide explanations of why the population are subject to hegemonies, but how also they are consented to (Ledwith, 2016). Hall (1980) argues hegemonic control is beyond the coercion demonstrated through false consciousness (a method of hiding and distracting the root of inequality) and instead utilises the 'contradictory consciousness' concept of Gramsci (1971): gaining consent from the individual through the actions of power being seen as 'common sense' (Hall, 1996). Consent, as argued by Hall (1980;1983) and Gramsci (1971) for instance, does not require coercion or the threat of violent force to be obtained (Ledwith, 2016). Implicit consent to social order, and its values, is given by enacting and reproducing itself as the natural order, the taken-for-granted and thus, is unquestioned, as it is interwoven deep within the realms of culture and society (Cammaerts, 2015) – just like the pervasive hegemony of neoliberalism (Monbiot, 2017). Neoliberalism is portrayed as inevitable through the mass media (Meyers, 2019), accepted uncritically (Bourdieu and Grass, 2003), and presented and reproduced as a simple logic: for example; spiralling national debt leads to reduced public spending to justify cuts to services (Farnworth and Irving, 2018). Simultaneously, it promotes the celebration of profit and wealth accumulation (Monbiot, 2016) in its limitless potential for exploitation (Bourdieu, 1998). Importantly, values are communicated not just through mass media, but also cultural production, cultural practice and socialisation (Ikenberry, 1990). Therefore, not only is consent given to this domination, but those who consent provide this hegemonic discourse with a life support - a self-sustaining system, transmitting and reproducing itself through its structures, through its people. It does not need to wield explicit violence for power, it uses symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977) and polices itself which allows it to reside camouflaged yet with complete control (Harvey, 2007; Monbiot, 2016).

Self-sustaining and common sense

A self-sustaining system reproducing and modifying itself makes the dominant ideologies of neoliberal hegemony so pervasive and successful, as it is supple and well grained enough to survive apparent counter threats – such as the rise of populism in the 2010s and the muddied contradictions of the messages of post-truth (Colpani, 2022). However, hegemony, as Hall (2019) explains, is comfortable being unstable as it reinforces the call for a common-sense approach to counter instability, and as common sense reproduces, it is constantly shifting. Therefore, post-truth, a state were opinion trumps facts, can be taken as another iteration of hegemony (Jaques et al., 2019), or as a tool further concealing a reality beyond it. Thus, hegemony, in this sense, can be simply ‘conceptualised as a struggle for the dominance of common sense’ (Carvalho, 2022:339). This struggle is played out not only in the mass media, with ideological stances presented as the people’s view: the political left being labelled as unfit, or traitors, for example, (Hall, 1983), but in how ‘common sense’ spreads and accumulates through socialisation (Ikenberry, 1990). It is this common sense that makes the dominant views seem logical, apparent, necessary and obvious (Bourdieu, 1991). Common sense itself can naturally be uncritical but also be contradictory (Gramsci, 1971). Within the realm of contradiction and confusion exacerbated further by multi-media messages of post-truth, is a seeming confrontation for neoliberal hegemony with a growing populism. However, neoliberal hegemonic discourse's ability to modify and reproduce means they can co-exist, if not even share values and goals (Weyland, 1999; Harmes, 2012).

Invisible/ visible

Hegemonic structures' visibility is dependent upon the lens and consciousness perceiving it (Freire, 1970). Neoliberalism, in a similar form to the hegemonies described by Gramsci (1971), is typically not a part of the public consciousness (Monbiot, 2016). It is engineered to position itself as an invisible but logical framework that is anti-ideological (Cammaerts, 2015). Lukes' (2005) theory on power is apt here, as he describes three faces: visible, hidden and invisible; these manifest in decision making power; non-decision making power and ideological power. The ideological power is the unseen and invisible and includes the internalisation and dislocation of powerlessness that are self-producing social processes (Gaventa, 2006). These can be a bulwark against collective resistance to power and hegemony (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002). But, as Foucault (1979: 60) explains power is not 'monolithic' with its actions taken separately by non-interconnected agents hidden within everyday life – such as social norms, discourse, practice and institutions (1998). Applying Foucault's theory to neoliberalism offers an explanation of how neoliberalism has a life of its own, deeply embedded in all aspects of everyday life as it sustains, reproduces and adapts to survive. However, whilst Foucault's theory differs from Bhaskar (1993) for example, wherein Bhaskar envisages the strands of society are interdependent (1993), Foucault also offers hope of resistance in providing means to reveal how power is embodied in the everyday life as people police and surveil each other through social practices and conventions echoing power - practices potentially otherwise invulnerable to revolution and regime change (1998). Foucault here provides examples of how to use what is hidden within people's lives and experiences as vehicles for critical awakenings. Hall (1980) also outlines the case for resistance as an inevitability, arguing hegemony is a 'state of play' from within class warfare that requires this opposition to reproduce and reconfigure to survive. Therefore, in this sense, if the resistance did not exist to it, hegemony would itself not exist,

This study draws on critical realism which offers an opportunity to better understand the complex processes within our ontological 'reality'. As Archer et al. (2016) explain critical realism is a cross theoretical standpoint encompassing several ontologies. It can therefore offer a window into the point of demarcation, as well as the many border-crossing overlapping elements, between the study participants' observable world and the unobservable 'real' world.

> *Critical realism is not an empirical program; it is not a methodology; it is not even truly a theory, because it explains nothing. It is, rather, a meta-theoretical position*
> *(Archer et al., 2016:4)*

The dual realities presented by critical realism, as it is used in this thesis, are of one reality being visible, and the other as being unseen to the individual (Sayer, 2000). For example, the visible reality for individuals are their lives, their social practices and processes that are known to them. The other reality is unobservable, but also unbeknown to the individual as it shapes and constructs the reality they see, experience and observe (Bhaskar, 2016; Danermark et al., 2019). Therefore, the unseen reality has hidden causal relationships with the seen reality and has a series of effects, for instance, in how the individual might think, the views they might hold about something or someone, and where they can work. Therefore, it is the unobservable reality which may decide their lives and fate. As Zweig (2011) explains:

> Invisible force fields of power are built into the structures that hold society together, giving it shape, setting the paths for our opportunity, and setting the limits as well. We tend to take these for granted, internalize them, think of them as the natural order (p.10)

However, if an individual becomes critically aware, they may begin to reconstruct their own seen reality and make the causal links to the unobservable reality. For example, Banfield (2019) highlights Porter's (1993) ethnography that exposed the unseen reality of 'structural racism' existing between doctor and nurse relations (Banfield, 2019).

Epistemology

Epistemology relates to the nature of knowledge, how do people know what they know in making sense of the world around us (Crotty, 1998). In this study critical realism is an approach used to explore the '…implicit and explicit ontologies' (Archer, et al., 2016:5) of this research and its participants. As the participants of this study are held within neoliberal hegemonies controlling and depleting their lives, with varying levels of both consent and resistance, a critical realist approach provides a basis for exploring the causes, events and mechanisms of realities (Bhaskar, 1978). Critical realism was chosen because it can recognise the need to use a range of theories to understand the complexity of marginalised people's lives (Tilky, 2015) over other epistemologies typically used in qualitative studies, such as constructivism, where an individual's knowledge and reality is seen to be constructed through their experiences (Elliot et al., 2000). Whereas critical realism addresses the hidden realities impacting upon the visible reality combining realist ontology (meaning there is real phenomena to research) and a relativistic epistemology (meaning people will learn and understand in different ways and methods).

Metatheories and the critical realism of this study

Critical realism is a meta-theoretical position (Archer et al., 2016) with many interpretations across disciplines, including health (Koopmans and Schiller, 2018), entrepreneur research (Hu, 2018) and educational research (Cochran-Smith 2009; Scott, 2010). Metatheory is essentially a broad set of overlapping ideas and perspectives, or the theory of theory, (Archer et al., 2016) that, in this case, can be used to examine '…how phenomena of interest in a particular field should be thought about and researched' (Bates, 2005: 257). Critical realism can provide a basis for knowledge of the realities of the research participants and which mechanisms and events shape them (Haigh et al.,2019), in this study's own 'critical explorations of nature' (Bhaskar, 1978: 248). Firstly, as a means of explaining the seen and unseen realities of the participants' lived experience, and their causal explanations (Archer et al., 2016). Causal explanations illuminate hidden events affecting the research participants' perceptions, thus limiting their agency, and shaping their reality and worldview (Lor, 2011). Secondly, to the emancipatory perspectives (outlined latterly within this chapter) of critical realism – which is the subject of some debate in the literature but is substantiated in works by Bhaskar (1986), Banfield (2019) and others.

Domains of reality and structures of oppression

Reality, in a critical realist lens, is stratified into three domains – the empirical, the real, and the actual (Bhaskar, 1978; Schiller, 2016). The *empirical* domain may allow for the observation of mechanisms, such as the power and resources of the institutions of society (Bhaskar, 1978) and are accessed by scientific investigation, and as a result, their interpretation is subject to ambiguity, doubt and human error (Clark, Lissel and Davis, 2008). The *real* domain and what occurs within it is typically hidden (Schiller, 2016) and from this domain, visible or invisible events occurring within effect the *actual* domain, (Bhaskar, 1978). The actual domain's events are perceivable and can be experienced (Schiller, 2016). This research works within the much revised and criticised empirical domain (Elder-Vass, 2022; Friar and Navarette, 2022) to primarily understand the two other realities presented by critical realism – the real and the actual (Bhaskar, 1978). Realities can be simply taken as one reality being visible, and the other being hidden to the individual (Sayer, 2000). The visible reality (the actual domain) contains the processes, systems and elements people perceive and understand. The other reality is unobservable (the real), this is hidden but the causes of the events and mechanisms occurring within this domain, playout in the *actual* domain (Bhaskar, 2016; Danermark et al., 2019). Therefore, as the structures are 'cognitively accessible to …investigators' (Margolis, 1986:283) the unseen causal relationships of one determining the structure and events in the other are brought into focus (Bhaskar, 1979). Within the *actual* world, the result of the mechanisms and events that typically control and oppress, are typically uncritically accepted as natural (Zweig, 2011). The concepts of reality and lived experience can be seen as part of a 'laminated system' (Bhaskar, 1993; Elder-Vass, 2010). Counter to Foucault's 'power is not monolithic' (1979: 60) within this system, its elements are perceived as being held together within numerous entwining interdependent structures demonstrating how the strands of society, its mechanisms, structures, systems and entities must be considered as a whole (Bhaskar, 1993). For example, the lived experiences and realities of the people of Sanford, whose stories are told within this thesis, are dependent and caused by the multiple structures and mechanisms of neoliberal society, and how they interact with mechanisms and events.

Emancipatory imperatives

Critical realism's emancipatory perspectives align with this study's investigation into the emancipatory critical literacy education. Critical realism foregrounds oppression and powerlessness (Price and Martin, 2018), through its uncovering of domains of realities, causes and events, thus highlighting those to blame for social conditions (Bhaskar, 1986). As research and knowledge are tools of liberation from oppression, all forms of critical approach should start from a basis of working towards social change and emancipation (Danermark et al., 2002) which aligns with critical pedagogy and the work of Freire (1970) for one example. Through its critical approach it can identify injustices and falsehoods within society, and, importantly, the functions injustices and falsehoods serve – typically the dominant class (Hammersley, 2002). Further, Hammersley, in discussing Bhaskar's perspective on emancipatory critical realism, posits if research identifies falsehoods, then in research's search for the truth, should it not itself project this truth and simultaneously condemn the authors and systems of the falsehoods? Therefore, critical realism should be an active counter to the dominant ideologies (p.37). Furthermore, Hammersley raises similar concerns made by Collier (1994), if research highlights human needs are wilfully not being met, then should not research critique the systems that do this? (Hammersley, 2002:37). As this study explores the development of critical consciousness through critical literacy practices, critical realism can not only help illuminate the hegemonies of oppression, their structures and systems, but also be a lens into the processes of the individual awakenings to what was previously hidden (Little, 2013).

An ethnography of communities

The communities and the informal learning groups of Sanford were visited over a period of six months utilising ethnography's 'unique ability to capture the configurations of any cultural or subcultural setting' (Anderson and Irvine, 1993:83). Ethnographic study focuses on how people interact and communicate within their environments and supports the researcher in gaining access to communities and beliefs and attitudes existing in them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Curry et al., 2009; Fetterman, 2010). As the researcher is the tool for data collection in an ethnography, experiencing and understanding the cultural norms and practices of communities was paramount (Creswell, 2012). It allows for the gaining of an enriched sense of the events occurring in communities beyond other qualitative methodologies, and the beliefs prevalent within them (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). It also provides insights into their reactions to the hidden mechanisms, events and structures shaping their lives and their world views (Bhaskar, 1978). According to Searle (1990), structures are not constructed, but, as the ontologies of Gramsci (1971) and Hall (1997) agree – structures are reproduced and transformed (Searle, 1990).

Therefore, an ethnographic methodology was a necessity to gain an in-depth experience of Sanford's communities to understand the conditions people are in (Reeves et al., 2013). Simply put, to better understand a person's perspective and beliefs, there must be an understanding of what shaped them (Archer, 1998). Primarily, as the study analyses the meanings the research participants attach to their involvement and engagement within informal learning groups, the methodology employed needed to be able to investigate often complex internalised workings, nuances or behaviour changes that could not be quantified (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, critical literacy education and critical consciousness are phenomena difficult to make concrete claims about as they reflect an unseen or difficult to identify change in viewpoint, state of mind, change in practice or attitude (Jemal, 2018). However, time spent in the field as ethnography requires, meant time spent in the communities sensitising the researcher to both the people and environment needed to research critical literacy and critical consciousness development (Whitehead, 2004). Thus, critical and qualitative approaches are needed (Powney and Watts, 1987; Denscombe, 2010; Denzin, 2017), not to find 'the truth' but to 'reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives' (Emerson et al., 1995: 3). An ethnography allows for a more in-depth study than other qualitative methodologies that also allow for the interpretation of the meanings people place upon experiences and interactions (Whitehead, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Emic and the etic perspectives.

The emic perspective, in this study, refers to the study participants' viewpoint upon their situation and reality (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Meaning in visiting the various communities of Sanford, I was consciously and subconsciously gaining information and making meanings to understand and form this emic perspective. The etic perspective is looking at the ethnographic setting and subjects through a theoretical lens. For example, using a critical realist lens, my theoretical position is observing the participants in their actual world establishing the causal links to the real world shaping their lives. Therefore, both perspectives are used within this ethnography (Watson-Gegeo, 1988).

Experiences in the field and reshaping the research questions.

This ethnography began with a defined subject area: the communities of Sanford and its informal learning groups. But initially, the research question was a more general inquiry:

> To investigate if informal learning groups in northern, post-industrial urban areas have the potential for providing critical literacy education and what the effect of this might be.

In undertaking an emic approach to understand the experiences and viewpoints of informal learning group facilitators, the research focus began to narrow as an unanticipated area of the research was discovered. Discussions with facilitators revealed they had undergone transformative occurrences to their own viewpoints and reality. Although they typically could not specifically articulate changes in a lexicon of critical consciousness, they could identify what caused change: their interactions with informal learning group participants. As this concept developed from an early point in the ethnography, so did the development of the etic perspectives – how in micro communities like informal learning groups, it is possible to develop a critical consciousness from interacting with and inadvertently reading another person. Answering this became the study's fundamental question. The etic perspective is visible in the early workings of theoretical frameworks which adapted theories from Freire (1970) and threshold concepts, such as Meyer and Land (2003).

As the study progressed in the early stages, the research narrowed and focussed further as evidence of critical literacy education, although typically an unknown pedagogy by name to the facilitators of this research, being practiced in groups became apparent. As these were times of austerity and dislocation, evidence of resistance to neoliberalism's alienation and isolation became apparent too. Therefore, the research questions became:

Main Research Question

- How might informal learning group facilitators' critical consciousness develop through interactions with group participants?

Sub Research Questions

- What forms of critical literacy education occur in informal learning groups and what are their effects?
- What forms of resistance to the consequences of neoliberalism can be found in informal learning groups?
- Can informal learning groups fill the gaps left by adult and community education?

In considering the questions, the methods of this ethnographic study needed to also be suited to the interpretative nature of this phenomena. Moreover, a clear reflexive approach was undertaken to better understand bias, acknowledging research is never free from bias or neutral (Given, 2008).

Reflexivity processes and positionality

Reflexivity is highly important to ethnographic research, not just as process to highlight inherent biases, but to establish its findings are naturally only partial and conditioned (Lichterman, 2017). There is no 'neutral observer' (Streams, 1998), so reflexivity can provide an openness about how the researcher's own perspectives influence the research process (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). The process of reflexivity and the researcher has been described as a '…continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality… with explicit recognition that this… may affect the research process and outcome' (Berger, 2015: 220). Reflexivity within this study is not one of a single transmission, for instance, solely of what the researcher does towards the research. A reflexive approach to the research undertakes the role of two main functions: firstly, in examining the effect of the researcher on the research (prospective reflexivity) and of retrospective reflexivity: the effects the research has on the researcher (Attia and Edge, 2017: 35). Acknowledging the researcher has their own biases and viewpoint is a valuable facet of the study, rather than something to be viewed as a detriment or as something to be masked or cached in some form of way (Malterud, 2001). It can demonstrate the imperfections of research, allowing for a greater understanding of the work and its findings (Berger, 2015) and within a transparent approach aiming to lay out any bias, preconceptions, interpretations or contributory choices by the researcher it seeks to enrich the study rather than invalidate it in any way (Malterud, 2001).

Trustworthiness

In a study with no positivist or directly provable outcomes, ‘dependability’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 300) and ‘trustworthiness’ (Searle, 1999: 266) are sought through a transparent account of my positionality and its own sources (Hosking and Plunt, 2010). In terms of research being emancipatory, a question also arises if the researcher cannot be reflexive and comprehend the influence they have on the research, then they will struggle to truly understand emancipatory practices (Coburn and Gormally, 2017).

My reflexive approach and framework

A rigorous and structured reflexive process highlights the effect the researcher has on their research (Russell and Kelly, 2002; Gilbert and Sliep 2009). Ethically, developing a reflexive approach provides a framework to question and check our own assumptions (Cunliffe, 2016), for example, those hidden or previously undetected internalised assumptions from dominant ideologies may marginalise the research and participants (Gramsci, 1971; Brookfield, 2009). A reflexive framework acts as a form of guidance, exploring and drawing out the reasoning for actions/interpretations. It adds a richer meaning and value to the data, presenting its own separate body of knowledge. However, a reflexive approach is not absolute, it is limited as it also comes from the researcher thus it does not identify all it sets out, such as bias, or researcher positionality (Wasserfall, 1993). Fieldnotes are an essential part of the ethnography (Dewalt and Musante, 2010) and my reflexive approach, through iteration and critical reflection, added layers of analysis to initial fieldnotes and rudimentary sketches (Yang, 2020). Critical approaches: seeking responses to my own actions ‘why did I think that way’, ‘why did I respond in that way’ tracing roots to their origins and assumptions with links and intersections to both the literature and original fieldnotes (Vindrola-Padros, 2020).

My reflexive framework begins (see Figure 1 below) with the method of engagement. This method of engagement could be an interview, an informal discussion, an observation – essentially any interaction or incident within the ethnography. Contemporaneous notes are initially made, either at the time, or as soon as possible after the event (Swain and King, 2022). This framework, which undertakes an anti-clockwork direction to represent the process of reflection and reflexivity (as one looks backward), starts to initially drill down.

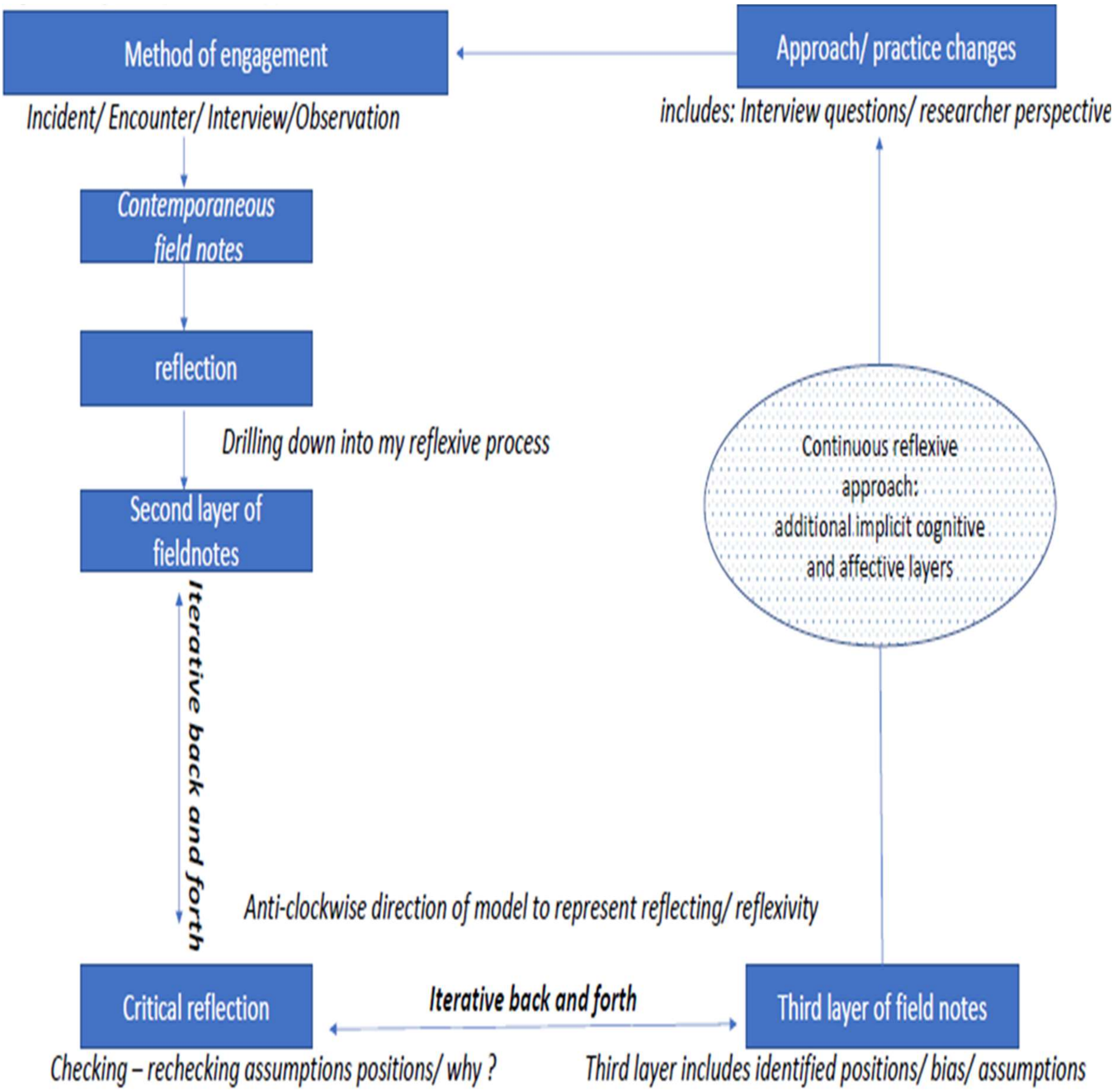
Method of engagement
Incident/ Encounter/ Interview/Observation
Approach/ practice changes
includes: Interview questions/ researcher perspective
Contemporaneous field notes
reflection
Drilling down into my reflexive process
Second layer of fieldnotes
Continuous reflexive approach: additional implicit cognitive and affective layers
Iterative back and forth
Anti-clockwise direction of model to represent reflecting/ reflexivity
Critical reflection
Iterative back and forth
Third layer of field notes
Checking – rechecking assumptions positions/ why ?
Third layer includes identified positions/ bias/ assumptions

Figure 1 - Reflexive process in the approach to methods

The next item of the framework is the initial notetaking completed at the time, or shortly after the event. Fieldnotes reported occurrences, feelings, observations and any points of relevance. Fieldnotes are artefacts of the ethnography and an important part in this process (Clerke and Hopwood, 2014; Coles and Thomson, 2016). Following this stage was reflection, using the notes and recollections of the event. This draws from the method advocated by Schon (1991), reflecting on action – what happened, what would I do differently, and any theoretical insights gained. After this period of reflection is the writing of the second layer of field notes[15]. This new layer of notes, written after a period of reflection, are produced prior to the process entering critical reflection phase, involving a deeper investigation into the event (Yang, 2020). Critical reflection utilises Brookfield's four lens model (2005) which promotes the undertaking of different perspectives - seeing the world through the point of view of others. Although Brookfield employs this in a teacher-student sense to improve the teacher's practice, it can be adapted for other scenarios (Fook, White and Gardner 2006) as various models have emerged from pedagogical theory into other fields. Brookfield's lenses: the teachers' lens; the student's lens; the lens of colleagues' experiences; the lens of the literature (Brookfield, 2005). Adapting Brookfield's model, I instead used: my lens; the lens of the other person involved; the lens of my supervisors/critical friends; and the lens of the literature. This process was iterative with constant back and forth to the notes, cross referencing to other notes/experiences, and the input and advice of my supervisors and critical friends (colleagues, peers) (with anonymity of people involved assured as no names/places used) and the literature. Critical reflection, as Brookfield explains, must have its:

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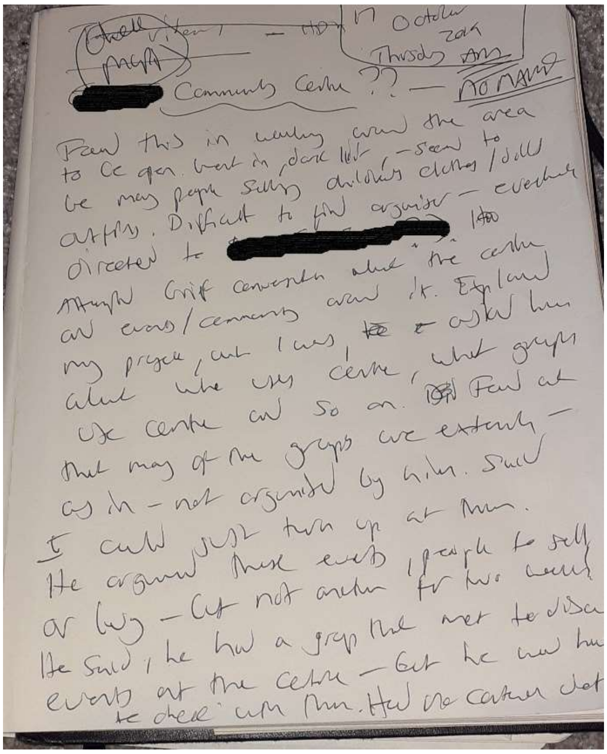
[15] This does not replace or revise the initial notes taken but is an additional layer to them.

> …explicit focus uncovering, and challenging, the power dynamics that frame practice and uncovering and challenging hegemonic assumptions (those assumptions we embrace as being in our best interests when in fact they are working against us). (2009: 293)

After this period of critical reflection, which like other iterative and reflective cycles does not truly cease for the rest of this process, is the writing of the third layer of notes. This third layer addressed the assumptions and biases Brookfield (2005) discusses, and all critical reflections are recorded. This is fundamental to the study's dependability, due to my own biases having such a bearing on how the data is interpreted. This is especially the case in such an ethnographic study of exploratory research where the researcher is regarded as 'the instrument' (Patton, 2002:4), or seen as the 'central figure who influences, if not actively constructs, the collection, selection and interpretation of data' (Finlay, 2002: 212). Therefore, reflexivity is a key contribution to the design, data and its findings, providing a method of meaning making in itself (Patton, 2002). Retrospective reflexivity has been self-revelatory in how I view myself in relation to the research: both in as my identity as a PhD researcher and how I view and identify with my past, my assumptions and my world. From the critical reflection stage, the framework enters an area it will progress from but is largely implicit and is difficult to define or record. This may create additional but subtle cognitive and affective layers influencing the critical approach to this process. Finally, the result of this framework is a change in practice or approach, demonstrated by changed approaches/interactions with participants and the data.

Example of using the reflexive framework

After a visiting a community centre in Sanford in the early weeks of the study, fieldnotes describe a meeting with a facilitator at the community centre, here is a page from the notes (with names of the research area/people redacted)



~~Field visit 1~~ — ~~HD~~ 17 October 2019 Thursday ~~AM~~

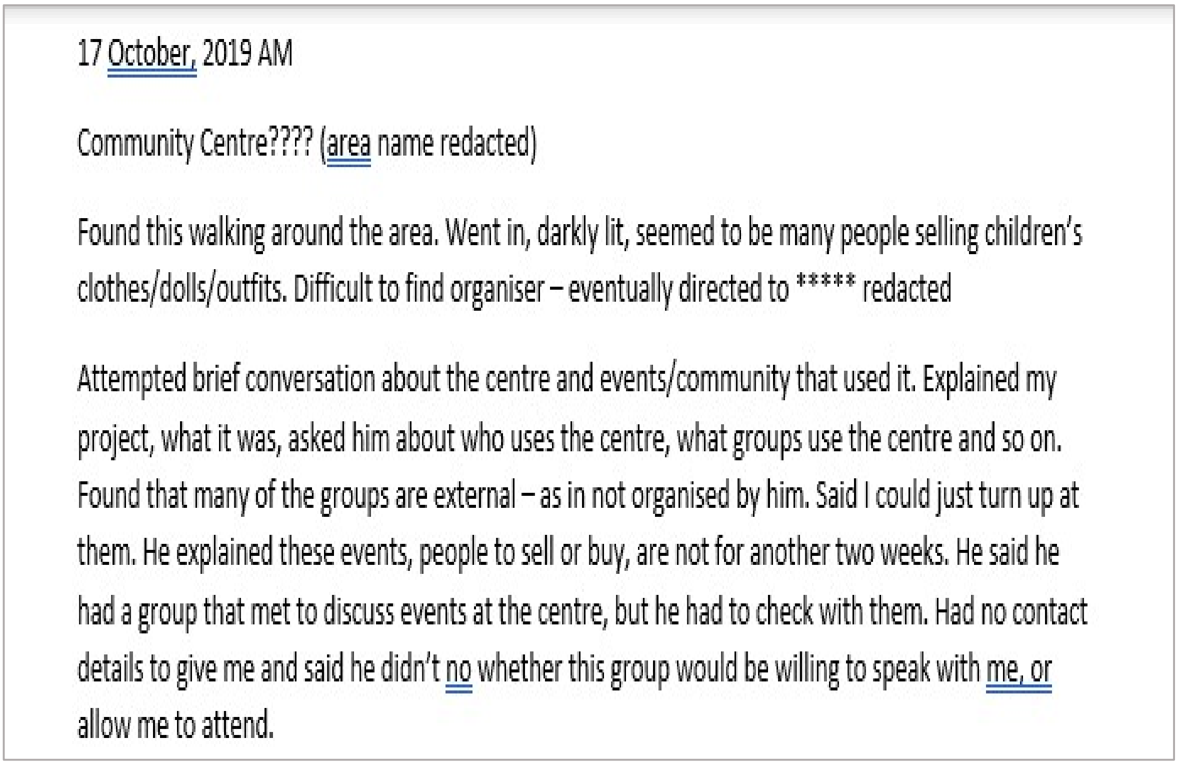
MGA

[redacted] Community Centre ?? — NO NAME

Found this in walking around the area to be open. Went in, dark lit — seemed to be many people selling children's clothes / dolls / outfits. Difficult to find organiser — eventually directed to [redacted] 1400 Attempted brief conversation about the centre and events / community around it. Explained my project, what I was, ~~to~~ and asked him about who uses centre, what groups use centre and so on. ~~[illegible]~~ Found out that many of the groups are externally — as in — not organised by him. Said I could just turn up at them. He organised these events, people to sell or buy — but not another for two weeks. He said, he had a group that met to discu events at the centre — but he would have to check with them. Had no contact det

Figure 2 - Fieldnotes of meeting with facilitator

Here is a typed version for clarity:



17 October, 2019 AM

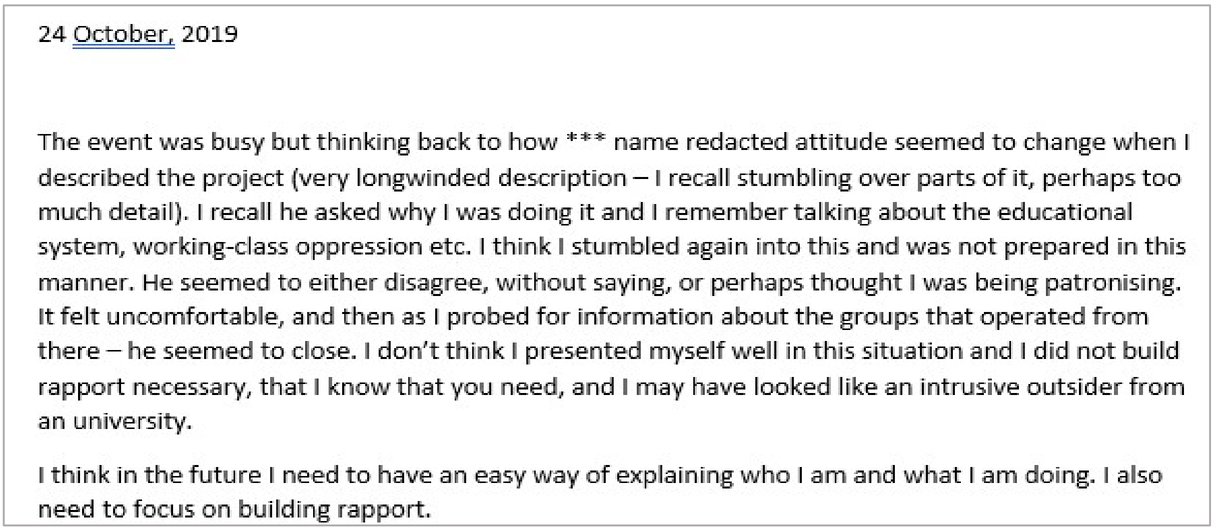
Community Centre???? (area name redacted)

Found this walking around the area. Went in, darkly lit, seemed to be many people selling children's clothes/dolls/outfits. Difficult to find organiser – eventually directed to ***** redacted

Attempted brief conversation about the centre and events/community that used it. Explained my project, what it was, asked him about who uses the centre, what groups use the centre and so on. Found that many of the groups are external – as in not organised by him. Said I could just turn up at them. He explained these events, people to sell or buy, are not for another two weeks. He said he had a group that met to discuss events at the centre, but he had to check with them. Had no contact details to give me and said he didn't no whether this group would be willing to speak with me, or allow me to attend.

Figure 3 – Typed version of meeting with facilitator

Then after reflecting on this event and action, a second layer of notes were made. Here is a typed excerpt:



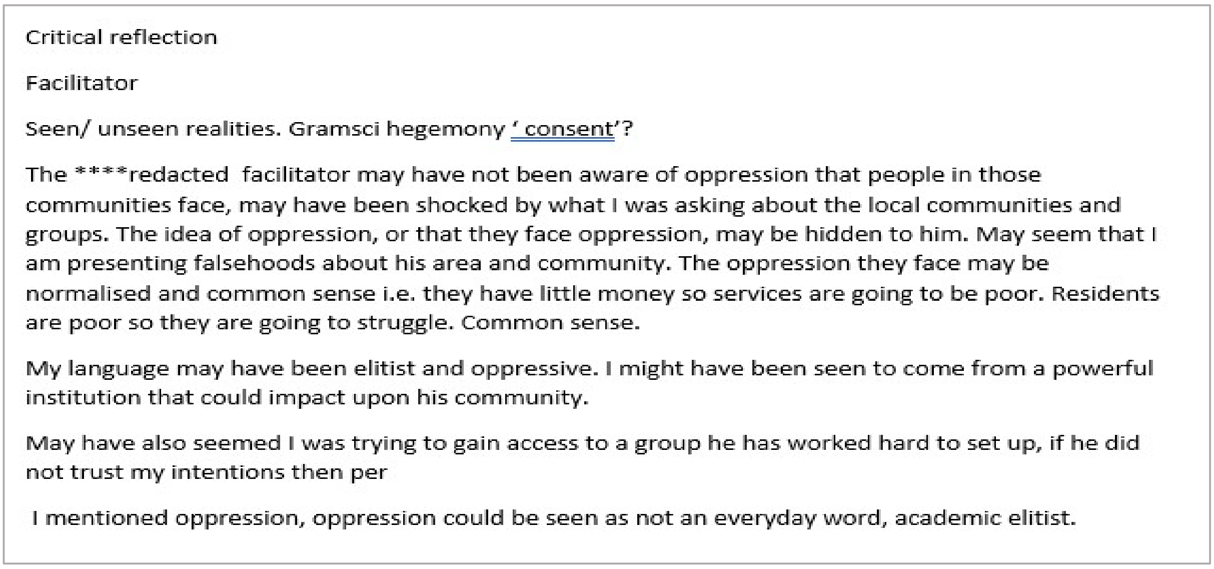
24 October, 2019

The event was busy but thinking back to how *** name redacted attitude seemed to change when I described the project (very longwinded description – I recall stumbling over parts of it, perhaps too much detail). I recall he asked why I was doing it and I remember talking about the educational system, working-class oppression etc. I think I stumbled again into this and was not prepared in this manner. He seemed to either disagree, without saying, or perhaps thought I was being patronising. It felt uncomfortable, and then as I probed for information about the groups that operated from there – he seemed to close. I don't think I presented myself well in this situation and I did not build rapport necessary, that I know that you need, and I may have looked like an intrusive outsider from an university.

I think in the future I need to have an easy way of explaining who I am and what I am doing. I also need to focus on building rapport.

Figure 4 - Typed version of second layer of fieldnotes post meeting with facilitator

After a period of critical reflection, a third layer of notes were made. This is a typed excerpt:



Critical reflection

Facilitator

Seen/ unseen realities. Gramsci hegemony ‘ consent’?

The ****redacted facilitator may have not been aware of oppression that people in those communities face, may have been shocked by what I was asking about the local communities and groups. The idea of oppression, or that they face oppression, may be hidden to him. May seem that I am presenting falsehoods about his area and community. The oppression they face may be normalised and common sense i.e. they have little money so services are going to be poor. Residents are poor so they are going to struggle. Common sense.

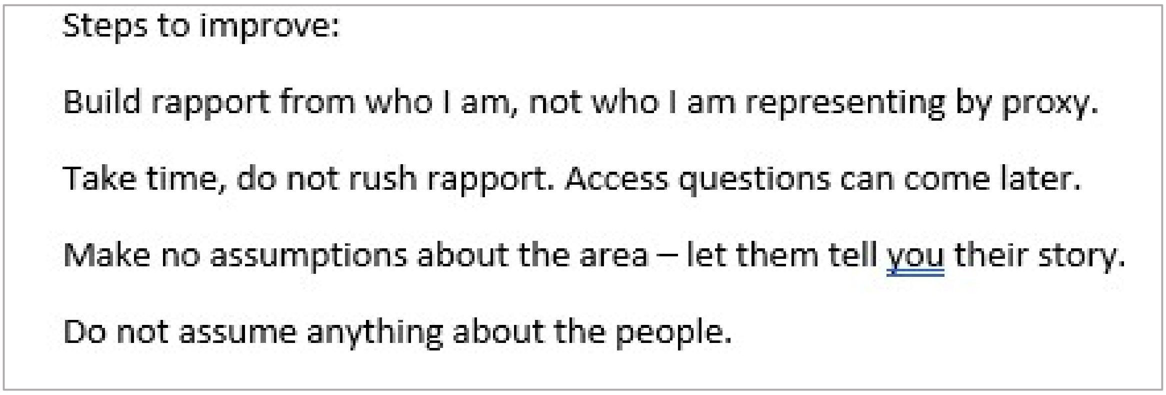
My language may have been elitist and oppressive. I might have been seen to come from a powerful institution that could impact upon his community.

May have also seemed I was trying to gain access to a group he has worked hard to set up, if he did not trust my intentions then per

I mentioned oppression, oppression could be seen as not an everyday word, academic elitist.

Figure 5 - Typed version of process with critical reflection

This excerpt is from critical reflection: using my lens and the facilitator at the community centre’s lens. The process then did not stop. The next stage is hard to define and are implicit and subconscious. From this event, here is an excerpt from how this process was used to adjust my practice with initial and impromptu meetings within the communities of Sanford:



Steps to improve:

Build rapport from who I am, not who I am representing by proxy.

Take time, do not rush rapport. Access questions can come later.

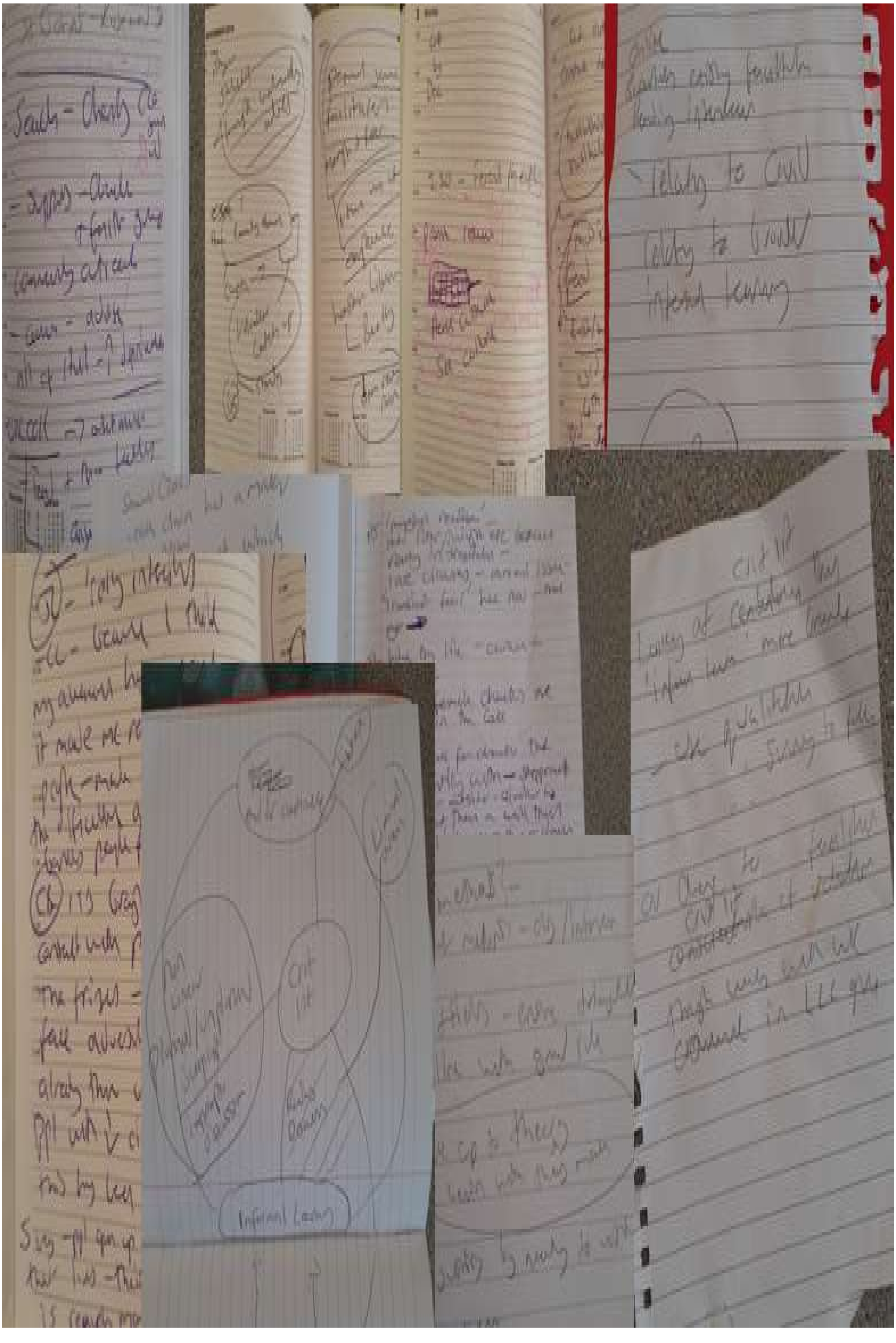
Make no assumptions about the area – let them tell you their story.

Do not assume anything about the people.

Figure 6 - Notes of practice changes post process

Fieldnote methods

There are different methods of how to write fieldnotes with different styles used by different ethnographers, each favouring what suits them and their study (Walford, 2009). The style employed for writing fieldnotes was based around Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein’s (1997) checklist for fieldnotes, that include recording place/date; sensory details; responses to you; words summaries of conversations; behaviours. Every fieldnote did not correspond with this checklist, especially the initial fieldnotes which could be a few sentences/ key words up to a few pages (Walford, 2009). Fieldnotes and reflexive journals support the concept of openness and dependability by documenting the whole research process in a transparent way guided by stringent ethics and academic integrity (Sword, 1999) as well as key tenets of trustworthiness and authenticity that are integral standards of empirical research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Keeping journals of internal thought processes supported the check of my assumptions, or other actions playing to my pre-existing beliefs about a context, person or any other element relevant to the study. However, it is impossible to set out a system that protects the study from unconscious misinterpretation, or find neutrality and objectivity, especially in light of the interpretative nature of this proposed study and my role within it (Sikes and Potts, 2008).



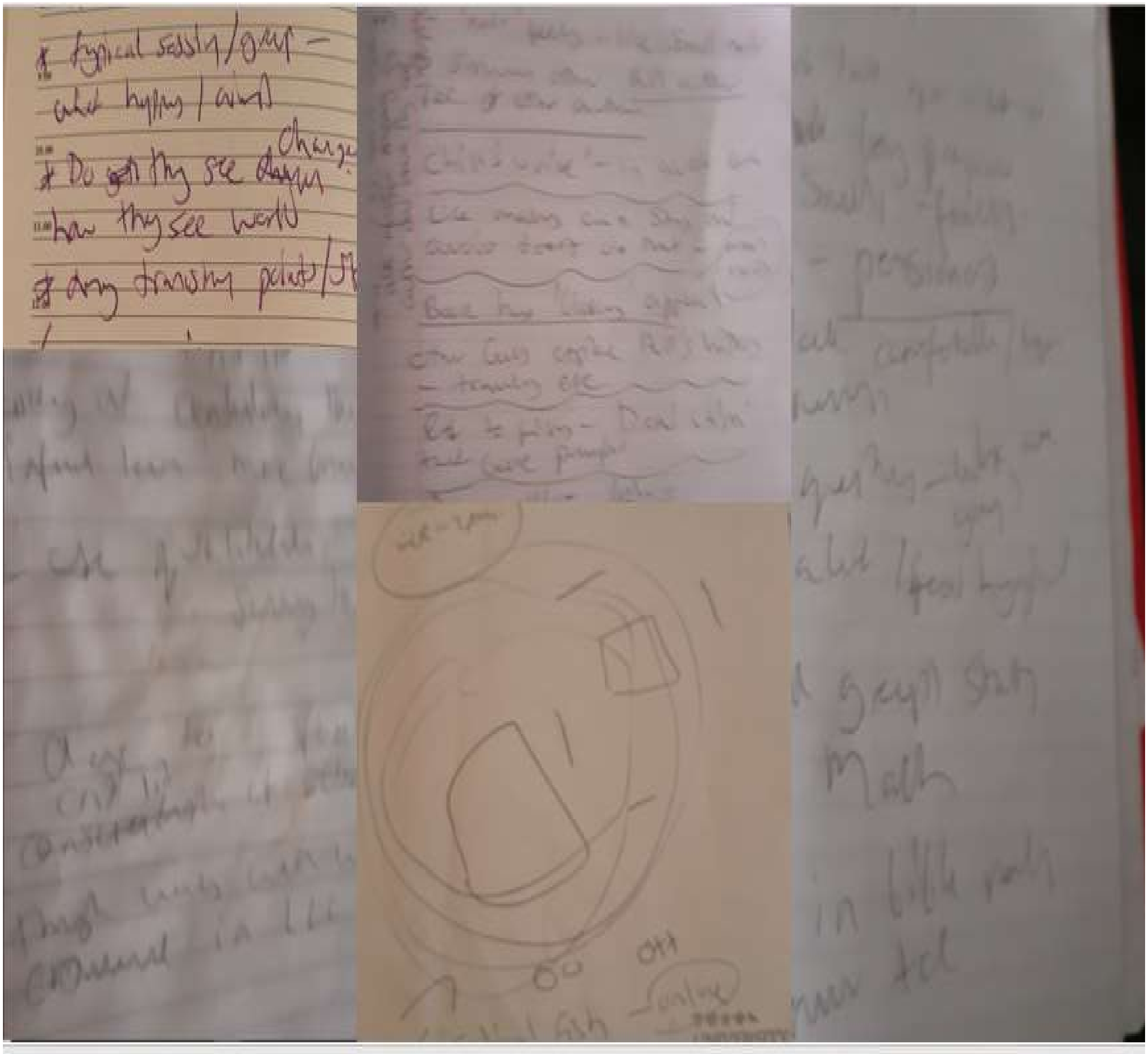


Figure 7- Sample of selected field notes collages: September 2019 – March 2022

Insider and outsider

Acknowledging the insider/outsider position of the researcher which is a ‘focus on thought processes which enhance critical awareness’ (Crossley et al., 2016:11) is a key part of reflexivity here. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) explore a fundamental but also complex quandary for the qualitative researcher, posing that the researcher needs to be both aware of the positions and meanings of, and given by, others whilst simultaneously being aware of the researchers’ own positionality influencing how they process and understand. The position of being an insider or outsider researcher within this ethnography, and my relationship with the study participants (informal learning group facilitators and group participants) is important in valuing and interpreting the data collected, as this relationship possesses agentic qualities in the co-construction of knowledge, especially, to place it simply, in the social and cultural similarities and differences between researcher and study participant (Berger, 2015). Hence, for the synthesis and interpretation of the data, it was crucial to explicitly clarify the differences to ensure the rigor and reliability of the study. Throughout the research, there are cases for me being seen as an insider and an outsider researcher. Within the communities of Sanford, the etic approach was of an outsider, but as an outsider spending time within communities, talking to people in communities and in many respects, becoming known and utilising this for snowballing and access.

My previous employment and associated work within adult and community education across northern England, provided initial community contacts in Sanford through related networks. These contacts posed advantages and disadvantages (Sikes and Potts, 2008; Coghlan and Brannick, 2010) such as access to potential participants through contact's networks but also has notable disadvantages. Study participants from these networks may have felt inclined to help which may lead to forms of exaggerating; or on the other hand, a reluctance to provide certain information due to our mutual contacts. Network contacts may also omit important information if they felt it was obvious, irrelevant or already known to the researcher (Fleming, 2018). This reaction can also play out as an outsider in an ethnography too, with restricted access and interviewees only giving the ethnographer 'partial truths' (Naake et al., 2010). In one sense, an outsider here could perhaps have a better opportunity to be offered this information, but at the same time, an outsider may miss nuances and the opportunity to probe the interviewee with questions relevant to them (Berger, 2015). There are points when the roles between insider and outsider can fluctuate (Hellawell, 2006; Crean, 2019). Naturally, the subject of insider and outsider is heavily debated, particularly with regard to the 'fixed dichotomous entities' of insider and outsider (Milligan, 2016: 235), and my interpretations of how it intersects with elements of this study are also open to such debate. As the researcher usually understands the topic area being studied and is becoming increasingly sensitised to the environment, it is possible the researcher constantly fluctuates between "involvement and estrangement" (Hellawell, 2006: 485). Alternatively, this could be perceived as a spectrum with insider and outsider at each end point, with the researcher always positioned in the spectrum between both points (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

Power differentials

Power imbalances or differentials (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) also have some bearing to the contributions of the interviewee. Firstly, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee can be viewed as exploitative (Lather 1986; Stacey 1988) but is partially mitigated by full informed consent, anonymity provided and ability to withdraw at any time up to publication. Secondly, the interviewees may fear our conversations could have future consequences, if I was to break confidentiality and share their data with mutual contacts, or their identity could be obvious to these contacts even with anonymity. In this sense, some of the participants undertook ‘a degree of risk’ (Powney and Watts, 1985:9).

Identifying and recruitment of participants and selection

As this study explored critical literacy phenomena within informal learning group settings, it was natural to seek facilitators, or those with past experience, stake holding or connection to such groups. Informal learning, itself is a classification often viewed with ambiguous and almost movable margins (Colley et al., 2003; Misko, 2008), is a broad spectrum of categorisation and can draw its constituent boundaries depending upon the type of informal learning it is, the space and location it takes place in, the process of learning it undertakes, the content of the informal learning and its purpose (Colley, 2003).

Initial strategies to identify study participants

Through the phase of identifying of the participants phase, I utilised these strategies:

- Professional contacts with links to communities in Sanford
- Scoping (both online and from visiting physical notice boards in community areas of Sanford)
- Snowballing

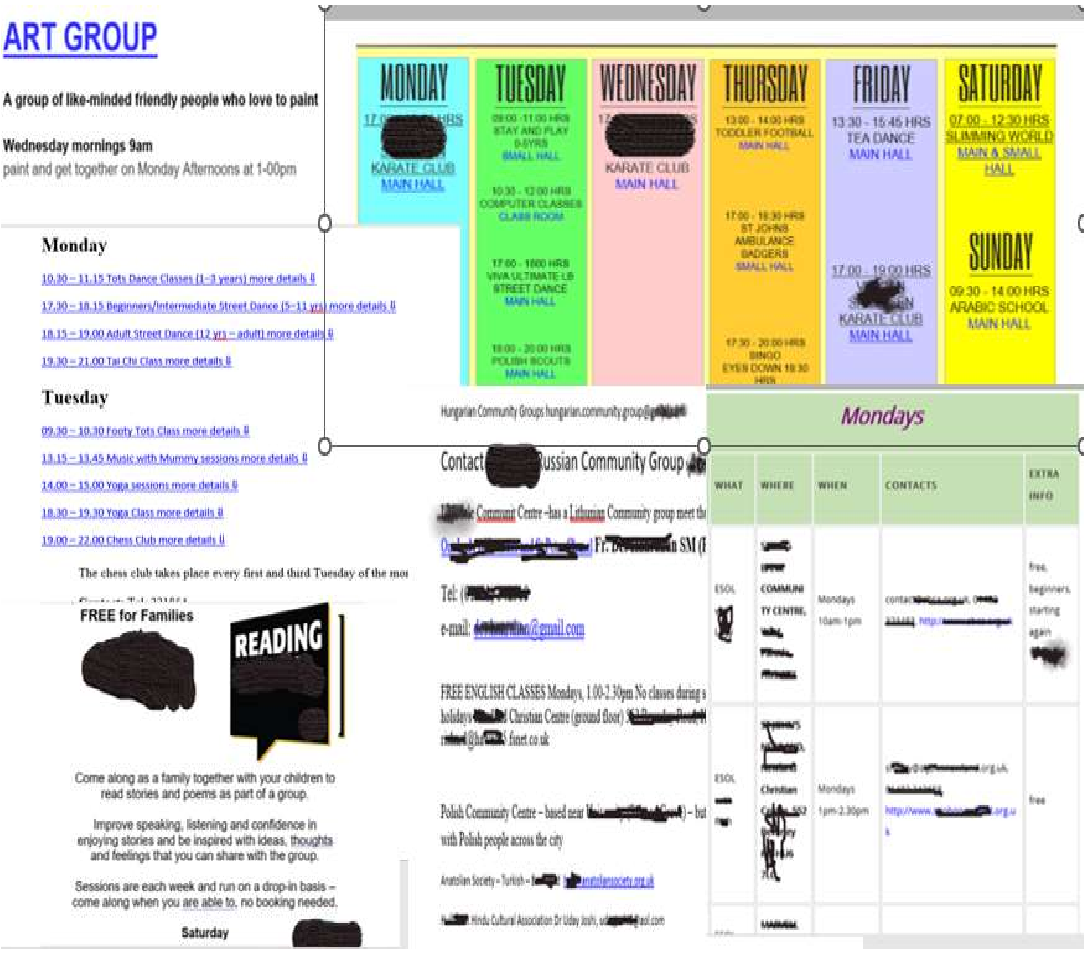
For ethical purposes, there were certain groups I did not visit as I did not want to appear voyeuristic, or intrude in anyway on the work they were doing, these were:

- Groups with an explicit mental health purpose
- Women only groups
- Groups involving under 18s in any form

The focus of the study was accessing informal learning groups operating face-to-face within the community and who met regularly to give critical literacy opportunities the chance to flourish.

Initial scoping: March – September 2019

An initial scoping of informal learning opportunities and groups was conducted across the setting, identifying a range of potential contacts/sites for participants (using publicly available means and existing knowledge e.g. investigating Lotto grants for the area, examining what is happening in libraries, children's centres, community centres and so forth). This revealed a plethora of informal learning groups in Sanford covering a wide range of arts, crafts, music, sport, self-help groups and well-being. Groups primarily concerning reading and discussion, such as book clubs, and English language learning groups were also identified. Initially, groups discovered with an explicit literacy focus tended to be ESOL.



ART GROUP

A group of like-minded friendly people who love to paint

Wednesday mornings 9am

paint and get together on Monday Afternoons at 1-00pm

Monday

10.30 – 11.15 Tots Dance Classes (1–3 years) more details ⇓

17.30 – 18.15 Beginners/Intermediate Street Dance (5–11 yrs) more details ⇓

18.15 – 19.00 Adult Street Dance (12 yrs – adult) more details ⇓

19.30 – 21.00 Tai Chi Class more details ⇓

Tuesday

09.30 – 10.30 Footy Tots Class more details ⇓

13.15 – 13.45 Music with Mummy sessions more details ⇓

14.00 – 15.00 Yoga sessions more details ⇓

18.30 – 19.30 Yoga Class more details ⇓

19.00 – 22.00 Chess Club more details ⇓

The chess club takes place every first and third Tuesday of the mo

MONDAY

17.0 [redacted] HRS
KARATE CLUB
MAIN HALL

TUESDAY

09:00 - 11:00 HRS
STAY AND PLAY
0-5YRS
SMALL HALL

10:30 - 12:00 HRS
COMPUTER CLASSES
CLASS ROOM

17:00 - 18:00 HRS
VIVA ULTIMATE LB
STREET DANCE
MAIN HALL

18:00 - 20:00 HRS
POLISH SCOUTS
MAIN HALL

WEDNESDAY

17 [redacted]
KARATE CLUB
MAIN HALL

THURSDAY

13:00 - 14:00 HRS
TODDLER FOOTBALL
MAIN HALL

17:00 - 18:30 HRS
ST JOHNS
AMBULANCE
BADGERS
SMALL HALL

17:30 - 20:00 HRS
BINGO
EYES DOWN 18:30
HRS

FRIDAY

13:30 - 15:45 HRS
TEA DANCE
MAIN HALL

17:00 - 19:00 HRS
[redacted]
KARATE CLUB
MAIN HALL

SATURDAY

07:00 - 12:30 HRS
SLIMMING WORLD
MAIN & SMALL
HALL

SUNDAY

09:30 - 14:00 HRS
ARABIC SCHOOL
MAIN HALL

Hungarian Community Groups hungarian.community.group@[redacted]

Contact [redacted] Russian Community Group [redacted]

[redacted] Communt Centre -has a Lithuanian Community group meet th

[redacted] Fr. [redacted] SM (

Tel: ([redacted]

e-mail: [redacted]@gmail.com

FREE ENGLISH CLASSES Mondays, 1.00-2.30pm No classes during s
holidays [redacted] Christian Centre (ground floor) [redacted]
[redacted]@[redacted].fsnet.co.uk

Polish Community Centre - based near [redacted]) - but
with Polish people across the city

Anatolian Society - Turkish - [redacted] [redacted]anatoliansociety.org.uk

[redacted] Hindu Cultural Association Dr Uday Joshi, [redacted]@aol.com

Mondays

WHAT	WHERE	WHEN	CONTACTS	EXTRA INFO
ESOL [redacted]	[redacted] COMMUNITY CENTRE, [redacted]	Mondays 10am-1pm	contact[redacted], [redacted], http://[redacted]	free, beginners, starting again [redacted]
ESOL [redacted]	[redacted] Christian [redacted]	Mondays 1pm-2.30pm	[redacted].org.uk, [redacted] http://www.[redacted].org.uk	free
	[redacted]			

FREE for Families

[redacted]

READING

[redacted]

Come along as a family together with your children to read stories and poems as part of a group.

Improve speaking, listening and confidence in enjoying stories and be inspired with ideas, thoughts and feelings that you can share with the group.

Sessions are each week and run on a drop-in basis – come along when you are able to, no booking needed.

Saturday [redacted]

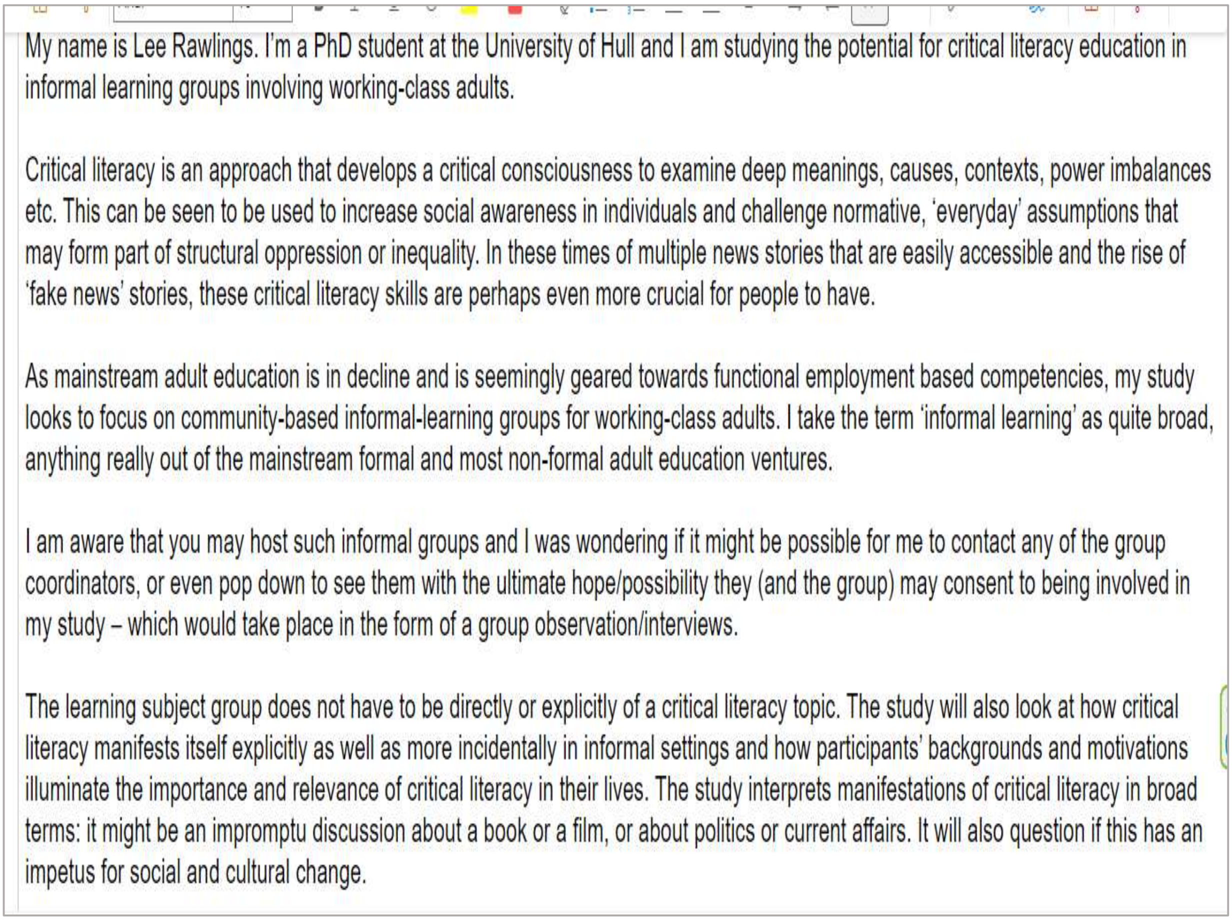
Figure 8 - Sample of initial scoping collage – screen dumps/ online information (redacted)

Specific scoping – September 2019 – March 2020

From this initial scoping (March, 2019 – September, 2019), ethics approval was granted by the University of Hull (September, 2019). From this approval, a more specific form of scoping began - continuing until the Covid-19 pandemic crisis hit in March 2020. This specific scoping meant visiting areas and sites where initial scoping had identified potential groups and is where the physical side of the ethnography began. Approaches to potential participants were made, both in person and online, with full disclosure of where I was from, what the research sought to do, the time it would take to participate in the study and what would happen. In both online and in-person visits, information sheets were provided fully detailing the study, what it would mean and require in taking part, signposting researcher contact information in case of any questions. This was to prepare full informed consent (Wiles et al., 2005).

Recruitment strategies

The process of identifying suitable participants for this study utilised several strategies. Online research meant searching for any information on informal learning groups in Sanford. This included notices, as well as social media platforms that hosted contact details and content by groups. Obtaining email addresses and web contacts often provided an easy non-obstructive introduction to potential participants. It was also an expedient means of providing information about the study for full informed consent to be given (Wiles et al., 2005). Furthermore, this method also allowed for the facilitator to reflect upon whether they wanted to participate without the face-to-face pressure perhaps unwittingly applied by more direct requests. However, email approaches met with an initial low response rate. I reflected that in my efforts to be transparent and fully inform any potential participant of my study, I produced opening, introductory emails that were too long and too complicated - they acted as a barrier. Therefore, potential participants may have felt it was too time consuming to read, disengaged by the language used – which may have appeared elitist and too academic (with terms such as critical literacy, critical consciousness and so on). It may have also been envisaged such language and questions could have a negative impact within their group sessions, and perhaps I would ask sensitive questions, probing their sense of social class or their education levels and so on. The language used within emails may have marginalised the recipient, which in view of the exploratory and emancipatory intentions of this study was an error. See example below:
However, using my reflexive framework I reconsidered the information given in the emails and the style of language employed.



My name is Lee Rawlings. I'm a PhD student at the University of Hull and I am studying the potential for critical literacy education in informal learning groups involving working-class adults.

Critical literacy is an approach that develops a critical consciousness to examine deep meanings, causes, contexts, power imbalances etc. This can be seen to be used to increase social awareness in individuals and challenge normative, 'everyday' assumptions that may form part of structural oppression or inequality. In these times of multiple news stories that are easily accessible and the rise of 'fake news' stories, these critical literacy skills are perhaps even more crucial for people to have.

As mainstream adult education is in decline and is seemingly geared towards functional employment based competencies, my study looks to focus on community-based informal-learning groups for working-class adults. I take the term 'informal learning' as quite broad, anything really out of the mainstream formal and most non-formal adult education ventures.

I am aware that you may host such informal groups and I was wondering if it might be possible for me to contact any of the group coordinators, or even pop down to see them with the ultimate hope/possibility they (and the group) may consent to being involved in my study – which would take place in the form of a group observation/interviews.

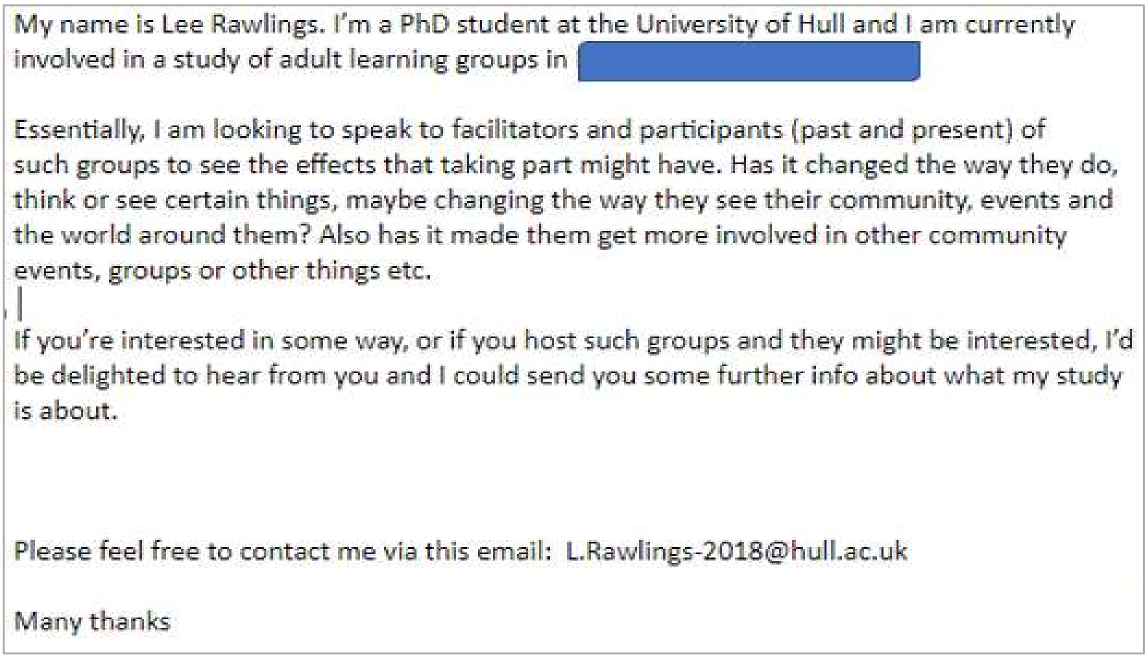
The learning subject group does not have to be directly or explicitly of a critical literacy topic. The study will also look at how critical literacy manifests itself explicitly as well as more incidentally in informal settings and how participants' backgrounds and motivations illuminate the importance and relevance of critical literacy in their lives. The study interprets manifestations of critical literacy in broad terms: it might be an impromptu discussion about a book or a film, or about politics or current affairs. It will also question if this has an impetus for social and cultural change.

Figure 9 - Sample email to prospective participants: September 2019

In other areas, the points of contact emailed acted as gatekeepers, thus it was often unknown if information was passed on, or if they did, how it was presented to the group was also unknown (Lavrakas, 2008).

Refining the emails reflexively – using the framework

A balance had to be found between reaching potential participants without alienating them and maintaining the ethical and transparent qualities of the emails. The length was reduced, and technical or academic terms were avoided where possible. This was to be succinct and to not create any unnecessary barriers or make assumptions about the knowledge of the receiver. If a positive response was gained, then the strategy would be to relay the information in a second email, or when appropriate. This refined approach generated a greater response than the first approach, although it could not be directly proven this was a result of this reflexive refinement, or if it was simply the recipients were more receptive to such requests.



My name is Lee Rawlings. I'm a PhD student at the University of Hull and I am currently involved in a study of adult learning groups in [redacted]

Essentially, I am looking to speak to facilitators and participants (past and present) of such groups to see the effects that taking part might have. Has it changed the way they do, think or see certain things, maybe changing the way they see their community, events and the world around them? Also has it made them get more involved in other community events, groups or other things etc.

If you're interested in some way, or if you host such groups and they might be interested, I'd be delighted to hear from you and I could send you some further info about what my study is about.

Please feel free to contact me via this email: L.Rawlings-2018@hull.ac.uk

Many thanks

Figure 10 - Example of refined email from November, 2019

Lotto Grants

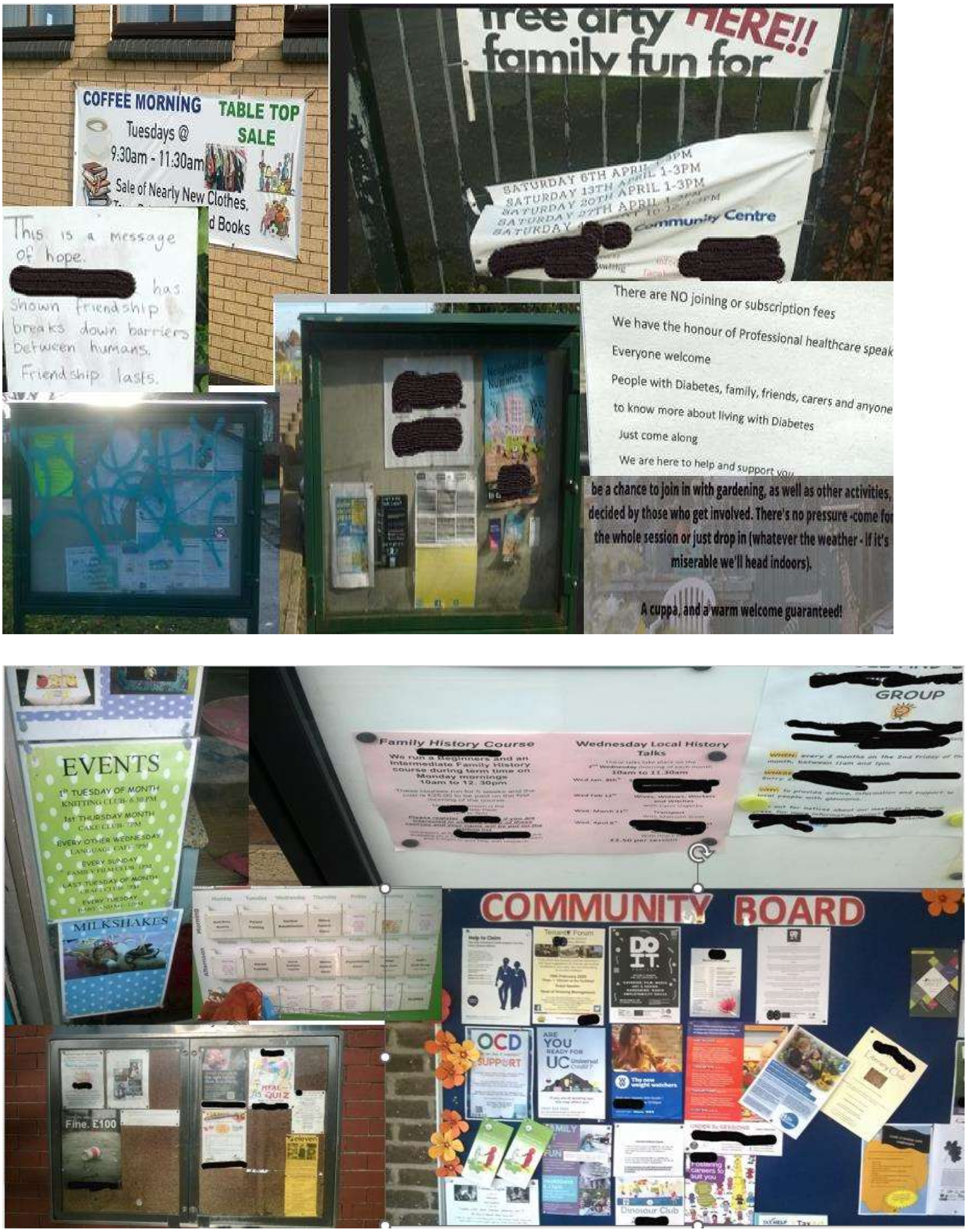
Another strategy employed for finding study participants was the researching of Lotto Grants awarded to community learning groups in the Sanford area. Searching the Lotto Grants website to locate awards to community groups, and then contacting them. This approach ultimately did not provide access to any study participants. However, it added extra detail concerning the scale of such groups within the local area and monies awarded by this external grant source. It is a method that could be explored further within future studies of such community groups due to the insight it provided.

Scoping and Snowballing – on foot in Sanford

This period of scoping and using snowballing techniques to find potential participants was a time-consuming process and travelling to Sanford, every week, included many hours within the field. It would be difficult to calculate exact hours spent 'on-foot' in communities scoping (as fieldwork was occasionally carried out alongside other tasks). A conservative estimate would be at least 10 hours per week, with more hours spent online since September 2019 to March 2020. Often this scoping would not, on a week by week basis, provide any tangible evidence to the study. But often, it meant I was becoming better known in certain areas and was a way of increasing access by becoming more accepted. In one example, in a council estate shopping precinct, I had begun conversations with a community conversation café worker/facilitator. At first, she spoke in guarded way, probably due to me asking questions about the purpose of the café and who visited it– although I did identify myself first and where I was from. But on the second visit (in March 2020), recognising me, she was much more open and introduced me to visitors involved in a community arts project. This was just one example of the benefits of familiarising within the community and hours spent in the field.

Visiting communities: the life and times of the ethnographer

The snowballing techniques employed provided access to potential study participants, particularly in helping access the so called ‘hard-to-reach’ (Valdez and Kaplan, 1999; Vogt, 2005). However, I accepted the possibility certain groups may not be locatable through snowballing due to not meeting those who can grant access. It could also be argued snowballing may limit the scope of research if potential participants have a common link due to their acquaintance (Berg, 1988). I divided Sanford into three areas of populous working-class communities, and places where they contained community spaces, such as community centres, libraries, religious centres through to shops and cafes and/or some form of ‘community spots’ that include notice boards or even just a space for posters. I visited ‘community spots’ around once a month (in most cases). Upon most visits, unless my camera (on my phone) was not available, photographs were taken. However, for many of the photographs, publishing them would compromise anonymity. I also collected flyers and leaflets containing information about informal learning groups or other community events.



free arty HERE!!
family fun for
SATURDAY 6TH APRIL 1-3PM
SATURDAY 13TH APRIL 1-3PM
SATURDAY 20TH APRIL 1-3PM
SATURDAY 27TH APRIL 1-3PM
Community Centre
COFFEE MORNING
Tuesdays @ 9:30am - 11:30am
TABLE TOP SALE
Sale of Nearly New Clothes,
d Books
This is a message of hope. [redacted] has shown friendship breaks down barriers between humans. Friendship lasts.
There are NO joining or subscription fees
We have the honour of Professional healthcare speak
Everyone welcome
People with Diabetes, family, friends, carers and anyone
to know more about living with Diabetes
Just come along
We are here to help and support you
be a chance to join in with gardening, as well as other activities, decided by those who get involved. There's no pressure -come for the whole session or just drop in (whatever the weather - if it's miserable we'll head indoors).
A cuppa, and a warm welcome guaranteed!
EVENTS
1st TUESDAY OF MONTH KNITTING CLUB
1st THURSDAY MONTH CAKE CLUB
EVERY OTHER WEDNESDAY LANGUAGE CAFE
EVERY SUNDAY
LAST TUESDAY OF MONTH CRAFT CLUB
EVERY TUESDAY
MILKSHAKES
Family History Course
Wednesday Local History Talks
GROUP
COMMUNITY BOARD
OCD SUPPORT
ARE YOU READY FOR UC
DO IT
Tenants' Forum
Dinosaur Club
Fine. £100
QUIZ

Figure 11 - Sample of notice-boards collage (redacted): shops and community spaces

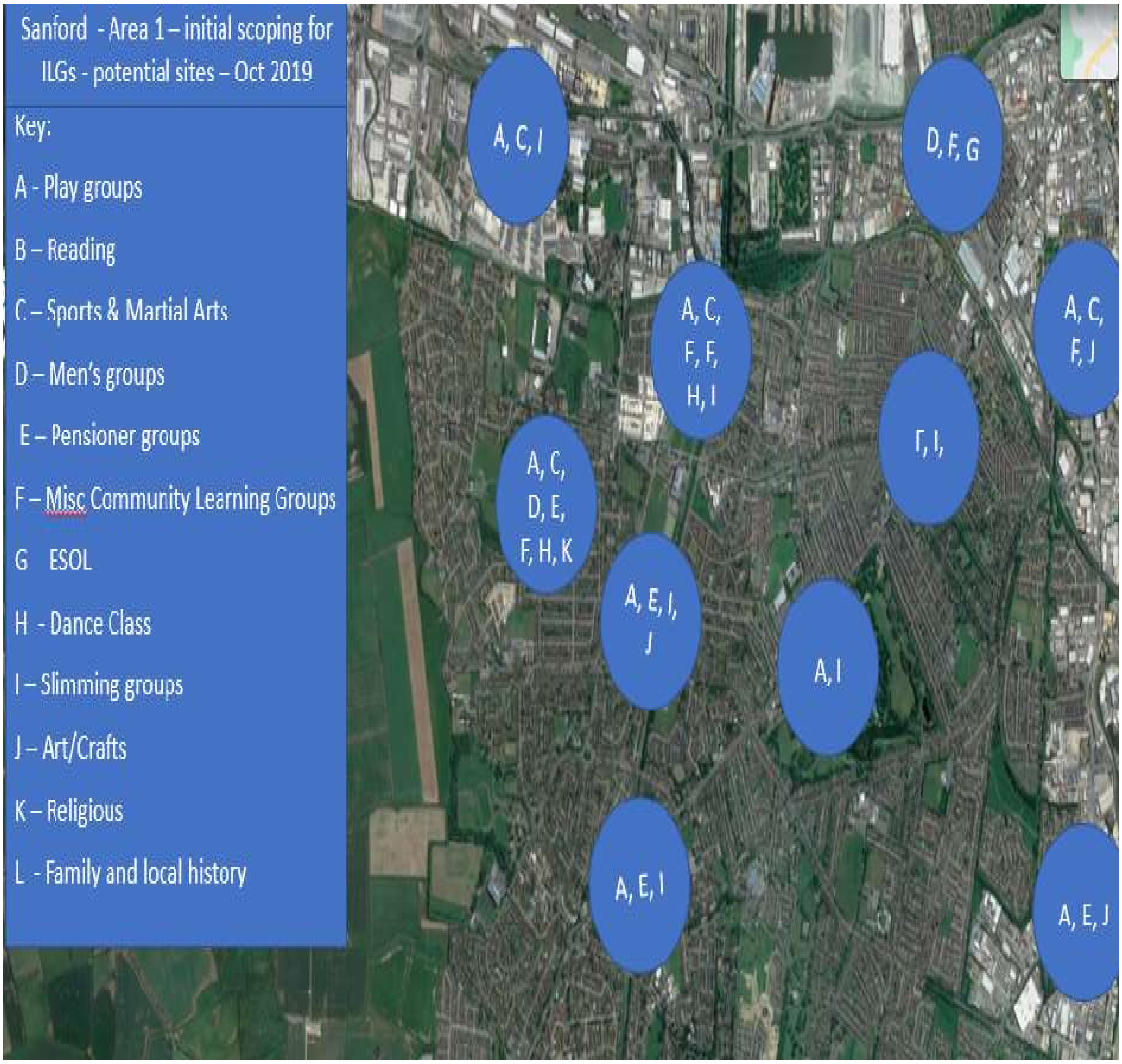
Visiting communities every month provided an awareness of life in the area; what was happening in terms of informal learning and other community activities. Naturally I accepted this, even combined with my online scoping, would not provide an absolute picture as it would not necessarily discover every group. Informal learning groups are transient, and a ‘complete list’ can quickly become outdated with many groups disbanding and many others emerging very quickly. Furthermore, as explored in Chapter Six, conversations within communities revealed informal learning groups meeting in people’s homes – which were completely unadvertised and only discoverable through this type of research. Every week, starting from September 2019, I visited at least one of the designated places to scope the area on foot. Visiting local shops, cafés and other community areas hoping to build rapport and ultimately uncover suitable informal learning groups.

Informal pre-meets

A contributory factor to recruitment to the study, was the informal pre-meetings arranged. In between October and March 2020, my records show I made 26 pre-meets. Pre-meets allowed for an informal, unrecorded (audio), discussion with potential participants and began in October 2019: with pre-meetings with various facilitators, including from *Share and Read* (who facilitated a number of informal learning groups in the area). Pre-meets proved valuable in finding participants, allowing both parties an opportunity to find out about each other and supported the building rapport with potential participants. 12 pre-meets resulted in a further discussion, an interview or a group observation at a later point – hence proving their value. The pre-meet gave me, as the interviewer, the opportunity to also find out a bit more about the participant to re-focus my interview questions to best capture their knowledge.

Journey from scoping to selection: told in maps

By the start of October 2019, the initial methods of scoping found potential groups across Sanford. A map of Sanford was divided into three areas and groups, and their apparent purpose, were also recorded. Whether the groups were still functioning in October 2019 is unknown, however, evidence of groups existing during this initial scoping phase was found. The first set of maps represent groups identified from the initial scoping phase.



Sanford - Area 1 – initial scoping for ILGs - potential sites – Oct 2019

Key:

A - Play groups

B – Reading

C – Sports & Martial Arts

D – Men's groups

E – Pensioner groups

F – Misc Community Learning Groups

G ESOL

H - Dance Class

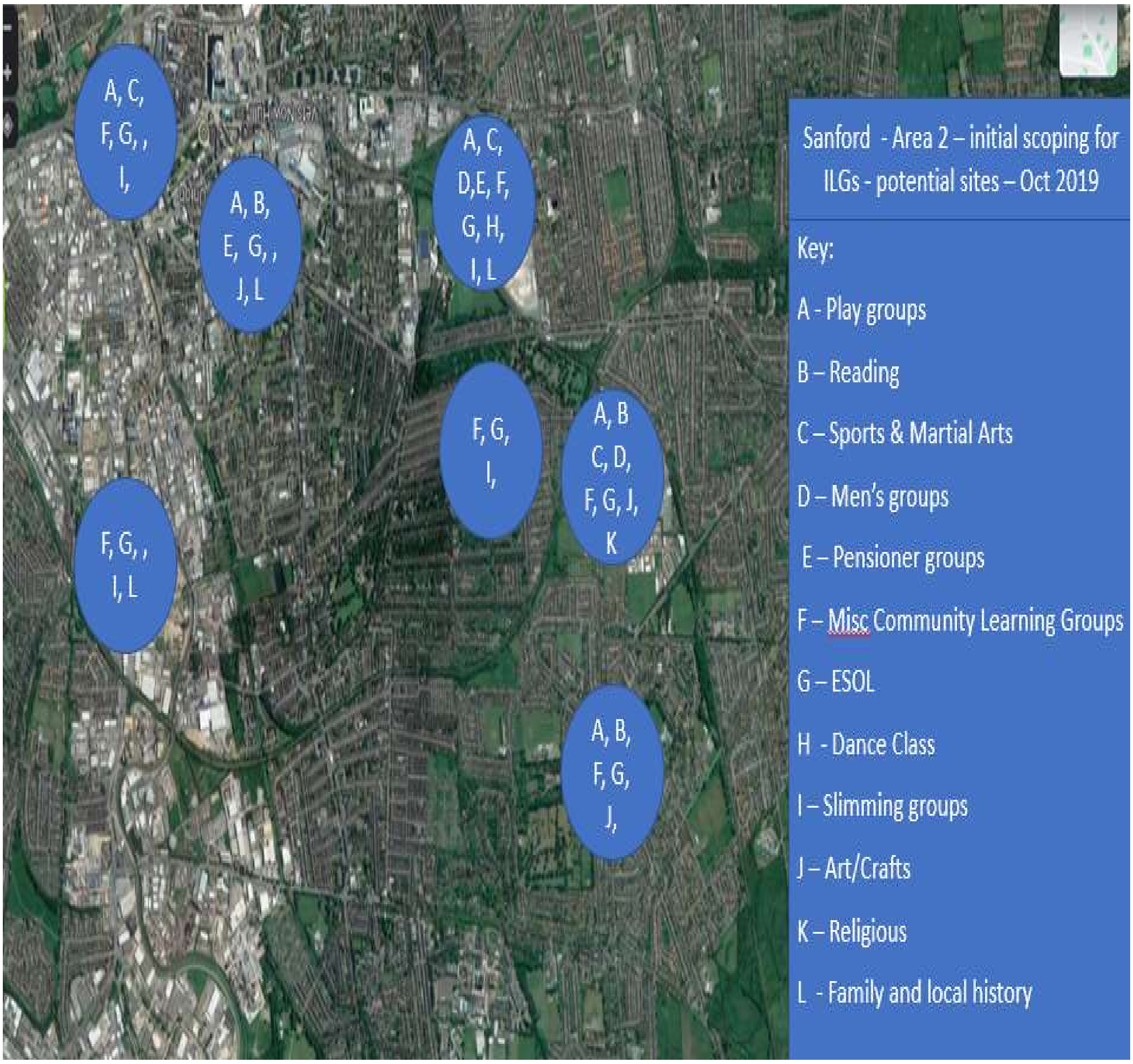
I – Slimming groups

J – Art/Crafts

K – Religious

L - Family and local history

A, C, I
D, F, G
A, C, F, F, H, I
A, C, F, J
F, I,
A, C, D, E, F, H, K
A, E, I, J
A, I
A, E, I
A, E, J



Sanford - Area 2 – initial scoping for ILGs - potential sites – Oct 2019

Key:

A - Play groups
B – Reading
C – Sports & Martial Arts
D – Men's groups
E – Pensioner groups
F – Misc Community Learning Groups
G – ESOL
H - Dance Class
I – Slimming groups
J – Art/Crafts
K – Religious
L - Family and local history

A, C, F, G, , I,
A, B, E, G, , J, L
A, C, D,E, F, G, H, I, L
F, G, I,
A, B C, D, F, G, J, K
F, G, , I, L
A, B, F, G, J,

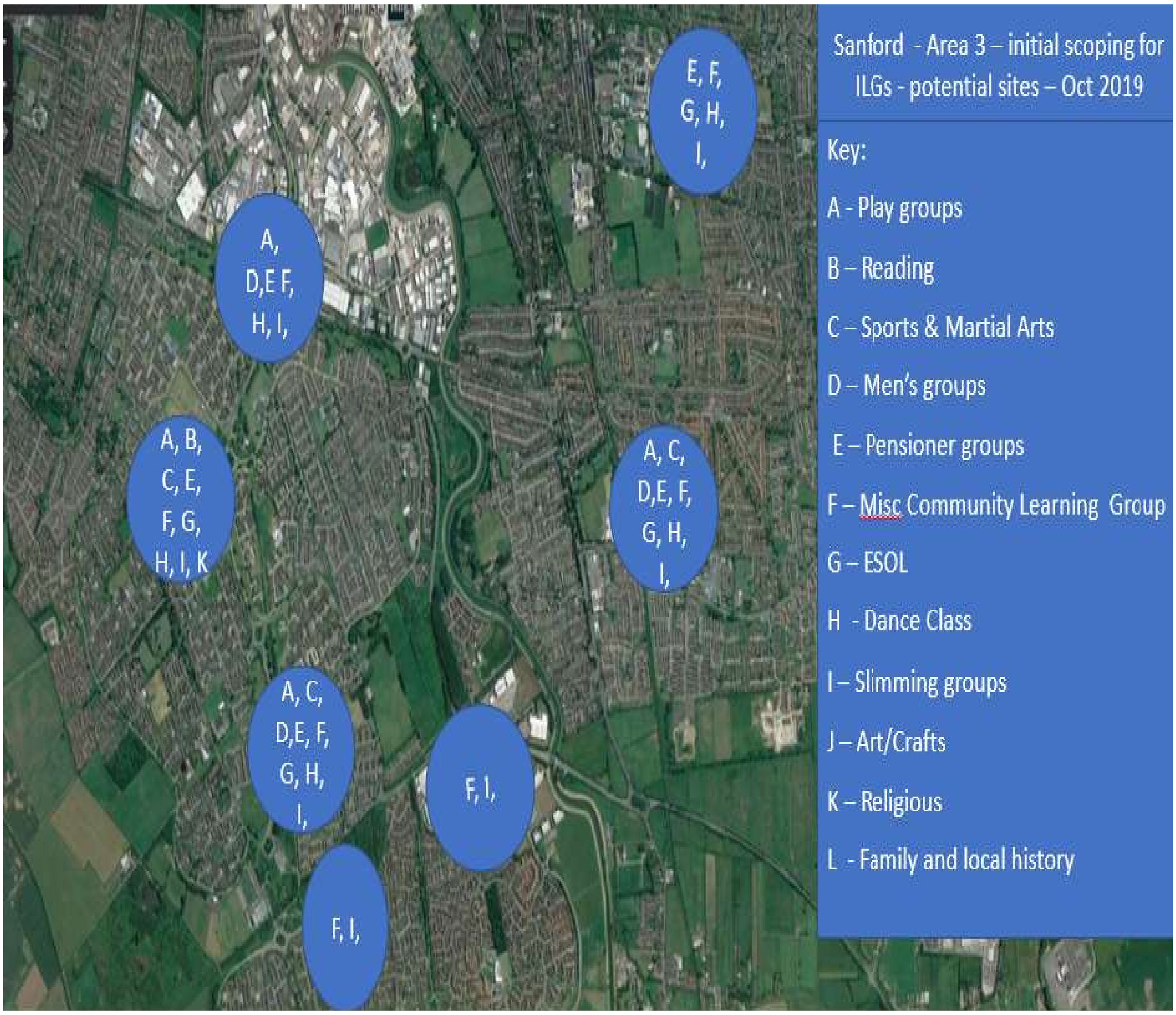
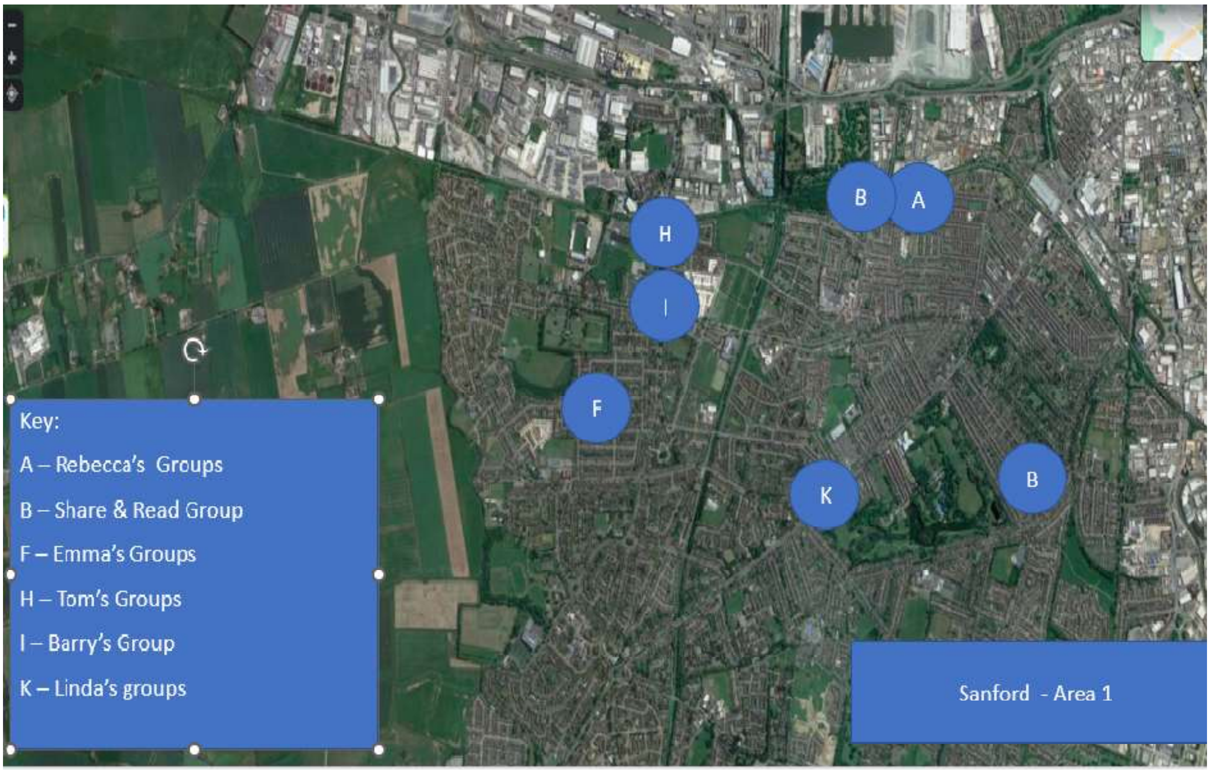
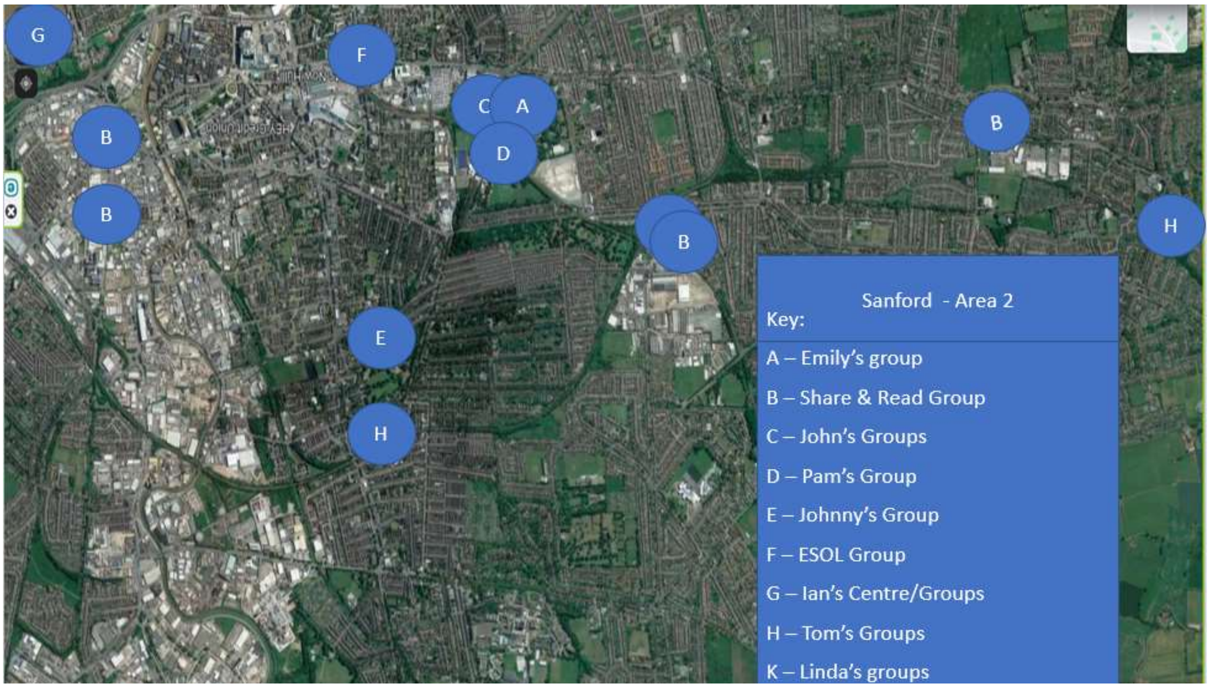

Sanford - Area 3 – initial scoping for ILGs - potential sites – Oct 2019
Key:
A - Play groups
B – Reading
C – Sports & Martial Arts
D – Men's groups
E – Pensioner groups
F – Misc Community Learning Group
G – ESOL
H - Dance Class
I – Slimming groups
J – Art/Crafts
K – Religious
L - Family and local history
E, F, G, H, I,
A, D,E F, H, I,
A, B, C, E, F, G, H, I, K
A, C, D,E, F, G, H, I,
A, C, D,E, F, G, H, I,
F, I,
F, I,

Figure 12 - Three maps of initial scoping phase

The following maps show the facilitators and groups that participated in the study. A small number of groups and facilitators have more than location.


B
A
H
I
F
K
B
Key:
A – Rebecca's Groups
B – Share & Read Group
F – Emma's Groups
H – Tom's Groups
I – Barry's Group
K – Linda's groups
Sanford - Area 1


G
F
C
A
D
B
B
B
B
H
E
H
Sanford - Area 2
Key:
A – Emily's group
B – Share & Read Group
C – John's Groups
D – Pam's Group
E – Johnny's Group
F – ESOL Group
G – Ian's Centre/Groups
H – Tom's Groups
K – Linda's groups

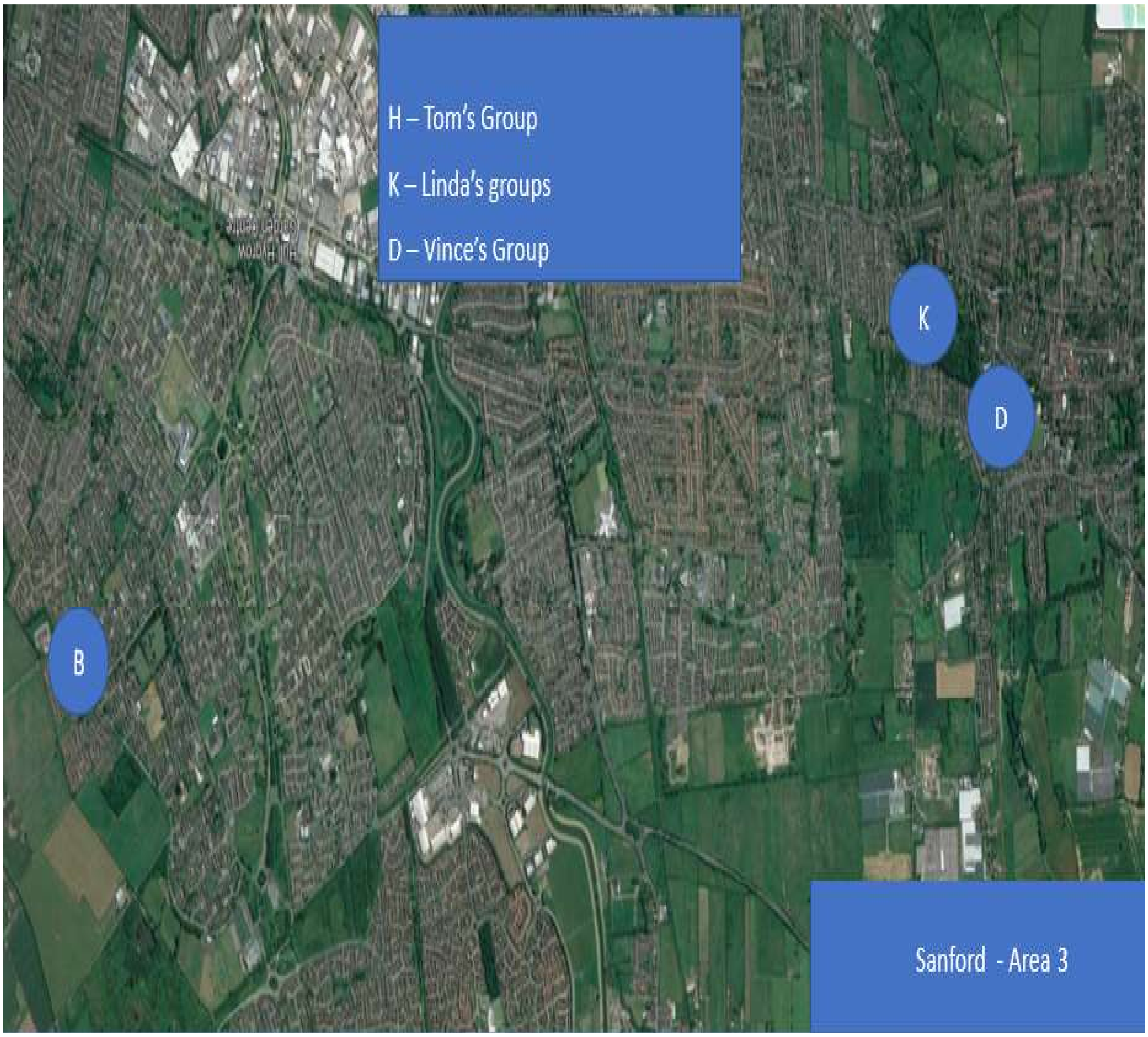


Figure 13 - Three area maps showing locations of participating group facilitators

Methods - Tools of the Ethnography

The data has been collected through the following methods:

- initial scoping – online searches of communities
- refined scoping – building on initial scoping – face to face, walking and scoping in Sanford's communities.
- semi structured interviews with former facilitators informal learning groups, and current facilitators of informal learning groups
- my own fieldnotes and reflexive notes from interviews
- reflexive work and use of the reflexive framework
- observing informal learning groups in action and taking fieldnotes

- a focus group of ‘volunteer’ informal learning groups facilitators (attached to a learning based third sector organisation)
- my own field notes/ reflexive notes from the entire research phase

Semi structured interviews

To enhance participation and access, interviews were held in an appropriate, comfortable and convenient setting for the interviewees. Typically at the group's venue but also encompassing other community spaces. All interviews were audio recorded and with verbal and written informed consent of the interviewee. Face-to-face interviews were the chosen method wherever possible as it is difficult to build rapport over the phone with those you have not previously met (Gilbert, 2001). However, due to necessity during the Covid pandemic, three interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Although this is not a direct like-for-like replacement for face-to-face interviews, the online interviews felt relaxed and comfortable as the participants were at home (Irani, 2018). Furthermore, as opposed to audio only interviews, non-verbal cues could still be read and used for understanding and building rapport (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013). The face-to face interviews were conducted from December 2019 up to March 2020 – with the Zoom interviews being conducted in June and July 2020.

Semi-structured interviews offered the most suitable method to best respond to opportunities within a conversation, as opposed to structured interviews which would be too rigid and not enable the participants to tell their own stories (Denzin, 2001; Di Cicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Interviews utilised a pre-set list of open-ended (and flexible) questions[16] as a form of prompt for myself, or as a form of interview guide (Patton, 2002). These had a similar core structure of questions with flexibility to change the order and approach, to best suit the flow of the conversations (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:79). This flexibility allowed for a pragmatic response to verbal and non-verbal cues, feelings, and to explore any offerings by the participant. Additionally, an informal, conversational approach was adopted aiming to enhance the development of a rapport between the interviewee and interviewer, building trust and enhancing the likelihood of disclosure (Powney and Watts, 1987).
Within the conversation, I sought to ask and find out about the following areas:

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[16] Typed sample of an interview schedule can be found in appendices.

- The facilitator’s own history
- Facilitator’s own views/ evidence of critical consciousness changes through working with groups
- Information about group participants, their motivations for attending.
- Group activities
- Transformations in people’s who attended (direct questions about their critical literacy)

I also used prompts to sometimes draw out information from the interview participant, such as a direct question about a particular aspect they had mentioned, or I knew they were involved in: ‘could you tell me about your role in ….’. Others were designed to prompt the participant to speak more about a particular subject: ‘could you tell me a little more about…’ or get a greater understanding of meaning: ‘could you explain it in other words’. Prompts themselves may be categorised into three separate groups: prompts that are detail orientated, promote elaboration and attempt to gain clarification (Patton, 2002). Being less rigid allowed the interviewee a sense of freedom to articulate their opinions, develop their ideas and present them in their own words (Denscombe 1998). It also allowed freedom to explore certain issues further, to use prompts (where necessary) whilst also responding to unanticipated responses. The interviews were individual (one happened to be interviews with both a husband and wife at their home who were both involved in completely separate informal learning groups), I also conducted a focus group – which will be discussed further. Interviews are however only one significant part of the ethnography (Esterberg, 2002).

Group observations

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and the closure of public meetings, observations of two separate informal learning groups were also carried out, between February and March 2020:

2 x observations of an English learning group for non-native speakers
2 x observations of a book club

This was to gain a first-hand insight into the groups’ workings, interactions between facilitators and the participants, to observe their interactions and activities that may involve critical literacy education.

Passive participant observer

The framework used to observe informal learning groups in action was one of a passive participant observer (Emerson, 1995; Seim, 2021; Loftland et al., 2022). Groups were told of my purpose for being there and they signed informed consent. I would observe proceedings (at the book club or the English language learning group), and visibly make notes. However, at breaks during the group session, I would ask group members questions about their experiences at the group, and the learning they engaged in. At the English language learning group, on one occasion, for unexpected reasons my role changed from a passive observer to a role that I will describe as an observer-facilitator (Seim, 2021; Lofland et al., 2022). Seim (2021) argues for mixing styles of observation to maximise potential for observation and meaning. On this occasion, I directly participated as a form of facilitator (due to an unanticipated level of new refugees arrived in Sanford visiting the group for the first time), so the refugees were not turned away, I agreed to help in the session. The refugees I worked with could speak English sufficiently to give their consent for me to observe as well as facilitate their learning. This provided a different experience to the passive observer and notes were written post event. As an observer, I consciously did not directly set out to interact with participants during the book club meeting as much as I consequently did, however, when appropriate and to be polite or build rapport, I initially interacted with the participants on a limited, but friendly basis (Seim, 2021), so my observer role sat somewhere between an active and non-active observer (Spradley, 1980). However, as rapport was gained, it also provided impromptu opportunities to briefly ‘discuss’ aspects of the group with the participants which provided a greater insight of the group and participants. Opportunities for this also were presented after the session had finished. I made notes during sessions, and I also added extra layers to the fieldnotes afterwards around key themes of the study and for potential exploration in the individual interviews. The notes then were considered through the reflexive framework described earlier in this chapter.

Focus Group

Through scoping, I became aware of a city-wide project bringing literature and poetry deep into the heart of communities, holding regular groups in a range of venues. The project, which I will refer to in this study as Share and Read, facilitated informal learning groups across Sanford due to its number of staff and volunteer facilitators. I attended a volunteer facilitators’ meeting in November 2019, and heard many rich experiences from their groups. In December 2019, after a brief period of consultation via email, it was decided single interviews with the volunteer facilitators would have been too difficult in terms of organising times and a suitable venue for many of them. It was mutually agreed the best method for interviewing them for the study, in terms of people's availability, was a two-hour focus group. A focus group is a 'series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment' (Kruger and Casey, 2000:5) therefore a central and suitable room could be arranged to suit their needs but with an appropriate amount of time to maintain focus and to explore the subject matter (Gibbs, 1997). I decided upon a focus group of six volunteers which I felt was neither too big to preclude all participants from taking part and offering data, but also it was not too small to mean individual interviews would have been a better method (Merton et al., 1990: 137). The focus group was held in a room the volunteers regularly met in, and as they had already met me previously, a friendly and open ambience prevailed.

The focus group took place in February 2020, at a library meeting room and provided the opportunity to explore the happenings within their groups (Barrows, 2000), if critical literacy education was taking place in the group and if their own critical consciousness had changed or developed in this time. A focus group also allowed the opportunity for group interaction as each volunteer had the opportunity to speak and react. A limitation to the focus group was the prospect of facilitators not wanting to speak frankly with other facilitators present. Time was also a limitation, as a minority of volunteers, particularly those who spoke first, had a longer time to speak than others. But it did enable for a large amount of data to be collected within just one meeting (Barrows, 2000) and was relatively easy to organise as all the participants lived local to Sanford. The manager of the project also coordinated with the volunteers which made organising the focus group relatively straight forward, unlike many focus groups which involve a great deal of organisation and logistics (Gibbs, 1997).

Purposive Sample

Having described the identification process, a purposive sample was then selected (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Patton, 2002). The purposive sampling used for this research was 'designed' before the research began but was also redesigned as the research progressed as it was not driven forward by theoretical categories, but practical and pragmatic considerations' (Emmel, 2013: 33). Considerations were designed to make best uses of the resources available (contacts, access, scoping, time and so forth.) and to best answer the question(s) of my research (Patton, 2002; Block and Erskine, 2012). I initially identified three different types of study participant to be approached for the research: (although these sometimes overlapped in terms of my classification due to numerous projects facilitators where sometimes involved in):

- informal learning facilitators (with current group(s)
- informal learning facilitators (former) – facilitators with considerable experience in informal learning practices which may enable observe any external changes in practice and a form of longitude in changes in critical consciousness)
- informal learning group members/participants.

The pool of facilitators in the sample are from a range of informal learning group settings across Sanford and were involved in a wide range of areas, including (not an exhaustive list):

- Food and cooking themed groups,
- Environment and wildlife
- Theological themes
- Gardening
- Book clubs
- European language learning
- Family history,

Groups were all situated in areas of Sanford beset with varying indicators of deprivation. As it became clearer informal learning was also facilitated through third sector organisations within Sanford another demarcation in type was made, groups with employed or funded facilitators, and volunteer facilitators attached to an organisation or funding. Externally funded groups are typically set up with a target, usually to meet a highlighted community need and therefore groups can sometimes reach people with specific disadvantages which may possess a greater potential for raising critical consciousness in the facilitators.

15 x semi structured interviews were completed from December 2019 – March 2020 – with three additional interviews occurring in June-July 2020 via Zoom. The names of the study participants have been anonymised and pseudonyms have been chosen by me, but have been chosen to reflect their age, ethnicity and gender (Wiles et al., 2008). On reflection, it would have been good practice to have asked participants to choose their own pseudonym and that will be implemented in future research, as this may also

support the building of rapport (Allen and Wiles, 2016). Other details that may identify the participants have been changed (or not revealed) to prevent them from being in any way identifiable. However, it is impossible to guarantee any participant absolute anonymity and be unidentifiable, despite every reasonable effort being made to ensure this (Van den Hoonard, 2002). Details of the participants and some important information is presented in Table A below (a more detailed guide is available in the appendices).

Table A: Interview participants:

Pseudonym	'Theme' of current or most recent group	Type of Group
John	Family History	3rd Sector
Ian	Food pedagogy, growing,	3rd Sector – multiple groups
Vince*	Resident/community groups	Contact with multiple groups
Barry *	Adult Education worker and past IL facilitator	Community action groups Informal learning community centres
Emily	Managers community centres/ oversee informal learning groups Previous resident/community groups	Informal learning community centres
Pam *	Previous resident/community groups	Informal learning community centres
Tom	British wildlife, growing food and plants	3rd sector plus runs own informal learning groups
Rebecca	Religious centre based	Facilitates and hosts various informal learning groups for residents in local area and to meet their needs
Linda	Learning	Own groups– uses houses as venues under national organisational umbrella that practice informal learning
Lucy*	Former Informal Learning in Arts	3rd Sector
Jim*	Education for adults – various groups	3rd sector
Jenny	Education – reading themed	3rd sector
Sarah	Education – reading themed	3rd sector
Rachel	Education – reading themed	3rd sector
Polly	Education – reading themed	3rd sector
Paula	Education – reading themed	3rd sector
Catherine	Community Learning, voluntary work/ skills exchange	3rd Sector
Jack	Book club facilitator	Own group

Figure 14 - Study participants information

Key * = not currently active as an informal learning groups facilitator

Additionally, I observed a book club, with several adults from differing backgrounds and I also observed an English language learning group within Sanford on two occasions. I intended to observe many other groups, and leading up to the pandemic, had plans and permission to observe groups (see below) in April and May 2020:

- Literature themed learning at a couple's home via third sector organisation,
- Literature themed informal learning groups facilitated by a volunteer who was also attached to this third sector organisation for staff at a local hospice.
- Share and Read groups.
- A women's group with a theme on growing food and cooking,
- A church-based group based on supporting people.
- A home-based language learning informal learning groups based around French conversation.
- A Family History group

As stated, the above group observations could not happen due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which would have given the study a wider range of observation experience of informal learning groups this study was focussing on.

Analysing the data

Braun and Clark's (2006) steps for thematic analysis were adapted to analyse the data. This section will demonstrate how the process is transparent and illustrates trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis groups related data together, with the researcher interpreting patterns or 'themes' within sets of data to construct meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, within thematic analysis, the researcher is the 'instrument for analysis, making judgements about coding, theming, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing the data' (Starks and Trinidad, 2007; cited in Nowell et al., 2017:1). Thematic analysis can unpick the range of rich and nuanced accounts of participants' views, allowing for new concepts and understandings to be taken from the data (Braun and Clark, 2006). For instance, the participants discussing topics such as their own critical consciousness could be classed 'semantic' (more explicit meanings that require less interpretation) or 'latent' which are more conceptual and require more interpretation from the researcher (Braun and Clark, 2006).

Theoretical approaches to data analysis

Critical realism posits dual realities - one as seen, and perceived by the participants and myself, form the observable elements of my research (the participants, their settings, cultural practices and so forth). However, this reality is shaped by the second, the unobservable reality, that constructs society, individual perceptions and their lives (Bhaskar, 2016). Hidden unobservable aspects include structural inequalities, interpellation (Althusser, 1971); internalised oppressors/oppression (Freire, 1970) power relations/ imbalances/cultural hegemonies (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1988). I explore the agents and phenomena in and between the realities. An ethnographic methodology was necessary - seeking, finding, speaking to people in Sanford and observing groups and interviewing facilitators, to expose multiple truths (Emerson et al.,1995). The study's approach also embodies interpretivism and is comfortable with individuals' 'versions of truth' and reality (Mack, 2010). Largely inductive in approach, both learning from and adapting from the data, it leads to gradually constructing an interpretation of the phenomenon being studied (Lodico, 2010). This also includes 'a simultaneous process of deduction and induction, of theory building, testing and rebuilding' (Ezzy, 2002:10 cited in O'Reilly, 2009).

Thematic Analysis

This section will the explore the thematic analysis conducted. *Figure 15* gives a visual overview of this process:

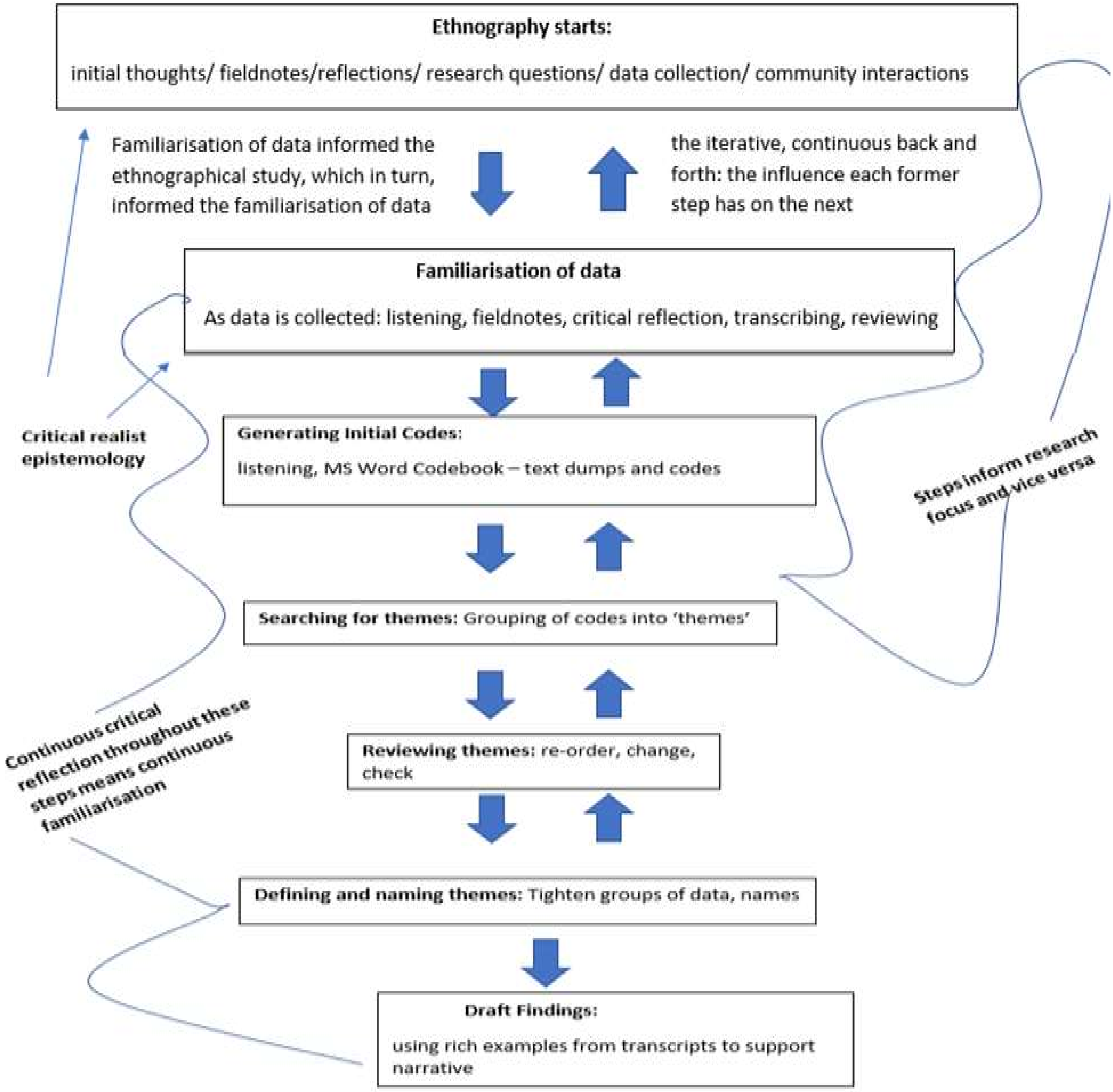

Ethnography starts:
initial thoughts/ fieldnotes/reflections/ research questions/ data collection/ community interactions
Familiarisation of data informed the ethnographical study, which in turn, informed the familiarisation of data
the iterative, continuous back and forth: the influence each former step has on the next
Familiarisation of data
As data is collected: listening, fieldnotes, critical reflection, transcribing, reviewing
Critical realist epistemology
Generating Initial Codes:
listening, MS Word Codebook – text dumps and codes
Steps inform research focus and vice versa
Searching for themes: Grouping of codes into 'themes'
Reviewing themes: re-order, change, check
Continuous critical reflection throughout these steps means continuous familiarisation
Defining and naming themes: Tighten groups of data, names
Draft Findings:
using rich examples from transcripts to support narrative

Figure 15 - Overview Thematic Analysis Process (steps adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Stage 1: Becoming familiar with the data

Face-to-face interviews were recorded on to a voice recorder in MP3 format, with three latter interviews carried out via Zoom, recorded using the Zoom application. Semi-structured interviews were conversational and flowed to create rapport to allow participants to feel comfortable to talk (Leech, 2002). Thus, gaining a richer, more detailed, picture of the phenomena being studied. I listened to each interview first, writing notes immediately after. Fieldnotes taken from observations/experiences within the communities I visited drew from Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein's (1997) suggestions for taking ethnographic fieldnotes, which include 'jottings' immediately after an observation, to complete notes and reflections (ibid). Collectively they formed a monthly log, providing a reflexive narrative of the fieldwork and reflections. This initial approach to familiarising with the audio recordings was to listen (at least six times) throughout the research phase, and in various situations – from formally making time to listen, writing notes and marking points to return to; to listening walking or exercising and making notes afterwards. Purposefully allowing gaps between each listen for reflection - but in between, I would sometimes listen to short sections of the audio I previously marked, particularly with latent topics open to interpretation. As I unpicked meanings that perhaps even the contributors were not fully conscious of, it was necessary to undertake strategic measures to gain insights and understanding. These approaches contributed to my familiarisation and critical reflection upon the data, albeit in unquantifiable ways.

The initial intention was to partially transcribe the interviews. However, as I continued the listening process, comparing the experiences of the research participants, the necessity to fully transcribe the interviews became apparent. This was to capture not only the stories which underpin much of this data, but also the nuance within it. The process of transcription was an intense period of familiarisation with the data. On one hand, the laborious nature of transcribing would sometimes be a mechanical process, and one at which, on the surface, I was typing, rather than thinking. However, I found, reflecting upon the transcription afterwards, I was also in effect, analysing the data simultaneously (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Bailey, 2008). After the data was transcribed, each transcript was rechecked against the audio file for accuracy and allowed for different perspectives to be explored and notes were made. After transcriptions were completed, verbatim, allowing the data to have its 'own voice' (Pulla and Carter, 2018). The reading of transcriptions, sometimes accompanied with the audio and sometimes without, began the initial process of identifying codes. It made comparing the data not only a cognitive act, but a physical one.

Stage 2: Generating initial codes

Following the familiarisation phase the process of finding meaning within this data continued with creation of a list of 15 codes from the raw data, which became the foundations or ‘building blocks’ of initial meanings from the data (Thomas, 2009) providing a sharpened focus (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Working through transcripts, copying chunks of data into topic headings, identified either explicit or implicit commonalities (see examples below). Organising data by shared meanings or topic areas, as Denscombe suggests (2010), allows data to be compared against other data in clear representable form.

Initial codes

- Awakening of facilitators of differing degrees
- Effects on their practice
- Crit Lit in action
- Effect on participants’ lives
- Increasing community involvement, empowering people in their own lives/ change in attitudes
- Participation in groups leads to more community action, building relationships.
- Successes and impact of informal learning
- Different vehicles for learning about the world and becoming critically literate.
- Decline of communities/ non formal education
- Feeling formal/non formal education is broken.
- a lack of crit lit skills being taught (in education)
- Differing perceptions of what education consists of
- Are informal learning group(s) education?
- New skills learnt by attendees.
- Motivations for starting group.

Coding the data was naturally a highly interpretative act to avoid unnecessary ambiguity, code names were essentially chosen to directly represent meanings interpreted from the raw data, both semantic and latent, examples below:

Data (examples) **Key S= Semantic codes L= Latent codes**	**Initial Codes**
S really interesting …because I think my awareness has been increased – it made me realise how people made me understand the difficulties and the day to day barriers people face’ **S** people open up about their lives – their day to day is revealing more than anything…it made me realise I am, live in a bubble I would say absolutely. on a very personal level, for me, I would describe myself as a different person I have done, I've said to people, I'm a different person, to the person I was before I started working on this project. And I think, so that's been from the end of 2016, to now 2020. I think it affects us in so different ways. **L** what I'm trying to get at is now you're working with them what I understand that I'm just the same as them, I'm still affected by them in the same ways affected as they are by the same sort of systems. **L** I'd never been anywhere that was quite so sort of monoculture. I didn't understand. I still am, in some ways, still quite naive in the way that I view the world	**Awakening of facilitators**

Figure 16 - initial coding example

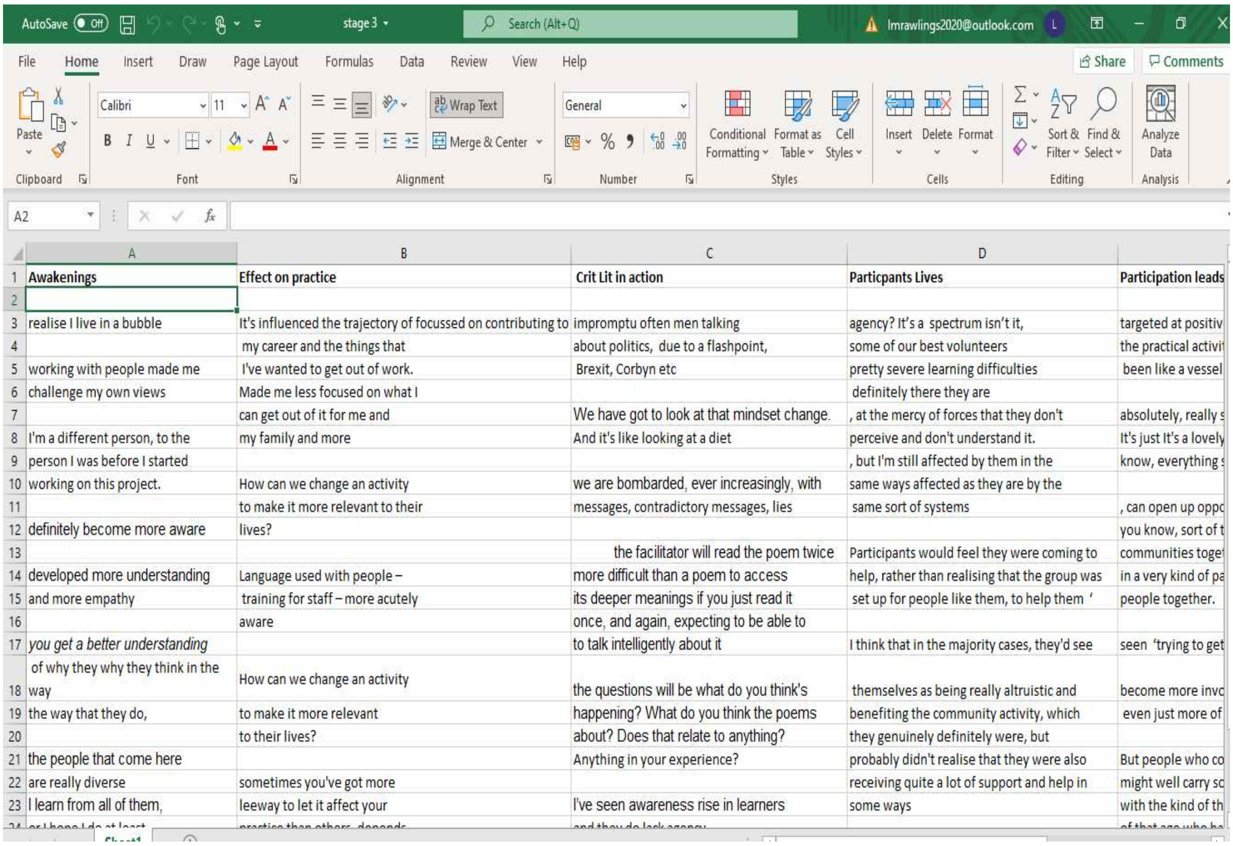
In the example above, the latent data is much more nuanced and open to interpretation, especially to its attributed code. This part of the data analysis requires an iterative approach to meaning making: reflecting and continually returning to both the data and the theoretical frameworks detailed earlier in this section. In the first latent data example above, the facilitator is potentially, through interacting with participants, now observing parts of the hidden reality that has such a powerful influence over his and their participants’ lives. He clearly sees himself as subject to forces too. it can be argued to demonstrate part of an awakening of the facilitator. The second latent text example is the facilitator, whilst discussing previously moving to a new city a few years ago, still acknowledging they are ‘still quite naïve’ which could be interpreted to suggest the process has made them ‘less naïve’ and potentially more aware. What does not appear in the text is the way this was said, which was humorously self-deprecating.

Stage 3: Searching for themes

After generating the initial codes, and whilst still in the process of the iterative continuous critical reflection, the focus turned to the grouping and ordering the codes into potential themes. Patterns were becoming evident in the data and a point of saturation had been reached as no new codes were being created, nor any new ‘emergent themes’ (Given, 2016:

135). As Braun and Clarke suggest, the use of ‘visual representations’ were useful in the grouping of codes into themes (2006: 19), with plans, mind maps, tables and code sheets being created and utilised in this process (see various examples in this section). This was particularly helpful for many reasons, such as seeing how themes interconnected. It also reduced the chances of mistakes, or important topics being misconstrued or even left out from the initial coding (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Using an MS Excel document, the initial codes generated in the former stage were now reviewed, whilst continuing the ongoing iterative process with the data. The codes were evaluated and checked, for both cogency and the recurrence of topics. As Ryan and Bernard (2003) effectively summarise: the higher the frequency of one of these occurring in the data, the more likely this will be a theme. This appraisal of the data, looking for ‘recurring regularities’ in the data (Merriam and Tisdale, 2015: 206) provided opportunity for the patterns to be detected and the themes to be identified within it. In data analysis these are often termed as ‘emerging themes’ but I use this with caution. This may suggest themes are merely found in the data, as opposed to the co-construction of the data between the researcher and the participant; as well as the ongoing iterative process in analysing the data.

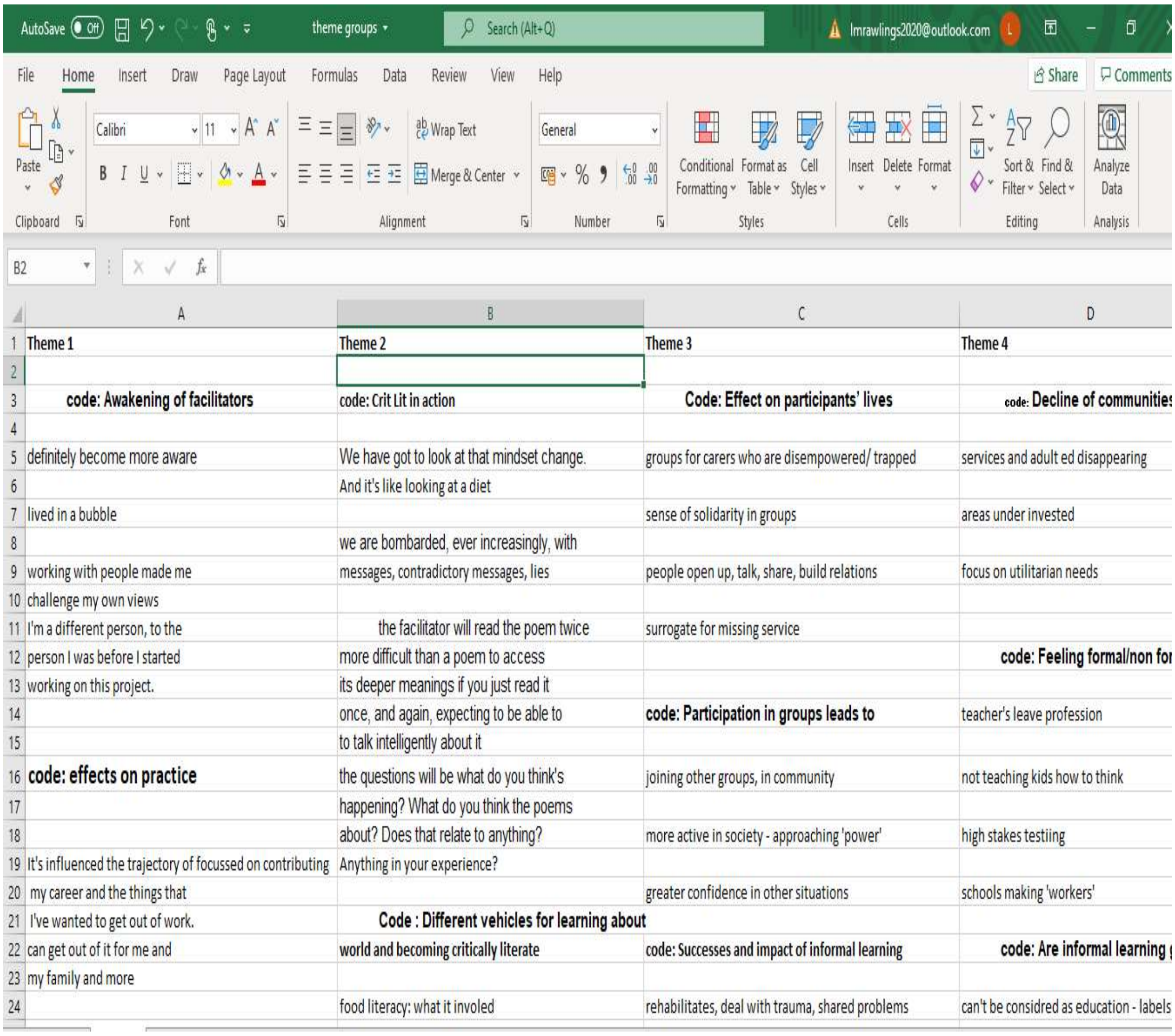
Using a MS Excel document, I began to organise initial codes into preliminary themes:



	A	B	C	D	
1	**Awakenings**	**Effect on practice**	**Crit Lit in action**	**Particpants Lives**	**Participation leads**
2					
3	realise I live in a bubble	It's influenced the trajectory of focussed on contributing to	impromptu often men talking	agency? It’s a spectrum isn’t it,	targeted at positiv
4		my career and the things that	about politics, due to a flashpoint,	some of our best volunteers	the practical activi
5	working with people made me	I've wanted to get out of work.	Brexit, Corbyn etc	pretty severe learning difficulties	been like a vessel
6	challenge my own views	Made me less focused on what I		definitely there they are	
7		can get out of it for me and	We have got to look at that mindset change.	, at the mercy of forces that they don't	absolutely, really s
8	I'm a different person, to the	my family and more	And it's like looking at a diet	perceive and don't understand it.	It's just It's a lovely
9	person I was before I started			, but I'm still affected by them in the	know, everything s
10	working on this project.	How can we change an activity	we are bombarded, ever increasingly, with	same ways affected as they are by the	
11		to make it more relevant to their	messages, contradictory messages, lies	same sort of systems	, can open up oppo
12	definitely become more aware	lives?			you know, sort of t
13			the facilitator will read the poem twice	Participants would feel they were coming to	communities toget
14	developed more understanding	Language used with people –	more difficult than a poem to access	help, rather than realising that the group was	in a very kind of pa
15	and more empathy	training for staff – more acutely	its deeper meanings if you just read it	set up for people like them, to help them ‘	people together.
16		aware	once, and again, expecting to be able to		
17	*you get a better understanding*		to talk intelligently about it	I think that in the majority cases, they'd see	seen ‘trying to get
18	of why they why they think in the way	How can we change an activity	the questions will be what do you think's	themselves as being really altruistic and	become more invo
19	the way that they do,	to make it more relevant	happening? What do you think the poems	benefiting the community activity, which	even just more of
20		to their lives?	about? Does that relate to anything?	they genuinely definitely were, but	
21	the people that come here		Anything in your experience?	probably didn't realise that they were also	But people who co
22	are really diverse	sometimes you've got more		receiving quite a lot of support and help in	might well carry sc
23	I learn from all of them,	leeway to let it affect your	I've seen awareness rise in learners	some ways	with the kind of th

Figure 17 - Screenshot of Initial Codings

The next step in this process was to organise themes into fewer but larger, connected groups/themes relating to how initial codes/topics interacted with each other. For example, topics concerning participants' views on the education system and informal learning's place within that system, naturally had a connection through a theme of education.


AutoSave Off
theme groups
Search (Alt+Q)
lmrawlings2020@outlook.com
File
Home
Insert
Draw
Page Layout
Formulas
Data
Review
View
Help
Share
Comments
Paste
Calibri
11
Wrap Text
General
Merge & Center
Conditional Formatting
Format as Table
Cell Styles
Insert
Delete
Format
Sort & Filter
Find & Select
Analyze Data
Clipboard
Font
Alignment
Number
Styles
Cells
Editing
Analysis
B2

	A	B	C	D
1	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4
2				
3	**code: Awakening of facilitators**	code: Crit Lit in action	**Code: Effect on participants' lives**	**code: Decline of communitie**
4				
5	definitely become more aware	We have got to look at that mindset change.	groups for carers who are disempowered/ trapped	services and adult ed disappearing
6		And it's like looking at a diet		
7	lived in a bubble		sense of solidarity in groups	areas under invested
8		we are bombarded, ever increasingly, with		
9	working with people made me	messages, contradictory messages, lies	people open up, talk, share, build relations	focus on utilitarian needs
10	challenge my own views			
11	I'm a different person, to the	the facilitator will read the poem twice	surrogate for missing service	
12	person I was before I started	more difficult than a poem to access		**code: Feeling formal/non fo**
13	working on this project.	its deeper meanings if you just read it		
14		once, and again, expecting to be able to	**code: Participation in groups leads to**	teacher's leave profession
15		to talk intelligently about it		
16	**code: effects on practice**	the questions will be what do you think's	joining other groups, in community	not teaching kids how to think
17		happening? What do you think the poems		
18		about? Does that relate to anything?	more active in society - approaching 'power'	high stakes testiing
19	It's influenced the trajectory of focussed on contributing	Anything in your experience?		
20	my career and the things that		greater confidence in other situations	schools making 'workers'
21	I've wanted to get out of work.	**Code : Different vehicles for learning about**		
22	can get out of it for me and	**world and becoming critically literate**	code: Successes and impact of informal learning	**code: Are informal learning**
23	my family and more			
24		food literacy: what it involed	rehabilitates, deal with trauma, shared problems	can't be considred as education - labels

Figure 18 - Screenshot of code groupings forming themes

Stage 4: Reviewing the themes

This stage initially reviewed the themes created from the previous stage. Its purpose was to confirm the themes and check them for reliability and how they represent the data. Furthermore, this also allowed for an overview of the themes in not only how they related to each other but how important they were in addressing the research questions. During this stage, I reduced the number of themes, from five to four – making the now redundant Theme 5 – '*motivations of the informal learning facilitator*' a sub theme of Theme 1 (codes on the *awakenings of facilitators of different degrees*). I initially decided Theme 5 would be an independent theme, however, in comparing the data, the frequency and reoccurrence of the topics within theme it was not as strong as the other themes, and upon consideration, I felt that the motivation of the informal learning groups facilitator could form important aspect of how their critical consciousness may develop. For instance, if their motivation was to help 'disadvantaged' people, could they be more pre-disposed to 'reading the participants'.

Stage 5: Defining and naming themes

This step reviewed each theme in relation to how they together created a narrative and addressed the research questions. I also named each theme at this stage: Theme 1 became: *Reading the participants as 'texts' – the raising of the facilitators' critical consciousness and related reflections.*

This theme presented data captured upon the facilitators' transformation through reading the participants. It also subsumed the older, smaller identified theme, of 'facilitators' motivation for being facilitators of informal learning groups'. It formed from and grouped together initial codes:

- Awakening of facilitators of differing degrees
- Effects on their practice
- Motivations for starting group.

Theme 2 became: *Critical literacy education and learning within informal learning settings*

This presented data concerning critical literacy education with informal learning settings, both of planned and unplanned events. The theme consisted of the initial codes:

- Crit Lit in action.
- Different vehicles for learning about the world and becoming critically literate.
- Increasing community involvement, empowering people in their own lives/ change in attitudes

Theme 3 became: *Respite and solidarity.*

This theme explored the safe place informal learning groups can provide to marginalised people, as well as the sense of community it can provide.

It consists of these initial codes:

- Effect on participants' lives
- Participation in groups leads to more community action, building relationships.
- Successes and impact of informal learning

Theme 4 became: '*Broken system' and the decline of adult and community learning*

It addressed the facilitators feelings towards formal and non-formal education, are their groups' 'education' and what is informal learning's place within education. It consisted of these initial codes:

- Decline of communities/ non formal education
- Feeling formal/non formal education is broken.
- A lack of crit lit skills being taught (in education)
- Differing perceptions of what education consists of
- Are informal learning group(s) education?

I named the themes with the following considerations: firstly, the name should enable the reader to understand what the theme is in relation to the study and the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006:93). To support the naming and confirmation of the themes, I created a thematic table to summarise and compare the themes, whilst also detailing the important topics and details of each theme, as I interpreted them (see Figure 19). Furthermore, I also created a thematic map, to visually show how the themes interconnect, particularly in relation to Theme 1 (see Figure 20)

Theme 1: Reading the participants as ‘texts’ – the raising of the facilitators’ critical consciousness and related reflections.

Unexpected changes in critical consciousness

Living in a bubble – crossing borders

Realisation of border being crossed

Changes in practice

(former theme) : ***Motivations for being a informal learning facilitator***

Empathy; to help people, ‘job satisfaction’,

Build communities of like minds

Theme 2: Critical literacy education and learning within informal learning settings.

Elements of critical pedagogies without knowing

Critical literacy activities: poetry, stories, discussion

Changes in participants outlook/ actions: subtle to bigger changes

Disrupting status quo, challenges to views

Theme 3: Respite and solidarity

Informal learning group participants ‘trapped’ within a system.

Powerless, alienated.

respite from structural oppression - solidarity of informal learning groups

Shared values and community

Increased activity in communities

Theme 4: Broken system' and the decline of adult and community learning

Neo-liberal utilitarian system leads decrease in adult learning provision.

Formal and non-formal education 'broken' and not 'fit for practice'.

Reproducing inequality

Informal learning's role

What is education?

Figure 19 - Thematic overview table

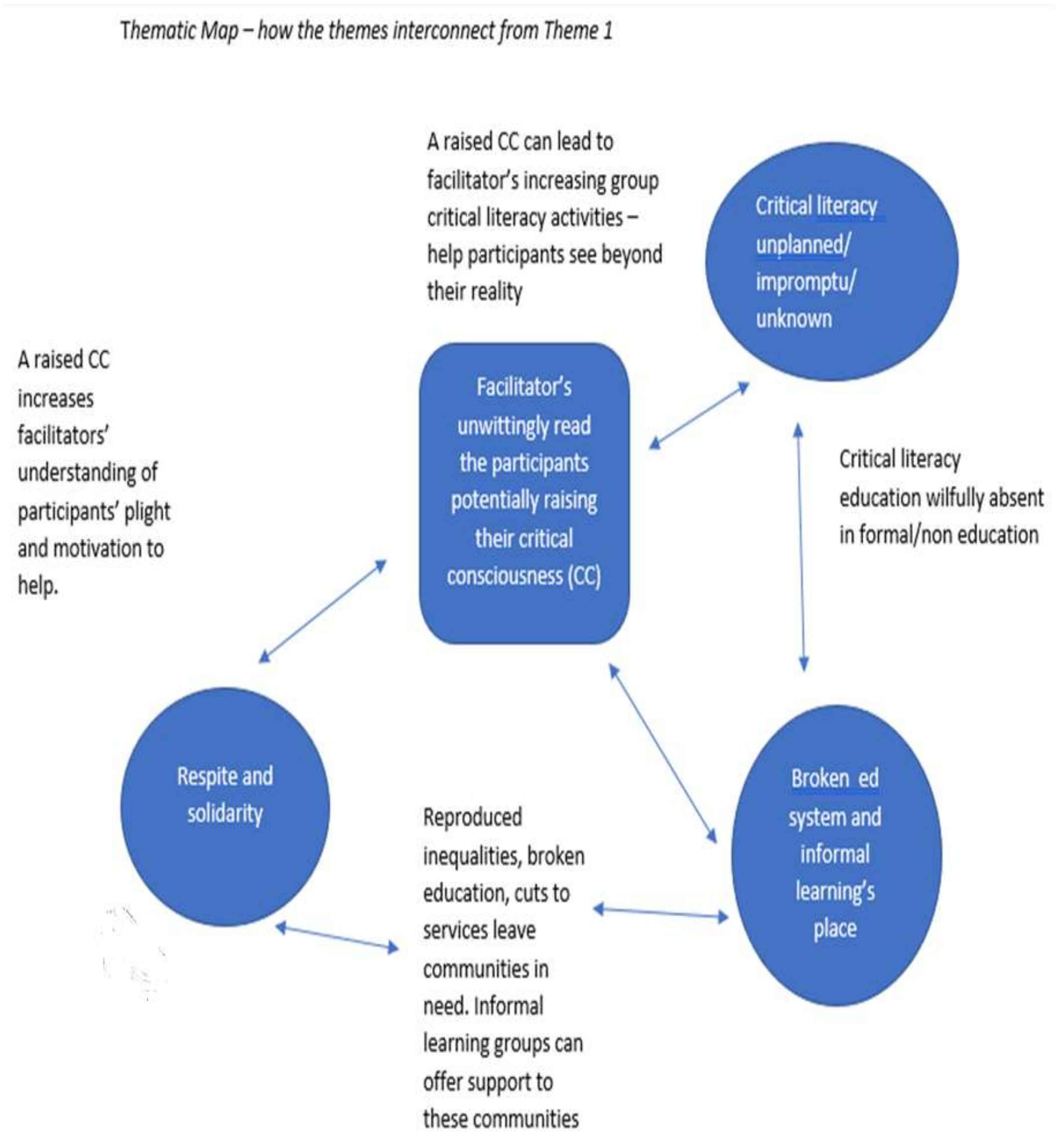

Thematic Map – how the themes interconnect from Theme 1
A raised CC can lead to facilitator's increasing group critical literacy activities – help participants see beyond their reality
Critical literacy unplanned/ impromptu/ unknown
A raised CC increases facilitators' understanding of participants' plight and motivation to help.
Facilitator's unwittingly read the participants potentially raising their critical consciousness (CC)
Critical literacy education wilfully absent in formal/non education
Respite and solidarity
Reproduced inequalities, broken education, cuts to services leave communities in need. Informal learning groups can offer support to these communities
Broken ed system and informal learning's place

Figure 20 - Thematic Map – how the themes interconnect from Theme 1

Stage 6: Drafting the findings

The earlier steps in this thematic analysis process had involved continuous and critical reflections which enabled a deep understanding of the themes and of the data. This understanding helped construct the narrative of the findings' chapters, evidenced through excerpts from the transcripts and contextualised within the interdisciplinary literature that situates this study. As not all of the data was utilised in the findings chapter, data analysis can be perceived as data reduction. However, this can be countered due to the amount of notes, mind maps, tables, charts, reflection that analysing the data created (Gibbs, 2007 cited in Cohen et al., 2011). As advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), I provided analysis alongside data in the findings' chapters, situating it in relation to the theoretical approaches outlined earlier in this section, to provide context and justification, and clarity - so the reader can understand my interpretations. To avoid accusations of being reductive, as data analysis can be perceived (Lemke, 2012), a further discussion chapter will complement the findings chapter by providing more extensive analysis of the main theme, placing the data within the wider context of the entire study and research focus. I used large chunks of data, alongside shorter excerpts to capture the thoughts of the participants, and their nuances.

Ethical considerations for the research and use of data

The study adhered to ethical guidelines as set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018). This was in terms of the responsibilities to participants, transparency, confidentiality, consent, any potential harm arising from the research and data privacy and storage. In gaining ethics approval from the University of Hull's Faculty of Arts Culture and Education Ethics Board in September 2019, I considered the potential risks to participants and the actions/solutions to reduce or manage them. The nature of the data collected from participants could be considered personal or sensitive, therefore it was explicitly explained to the participants, steps would be taken to provide anonymity through pseudonyms for them and any group or organisation they represent, complying with BERA *Guideline 40 (2018: 21)*, as it potentially could contain details that could lead to their identification. However, it was made clear absolute anonymity could not be assured (Scott, 2005), as they may still be identifiable (Van den Hoonard, 2002).

Participants were given written and verbal details addressing the purpose of the study and how their contribution would be used, in accordance with BERA's *Guideline 9* (2018: 9). In all cases, each interview participant had at least two weeks to consider contributing to the study prior to doing so. The focus group used also had at least two weeks to respond after being given information. Also, through verbal and written means I ensured those who took part understood the study, the ramifications of participating and how to contact me through verbal and written (signed forms). Therefore, fully informed consent was established with each participant prior to interview, and prior to group observation (Wiles et al., 2005). It was paramount all participants understood their participation was voluntary (Wiles et al., 2008); thus, they were assured they could withdraw their contribution up to any point prior to publication. It was crucial to outline the exact detail of what contributing to this study would involve to each participant as I listened to any concerns prior to the interview. However, with those who participated in my study, no one offered any concerns. In accordance with BERA's *Guideline* 31 (2018:18), repeated verbal reminders were made to remind and assure they were free to leave the study at any point up to publication and contact information was provided for participants to query or withdraw any or all of their contributions, as well as the opportunity to review the confidential information they had provided through the opportunity to see transcribed interviews or notes before use in the study before publication. This latter aspect was also to attempt to avoid the prospect of leading the participants into giving information they did not intend to, or to reconstruct the information they had given with meanings than they had initially intended. As stated previously, the participants, in certain cases may have provided information they regard as sensitive or, even with anonymity, may lead to them being identifiable by an outside source/person after publication. In order to recruit potential participants, group facilitators were contacted and were asked to consider participation in the study. After the initial contact, and if they agreed to participate, their informal learning groups were also considered for observation. Where appropriate, and pre the Covid-19 pandemic, facilitators were either emailed with information, or were visited first to explain the study verbally (as outlined already). They were then provided with an information sheet to give them time to consider participation without coercion or pressure. This also allowed them to reflect further, and to hold another discussion regarding the research with me if required by them to enable them to make an informed decision. The research was carried out to minimise any potential harm to the participants from participating in the research in accordance with BERA's *Guideline 34 (2018: 19).* The potential harm mainly came from participant's discomfort about their views (Merriam, 1988) or from accessing memories or reflections that cause them emotional distress. This was minimised through informed consent thus the participants had a prior understanding of what they might be asked about and I ensured they understood they would not be intentionally asked or required to talk about anything that made them feel uncomfortable.

The handling and storage of data was compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018) and BERA *Guideline 48* (2018: pp 23-24). Each participant was informed of how their data would be stored, how it would be used and who could access it (ibid). The data was stored securely on the password protected University of Hull cloud system known as Box. After each audio recording was made, these were uploaded to this system and deleted from my audio recorder. Any notes I made used pseudonyms rather than real names, therefore, if compromised they could not identify any participant. Written notes were also typed up at a later point and are also stored on Box.

The ethical complexities and tensions inherent in studying Sanford's communities meant a dedication to reflexivity was essential (Lassiter, 2005). This involved consistently reassessing and adjusting the research approach as necessary. For instance, see the

'Example of using the reflexive framework' section within this chapter for an illustration of this approach in communicating with potential participants. This commitment to reflexivity, as Chari and Donner (2010) explain, is fundamental to an ethnography's success. Within this ethnographic study, ethical tensions particularly arose from power differentials and relationships, including the concept of informed consent (Van Maanen, 2011).

In examining how power differentials manifest within the ethnographic research context, notably in the relationships between the researcher and participants, as well as among participants themselves, particularly evident in group observation settings, it becomes apparent that such dynamics significantly impact both data interpretation and collection processes (see the section on power differentials in this chapter for a fuller exploration). Furthermore, this section highlights the significance of researchers embracing reflexive practices that acknowledge their power, privilege, and subjectivities, as outlined by Lassiter (2005).

The notion of informed consent in ethnography also evokes inquiries regarding power dynamics. As previously discussed in this section, I aimed to provide comprehensive informed consent through both written and verbal communication (Van Maanen, 2021). However, as evidenced by my dedication to fieldnotes in my reflexive practices, conveying to participants a detailed comprehension of how their data would be utilised proved challenging and intricate, compounded by my incomplete awareness, as the researcher, of the full scope of my reflexive processes at that time. These tensions may be further exacerbated by the perception of informed consent as an opt-in or opt-out mechanism for participation (Feltzman, 2020). Nonetheless, to address these tensions, I assured participants of their right to withdraw at any stage prior to the publication of the study (although this posed a risk of data loss, it was instrumental in fostering trust). Moreover, relationships cultivated with participants throughout the data collection process afforded them a deeper understanding of the study and of me as a researcher, aligning with Wynne and Israel's assertion that consent emerges from ongoing human interaction (2018).

Limitations of the study

The following section addresses my reflections upon the potential limitations of this study.

- *Interpretative nature of study*

The research and its findings are based on my interpretations, which are used to understand the meanings placed on interactions and experiences between facilitators and participants within this study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). These form the basis of the concepts of the Participants as Texts model (PAT) and the Participants as texts conceptual model (PCM) (see Chapter Eight). It is possible, my initial discussions and questions with facilitators around critical literacy and critical consciousness development, may have sensitised them to these theories and ideas, and possibly effected how they interpreted and relayed events within interviews. However, as phenomena of this kind cannot be measured (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), naturally, the interpretative nature of the study could be perceived as a limitation to its findings, as I may affect their outcome (Berger, 2015: 220). However, as addressed in this chapter, I set out a reflexive approach in working with the participants and the data. I am also clear that I present this research under the premise that research can never be neutral (Given, 2008) along with my understanding that I, as the researcher, am also a contributor to the data (Charmaz, 2017). Also, this ethnographical study does not claim to be a comprehensive and exact account of the many critical literacy education workings occurring in an informal learning group. It is instead a snapshot of a sample of groups from a certain time, setting and context, offering insights into the new and important finding of reading the PAT, the process of the PCM and other informal critical literacy education practices.

- *Time in the field and the impact of Covid-19*

As addressed earlier in this chapter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly cut short the research period by six months in March 2020. However, by this point, I had already collected a substantial amount of data and this premature end to the ethnography sharpened my focus towards the data already collected. Further, as the continuous iterative process was a key method in interpreting this data this may have been diluted if substantially more data had been collected and perhaps parts of the findings may have been obscured by the weight of working with extra data.

- *Sample and the tools of the ethnography*

In conducting ethnographic research in communities, access to research participants and the representativeness of the sample may be constrained by factors such dynamics of the communities, trust, gatekeepers and a degree of happenstance. This limitation raises questions about the extent to which findings can be extrapolated to other working-class communities or broader populations. There are also considerations regarding the representativeness of the sample due to methodological tools used. For example, snowballing facilitated access to potential study participants, including those deemed 'hard-to-reach' (Valdez and Kaplan, 1999; Vogt, 2005), but there remains the possibility that certain groups were not accessible through this method due to not encountering someone who could grant access. Additionally, snowballing may inadvertently limit the scope of research if potential participants share common acquaintances, potentially biasing the sample composition (Berg, 1988). Furthermore, despite efforts to visit communities regularly and observe informal learning and community activities, there are inherent limitations to this approach. The researcher's visits, combined with online scoping, may not capture a comprehensive picture of all informal learning groups, which are transient in nature and subject to rapid change, thereby potentially skewing the understanding of community dynamics and informal learning practices. Additionally, while efforts were made to document community spaces and events through photography and collection of flyers, concerns about anonymity precluded the publication of many photographs, limiting the extent to which the community context could be fully illustrated. Therefore, while the study provides valuable insights into working-class communities, the limitations of sample representativeness and data collection methods should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

- *Reflections on PAT subjects' feelings*

A potential limitation of this study concerns an aspect of its central finding: the reading of the participants as texts. As established in Chapter Three (section ‘Texts’), it is the reader who assigns what is a text but these participants were not deliberately chosen. They were read unconsciously and unintentionally, thus not objectified, or used, deliberately. As the research progressed to a greater focus on the facilitators (as discussed in Chapter One: section ‘Research Aims and Questions) the participants who were read were not interviewed as part of the study. Reflecting upon how they might have felt is speculative and it is likely that they would experience a range of emotions depending on the context and their personal beliefs.

Some individuals might have felt positive, pleased to have contributed, or felt indifferent. Others might feel uncomfortable upon discovering that they were ‘read’ without consent, especially if the post-reading reflections made by the facilitators involve what the participants might consider intimate aspects of their lives. They may perceive themselves as objects under scrutiny, with compromised autonomy and privacy, internalising this as a deficit, viewing themselves as objects or being used to enhance others' understanding.

However, another possibility exists. As this study demonstrates, the messages the participants carry can be deeply transformative, providing these participants with a sense of agency they may have been unaware of previously. They have played a significant role in transforming the critical consciousness of individuals at a time when critical literacy education is lacking. As explored in the data section, their messages do not attract pity or sympathy in the facilitators, but evoke powerful emotions such as empathy, respect, and trust. The results of readings also recognise the complexity of their experiences and the transformative power of their lives and messages.

This reflection also underscores that it is essential to continue exploring the nuances of participant experiences and to prioritise ethical considerations in research practices, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. Through such efforts, we can strive for a more equitable approach to understanding and engaging with diverse communities.

Chapter conclusion and summary

This chapter explained the impact of Covid-19 on the research on the ethnography. The chapter also discussed the necessity of the theoretical underpinnings of the research, how the ethnography was carried out and how the data was analysed. It also set out the reflexive processes undertaken in considering my position as a researcher throughout this ethnography and how the researcher is never free of bias. The chapter concluded by discussing the ethics in which the study was conducted and the limitations of the study. The next chapter looks at the findings of the study relating to the first two research questions, using data, commentary and alignment with the literature. This chapter explores the critical consciousness development of the facilitators as well as exploring the critical literacy activities occurring in informal learning groups.

Chapter Six - Findings – Part 1: *'I'm a different person to the person I was before' - Sarah*

The main theme "Reading the participants as a 'text': a tool for the raising of the facilitators' critical consciousness" and related reflections on its effect is addressed in this chapter: Followed by theme 2: "Critical literacy education and learning within informal group settings". This chapter presents the findings alongside critical analysis and discussion. Further and more detailed discussion on the main theme (Theme 1) is in Chapter Eight, as this theme relates to the main research question. Further information expanding upon the participant list of the previous chapter is available in the appendices (Appendix G).

Theme 1: Reading the participants as 'texts' – the raising of the facilitators' critical consciousness and related reflections.

Early in the research a clear but largely unanticipated finding became apparent (Roberts et al., 2019) that could broadly be seen as a reported rise in critical consciousness within several of the informal learning group facilitators. Initially, I had expected to find critical consciousness awakenings within the informal learning group participants, not the facilitators. The development of critical consciousness of the facilitators was a result of their interactions with the group participants, many of whom were from working-class backgrounds and faced marginalisation, alienation and other structural barriers that were an oppressive force upon their lives (Freire, 1970; 2005).

The informal learning group facilitators provided rich descriptions of participants' realities, how they saw the world and the forces that would have such influence upon the participants' lives (Bhaskar, 1975). Many of the facilitators perceived participants as lacking in agency (Evans and Tilley, 2017), recognising their oppression under austerity (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Some facilitators relayed their observations of participants' lives that could be interpreted as examples of symbolic violence, such as how the participants would blame themselves for not finding well paid work, rather than blaming the systemic inequalities that had such power over their lives (Bourdieu, 2001; Connolly and Healy, 2004; Rahayu, 2021; Schneck, 2022). Manipulated by various forms of 'fake news' masking the real sources of power and the many decision-making processes that played such an important role in their lives (Hall, 2011; Peters, 2017). The lives of the participants typically differed from those of the facilitators, and the facilitators explained that their interactions with participants provided them with greater insights into how power works, just as conventional texts in critical literacy education activities would (Shor, 1992; Baynham, 1995; Luke and Freebody, 1997; Wray, 2004). All of this, and more, affected some of the facilitators to the extent they could deconstruct of their own critical consciousness development in our conversations (Hinchey, 2004).

Therefore, this presented a new finding in critical literacy education to explore, an unintentional transmission between participant and facilitator, with the facilitator as the receiver. In other words, facilitators were, unintentionally, using a tool to raise their critical consciousness (Freire 1970). This tool was essentially the 'reading' of participants as 'texts' which I conceptualise as a process of reading 'participants as texts' (which from herein will be referred to by the acronym PAT). This finding subsequently influenced my research and interview questions (Bolderston, 2012). The concept of a facilitator being a receiver of critical literacy education is not entirely new as those who have written and practiced forms of critical literacy or other forms of critical pedagogy, explain that critical literacy education should be a continual and mutual form of learning (Freire, 1970; Luke, 1994) through the discussion and analysis of texts – for example: books, articles, films, political artefacts and so on. An analysis of a 'text' such as a book, poem film; or a broader form of text, such as a computer game (Kress, 2003) is a fundamental practice of critical literacy education - even in its many forms across the world. However, importantly research has not identified a person being read as a text – specifically here an informal learning group participant who has been unintentionally read by group facilitators. Therefore, in reading the PAT, 'texts' appear to have the transformative qualities required for critical literacy education and could be acting as a potential but inadvertent tool for raising critical consciousness (Jermal, 2017).

In this discussion of Theme 1, the findings look to address the main research question:

- How might informal learning group facilitators' critical consciousness develop through interactions with group participants?

People can relay or be the vehicle for texts, for example, we can see a person delivering a speech, or playing a role in a story and therefore see a person as being active as part of a text. But the real difference here is the participants of the informal learning groups are not 'acting' as vehicles for a text. Their lives are inadvertently read by the facilitator through direct and indirect interactions between facilitator and participant over an unspecific period of time, and importantly, critical consciousness development is an unintended consequence for the informal learning group facilitator.

Therefore, within this section, I examine reported changes in critical consciousness, including variations across facilitators. It is useful to establish backgrounds and starting points (in terms of their levels of critical consciousness) and, where possible, understand the threshold(s) they may have crossed in developing a critical consciousness (Flanagan, 2014). It is possible those undertaking a role that involves working with, or supporting, people who face structural inequalities are more likely to be sensitised to 'read' participants. By undertaking such work, paid or unpaid, they may already possess high levels of empathy (Berardi et al., 2020) and perhaps be politically and socially aware.

As the research began, one of my first scheduled meetings was with *Share and Read* [pseudonym]: a third sector organisation who promote well-being through facilitating informal reading and discussion groups in the communities of Sanford. They operate in various spaces: community centres, libraries, hospitals, people's homes and so forth. During an initial meeting to discuss my study and concepts of critical literacy, facilitators described their own experiences, deconstructing the effects of their interactions in informal learning groups. Sarah explains:

> I think my awareness has been increased – it made me realise how people made me understand the difficulties and the day-to-day barriers people face.

Sarah, who manages Share and Read (*S&R)* described herself to me as being 'empathetic' towards disadvantaged people's needs and demonstrated an understanding of inequality and marginalisation. The nature of the informal learning occurring in *S&R* can facilitate the empowerment of its participants through 'giving them a voice' (Paula – S&R) and by 'listening to their stories and views on a multitude of topics' (Jenny – S&R). This sharing was described to me as a range from current feelings, and problems to memories from childhood (Polly – S&R). By its nature therefore, the sharing of their personal situations, problems and thoughts may have allowed the facilitator to 'read' the PAT. Sarah clarified how deeply she viewed the changes within her own critical consciousness:

> I would say absolutely. on a very personal level, for me, I would describe myself as a different person I've said to people, 'I'm a different person to the person I was before

> I started working on this project'. So that's been from the end of 2016, to now in 2020. I think it affects us in so many different ways.

Sarah identified herself as having a 'good education' being 'empathetic' with ability to make informed choices. For instance, she provided examples of challenging previously held views in herself and the people around her, such as tabloid attempts to divide people, reminiscent of how Moore and Forkert (2014) describe how the media works to divides the working class. She regularly demonstrated empathy for the participants of the various *S&R* groups, seeing the world 'in other people's shoes' and understanding their choices were carved from structural inequalities. This echoes Lewison et al.'s (2002: 383) 'standing in the shoes of others' stage of critical literacy development:

> I think with all the different…groups…you end up with a feeling of empathy at least, even with the sex offenders. I mean, obviously, I wouldn't say that I feel that I'm a step closer to their thinking. But even listening to the things that they were saying, you can see there's reasons why things have gone certain ways. And people are ending up in the situation they're ending up in.

Even if starting with a position of empathy for people, understanding the inequity of the world could potentially place facilitators like Sarah at an advanced point of critical consciousness rather than, for instance, the magical consciousness as described by Freire (1970) as explored in Chapter Three. She addressed this, explaining she already 'considered herself to be educated and critically literate' but the difference here, for Sarah, the experiences have potentially enhanced her consciousness and in some cases, gave cause for her to expand her own thinking and awareness. Freire explains that critical consciousness is an ongoing process with more to learn and understand (1970). Importantly in critical consciousness development, readings of participants initially disrupted Sarah's commonplace (Lewison et al., 2002) by making her re-question what she already felt she knew: 'it made me realise I live in a bubble…working with people made me challenge my own views'. For example, Sarah explains one couple (whom have their own 'group') had a large impact upon how she now sees the world. She began describing her perceptions of the couple and their reality:

> … they're living in a completely different world to the one…that I inhabit… they actually have very little agency in their own lives…things are stacked against them.

Above and below, Sarah is contemplating the different realities people exist in (Sayer, 2000). As she has developed critical perspectives (Ledwith, 2001; Fenton, 2018), she can see worlds hidden to others (Bhaskar, 1975; Sayer, 2000). Sarah then moves to articulate about the changes in her perceptions:

> I have a much greater understanding of both how people arrive at those places, and how the world then makes it so difficult to get away from those difficulties. I am now deeply affected by those things.

Sarah summarises the changes she has been through from reading the PAT. She reflects upon when her perspective was different to how it is now, through her views on recipients of Universal Credit:

> …five years ago, that wouldn't have been something I would have considered. I don't really know many people on benefits. It's not something that affects my own life. But now, I feel very strongly about the things that have been said about Universal Credit because I've seen it first-hand. I've experienced it.

From this change in perspective, Sarah explains how it this has changed how she views social issues as she now sees oppression internalised in society's structures (Freire, 1970):

> …I've been in hospital working with people…so, I feel that my perception of hospitals has changed. My perception about care for the elderly, has very much changed, I would say it's had that much of an impact. It's also had an impact in how I work with people and how I treat people, whether it's at work or outside of work. So, some really fundamental behavioural changes have come about because of these contacts.

Sarah also talks about how she interprets the news and her political views:

> So, it has changed how I view and consume the news and political messages. I have much more informed opinion about those things which flavours, how I'm then consuming, and reading and my opinions and ultimately, how I might place my vote, at a general or local election. That could be affected now, by those experiences that I've had through the project.

These powerful descriptions from Sarah of both how her contact with *S&R* participants have had significant impact upon how she views the world, to the extent of how she interprets the news, parliament and even how she may vote in the future. As she explains, five years ago she would not have understood the plight of those navigating the benefits systems, or the health care systems. She now sees the symbolic violence endemic in societal structures and practices (Connolly and Healy, 2004; Rahayu, 2021; Schneck, 2022). I asked her if she could give more detail in how she now interprets political messages and decisions, and what she now thinks when analysing them:

> How is that actually really going to affect people on the ground? How much connection is there between what's being spoken about in Parliament, and the reality for the people? And my feeling is - not a lot. Now that I have a better understanding of things, and the same with care systems, and all of those sorts of things here, it really flavours how I listen.

Sarah’s evidence demonstrates the profound affect her interactions with the informal learning group participants have had on her own reality, including how she perceives and questions her past assumptions within the hegemonic structures and their messages from the dominant ideologies (Gramsci, 1971). Her awakening has changed her reality, and the structures which are unobservable to the couple she describes for instance, have become more observable and understandable to her (Bhaskar, 1975). With this rise in critical consciousness, which in Freirean terms could represent a movement from naive consciousness to critical consciousness (as defined in Chapter Three), she also discusses the interventions she may take, for example, the way she may vote. It is also clear her empathy has also increased with developed consciousness.

Another informal learning group facilitator, Tom, has facilitated a variety of groups within different third sector organisations. He also has facilitated his own projects that typically involved outdoor learning with environmental themes. Projects have included group gardening aiming to reduce social isolation and anxiety amongst other well-being indicators. He, like Sarah, also describes himself as starting with an empathy towards those who experience inequality, and as having an awareness of this before group facilitating:

> … you can see that they're good people. And you can see that they've got genuine reasons for why they think something is the right thing to do, or why they think one alternative is better than another. And although you might disagree strongly, you can't really say that you're right, and they're wrong, because they've got genuine reasons. They’ve lived a different life too. But I think when you when you're mixing [with] people who are completely outside your echo chamber, you get to experience completely different views.

Tom identifies working with informal learning groups participants, many of whom, face financial hardships, are unemployed, isolated, has developed his critical consciousness:

> …definitely become more aware, yeah. I think I have a reasonable understanding because I come from an old mining town…I always understood that some people get jobs and some people don't and are affected by government decisions….I've always understood, on some level, that there's the haves and the have nots [with] social dynamics at play in control of their lives - they're sometimes not conscious of that. But definitely, I know a lot more now, from working with these people about how government decisions, local council decisions effect their lives and how isolation and alienation can really impact on their lives.

Here, Tom describes classic critical literacy developments: the reading of PAT has enabled him to view power structures in a different way and see inequity embedded within (Shor, 1999), again building upon a previous knowledge and potentially evidencing a rise in critical consciousness. Through reading the PAT, Tom can and is questioning how power, in this case power in terms of the national and local government's decisions, negatively affect people's lives which echoes fundamental critical practices as outlined by Janks (2010), Freire (1970) or Giroux (1983). He is, in effect, reading the lives of the participants of the group, to better understand power imbalances. Tom gives examples of participants of his informal learning group who have impacted upon him, describing their lives and the challenges they have faced. He starts by discussing how he interprets their perception of their reality:

> Some of the key volunteers and learners that I have been involved with come from pretty deprived backgrounds. I don't know how conscious they are of that, because it's what they've grown up with what they've always understood…

Tom here is deconstructing the realities of the members of his group, he contemplates their awareness of their situation and how, as Seal (2016) points out, the real world is hidden to many through both context and contingents. Below, Tom addresses these contexts and contingents explaining 'it's what they've grown up with what they've always understood'. This and Seal's explanation touches upon many factors, to levels of consciousness, which here Freire might read Tom's group members as magical consciousness (1970), to the accident of birth in an unequal society - that Seal (2016) is hinting at with contingents. Tom explains:

> …a couple of people in particular, and they're like one of eight or nine kids within the family. Some of the siblings have had work over the years, and some have never, and they have always been living in social housing, and none of them have ever had aspirations to go abroad on a holiday or to have their own property or anything like that. It's just not in their sphere of family thinking.

Tom, explaining this with emotion in his voice, clearly values the people he is discussing and is affected by their exploitation:

> The blokes have done manual work. And that's dried up, some found work in bakers, and then the bakers shut down. Working in oil refinery kind of places and then getting laid off - that sort of stuff. [Some of the] blokes would never have worked at all…because they've got learning difficulties.

My fieldnotes here mark Tom's passion and visible annoyance with the system:

> They've got a lot to give in terms of like, physical ability, and being good, good blokes to get on with and wanting to contribute to society, to their communities, but not having the level of education on how to read and write, for example, like all employers expect, or not being able to fill in an online application form.

I asked for clarification: 'They feel kind of alienated?' Tom replied:

> Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. Probably not even conscious of that, to some extent, because they won't even realise some of the things that are going on that they're not.

Tom describes the lives of many men in post-industrial cities, from unemployment to habitual unemployment due to learning disabilities or not being able to fill out forms. Tom points out, they are 'good blokes' who are 'good to work with', as Tom interprets their unemployment is a systemic fault (Harrko et al., 2018; Mencap, 2019; Autistica, 2021). Tom believes the group participants to be unaware of their situation which echoes Freire's magical consciousness (1970) as they typically struggle to explore their potential due the unobservable forces and structures that are hidden to them (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1983; Seal, 2016). These forces are known to Tom as he reads the observable impact on participants' lives and actions (Price, 2001). Furthermore, if Tom's participants became more aware of their situation, without consistent support, would this necessarily be a liberation for them, or would it be another cross to bear for a demographic with high levels of mental health problems and suicide rates (Wylie et al., 2012). Alternatively, it also raises the question of a raised awareness of their situation facilitating the means for their own liberation, without support, as Freire (1970) argued. Finally, and importantly to this discussion, bound within Tom's description is empathy, and it is apparent in the way he talks about the group participants as he is clearly both enthused, concerned and speaks about them warmly. Tom tries to give more definition to the changes to his critical consciousness from his experiences of working as an informal learning group facilitator:

> I just developed more understanding and more empathy. Whereas I would have not written someone off if I knew they were a Tory voter. But I what would have, I would

> immediately have preconceptions about the kind of person who might be. Whereas now working alongside some of these groups, I can see things from their point of view, so I can understand better. I'm not saying I agree, but I can understand better why they voted Brexit or why they would dismiss someone like Jeremy Corbyn, why they would buy into some of the things that are in The Sun newspaper. I can see now the power that the media has in that respect.

From working with and reading participants, particularly those whom Tom has described as marginalised, with health or learning disabilities, Tom has a greater understanding of how the media is a weapon for the powerful, and how it can persuade people to judge, view, perceive and even vote accordingly in a manner in chooses to support the normative view (Hall, 1997; Street, 2001; Neary and Ringrow, 2018). In this case from reading the participant as a text he has been able to see false consciousness as Marx and Engels described as a means of concealing power (Starks, 2007) played out and view the narratives of the right-wing press replayed in everyday life. This makes the participant a powerful text representative of effects of the media and offers insights their own belief systems, their sense of agency and rationale. Tom is clear the group members are not holding these views to be belligerent, and need to be respected:

> It can be a real education, because you get a better understanding of why they think in the way that they do and why they vote in the way that they do, and appreciate the making decisions they think are right, and are ostensibly sensible reasons.

Tom learns from the devastating results of the multi-fold structural inequalities several of his participants face, and recognises their own meaning making in greater detail, as such he does not underestimate what the group members face:

> I think definitely they are at the mercy of forces that they don't perceive - and don't understand…. But I think what I'm trying to get at is now you're working with them what I understand that I'm just the same as them.

Tom rationalises the hegemony they are trapped in, as one that we are all potentially trapped within (Litowitz, 2001):

> Maybe my level of understanding is slightly greater, but I'm still affected by them in the same ways affected as they are by the same sort of systems. And I can't knock their decision-making in a way that maybe I would have expected to, because to them, they all make sense. And I can't change that because if I put my argument forward, it's an argument from a different sphere of life from a different understanding of life.

In one sense, Tom feels powerless to help the participants understand this, and in the role/contact that he has with the participants, also does not feel able to do this. This is important as this would suggest Tom has not progressed to action that is needed for a complete critical consciousness development as outlined by Freire (1970). Tom identifies with being working class himself: ‘I’m the same as them’, but due to his role, culture, and education (higher education) he feels different to many of the participants and recognises that he may have crossed certain social and cultural borders. It could be argued that he feels by ‘disrupting their commonplace’ (Hewison et al., 2002) he is conscious of the fact that he risks alienating them and even losing them as participants, particularly as he has not claimed to have an awareness of critical pedagogies. The informal learning groups he refers to here were externally funded and were set up with targets to reduce social isolation, not to develop the participants’ critical consciousness or challenge the underpinning problems of social isolation. Thus, the group’s aims may have masked the potential for critical consciousness development. Tom gives another example to expand upon his empathy with the participants. He begins by setting out his own background:

> One of my first formative political experiences was the miner’s strike. Thatcher and Scargill on the telly, seeing all the graffiti in the area where I lived on the walls “victory to the miners” seeing the footage of “Orgreave” on the telly and all that. I'm naturally going to be on anti-Tory…it's not even a decision I've got agency over – it’s formative. And then later in life, I chose to read The Guardian newspaper that …effects in my thought processes I'm not even conscious of.

After setting out his upbringing as ‘anti-Tory’, he compares his upbringing to one of the informal learning groups participants:

> …one of his formative experiences was growing up under Labour with rubbish piling up in the streets. So, his perception of Labour and Corbyn, ‘it's all gonna go back to that: the union’s gonna have control, it's gonna be a bag of shit like it were’, because the Labour government at that time really negatively impacted on his job and on his life and his family. So, and then for the majority of his life, he's read The Sun newspaper. So basically, we've gone through the same process, but just because he's at one end of it, and neither of us is clever or better than the other. It's just we both had a really strong formative experience with political parties that's impacted on our thinking for the rest of our lives and that's been reinforced by the type of media that we've chosen to read.

Tom again demonstrates both respect and empathy for the participants, even coming from the background he does, he can place himself in this participant’s shoes, and respect him in a human sense. He recognises the power of formative experiences in shaping us and the baggage we carry (which I will discuss further in this chapter). Tom clearly shows empathy towards the contradictory consciousness (Gramsci, 1971) of the participant and describes him almost as helpless - at the mercy of The Sun newspaper who exploit such formative experiences, false or otherwise. Tom himself could potentially be seen as powerless in a sense as he feels unable to help in this matter, but this is a reasoned and understandable inertia within the hegemonic power (Hall, 1983; Foos and Bischof, 2022; Yeoman and Morris, 2022). Tom discusses how this increasing self-awareness has influenced his work and career:

> Yeah, it's changed sort my focus in terms of it’s influenced the trajectory of my career and the things that I've wanted to get out of work. I’m much less focused on what I can get out of it for me and my family, and more of my focus is on contributing to the local community where I live and now is benefiting the people.

Other facilitators in the study had similar experiences. Vince, who describes himself and his role as being like a ‘social worker for groups’ has over three decades of experience of working with, and in, various community development groups and initiatives; several of which can be described as informal learning groups. I asked him about the group participants he had encountered and whether experiences with people/participants had developed his own critical consciousness. His answer had striking similarities to Tom’s own reflections:

> I was completely unsurprised that nearly everybody on the estate, that I live on, voted for Brexit. I was completely unsurprised that the turnout doubled for the referendum in comparison to any other election because it was one thing that people saw, they actually might be able to have some kind of direct influence over it. And you could see and feel it being an expression of people's very great frustration. I would say, a lot of that was misdirected. But and based on maybe quite a lot of misinformation and all the rest of it.

Whilst Vince is clear that ‘a lot of that was misdirected’ it is also clear that he, like Tom, possesses a respect for people and their political choices. Furthermore, respect for those who have been typically much maligned by certain sections of the media, with this intensified against working-class people – such as the people who attended informal learning group on Vince’s estate (Tyler, 2013; Dorling, 2016). Vince’s critical literacy aided by his direct experiences, have allowed him to analyse the nuances and the experiences of working-class people’s day-to-day lives:

> To just suggest that people hadn't thought about why we're gonna vote for Brexit... just to disparage that as ‘you've been lied to by Boris and his bus’ or something, I think is to significantly underestimate a lot of ordinary people's ability to have some sense of control over their own lives. So, Dominic Cummings didn't just come up with a clever phrase: ‘take back control’ [it] was…an emotionally clever way of encapsulating how a very significant proportion of shat on people felt. So, my experience of these groups working in Sanford and you know, tells me that it wasn't just a dupe…But to say that people haven't thought and made a decision that actually mattered to them. I think is a serious underestimation of people.

Reminiscent of Tom’s empathy and understanding, Vince here also demonstrates that he can place himself in the shoes of many of his working-class informal learning groups participants and understand how and why they make decisions (Lewison et al., 2002). Ian, like Tom, facilitates informal learning groups that have environmental themes, but are typically focused on food and growing. Ian facilitates groups (and hosts others) at his own centre. He described a process of ongoing change in his critical consciousness, starting over ten years ago, but notes a marked change from when he started working with and listening to the views of the varied range of informal learning group participants. He can pinpoint the cause and start point of when his own critical consciousness started to change:

> You find in life when things change you it doesn’t come from success, it comes from failure.

Ian describes hitting a low-point in life which ‘really starts to make you think’ and questions his own way of analysing the world around him and, for example, question his religious upbringing. Ian says that reaching this low point helped start the process of re-evaluating everything and changing the way he operates in life and views life, something which he says ‘would not have happened with success’. This incident started the process of reflection and change in how he viewed the world and Ian talks about the philosophy influencing how he both relates to people and learns:

> I’m non dualistic, which is saying I’ve got this view, but I’m really interested in your view, and when I listen to your view, you might have a really good point. It’s about not being right all the time, it’s about wanting to learn more.

This, as Ian points out, is in stark contrast to his earlier life where he would be closed to the arguments of others. However, he underwent a ‘mind shift’ and this inspires him to now help others ‘break free’ and see the world differently through supporting them with their own mind shift. This form of intervention is common in the critical pedagogies of Freire (1970) or

Giroux (2014). Ian also describes how he began to challenge his own status quo, starting afresh with community work was challenging in a sense that it initially removed him from the safe space and his own baggage:

> A lot is put on us by our parents, our schooling and our peer group. And I don't think we realise how much that forms us. And if we're not careful, we don't move out of that circle, we sort of accept that what that circle are saying. It's like our tribe that is there. I mean, I suppose I'm fortunate, I've come out, I was brought up on a farm literally in the middle of nowhere. And then I've sort of been dropped into such a community. And I like to sit back and go bloody hell.

Ian then addresses his own move into community work:

> You know, there's a lot of me early on, want me to revert back to what was safe, but then sort of pushed through it and found this is fantastic. But it's because I'm about to have that mindset change to say, I want to find out more. I want to do this, I want to go that bit further. I want to talk to more people I want to you know, it's that drive, which sort of pushed me on and it's got me to a place now where that's what I love doing that's what I want to do.

Changes in critical consciousness are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Eight, however, Ian's realisation of overcoming the baggage we each carry, such as formative experiences echoed by Tom's analysis of his participants, is very important to enact change:

> But for me personally, having that non dualistic thinking, has helped me to get rid of all that baggage of I'm right and you're wrong.

This is reminiscent of Illich's work on 'deschooling society' in which he explains how our schooling takes psychological loco-parentis forms and psychologically indoctrinates children into simplistic reasoning rather than developing critical thinking that can critique society and morality (1971). This is the form of banking of knowledge of teachers into their students that Freire (1970) describes. When examining transitions in critical consciousness one can look at the different thresholds passed through in this journey (Freire, 1970), perhaps Ian was stuck between thresholds within the unknown liminal territory that shocked him and made him consider turning back (Berg et al., 2016). This liminal territory introduced in Chapter Three is the uncertain but transformational space between thresholds of learning (Meyer and Land, 2003). However, Ian describes continuing and pushing through which seemingly took him into new thresholds of critical consciousness. Ian explains that working with groups, since circa 2014, has had a dramatic effect upon how he views the world and that he has learnt from understanding the 'challenges people face on a day-to-day basis' and the human need for equality. Furthermore, since Ian’s move into working within the community and informal learning, his community and civic awareness has increased with the opportunity to meet and learn from members of the local community from a variety of diverse backgrounds of marginalisation, for example, former prisoners and people with alcohol and substance disorders:

> The groups that come here, the people that come here are really diverse in their outlook and needs. I learn from all of them, or I hope I do at least. But, what it has taught me is that things are not always how they are first presented and I look for the truth, whatever that is or may be, and I don’t care for stereotypes or past reputations. I think that has helped me change and see beneath as well as others’ points of view. I do this and learn.

A sign of Ian’s raised critical consciousness is in action – his increased work within communities against inequality in his world (Freire, 1970). In this case through forms of critical food pedagogy – which address power relations relating to food (Renwick, 2013). This also involves the facilitation of the conditions for facilitating the empowerment of people to ultimately to take individual and collective action themselves:

> We have got to look at that mindset change. And it's like looking at a diet…it's all about a mindset shift, you've got to change that philosophy of how you look at things. So, if you’re on a diet, well, don't eat this and exercise more… you've got the mindset change to say, right, I'm going to change. And I think in community projects, we're going to look at a lot of the mindset. Our role is to enthuse people to get them back out in society, again, whatever….The bottom line is we've got to make the world a bit better place. I can't stress that enough. But how we do that is just to encourage people.

Critical literacy is intended to facilitate the individual to work collectively to make the world a better place, just as Ian does, by taking action against the injustices, whatever form they take. Ian also uses words like ‘enthuse’ which is supportive and facilitating rather than instructive and allows people to grow themselves. He encourages and facilitates the conditions for people to empower themselves - akin to the Freirean notion of the only true liberation is people liberating themselves (1970). If we consider that reading participants as texts (PAT) can be unintentional and an inadvertent tool accessed for raising critical consciousness, there is also the possibility, that Ian describes, as engaging with this tool intentionally. Ian does not use the language of developing a critical consciousness or raising critical awareness, but that is not important. Ian explains his own philosophy is to learn from others, share experiences and the important aspect here is that Ian reports of a change within his consciousness, in how he sees and reads the world (Freire, 1970). He welcomes the meetings with a range of people as a method of learning and understanding more about the world around him.

Emma facilitates numerous forms of informal learning groups throughout Sanford. Like Ian, Emma also talks about a process of a continuous development of her own critical consciousness that became heightened through her work with informal learning groups and the participants:

> I had an awakening. And it wasn't through education, but life experience and work experience.

Emma explains that she began to work as a clinical psychology practitioner in the NHS and her experiences there of how people were treated in the system began to spark questions and realisations within her:

> I've always been a questioning person. But it was only when I started working in the mental health system….Then you can see all the things that are impacting and that the way things worked and the power imbalances within the mental health system within psychiatry. But the damage that was caused to people in in relation to, I guess, how their lives were defined for them.

Here is an example of Emma reading PAT within that particular system. Health is an area in which people can feel disempowered or trapped within a system such as mental health, or community care (Boudioni et al., 2018; Petrie and Kirkup, 2018; Haslam et al., 2019; Becker et al., 2021):

> These services are in boxes that don't interconnect with everything else. So, it's like, what are the bridges from having a major mental health problem to getting back on with life, and reconnecting and being readmitted to your community. As well as having a voice in there…rather than being a passive recipient, which is what our services tend to do to people is we're recipients, it takes away any power and opportunity to actually have agency and to act for ourselves. And we're, most of us are just brainwashed into, like asking permission.

Emma discusses the lack of agency, the lack of voice, 'the passive recipients'. Emma describes her observations and analyses as important points of her critical awakening (this is discussed by other informal learning group facilitators to which I will expand upon later in the findings.) Emma continues and describes an incident which caused disruption and further opened her eyes and pointed to the work she is involved in now:

> There was an arts and health project, which was actually working with real artists, and seeing that as a catalyst for people actually waking up to something else and being and believing that they could do something was really important. And, I guess, the route to X, Y and Z [informal learning groups she is with now].

Emma tries to explain more of the process of her own development and the stages of it:

> It sort of layered, my awakening, around the way the mental health system and these sort of big systems work or don't work, and the fact that there is no sort of, systemic connection between all the other impacts that that has on someone's world. So, it's sort of awakened more and more and more so out of that I was running a media company… we were looking at mental health promotion. And, you know, changing people's perceptions and realising with jobs that we did that people didn't actually want that to change, it was still comfortable keeping people in those boxes.

Emma then begins to explain her routes back into informal learning groups in the community:

> I become aware of [group name], it was really when I got involved with it, it exploded, I thought this could be a bridge back to community, this will enable people to talk about the things that they like. And so, I was seeing it very much like finding the things that get that sort of twinkle in people's eyes to enable them to take those first steps. And, and commit to themselves and their lives as well. And, also that they could get something back. So, it was a reciprocal thing rather than a passive recipient.

In a similar vein to Ian’s Freirean ‘enthusing and encouraging people’ belief, Emma is discussing reciprocity in her final sentence. She observed participants as being ‘passive recipients’ within the health service, where she previously worked, and this notion of inhumane injustice motivated her to intervene. In her work within numerous informal learning groups, she credits this as part of a ‘deeper reawakening’. A main aim of critical literacy education is to facilitate conditions for empowerment, not attempting to empower people as this would not be empowerment – returning to Freire’s argument of people liberating themselves (1970).

Rebecca, who works with various informal learning groups based at a church in Sanford, explains that her experience of working with participants has changed how she sees the world:

> Even though I thought I was quite open minded before, there's just assumptions I had - you don't realise you're making them. Politically I assumed here would be Labour, but the whole Brexit thing was far more complicated. I had more faith in the system, which I thought was more fair and open. I was quite naïve about addiction…

In the above example what Rebecca explains the disruption to her assumptions on what areas might be like, what people might be like and how she viewed 'the system'. This was initially problematic at first but began to learn more about life in this working-class area of Sanford with its high levels of poverty. Several facilitators, due to the specific needs of participants who attend their informal learning groups, have become acutely aware of specific failings within the system itself, particularly in the realms of health and social care and the detrimental effects that has on certain people in society. Polly, who is also part of S&R, has facilitated reading and poetry groups for carers of people with dementia. Here Polly talks about the impact working with those participants has had on her:

> And I think in the past, we would sort of just walk past you know, or not think about dementia if it didn't affect us directly, or not think about adults who have disabilities if it didn't affect us directly. But I think what this has done is it's opened my eyes to the fact that and this needs to happen.

Polly, speaks of her awareness being raised, and understands the benefits of S&R informal learning groups are vital for those suffering this specific form of alienation. She explains it as form of 'social prescribing'[17] (Husk, 2019) which is cheaper than 'a bottle of pills or a bottle of wine'. She does not explain that this experience has helped her see the world differently beyond this point, but she is an 'active reflector'. For other facilitators, including *S&R* volunteer facilitator Ruth, facilitating groups in a hospital setting made her think about staffing in hospitals, how they are presented to the public face-to-face with the truer picture. Ruth said:

> I was just in the corridor and I looked on a board in the children's ward and it said, 'How many staff there could be, how many part-time they were, full time, voluntary'. I

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[17] Medical professionals connecting patients with non-medical services, such as community groups, for mental health and well-being benefits

> thought do these numbers tally up? Are the hospitals understaffed? How understaffed are they and I don't think we probably do know the story.

Whereas Ruth does not offer an explicit link here to how those in power can distort the truth, her questioning the text of the staffing levels is revealing and is a sign of critical literacy education in action – leading her to speculate that we, the public, are not told the truth about hospital staffing levels. Reflecting further upon my question, she elaborated:

> …people that needed attention have had to ask for tests that in the hospital that have not been automatically given - there could have been traumatic results… That's nothing to do with S&R, but maybe that's made me generally more aware of situations like that... But that comes with education, not everybody would know a thing to ask for, or to demand. Does it boil down to cost or care? Which was my question to these people at the time…long term if something goes wrong, so taking shortcuts doesn't necessarily mean long term gains.

Ruth's experience here is an example of her 'reading the world' (Freire, 1970) with her awareness of the problems raised, linking real life experiences with the 'text' she saw in the hospital, therefore using multimodal texts, which as Janks (2013) explains, can have powerful impacts. She has knowledge of people not receiving the care (vital tests) and expressed concern for those who might not have the agency to intervene and demand what they need. It does link with Emma's experiences in another part of the health service, that of the 'the passive recipients' asking for permission. However, combining both of Ruth's reflections, suggest the possibility that 'texts' of the environment the informal learning group is carried out in, in tandem with, the participants and the facilitators' own knowledge, can potentially form as powerful multimodal texts and act as tools for raising critical consciousness in facilitators.

Paula contends that her critical consciousness may have developed through her work with S&R when I put the question to her, but balances this notion against other potential factors:

> Possibly [has developed my critical consciousness], but that could just be an age thing, or just a kind of mature thing anyway. I think I'm probably quite critically aware anyway coming through, you know, the education system and higher education and so on. I think always life experience and communicating with other people means that you have gets a greater awareness of a variety of views.

For facilitators who described a change in their critical consciousness through their work with the participants of informal learning groups, typically impacted upon their practice. Effects were varied and sometimes restricted by the nature of the group's type and initial aims (groups may be dependent on fulfilling set targets made by funding, or other goals attached to an organisation). As Tom said:

> Now it's much more focussed on, how good can this activity be in and of itself, but how, how can these people benefit from an activity? How can we change an activity to make it more relevant to their lives?

But sometimes the informal learning group are formed by third sector organisations who have policies that impact on what can and cannot be done within a group, or there might be specific aims and objectives from funding, which again might make change difficult, as Tom explains:

> ...obviously, sometimes you've got more leeway to let it affect your practice than others, depends on what your boss says, and what the funding programme wants and that kind of thing. So, it's not like I was able to make all the changes I want to, but yeah, it's definitely been a learning curve for me as well.

Sarah, at *S&R*, explains how initially they had no control of the texts they were being sent to use, and that they had to base their selections with their experience of the participants in mind:

> For start, we also are presented with texts that challenge and our own thoughts and feelings, and our stories and our poems, we, we initially weren't choosing…they were being sent to us, from an arts organisation in Northern Ireland. So, we didn't have any control. So, we will be confronted with things that we might not have chosen. And our role is, it's not about our own likes and dislikes. So, we might get something that does actually confront something within ourselves of prejudice, texts like that can also make us think ourselves about things.

Sarah continues to explain how their practice and they themselves have been affected in their work in a powerful way:

> We're affected by the people that we have worked with, because our work is so much with the vulnerable. And it's so much around kindness, and empathy, and the listening ear, that any feeling of not having time to do that with people, or feelings of either people being distanced from your own existence, are completely wiped away.

Ian talks about how his critical mindset changed and this manifested in how he welcomes people into his space, and how that, in turn, has influenced how his space operates:

> …we've got to be inclusive, that means we accept everybody, treat everybody the same. So…that means if somebody walks up with a Rolls Royce, and [then] you get a homeless guy, and the both of them walk up together, our human nature is… go to the one from the Rolls Royce [to] shake his hand. We shouldn't be like that! We should treat them both exactly the same. Both human beings are the same as me and you. So, we've got to give them that same sense. It's that attitude. And I think it's this mindset of looking at it differently

As previously discussed, Ian underwent a period of change he describes as beginning around ten years ago, although he sees this process as a continuum, journeying through the thresholds of learning and critical consciousness, which effects his practice as both a facilitator and a human being, especially in appreciating and reacting to the variety of opinions and belief systems of others who come to his groups:

> It’s understanding we're all in this together. We're all at different stages of life. I’m no further on than you are, we’re all learning together. And I think it's an element of sort of understanding and accepting that they might not have the same views of me.

During this change to Ian’s critical consciousness, Ian has been more open to different philosophies which then influence his practice:

> We’re going on to what’s called One Planet Living, which is its sort of ten principles, and it's environmental…it's about being happy. They’re not bad principles to go by that is sort of the basis of it. Now, the difficulty is, is, is getting people to understand where you're coming from

Data in this section gives an insight into changes in the levels of critical consciousness of facilitators, as for example, Sarah describes her readings leading to a reawakening which could draw parallels to the effects of conventional texts within critical literacy education that for example Freire describes (1970). Whereas Tom’s reading prompted development of a greater understanding of the power imbalance, false consciousness, structural inequality and the effects of different enforcers of power, such as the media (Graber, 2011). Vince, like Tom, has gained awareness of why working-class people vote in the way they do, but in the examples they provide, did not suggest they would directly tackle the participants’ political opinions. Both conveyed respect for their participants and the reckoning that a direct intervention would not work as it could alienate the group participants further and could even be bound as part of the problem. As Tyler (2013) describes how society others the working class, branding them as stupid and ignorant, it is therefore unsurprising many working-class people feel ignored and not listened to by the political class (McKenzie, 2017). These salient descriptions of feelings and experiences from working-class groups are open to exploitation for political ends. For example, the notion of the working class being left behind (Rhodes et al., 2019) has particular emphasis on the plight of white working-class (again, emphasising division) being 'weaponised' for political gain by the Conservative Party and the right (Treloar, 2021). For this reason, the empathetic and indirect approaches to supporting change, as discussed by Tom and Vince for instance, allow people themselves to make their own connections and meanings within their own lives[18]. It also does present a deeper understanding of their participants' lives, that has perhaps been developed and enhanced through reading PAT whilst working collectively towards, demonstrating the power of unity to participants in fractured times; or just creating and providing a space to listen to each other.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the facilitators, who largely have come from a 'starting point' of empathy with self-declared levels critical consciousness beyond the magical, have not intended to use informal learning group contexts or participants as a tool for their own self-awakening, or engage in learning through reading of the PAT. It has not been a declared intention of the facilitator nor a declared motivation for setting up the informal learning groups. In terms of the critical consciousness development, many facilitators spoke of a prior understanding of 'structural inequality', oppression and the effects that has on people's lives – therefore, typically, they did not begin at the stage of a 'magical consciousness' that Freire explains (1970). However, arguably this can be the case with many of the facilitators within this ethnography, who themselves had varied experiences and a range of vocational and educational backgrounds. Also, what is difficult to ascertain is that if this realisation is retrospective, that the reading of the PAT has helped them make meaning and sense of previous ideas and conceptions they had. Building upon this, the stages of critical consciousness that the facilitators 'elevate' to is also difficult to exact, however this is discussed in Chapter Eight where the PAT model is discussed in greater detail and is foregrounded as a powerful framework for understanding triggers of critical consciousness development.

The above data demonstrates consistencies that include self-realisation (for example, 'I live in a bubble') and that the participants had been the vehicle for facilitators to unintentionally awaken through. Not every facilitator who spoke about such direct awakenings could pinpoint the actual moment of change. However, as these awakenings were unconscious, determining such a point would be difficult.

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[18] As discussed within this theme and the next theme

Theme 2: Critical literacy education and learning within informal learning settings

Theme 2 relates to the sub research question: what forms of critical literacy education occur in informal learning groups and what are their effects? In this section, I examine the instances or incidents of critical literacy education that have been described by the facilitators as occurring within their informal learning group settings. Also, in the group observations I made, in the run up to the first national lockdown (March 2020), I also use my fieldnotes to refer to incidents and instances of critical literacy education with the participants. Within this body of data, clear examples of critical pedagogy and critical literacy education are present in the informal learning groups, with the latter being in both conscious/intentional and unconscious/unintentional forms.

Share and Read (S&R), with its various informal learning activities across the city, offers critical literacy education opportunities despite not being an explicit intention of the project. Its aims, broadly, are not focused on the education of the participants as such but are focused on well-being, reducing isolation and the prompting of memories to be shared with the group. This is to catalyse conversations and discussion points within the diverse range of participants who only contribute to sessions on a voluntary and non-compulsory basis. Sarah, who leads *S&R* and who has herself, as detailed, felt an awakening from her experiences with the group participants, recognises the need for critical literacy skills for people to navigate through the world:

> I personally feel that now we are bombarded, ever increasingly, with messages, contradictory messages, lies, half-truths; and to pick your way through all of that is impossible. The whole Brexit argument, none of us are really equipped to work out who's telling the truth about what, and it's overwhelming. And I'm somebody I think I now have quite a high level of critical literacy. And so, where you have people who perhaps, struggle more with being able to pick things apart, how can they begin? How can people even begin to work their way through all of that rubbish.

Lucy, who also works with the S&R project, has similar views about the problems of a lack of critical literacy apparent in society, and provides insights into how she has approached related incidents:

> One of the things that I tried to do was to make people a little bit better at… taking in information and actually understanding it, which is a really hard job, when you're fighting against society and their families. And it's never nice to have to tell [someone] what grandpa says, was wrong. That's quite hard. I think it's just all about education, I think if you can, if you can learn about a thing, then you're much less likely to judge it.

S&R typically uses stories and poems as its material, approaches can vary, here Paula describes a typical session (although Paula does point out that not every session is like this and it very much depends upon the group):

> A typical session would be about an hour long, it would involve a story or, or a piece of prose and poem, but not necessarily, related [to each other]. The normal session would include two facilitators: usually one taking the poem; one taking the story. Every person in the room would have a copy of this and the facilitator reads aloud, we'll stop and ask, usually…an open question - unless people have cognitive problems in which it might be a closed question. So, for example, 'what do you think's going on here?' 'Has anything else ever happened to you?'. And then a discussion usually takes place and it can go way away from the original questions.

Paula elaborates further on the strategies used in such a session:

> The idea is, it's very open ended, it gives people the opportunity to talk openly and in a safe space… The facilitator will read the poem twice, because it's often more difficult to access its deeper meanings if you just read it once, and again, expecting to be able to talk intelligently about it. And so… the questions will be what do you think's happening? What do you think the poems about? Does that relate to anything? Anything in your experience? How do you feel about it?

The typical session Paula describes here has critical literacy education potential. It uses a text (in this case prose and poetry), they then deconstruct the meanings and deeper meanings of the text together, making connections with their own lives. The analysis that leads to finding the deeper meanings are typical of critical literacy education, as described by many, including Giroux (2014), Janks (2013) et al. I asked the *S&R* facilitators if they had seen any changes in the participants as a result in them taking part in S&R sessions. Sarah replied:

> I've seen awareness rise in learners - as they do lack agency. Some are trying to get some control back and I've also seen some become more involved in other groups in the community – for some even, it is just getting more of a 'grip' on their own lives.

The notions of agency and getting control back have increased in importance in the wider domains of politics since the referendum on leaving the European Union of 2016. However, it has been largely weaponised and used as a further tool to divide the working class (Treloar, 2021). However, here Sarah describes the problem, the real sense of the participants having a lack of agency, but then, through the group work, presents positive outcomes: the participants becoming more involved in other groups and getting more of a 'grip' on their agency via the development of critical consciousness. Critical literacy education aims to support the enabling of people in taking more community and civic action (Dunkerly-Bean and Bean, 2014). Sarah then provides examples of the effects of their work within different groups:

> I've seen changes with groups where people have a greater mental capacity in their cognitive behaviours to make those judgments. One of the groups where that's been really clear was when we were working with prisoners. We ran a *S&R* at HMP Sanford, for about a year and a half, we were actually working with their sex offenders. So, it was an interesting group, because with the population in the prison, you find that the main prisoners tend to be not particularly well educated. Whereas the sex offenders, they call them 'vulnerable prisoners'… tend to have a higher cognitive level of understanding. So, there's a very different feel to working with them.

Sarah then explained about the strategies employed with this group:

> We took pieces in that deliberately addressed issues of being in prison, being caged, empathy, understanding other people's points of view… a lot of those prisoners, once they got used to what we were doing, found it quite therapeutic to talk about their feelings about their experiences of being in prison, and could make very good connections between certain things within pieces [texts] and also to listen to each other. And definitely, there was some shifts, quite subtle shifts, but still shifts in perception between themselves and how they saw each other. And in some of the ways that they were perhaps thinking about people outside of that.

Naturally, it is difficult to determine the result of critical literacy education in a prison context, unless there was a form of follow up or longitudinal study, and from speaking to Sarah, this group were no longer active with S&R.

Other instances of critical literacy education at *S&R* have been triggered by incidents within the group in relation to how the participants see the world around them, for example, their views on migrants, not only within the group, but how it is projected and played out in the media and society. Paula highlighted specific training for facilitators to better deal with overtly political topics as they try build such social issues into the fabric of the sessions through the texts they choose and use. This is reminiscent of Janks' (2010) approach, as explored in Chapters Three and Four, where Janks' utilises everyday texts to address power imbalances. The texts used by Paula were clearly aimed at being provocative and disruptive to the status quo of the participants, the status quo here being the participants' mindset towards how society and its people are typically presented to them through imagery and texts, akin to Hall's representation theory (1997). This type of activity could be considered part of critical literacy approach. Sarah explains the uses of targeted texts to provoke discussion around particular topics:

> There's some things that we use which are very deliberately designed to provoke discussion, there's a piece we use called ‘There and Here’, which is about two migrant children who come to Ireland and I think they're from Ethiopia

Sarah gives an example of such an approach being used with groups and its aims:

> We were working with a community group from a local hospice. It's a group of people, largely carers, average age 75, and… might well carry some of the prejudice that we can associate with the kind of thinking from people of that age who have grown up in in the mindsets of those times. So ‘There and Here’ is a story that really deliberately provokes conversations about people who are different from ourselves and who have come into our communities.

I asked Sarah about what prompted this within this group and why the decision was made to approach their perceptions of migrants:

> It was at a time when we had a lot of refugees coming from North Africa, Syria and there were the horror stories of boats of refugees, drowning, and quotas. So, there was talk in the group about what people had seen in the news. And on the one hand, people said how terrible it was. But on the other hand, people said, we can't take them here. We don't have room. We don't have jobs. We don't have the resources.

Sarah continued to document other fears of the group:

> We've got some Poles living down the road, they're all right. But we don't want the Poles here!’ So is that split between the thing that came out of it. It was that split between the micro and the macro coming out in the conversations, but it gave vocabulary and the chance to vocalise some of those thoughts, issues and fears. The fears were around things changing, the unknown, different food smells, different languages being spoken and definitely a feeling of being threatened by that within their community – so perhaps being able to talk about that also mitigated some of those fears.

Sarah then talks about the text’s impact:

> It's difficult to measure how that impacts outside *S&R*, but certainly within it people's language visibly changed. From ‘we don't want the migrants’, they began associating them as individuals. And of course, once people start thinking of individuals, humanity steps in. And so they think about it differently. So, you could see that happening as part of both the meeting and the discussion process, whether that thing is taken to the next time they watch the news talking about ‘migrants flocking in’, who knows? But if you have to assume that if there's been a little spark lit there, it's not going to go out.

The above description from Sarah is an example of critical literacy education in practice as again it challenges perceptions that are often accumulated through alienation, false consciousness and a media which dehumanises migrants (Esses et al., 2013). The dehumanisation of migrants can lead to horizontal violence between the settled working class and migrants, as the two are set against each other (Freire, 1970; Moore and Forkert, 2014). However, the texts used in Sarah's example, disrupt this view leading to a restoration of the migrants as humans (Gu and Catalano, 2022), and then, as Sarah points out, people relate to them, rethinking their past assumption and even question the media in the future. The fears described above by Sarah are clearly real to the participants, perhaps heightened by their age (circa 75 years old) and perhaps exacerbated by a world that has steadily changed around them, challenging their notions of reality. Within this new reality, elderly people are typically alienated (Wong et al., 2017) and the immigrant is scapegoated and dehumanised - represented in the media as parasitic or hostile, whether it is to steal precious and scarce resources (resources which have possibly been scarce to the participants throughout their lives systematically) or taking up decreasing employment opportunities (Sides and Citrin, 2007) even though older people, as a demographic, typically benefit from immigration the most (Schotte and Winkler, 2018). The scapegoating of groups such as the fear of migrants are part of their assumptions which was challenged by text and discussion, which is an important part of critical literacy education.

Tom describes 'impromptu' discussions between the participants of his informal learning group, usually 'fired by a topic or public event'. Brexit, for example, provided a focus for typically the men in one of his groups, as they would talk about the 'rights and wrongs' of it, whilst digging or doing other forms of community gardening work. Tom suggests that the real learning in his group is from impromptu conversations, as well as them 'working together to benefit their local communities'. The group working collectively engaging in dialogue therefore reinforces collective power, a power that has been systemically attacked in working-class communities (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). This collective work can lead to the participants joining other community groups, engaging in other types of action, which is an explicit aim of critical literacy education. Tom explained that whilst his role is to reduce social isolation, he values the supporting of people, encouraging them to participate and take action, as a pleasurable and important part of his work. Ian explains that his informal learning group's role is 'to enthuse people to get them back out in society' and ultimately 'change the participants' mindset'. He perceives that people's backgrounds continue to play an important role in how they think, especially in their upbringing and education:

> A lot is put on by our parents, our schooling and our peer group. And I don't think we realise how much that forms us. And if we're not careful, we don't move out of that circle, we sort of accept that what that circle are saying. It's like our tribe that is there.

This is also strikingly similar to Emma's belief that people are schooled to be 'worker ants' and echoes the banking system of Freire (1970) or Illich's hidden curriculum (1971). Ian explains the importance of the environment and culture of informal learning groups in supporting the bringing about of this change. He is also equally mindful about being 'insular,' or 'protective' of his participants, an observation he has made in other community groups. He expresses his desire to help the participants to make 'mindset changes' and that can only come from within a liberated environment in which they feel completely free to leave. The notion of freedom for the body and mind is at the heart of Ian's ethos. He described an informal learning group he is not connected with, comparing it to his own groups:

> It was a programme which was dealing with addicts, and… they were really good. But they have trouble releasing that person back into society, because they didn't know what to do with them once they started getting better. That was a problem for them, a massive problem. And I thought, well, you don't want to create something which is gonna hold somebody in. Create something which allows people to go and that don't feel as though they're committed here, a part of this tribe again, and they can't move out. You've got to encourage them all the time.

This is reminiscent of Freire's work of supporting people's own liberation (1970). Ian wants to help facilitate people to undertake change themselves. He is mindful of people's baggage, their forms of internal oppression, that are barriers to freedom. Ian wants to help them change through their own efforts and free will (again like Freire explains) to avoid creating new reliance and new baggage. Ian describes the learning that typically occurs in his groups, from sessions facilitated by himself, volunteers and those facilitated by external facilitators that are paid for by external funding. Many of the planned activities could be argued to have both direct and indirect critical literacy education potential, but certainly, a significant learning theme, what Ian describes as 'food literacy' has a great deal of similarity with the practices of critical food pedagogy[19]. I asked Ian to explain what the term 'food literacy' means and how they approach it within the groups he facilitates, what they discuss and how this relates to wider issues in people's lives:

> How do you look at food literacy as a whole because it's a massive, because it does bring the whole social political agenda into it. Vegetarianism…veganism - it's so political…And then we get on to if you're not eating meat or dairy, where are you

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[19] A pedagogy that, amongst other food related aspects, critiques power relations within food and the food industry

> getting your food from? There's evidence now to say a lot is coming from GM soya because a lot of a soya is the plant base, which you use for a lot of the vegan processed food. Big companies like Birdseye, who we deal with, they're using a lot of the waste product like pods to make the base for vegan burgers. Now, they're rubbing their hands, because they're making vast amounts of profit from waste. Now, that is all part of food literacy. And it's difficult to say. You cannot have a black nor white, this is right and this is wrong [approach]. The research is vast, because there's so many implications.

This is just a snapshot of the 'massive' area of food literacy that Ian engages in discussion with group members. He asks critical questions of the food industry and process: where food comes from, who it effects, who controls it and who profits; to how it relates our own lives and social and cultural practices. It is the presentation of food literacy themed texts with analysis and discussion that leads to critical consciousness changes within people, or in this case, the participants whom Ian encounters. Recent work by Rowat et al. (2021) describe multiple changes in students who engaged in food literacy, including the raising of political literacy and health literacy cultivating their critical citizenship. Ian explains the process further. He believes that if participants can make these links, even in a small way, it can be the catalyst of the change in mindset:

> …it's a form of discussion, which we could talk here about solidly for the whole week, and not get through it, because I think you only want one little thing to change, and it has such a knock- on effect…Sometimes it's encouraging. Well, you know, a lot of time it is quite frightening. People change how they do things. It doesn't happen quickly. But yes, it does. It does change people's thinking.

Ian understands the fear intrinsic to a change of mindsets and the re-evaluation of assumptions. The stages of critical consciousness development are addressed in Chapter Eight, but the fear Ian describes is reminiscent of those within the processes of critical consciousness development. The fears, the uncertainty, of being in between learning, the liminal states between the thresholds of learning, whereupon the person leaves the certainty of a threshold or a status quo, to a flux: a liminal place between thresholds. Until the stability of the next threshold can be reached, fear is an understandable emotion. (Caputo, 1987). A recent literature review presented mixed relationships between critical consciousness and well-being in young people in several contexts, crystalising the fears Ian highlights (Maker Castro et al., 2022). Ian explains that this transition can be a lengthy process and many participants have attended his centre and groups for several years. He believes that the process of a mindset change can be gradual and provides several examples:

> It doesn't happen quickly. But yes, it does. It does change people's thinking.... I do believe I can pick out a lot of the volunteers that will have changed their views, become more confident, very often, nothing to do with food. It's about that confidence, and that maybe awareness of what's going on around them.

Awareness can manifest in different forms too as Ian points out. It can be observed in connections between the subtle changes in the participants/volunteers' worldview, and changes in how they live, often with an increased confidence and developed critical consciousness of the world around them. In Ian's groups, participants are supported through interaction with group activities and participation in discussion around various topics, with much drawn from food literacy. But also, as Ian points out, often this has nothing to do with food directly, as the critical food pedagogy practiced here provides the tools to think about power and emancipation beyond food: learning to read the world through food (Summer, 2013). Furthermore, the increase in an individual's confidence also can lead to forms of informal mentoring that occurs in Ian's groups:

> There is a lot of one-to-one going on. She [a volunteer at Ian's centre] took somebody under her arm and she's helped them get them involved with things. And then she'll try and do things. There's a lot without actually saying this should happen, happens.

Ian believes that this mentoring should be a natural development:

> And I think that comes from or it should come from in a positive and a happy environment. And then that those are the sort of the fruits of it. That's what blossoms from that. You can't dictate that. The minute you say or answer one to one mentoring. Now, will you look after so and so - you might as well forget it.

Apart from the external facilitators who are paid to lead specific sessions, Ian and the volunteers, who typically do not possess formal teaching qualifications, or formal experience in specific skillset, facilitate these sessions. The centre has more of an emphasis on 'learning together' in an informal way, which can help lead to the sharing of skills and discussion based around the topics at hand (often with food literacy) and other current affairs, life themed discussions. In a sense, this is akin to learning within a community of practice (Wenger and Lave, 1992) - people learn from each other's experience and views. It is the lack of didactic formalities that provides the space for this type of learning:

> None of us are experienced in in particular way, like the cooking. It's people who come with the experience of cooking rather than being through catering college, through university or have done catering to a higher level and know how to teach it. We're not doing that. We're coming from a practical way. We're not going to teach

> you to do some fancy curry dish, but we will teach you to bake bread [and make] soup.

The non-elitist ‘we can do it ourselves’ idea embodies the facilitation of empowerment and helps cut through barriers. In a way, and I would suggest this is unconscious, is a rejection of the often -needless formalities and the failings of formal education, like Illich’s ‘schooled to confuse…a diploma with competence’ (1973:9). It also demonstrates what a collective of people, working together, can achieve. Ian discusses people changing mindsets and then taking this beyond the centre:

> They go off and do other things and I don’t follow up to know…I think they'll pass on the knowledge.

Ian’s centre, with people from various backgrounds working collectively towards positive change, who then spread this mindset into the wider community, is reminiscent of the practices at the Highlander Folk School in the USA and the programmes facilitated there to promote critical consciousness raising and community leadership (See Chapter Three). Although Ian does not directly explain that community leadership is an aim, as at Highlander Folk School, many participants have become volunteers who facilitate sessions, or decide to mentor other participants. Ian suggests their aim is to ‘make the world that little bit better’. Freire (1970) is clear that you cannot emancipate people, they must emancipate themselves, which is echoed by Ian when he says: ‘it's back to that mindset change where people say, I've got to do it’.

Emma, like Ian, is at the heart of numerous informal learning groups. She and explains the processes and examples she has seen the development of critical consciousness within participants, foregrounding her own experiences (at the beginnings of her own critical awakening, as described earlier):

> I always used to say you look for the sort of sparkle in someone's eye, because that's your route back to open up their worlds again. And so, I was finding the things that get that sort of twinkle in people's eyes to enable them to take those first steps. And, and commit to themselves and their lives as well. And, it is also political that they could get something back. So, it was a reciprocal thing rather than a passive recipient.

Reciprocity, participation and emancipation are at the core of Emma’s beliefs and are crucial to the world she envisages. As she is a person who has, as she explained, been awakened, she clearly aims to intervene in injustices and support the empowerment of others. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she hoped to grasp opportunities to help the group members develop their own agency:

> There's potential for people really realising that we're slaves in this world that we live in. And something else could be possible, particularly with people taking their own power back through mutual aid Covid groups as well. We're hoping to harness that opportunity.

Emma has grave concerns about the effects of the media on the people of this country, particularly targeted systems to trigger certain responses in people who may be vulnerable to such messages:

> You know, the Cambridge Analytica thing. It's weaponised propaganda, like social media and all of that. So, for people who are feeling disenfranchised, it's their understanding of the psychology of people when they feel angry, and we're more used to being made to feel angry and responding than feeling good and responding.

Emma also highlights concerns about misuses of social media and the internet to spread fake news that can be divisive and sew disharmony:

> I think there's the issue with the internet and everyone thinking they're a researcher, so they're researching but they don't know what they're looking at when you hear people say, 'truth!' What we need, desperately, is understanding and critiquing the stuff fed.

Emma believes that her work with the reciprocal service exchange can be counter to such contradictory consciousness and disconnections within people and community and society:

> So, the whole point of this, it's a vehicle of equality, reciprocity, and relational network building and trust building. It asks about what you love doing, what you know: it unlocks things, particularly people who've not been in work, have to do different courses and learn different skills, but then never have an opportunity to use that.

Through this 'vehicle' Emma hopes to support the change in people away from the structures of this society, which reinforce separation from community and enact inequities. She hopes that from this basis, the participants can explore visions of an alternative way of living and working in a fairer, equitable world:

> It's because people have been brainwashed into thinking we have one story of our world, which is the neoliberal story and is about growth and jobs and work. We talk about five types of work when we talk about what we do, because we're not just [name of group], it's mutual aid, as well. So, we're looking for ways that people can exchange with each other, where money is the last option rather than the first.

Emma provides examples of strategies they use to both challenge participants' views and raise their awareness and understanding in certain cases, here she employs intergroup strategies to reduce the imposed barriers between people from different cultural backgrounds (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), which has similarity to Sarah's practice at *S&R:*

> I know that we've had members who…would turn racist…obviously, we've got a code of conduct and all that but just because they're coming into contact, contact with someone… like a refugee or something, and dancing, or doing something ridiculous together. That's a very subtle way of actually enabling people to go to thinking slightly differently and not be as brainwashed by a weaponised media.

Emma talked about the different types of learning that go on in her groups, and some of her responses were clear examples of critical literacy education in action:

> We hosted a workshop with a collaborator in Leeds who had mobilised 1000s of people around floods…. So he did a little workshop on how to like connect in a neighbourhood safely without taking data…. But then it just turned into this group. We use sociocracy as a sort of tool to and we talk in circles. We've been redefining our drivers actually. The group is in transition. It's been really quite interesting.

Emma here discussed how one of the groups was formed from people attending a workshop on flood mobilisation – which is a community need. Furthermore, how the participants use discussion to self-govern how the group operates (sociocracy) in Freirean learning circles (Freire, 1970). Critical literacy education aims to progress consciousness to states of praxis, which the above is an example of the discussion, the reflection and theory building (redefining their drivers) and the action – the transition (Freire, 1970; Burke and Lumb, 2018). Further to this, Emma facilitates 'film screenings, and then they engage in discussions about the films'. This is also a common critical literacy education activity, the film being the text, and then the discussion afterwards to find the meanings in relation to power and people's lives.

I asked Emma if she had observed changes in participants that could relate to a growing critical consciousness. As Emma is involved in many informal learning groups, she could confirm that she had on several occasions:

> If someone's not confident, you give them something to do….There's something in there, everyone is part of it. And it enables conversations to start. And it's, it's subtle. So, with some of our members, it's very much we've got a movement building here. And it's very exciting. For me, I feel like I'm not a lone ranger, and we're working internationally on this as well. So, we've got collaborators all over.

The often explicitly political actions that Emma's groups, and also to some extent what Ian describes, draw parallels to the informal learning, community action and community groups described to me by Barry, who had experience of working and volunteering within informal community contexts in the 1970s/1980s. Barry described a community action group forming where he lived due to local children being at risk of drowning in a nearby drain. It initially started as a pressure group for change but became part of a wider community collective that provided many informal learning avenues for the local community. For those involved it had a marked change, especially on those who were not previously politically or socially active:

> All of a sudden people, you know, were prepared to go and talk to a councillor. They were prepared to actually argue the toss, when it came to it, and they weren't afraid, and they knew there was some way where they could get support for that if necessary. So yeah, I mean, in a broad sense, people's consciousness, political consciousness did grow, there was no two ways about it.

Raising consciousness through participation is observed in many of the informal learning group participants Rebecca encounters. Rebecca who has paid and unpaid roles through the church, is involved in different forms of community work and informal learning. She relayed similar increases in political confidence and consciousness that Barry described. She explains that many of the group participants, display observable signs of a developing a critical consciousness in their increased interactions with local politicians and police:

> On Tuesdays, we have local police and local councillors come in to talk and do a surgery. They have a coffee and sit at a table and people come in…people who didn't use to, now talk to them about the things that bother them about their neighbourhood. I guess a small step for some of them, but they now think, 'I can do that'.

This is an example of an increasing civic responsibility and capacity that is a key manifestation of mindset transformation (Giroux, 2010). As Rebecca infers, there are moments of critical consciousness development and self-realisation that can then have a knock-on effect meaning that people do start to intervene and take an active role in shaping their lives and local environment and community. Returning to Vince, both he and Rebecca have both worked with an organisation that uses critical pedagogy practices, including those of Freire (1970), to resonate stories of the bible with working-class people, as Vince explains:

> …it's predicated on Paolo Freire's ideas about pedagogy. So basically, it's saying to churches, if you want to have a better understanding about working-class communities, to understand what the fuck you're talking about, well going on about

> Jesus, and all your doctrines… you have to start with people's own story! If you think the Bible has a story to tell, and it is principally a load of stories, then you have to start with people's own stories.

Vince’s point about starting with people’s own story echoes Ledwith (2020) on community development and critical pedagogy. Vince then provides examples of this in practice:

> So, I am supposed to produce a piece of drama [to explore Exodus] with some of the people that turn up…four women turn up. And I'm thinking, I don't know these people. I've got no knowledge of your lives. They're all women. What the hell's this Bible story about people leaving Israel and leaving Egypt and going to the promised land? What the hell's relevant here?

Vince, as the facilitator realised that the key to understanding was allowing people to tell their stories and their world:

> So, I said, ‘I don't know what the word Exodus means to you? But you know, have you ever escaped from anything? Run away from anything, you know, packed up your stuff and got out in the middle of the night from anywhere? Have you got any stories like that? Well, of course, every one of them had a story like that because the three of the young women had all ran away from violent partners, one of them in the middle of the night with the kids.

Vince explains the participants started to self-analyse then their own lives through this lens:

> Everybody's got a story. So you open up the story now and the learning that comes out of that, and the sharing of experiences and then learning from that, I've seen that happen viscerally, a vast experience of opening up issues in a way that people will listen to each other and then learn from each other about how they coped, and what you can do about it.

Vince then explains example effects this type of learning has had on participants:

> …because when people start, this sharing of some hurt or, or pain or bad experience with people in a kind of slightly controlled, but basically loving and accepting, atmosphere, that is a liberation in itself… I think, helps people to learn from the experience, and it helps you get a new perspective on it, and maybe even get a bit of distance from it, and, and reflect on whether you've recovered at all from it.

This idea of sharing, learning and liberating yourself is a common theme within the contributions, as well as this notion of ‘freeing yourself from your past baggage’ that Ian also spoke of, by gaining new insights from learning from each other.

Rebecca, who has also facilitated groups using bible stories in a similar way, to support people in their own understanding of their own lives. Rebecca describes an incident at one of her groups:

> The session is about, 40 minutes, a discussion session. We do little runs of them. We've got one called 'New Year/ New You' - all about new year's resolutions. There's one's about food, around relationships, about parenting and, and all sorts of stuff. It starts with people telling their own story or their experience. Then there's a bible story followed by an open question like, 'how do you understand what we have talked about', or 'how does this relate to your own story'? And then usually something like a practical response. So, it's amazing because, again, it takes away the power base of knowledge. So, you don't have to know the bible stories.

Rebecca acknowledges the power imbalances regarding knowledge and understands how removing this can be inclusive to learning.

> This one session was about food. There's this woman I know, saying afterwards: 'Rebecca – 5 loaves two fish, fed all of those people – couldn't believe it''…And she said he had that 'stuff left over' – which surprised me because there is literally one line in the bible that mentions the leftovers. So, the next session started with: 'what are your childhood memories of food' and it was meant to be fairly innocuous question. She started telling this story about how she had no feeling in her finger because she put her hand once into a deep fat fryer to pull out a chip because in her family, her stepdad was fed first and they had whatever was left with - and that's what was left - so then her finger was burnt. So then, through this story [of Jesus feeding the multitudes] she could see how this connected with her and not only did they have enough, but he had more than enough. It helped her understand the anxieties she has now.

This example demonstrates how the analysis of a text, in this case a bible story, can help to gain self-perspective to progress on to understanding and reading your own world. As Lewison et al. (2002) explains that critical literacy requires us to understand 'experience and texts from our own perspective' (p.383). Here, Rebecca's learner self-contextualised the bible story which evoked memories of a trauma from childhood relating to food. Jones (2019) discusses how African American women in critical learning spaces learn how to deconstruct their own trauma, akin to how Rebecca's learner has begun here, by drawing links to her own life.

Not every facilitator interviewed provided stories relating to my investigation into critical literacy education, however, other examples of changes to participants' perspectives were recorded, such as from Family History course facilitator, John. He facilitates groups of participants using various strategies and tools to find information relating to their ancestors –

‘it’s like doing detective work’. In the interview he relayed a typical incident with course beginners, which would disrupt their reality:

> I think ‘Who Do You Think You Are’ on television has got an awful lot to do with it because they can press one finger and the history just comes out and they expect us to do that and do and get everything for them.

After the interview I asked John about that point in more detail, and he explained it can be a ‘make or break’ for the participant staying and that the glamourous vision of their family’s past is something that ‘they’ve held on to’. Now when that notion is ‘shattered’ or realise that it can be a ‘slow and dedicated pastime or task’ then it can be a barrier to them continuing. However, those that ‘stick at it get some reward’ and ‘learn something about TV and what’s real and what is not’. The last comment by John is of interest as TV is such a powerful medium and has such a role in shaping people’s realities and world view.

Johnny, facilitator of the Book Club I spent time at, describes the learning that occurs there:

> It's more learning from other people, rather than learning from the book itself. And I think you learn more about people's viewpoints and where they're coming from based on their own experience and based on their own lives than the book itself, if that makes sense.

Johnny also explained that at the club’s participants have diverse interests and a range of backgrounds that contributes to the ‘broadening of our cultural horizons’. Group members gained exposure to cultural experiences they would not typically get access, or choose to access, through interests of other members of the group, which, for example, has led members of the group, including Johnny, watching opera for the first time. I visited the book club observing sessions, taking fieldnotes in terms of the incidents that could arguably be considered critical literacy education opportunities. The small group I attached to were discussing a fictitious crime genre novel that was set locally. I labelled each member with a letter and made assumptions about their age/gender as I felt it was not appropriate to clarify such points at this time. Here is part of my fieldnotes from the critical literacy education incidents:

> C (male in his 40s) questions the class assumptions in the book that ‘perhaps people from Sanford’s council estates wouldn’t read it’ and people from certain areas of Sanford, [lists council estates in Sanford’ might be offended by his [the author’s] descriptions of these places and the way he talks about them. The man (Z in his 40s) says being self-depreciating is part of ‘Sanford’s character’. “The over emphasis on how derelict and deprived the area is, seems stereotypical’ says B (female in her

> 50s). when he writes: “They drank away their benefit cheques’. And that ‘the property will be robbed/burnt to the ground in her absence’ B continues ‘just seems like the usual rubbish said about estates in newspapers in Sanford and elsewhere.
> This discussion seems to effect E (female in her 30s) – ‘I never thought about it like that, but I see what you mean. Z thought he was just being droll.’ ‘He was a journalist before being a writer’, says G, maybe he’s always looked down on these places?’

This discussion has critical literacy education potential. The group are analysing the subtleties of the text and perhaps the author’s deeper thoughts and meanings towards social class. C objects to the depiction of people from council estates in the book and connects this to the media portrayal of council estates where, all too often, its inhabitants are mocked or derided in many forms of the media. By challenging this stereotype, they then delve into potentially deeper meanings of perhaps the author’s own views: a repetition of well-worn tropes against people who live on council estates which echo Tyler’s (2013) perceptions of problem people with self-induced problems. This seems to have effected E, who says ‘she had never thought about it like that’ which may have had an effect of change on her the next time she reads or hears similar stereotypes. Z does counter the possibility with that as the author is local, perhaps it is a part of Sanford’s character to be ‘self-depreciating’. The discussion moves away with a classic ‘them and us’ consideration, in G’s explanation, that perhaps the author, who also practiced a typically middle-class profession, ‘always looked down on those places’. Reflecting after this observation I considered the use of the authors phrase from another perspective, highlighting the critical literacy education potential in this study for me, the researcher:

> I reconsidered the phrase: ‘ they drank away their benefit cheques’. I could not recall hearing anyone after spending months conducting an ethnography Sanford, refer to state benefits as ‘benefit cheques’ nor had I heard it anywhere before in various places in northern England. It seemed that it might be an imported phrase. Regardless, it seemed like a phrase borrowed from a trope deriding the working-class taken from elsewhere, or a phrase perhaps written in mind of a wider more middle-class audience and that perhaps C’s statement that the author believes that no working-class person from Sanford’s council estates would read it, perhaps is a conscious or unconscious belief by the author. Or, that if working-class people do, it could form part of a divisions between so called more educated and more affluent members of the working class, than council estate working-class people.

Chapter summary and conclusion:

The chapter provided a brief introduction to the study participants and their groups to accompany the reading of the findings. It also introduced the PAT concept and how that unfolded in the research with contributions from the participants accompanied by commentary and alignment to the literature. The chapter made the case for the dynamic impact in critical consciousness development that the PAT has. Also, how informal learning group facilitators have changed their views and practices as a result. Theme Two also revealed significant changes in informal learning group members' critical consciousness – as the groups offered a range of critical literacy learning opportunities, both intentionally and unintentionally.

The next chapter addresses Theme 3 and Theme 4 and will look at the potential for informal learning groups to be sites of resistance against neoliberalism's effects through respite and solidarity. Theme Four will consider the future for informal learning groups and can they fill the void left by adult education in communities like Sanford.

Chapter Seven – Findings Part 2 - *'…meeting your neighbours and talking to them…it sounds so basic, but I think a lot of people were liberated by those experiences.'*

This second findings chapter explores the facilitators' perceptions further. This first section of the chapter addresses Theme 3 which examines informal learning groups as sites of resistance to neoliberalism and the alienation and social isolation it causes (Fishwick and Connolly, 2018; Becker et al., 2021). This resistance can also offer opportunities to envisage the rebuilding and restoring communities, and in some cases how they act as surrogates in place of vital services that have been stripped from communities, heightened since 2010 (Watkins et al., 2017; Cummins, 2018; UNISON, 2019). Theme 4 looks at the facilitators' perceptions of the education system, the decline of adult and community education, and contextualises the place informal learning and informal learning groups has within this 'broken system'. In a similar format to Chapter Six, findings are presented alongside discussion and analysis.

Theme 3: Respite and solidarity

Share and Read (S&R) engages participants who commonly experience marginalisation, many of whom have been excluded from traditional non-formal adult education due to social, health, mobility or other reasons (Wallis et al., 2022). As such, the *S&R* project primarily aims to increase well-being and reduce social isolation through its work with their participants. Social isolation, catalysed by harsh application of neoliberalism (Becker et al., 2021), is recognised as being more predominant in certain areas than others, such as those from working-class communities (Kearns, et al., 2015). Furthermore, social isolation has a greater impact upon specific demographics, such as the elderly (Hawkley, et al., 2008), carers and the cared for (Babudu, et al., 2016) and immigrants, asylum seekers or refugees to Britain (Christodoulou, 2014). *S&R* facilitators explained their participants tend to come from marginalised groups and the project seeks to facilitate groups in venues that are accessible to their target demographics, including settings that non-formal education would not typically reach.

S&R and its concept are not unique to this research area, and its aims and mode of operation are found in other 'sister' projects in other urban areas nationally. Sarah, *S&R's*

project manager, here in conversation with volunteer facilitators from the project at a focus group, explains the differences in their outreach groups within this area:

> Shared reading [in this form] has existed for about 10 years. But the scale that we did it on and some of the places we go - I mean, hospitals are completely new, that's unique to Sanford… people have done it in residential homes, mainly, or with existing groups in the way that we have.

Sarah provided a more comprehensive view of where *S&R* would practice, and it became apparent that one of its strengths was its spatial versatility. Often facilitated in untypical venues, such as hospital wards, waiting rooms, hospices, medical centres, care homes; and with the appropriate safeguarding, brought into people's homes. It does also have a presence in more typical adult and community learning places, such as libraries, community centres and prisons too. It can operate with regular groups and does ad hoc one-off events, such as 'pop up poetry'; designed to engage with the public at events, and regularly at out-patients waiting for appointments at the hospital.[20]

The hosting of *S&R* groups in people's homes, which is, according to Sarah, is only happening in Sanford, naturally removes many of the traditional barriers to engagement with educational or social groups, especially for those who are unable to leave their homes, for various reasons, such as their own limited mobility, or if they have caring responsibilities themselves. This flexible approach to where an informal learning group can be hosted means a greater number of people, previously disenfranchised by adult education, can participate. Numbers can vary in the groups, for instance, in untypical cases, the group could consist of just two adult participants. Or, in other cases it could be a larger group of adults (examples were given by *S&R* of married or co-habiting partners by themselves, or joined by members of their family, carers, or sometimes a larger group of adults of varying relationships, including, for instance neighbours or their extended family).

S&R's flexibility in relation to where they can facilitate groups means they have a greater reach to groups of vulnerable adults, who for example are in hospital, a care home, or housebound, meaning they can be involved with this experience of informal learning, as opposed to being potentially excluded from non-formal adult education through being unable to travel to an adult education centre, or outreach venue (Pennacchia et al., 2018). Although, adult education has specific courses for vulnerable groups, for instance for Adults with Literacy and Learning Disabilities provision (ALLD), funding has reduced in real terms for adults with learning disabilities (Mali et al., 2018) across adult education since 2010 (O'Hara, 2015). However, alongside this reduction in funding, participation nationally is also proportionately falling, particularly amongst those who are in poverty and/or typically face the greatest disadvantages and adversity in society (Mersinoglu, 2020). The benefits of informal learning groups facilitated by *S&R* are clearly articulated by the facilitators, volunteer facilitators and group participants. Below, Polly, who facilitates groups that consist of both carers and the cared for, shares her confidence in the positive effect of the informal learning groups upon their participants and their families:

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[20] S&R project manager, Sarah, explained that feedback from doctors within these hospitals was positive, and the 'pop up poetry' was visibly positive for patients, helping reduce stress and improving interactions between doctor and patient during appointments.

> …the knock-on effect was, we were impacting on the people who have problems. We were impacting on those that that had had the heart attacks, that have the strokes that had dementia, so it wasn't just the carers, we were actually making a difference to their lives.

Above, Polly describes *S&R's* ability to enable the participation of the vulnerable, and ill, that non formal, adult education, does not typically engage with (Learning and Work Institute, 2018). Paula (*S&R*) echoes Polly's view, reporting positive effects upon the carers of vulnerable participants who attend their groups, who typically do not have time or space to attend such informal learning groups due to their role as carers. However, as Paula describes below, many of the carers struggle to leave their role as carers to attend a group, even for a short period of time:

> That's certainly true of, say, the carers that we've worked with. That it's time for them and it's quite difficult for carers to let go at all. And so, Share and Read for them has been really important in terms of being able to talk for themselves and not talk for the person they're caring for. And let their own needs be foremost as opposed to the people they care for, and that's actually what they find really difficult to let go.

The importance of the informal learning groups for both the carers, and the cared for, was consistently highlighted as being highly important for participants suffering additional forms of alienation and marginalisation due to their individual circumstances. Those who are themselves ill, or those who care for an ill person, are often left feeling powerless and trapped within a system (Boudioni et al., 2018). Above Paula highlights the alienation and isolation of both the carer and the cared for. The cared for communicate through the proxy of the carer, and the carer's anxiety of leaving their side and perhaps feeling they, as proxy, are leaving them without a voice and therefore helpless. Carers, who often have left employment to care for partners or family members, typically have reduced contact with friends and family (due to their care work) and as a result suffer in terms of stress and their own health (Petrie and Kirkup, 2018).

S&R also facilitates informal learning groups for staff who work in palliative care settings. Dawn, who is a volunteer facilitator for *S&R,* facilitates an informal learning group solely comprising of staff at a hospice, for residential palliative care. She describes her monthly group with the staff hosted at the hospice, and how it appears to support them in many ways. Firstly, she details parts of the mental trauma, which also can be emotionally complex at times, from working in such a role:

> I think it can depend to a certain extent, what sort of day or what sort of week they've had, being in the job they're in. You can have pretty awful weeks from losing a patient point of view, even though they're terminally ill…. But maybe some hit the staff more harshly than others, depending on the age of the patient….and other days, it can be that somebody has had what they would describe as a good death. And they're even uplifted and can be quite, not pleased, but happier that that person is now out of pain…

Dawn then continues, explaining how being part of the informal learning group can support both individually and as a group:

> More often than not, though, they come in, in quite a noisy…but happy way…What we found over the over the months, they now share some quite intimate stories, really personal stories that obviously stay within the room. But I think that's why they've got to know each other better… I don't know how you would measure it but maybe it makes them a better team. Maybe they gel together better because they've had a shared experience through Share and Read, and those personal stories and those conversations. And they've gotten to know each other better, more intimately and more deeply than they would sitting at a desk next to each other. I think that's a real sense of the story and the poem just being tools in your tool belt to enhance that conversation starter.

Informal learning is also a common training tool in the workplace for employees to learn a new skill (Soloman et al., 2006). In this case, engaging in discussing stories and poems unconnected to their jobs seems, according to Dawn, to have two main benefits for this group. One to act as a form of therapy in a safe space, a space which, through the medium or stimulus of a shared poem or story, they can process traumatic events and share their thoughts, and do so confidentially. This echoes findings from a systematic literature review of arts-based projects with palliative care workers who reportedly enhanced their skills, empathy and awareness (Turton et al., 2018). But also, by sharing and trusting each other, it strengthens them as a collective through this solidarity. It may improve their working performance, and seems to provide a happier, more positive environment, which should benefit both staff and patients. This concept has been explored recently within the field of nursing, with Wang et al. (2023) and Kristoffersen (2021) offering examples of similar types of solidarity.

Moreover, reports of the participants finding solidarity within groups was commonplace in the discussions with the facilitators. Examples of participants sharing intimate and personal thoughts and experiences within the group, and strong group connections developing were common, particularly within groups who had health problems, or that cared for a partner or relative. These experiences relate to the works of Haslam et al. (2019) or Becker et al. (2021) whose works both outline the multiple benefits group sharing can bring. Returning to Polly, from *S&R,* and her group of carers, she also provided an example of participants feeling supported to the extent they feel comfortable enough to share personal details and stories within the group:

> Polly: one lady…got upset as she starts to talk about husband with dementia, and he was the one that looked after them. So, for her, he was a different person. Now it's almost like she's going through the grieving process, because she's already lost him…. [she said] ‘I'm really sorry about this, I shouldn't be doing this’. And all the women went, ‘yes, you should’. This is what Share and Read is about. It's about sharing our experiences. And, and this is, you know, this is what the stories allowed you to do… it allowed you to say something that you can't always say to your family,
>
> Lee: Is there a lot of solidarity there?
>
> Polly: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely, really supportive. They get to know each other….The story [the texts used in the session] allows you to focus on something completely different….if you're a carer, …you know yourself during that time, you're not thinking about: ‘‘I’ve got that to do when they get back. He's got that appointment tomorrow’ …you just focus in on that one story…the conversation and you're being listened to. And you're talking about something other than your poorly parents or your partner...

Polly, in demonstrating an example of the solidarity experienced by the group of carers, highlighted part of their alienation: a feeling that you can speak freely and be listened to as an individual may be rare for a carer experiencing alienation. The caring shown by the group echoes solidarity being the ‘reciprocal sympathy’ and ‘mutual support’ that Wilde (2007) describes (p.171). Polly continues:

> Some of them say this made me read more. It's made me engage more [inside and outside of the group], it's provided the confidence that has enabled me to go and do other things. So, it is an enabling process. And carers have said about the partners, it’s so lovely to see them enjoying themselves, you know, because, but when you've got poorly partners or parents, you’re wheeling them around to different appointments, and they always look a bit grim.

The above excerpts demonstrate the potential informal learning groups can have in providing respite and support to vulnerable people who are cared for, and those that care for them, by providing a safe setting to share their thoughts, fears and feelings with people who, as Wilde (2007) describes, share similar contexts to them. Whilst groups can seemingly be a place of respite, solidarity and community, they also can provide the platform and impetus for a greater participation outside of the group, encouraging the participant to ‘read more’ and ‘engage more’ outside of the group. Examples of this, and the multiple benefits (health, mental health, increase in confidence, self-worth and others) can be found in the work of Becker et al. (2021), or Ehsan et al. (2019). Both papers explore the benefits of community participation and the outcomes it can have beyond it. Vince, who has worked with many different forms of informal learning groups for several years, explains the aims and the potential progression of his groups:

> …we're trying to see human beings in this whole thing. So, because you have a mental health problem, it doesn't define the hole in your life. So, we're hoping that in doing one course, that will form a local group of people in that church building where it's happening. And that group will then go on to say, ‘Well, we've done that together, we'd like to do this together’. And that is beginning to happen in sites that we've been working with. So, I think there's some interesting group formations learning together about specific things, like how to use a slow cooker to cook cheap, nutritious meals, and how to budget around that. And then [from there] going on to look at our mental health together, or how we're going to cope with the pressures of Christmas and buying presents whilst minimising the cost of debt.

In the following three excerpts, Vince, as Becker et al (2021) or Ehsan et al. (2019) also explore, continues to explain how this can have positive outcomes for groups and the positive changes it can have for the participants:

> You've got different sorts of learning happening…I think that's indicative of something real that's going on, you know, that no matter how hard the practical things might be, dealing with it on your own, or within your very tight circle of your own family, isn't healthy.

Vince then described the processes the participants journey through:

> …because when people start sharing some of the hurt, or pain or bad experiences, with people in a kind of slightly controlled, but basically loving and accepting atmosphere, that is a liberation in itself. And I think a lot of people, carry around a lot of damage, a lot of experiences. It's not necessarily that family members don't know but by creating a slightly separate [context] from one's family, in which a personal

> experience can be shared and articulated, it is in itself is a sort of a way of processing something.

Vince continues by explaining dialogue helps people move on and gain new perspectives on their pain:

> I think it helps people to learn from the experience, and it helps you get a new perspective on it, and maybe even get a bit of distance from it to reflect on whether you've recovered at all from it. Although I think, just the experience of articulating some of the experiences of life that a lot of people in the shit go through. Yeah, cos I don't think people get a lot of those opportunities.

What Vince describes here is akin to Freirean (1970) or Girouxian (2020) critical pedagogy, as they address real word problems through listening, dialogue and action. Vince's view corroborates with Polly's and Dawn's - the act of being able to share feelings, listen and be part of a group, outside of the pressures of a family setting, can be uplifting and even a 'liberation'. It can also perhaps allow for, as Vince suggests, a chance to reflect upon life and its meaning. Essentially, this opportunity to be part of a group and to talk to other people can have therapeutic and holistic benefits for the participants who attend:

> …the possibility of meeting your neighbours and talking to them and all the rest of it. And, you know, it sounds so basic, but I think a lot of people were liberated by those experiences.

This sharing, between people on a human level, builds solidarity that is an emotional act as Boltanski (2010) describes. It also could be seen in a Freirean sense, not just as an anthesis to neoliberal brutality (Lynch, 2020), but in the beginnings of trust in one another, 'the dialogue' and the sharing of their hurt and wounds, the de-codification of their situations, and the community in the group that may arise from it (Freire, 1970). Vince further discusses the isolation felt by several of his group participants:

> One of the things that all public health professionals and even the government is interested in, is isolation and loneliness. You know, it's one of the big things we've got to do something about…our understanding about how people cope with their own mental health issues. You know, it's all so much worse when you're isolated and lonely…if we just put people in touch with each other and make more friends. Well, it means that we don't have to spend as much money on the National Health Service. Well, that may be true, but it's also a good thing to do.

Interestingly, above Vince considers neoliberalism's response to the problems it created. On one hand, neoliberalism is one of the root causes of social isolation and loneliness with its 'competitive self-interest and extreme individualism' (Monbiot, 2016) permeating throughout all aspects of society, from the labour market to education, to body image and social media as neoliberalism pervades our lives (Scharff, 2015; Monbiot, 2016). This erosion of solidarity, by setting people in competition against each other (Becker et al., 2021), devastates community life (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and creates barriers to the fundamental human need to socially connect with others (Martino et al., 2015). But on the other hand, neoliberal logic sees funding or 'encouraging' informal learning groups as a cheaper option than funding NHS treatment, which makes it economically viable. This means that neoliberalism creates groups aiming to tackle social isolation, by creating the social isolation in the first place. Zeira (2022) and Calderón-Larrañaga et al. (2022) highlight this paradox's success - this funding can present a human face of neoliberalism in a similar vein to the sports and greenwashing highlighted by van den Berg (2016) and Boykoff (2022). The success, or partial success, of funding groups to tackling social isolation echo other facilitators' views, such as Polly's (*S&R* facilitator) earlier statement about social prescribing in Chapter Six that the group is 'cheaper than a bag of pills'. A recent study in Redbridge unsurprisingly corroborated Polly's view, finding social prescribing led to significant positive changes in the well-being of patients (Berlotti et al., 2022). In terms of education, this point was underlined by Hughes and Adriaanse (2017) as they drew the explicit links between a visible and fully functioning adult education sector and the saving of money through alleviating pressure on health services. In a similar vein to *S&R*, the groups Vince works with also take place in the areas where it is most needed and is most accessible for people to attend. In this case, in working-class communities that have seen local services cut, including adult education services:

> …most of the church congregations…might be a dozen to 20 people. But church buildings are still located in communities where most services have become absent, and there's quite a lot of victims [from austerity]. So, the Church of England clergy actually live in those communities as well and they're the last professionals to do so. So, we use those churches and the activities that go on around us kind of like hubs and we offer… slow cookery, emotional literacy, basic mental health issues, how to make Christmas decorations cheaply. So basically, there's a kind of a smorgasbord of offers.

The notion of the informal learning groups being a community of solidarity is also echoed by many of the participants of informal learning groups who contributed to this study. Joan, who at the time of her participation in this research, was a participant at S&R groups but had begun the process of becoming a volunteer facilitator with *S&R.* She also continued to attend multiple informal learning groups across the area as a participant:

> We [Joan and her husband] moved to Sanford in May 2018. We had no connections whatsoever with it…So my existence in Sanford has been a process of getting used to England…. And dealing with basically problems, isolation, meeting people, doing things, you know, to meet people. I heard about Share and Read, and it sounded interesting…I [first] did it in November, last year and I loved it. And…what I've been doing is basically dealing with my fears about the situation. So, I mean, as far as my motivation is concerned that basically, what brought me here.

Joan, who recently moved to the area from another European country explains her difficulties in adapting culturally to her new life, but also in the problems she observes within society and how that affects her mental well-being. She begins by explaining her problems with integrating into present day life (pre Covid-19):

> …it's just been really difficult...even just taking the bus, which I do practically every day…and just seeing how people live… I've had my own problems relating to the NHS, because you just can't imagine how difficult it is when you come from a totally different system and different culture. I mean, it's not that big systems are any better off in Europe. It's not that, but it's just how to deal with system…I've just taken the totally wrong paths about certain issues that I have ended up totally the wrong place. I think I'm educated, intelligent, I'm aware. I can't get it right. So, what about people who are not particularly educated, and have several small children. Or maybe single parents or have got disabled members of the family. I just think oh my God, you know, it's just horrendous. It's just horrendous.

Whilst Joan demonstrates her own fears, alienation and frustration, she also demonstrates an empathy with those who are also vulnerable in the same system as her, those who the neoliberal system effects the harshest, such as those who have a family and children to look after. This prospect seems to cause her more trauma:

> So obviously, I'm seeing a lot more because I'm living in a town… I don't have children. I don't have family - don't have relations. I mean, you know, we are alone here. And I am so terrified about, you know, what's going to happen. I feel so isolated and I feel really terrified… people who are suffering the consequences of all the social, what's the word, dislocations? And yeah, I think dislocations is quite a good word. You know, I just see everything, you know, like, organisations, big bureaucracies and things...and this is something that I've had try come to grips with.

In the above excerpt, which is reminiscent of descriptions of the Weberian Iron Cage[21] (Baehr, 2001), where the individual can find themselves trapped in systems built for efficiency. This is particularly apt for Joan in her sense of entrapment in various impenetrable modern-day bureaucracies which play a major role in her alienation and echo the socially induced psychological alienation found in capitalist societies that Kalekin-Fishman and Langman (2015) and Øversveen (2022) describe and explore. An example of this alienation is found in Joan's experiences with technology as much of life (including booking appointments) is moved online:

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[21] the iron cage is a metaphor for how people are trapped in socioeconomic systems (Baehr, 2001)

> What is really new for me and difficult for me is that everything is on internet, is by computer. You know, and that that's absolutely not the case where I moved from. Yes. Some social centres in the country is starting to close…but whether it's taxes or medical service, it's …still very human…It's very face to face and that's what I'm used to. I'm not very good on the computer. So, I have a lot of problems. I still haven't come to grips with the appointment system.

Ledwith (2020) explains through developing critical consciousness individuals should understand how power operates within their own contexts. Above, Joan, despite displaying clear feelings of powerlessness, still has the agency to analyse and identify her own alienation and an awareness of the structures causing it. Similarly, Ledwith, in her seven steps towards radical community development, argues for the need for individuals to make critical connections, and above Joan is making connections between society's structures, structural barriers and her own context. Joan also explains the benefits of attending different informal learning groups, and the respite they provide in her isolation and desperation, and perhaps, the opportunity for community and solidarity she does not have in her family life.

> [but] I'm really proactive about going out and getting involved in things and meeting people, and things like that. And it's like, thinking about the poem that we were getting to read…which is 'fighting the tide'. And that's, that's what I'm sort of doing. So I just like the idea of stories, telling stories and hearing stories, meeting people and things like that.

Above, Joan is taking action as Freire suggests, albeit to initially help herself (1970) but also to contribute to the collective. Here Joan demonstrates solace and comfort within the shared reading and discussion of the group:

> …[it's] allowed me to be in touch with meet various interesting people do activities together, things like that…. I've learned things and done things that I would never have thought of doing before. And one of the first things that we joined was a singing group. It's funny, because I've never done any singing before. And I was just attracted by the fact that, you know, there's no judgement, there's no audition. I think it's just singing for fun….And so that's, you know, turned out to be really, really nice, so I get out and about quite a lot.

This feeling of community and solidarity, a human place where there will be ‘no judgement’ and a place of care and sympathy (Wilde, 2007) can be contrasted with Joan’s articulation of ‘dislocation’, ‘isolation’ and the perceived unsafe and unjust space of the world around her. She says they will be no judgement, no audition which is in stark contrast to the competitive neoliberal world she lives in, where those who fail within this system, the victims, are judged and blamed as Harvey, (2005) argues. Harvey addresses this judgment and blame within neoliberal socioeconomic systems, where funding cuts reduce services and safety nets to the minimum and when people on the margins inevitably slip through it, it is perceived as their own fault as neoliberalism, and its mantra of the individual, has redrawn responsibility for wellbeing as one of the individual’s responsibility. Bourdieu (1998) supports Harvey’s point and explains the mantra of individualism of neoliberalism not only helps mask its role in creating and exacerbating societal problems but also to ‘blame the victim’ as they are responsible for their own wellbeing (p.7).

Discussions with facilitators and participants highlighted individual illustrations of neoliberalism’s systems and structures, such as Joan’s experiences (Gamble, 2009; Cepiku, et al., 2016; Kim and Warner, 2016; Davies 2017; Jimenez, 2019; Kochi, 2023). Joan above however demonstrates resistance in the face of neoliberalism as she attends informal learning groups and finds solidarity (Sangiovanni, 2015). She also resists blaming herself and rejects the neoliberal tendency to victim blame as Harvey (2005) and Bourdieu (2000) describe. Joan also demonstrates the awareness to understand the structures that are alienating and overwhelming her. Tom, whose groups target social isolation, explains that social isolation is also prevalent amongst the more affluent retired middle-class participants who also attend his groups. Tom provided details that a minority of the groups were mixed between working-class and middle-class participants, with both groups being socially isolated but often for different reasons. Tom notes the perhaps obvious material differences between the working-class and middle-class participants (identifiers such as clothing and equipment) and their cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984). Prieur and Savage (2013) explain that Bourdieu’s cultural capital is key to understanding social groups’ ‘…lifestyles, tastes, cultural competences and participation, as well as of their attitudes in cultural, moral and political affairs’ (p.248). Tom acknowledges the differences, but he also draws parallels between participants of both classes who face age-related marginalisation (Babudu, et al., 2016):

> There’s a surprising amount of similarities, actually. So, whenever I'm working with a group, so, a group of 10 or 12, adults, there's almost always a couple of them, that have too much of a need to talk to you, that almost want you to become friends with

> them, and they'll start bringing in (it's lovely) things they've made at home to give you, or they'll want to keep talking with you after the session is finished. Or sort of become like the star pupil within the group and like earn your favour and approval in a way. That's equally the case when the more deprived, less educated, people come to some of the sessions and with the more affluent people. So, that's interesting. I think that must be a symptom, you know, lack of company, a lack of interaction in public spheres maybe.

ONS data shows that widowed homeowners are prone to social isolation (2018) as Tom adds:

> …a lot of them are much more affluent, retired middle class live in [lists affluent areas in Sanford region]…and it's not a lack of money or opportunity, but maybe just because their friends have moved out of the area. And remember, they're retired and don't see their workmates socially anymore. And they're just looking for opportunities to get involved and contribute to the community in a similar way, but for different reasons.

Tom explained his groups would form in local communities and people typically attracted to the project would join, but would often would not consider that the project was aimed at helping them:

> They were really keen to help the neighbours really keen to come along and support the project. I think that in the majority cases, they'd see themselves as being really altruistic and benefiting a community activity, which they were, genuinely definitely were, but probably didn't realise that they were also receiving quite a lot of support and help in some ways. And probably didn't realise that one of the primary reasons that the group was running in the first place was to support them, I think a lot of cases there might be felt contributed.

Tom was also clear that this 'unawareness of their situation' was within every participant:

> …a couple of them definitely used to thank me… 'before you came along I was sat at home all day'.

However, as explored in Chapters Three and Four, participants being 'unaware of their oppression' can be nuanced and perhaps in this situation, as Freire (1970) explains, the participants that Tom references perhaps possess 'a perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression' (Freire, 1970:45). This means their own perception of reality is distorted through oppressive structures that are normalised in a neoliberal society. (Winston, 2018). Tom said:

> And they're really, 'you know, so glad this project's here'. And I kind of think so there's an appreciation of what they were getting out of it. But I think, probably not an appreciation of how vulnerable they were or how isolated they were.

This first section of this chapter examined facilitators' perceptions of the role informal learning groups played in the participants' lives and well-being. In doing so, these accounts also highlight the cases of respite and solidarity many have experienced in attending and participating in groups in areas and communities beset by austerity.

Theme 4: Broken system' and the decline of adult and community learning

Informal learning whose definitions and margins are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, comprises of attributes from a broad spectrum of direct and indirect, planned and unplanned, learning events, incidents, conversations and interactions (Hagar and Holiday, 2006; Ziegler et al., 2014). However, as Van Noy et al. (2016) caution, access to informal learning group opportunities is not always possible due to their often lack of publicity or localisation. Facilitators who participated in the study were passionate regarding the multiple benefits of informal learning groups, as previously outlined, stressing how important they could be to individuals, families and communities at a time when vital services and support had been reduced (Hastings et al., 2015). Additionally, when both formal and non-formal learning are increasingly driven by neo-liberal values of instrumentalism, both do not meet the needs of the most disadvantaged in a diverse society (Holford, 2016; Reay, 2017). In conversation with the facilitators, a common view became apparent: education, both formal and non-formal, was not fit for practice. Moreover, non-formal education was becoming noticeably scarcer in their local area (compared to the years prior to austerity). For example, Peter, from *S&R* captures the lament of many of the facilitators:

> But the fact that in so many places, whatever the politicians, local or otherwise will tell us, in so many places, adult education has virtually disappeared. I was an adult educational lecturer across turn of the millennium. And there was half a dozen adult education centres across the area. Is there two now?

In addition to the closing of adult centres, the facilitators expressed concern for the shape of formal education. Lucy, who works with the *S&R* team, is a qualified secondary school teacher but left the profession due to her dissatisfaction with the educational system:

> …one of the reasons I left teaching was because the education system is broken…I just think that the emphasis is on results, it's on all the wrong things. And I went into

> teaching to make a difference in children's lives. And I think that that isn't important anymore. I think as long as they have all these facts in their heads, and they leave the school with the right numbers against their name, then that's all the schools or the education system cares about.

Lucy’s comments above are reminiscent of Ball (2003, 2012), Reay (2017) and Clarke et al. (2021) who similarly describe a broken system of high stakes testing (Reay, 2017) and performativity (Ball, 2003; Clarke et al., 2021). Ball’s performativity means that the teacher is compelled to commit their focuses on tasks, such as paperwork and targets. She adds:

> When I was a teacher, one of the things that I tried to do was to make people a little bit better at kind of taking in information and actually understanding it, which is a really hard job, when you're fighting against society and their family’s [views].

As Lucy explains she wanted to help children be ‘better at taking information in’ – this is at the heart of the problem Reay (2017) describes. If schools do not instil or develop a child’s skills to critically evaluate what they see, read and hear, it potentially leaves them vulnerable to manipulation. I asked Lucy if she felt that *S&R* could fill part of the reduced provision left by funding cuts to non-formal education provision, she responded:

> We’re not supposed to be trying to claim that we are educating people. I mean, we find it very difficult to say that we're doing anything in terms of how to actually gauge what impact we're having. And I think it's not really education, because you're not trying to get to a point…we're not going in with the aim of what we want to do.

Lucy, a qualified teacher, either does not recognise what *S&R* does is education, or perhaps, she merely rejects the contentious and loaded label of ‘education’ being attached to *S&R*, she explains*:*

> I remember when Rachel [S&R facilitator] was setting up one of the workshops for children in a school. And they [the school] want to, at the end of every session, some kind of wrap up to see what had been achieved. When you're a teacher you show progress. But that changes what we do. If you do that, at the end of the session, you're making it about progress, and it shouldn't really be like that. It's a bit more natural. And obviously, if people feel better, that's great. If people think better, that's great, but I don't think it can be seen as education.

Performativity includes the regular measuring of progress and performance (Ball, 2003; Clarke et al., 2021), and how Lucy states above: the teacher ‘needs to show progress’. Perhaps, in this case, as Lucy is a qualified teacher, she perceives education accordingly with how she was trained: a necessity to have clear and tangible learning aims both valid and reliable in terms of making and measuring progress. It is also possible that she perceives education, in the way she described why she left the profession, as being tainted by this ‘performativity’ and therefore possesses a desire to not have such a culture at *S&R*. In a later discussion, Lucy returned to this topic:

> It couldn't be part of [S&R] to educate. And you can't really have the conversation part if you're not having the education part, for people who are trying to do ESOL. So, someone somewhere was gonna have to teach them English and that couldn’t be S&R.

Lucy directly ties the concept of education to the learning of the measurable (for instance, in this case, the learning of English), and explains that could not directly happen within their groups (as they are centred around discussing a text, not language learning). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, other forms of learning are evidenced in *S&R* groups, such as group discussion leading to the changing of social attitudes. In looking at concepts of education or learning for example, the discussion between facilitators provides clarity on how the facilitators at *S&R* perceive the difference. Sarah, who manages the project, begins by stating:

> …sometimes we will deliberately place things where we know it will challenge preconceived ideas. And so, it's not teaching. It's challenging and opening up discussion.

Sarah’s ‘challenging and opening up discussion’ is the dialogue of critical pedagogy as described by Freire (1970). The exchange at the focus group below extends the conversations:

> Dawn: Some groups thrive on that challenge.
>
> Lee: How do they react to that?
>
> Sarah: The conversations are really quite in-depth. That one particularly where the brother of the sisters really had decided they would really like this dress for Christmas [a text used by *S&R]*….Placing that in front of people. It does confront them to think how would I manage?
>
> Lucy: But it's not necessarily about picking stories that teach someone to change their opinion, which is wrong, it’s about them thinking about their own opinion and hearing someone else’s opinion.
>
> Sarah: Yeah. And then maybe linking that, if they hear a story in the news or if somebody else is talking about something from their own lives. The effect the subtle

> effect that that might have on how they then receive that, that story, because if they've considered it in their own minds already, they might then consume that media or the discussions of the people in a different way.

Above the *S&R* facilitators discuss using texts that provoke and challenge previously held assumptions, albeit, as Sarah said, in a subtle way. Also, as Lucy explains, they are not trying to dictate opinion in people but are facilitating the forming of their own opinion. This has transformative potential, and if transformation occurs, learning must be taking place. This pedagogical approach may change how participants ‘consume media or discussions’ which, in turn, could have a marked way in how they live and see the world. It could be argued this demonstrates that critical literacy education is taking place even if it is through an indirect means. For example, Birner (2015) describes a similar use of stories as a tool to develop critical literacy skills, which like S&R, chose provocative stories with embedded social justice issues in an accessible picture-book format.

Potentially, the position of the *S&R* facilitators is a semantic and a psychological one. They define education as a particular pedagogical form, perhaps their experiences in neoliberal education means they see education as a formalised setting, where there is a deliberate and defined pathway from point a to point b. As Ball argues that neoliberalism and the emphasis on performativity has changed the entire culture of education (2016) it could be argued S&R facilitators perceive education as inextricable from performativity and structures of neoliberal education. Paula, of *S&R,* explains her opinion:

> …it's very different from an educational setting, where you want to see that the people are performing. It is very much about choice, and about not putting people on the spot. So, you may have people in the group who don't speak at all, but are listening but not active, you know, not actively taking part in the discussions and things and that's fine. It's so it's very different from trying to prompt something from everybody involved.

Paula formerly worked in adult education and within that environment, a tutor’s performance would be measured in part by how they keep every learner engaged (Ofsted, 2019). However, her first sentence is revealing: ‘it’s very different from an educational setting’ which suggests that she does not perceive this as such a setting. As a fundamental tenet of her previous role in adult education was to ensure all were engaged, the issue that participants are not always engaged or active in informal leaning groups, lends weight to the contention it is not education as fundamental expectations of the learners (participants) are different. I asked Paula whether she felt that informal learning groups like those at *S&R* could fill the gaps left by adult education’s reduced provision, she said:

> Yes, I do. I think that it's definitely got a different focus. And definitely its reason for being is completely different from that, because it's about more about mental and emotional well-being than it is about ‘literacy’. But if it's about helping people to socialise, to be confident to try and alleviate some loneliness and isolation, then it does all of those things which adult education used to.

The focus of the informal learning groups here is important. To reduce loneliness and isolation for example, rather than helping an adult improve their spelling proficiency or pass an exam, which is very different from the primary aims of adult education provision. But within that, what is not stated, is the methods employed by *S&R* which use texts that sometime challenge and transform people’s world views. The topic continues with volunteer facilitators Peter, Dawn and Joan:

> Peter: …the point I'm making is adult education is disappearing. And projects like [S&R] are sliding into the gaps, but they're not education and they were never meant to be educational. This is not about education or literacy. This is about stories. This is about sharing stuff with people rather than anything else.
>
> Dawn: We don’t want this selling as education. It’s conversation. Personal connection.
>
> Joan: It’s promotion of the community.

Joan, preparing to be a volunteer facilitator at *S&R* and is a member of other informal learning groups states that she sees the project as a ‘promotion of community’, which relates to her already described needs and reasons for attending such groups, as her experiences there have helped with her feelings of ‘dislocation’ – and to be part of a community. It could be argued the other facilitators (staff and volunteer) perceive *S&R* with a level of unconscious fear towards classifying their practice as education. As already referenced, education can have negative connotations: pressure, judgement, performing and performance, success or failure and often having to do what you may not want to do. Therefore, as they are unexposed to forms of participatory pedagogies for example, forms of education that deviate from this ‘norm’ are not thus perceived as education. Dawn states that she does not want this ‘selling’ as education - as she perceives labelling S&R as education may be a barrier, or lead group participants to have greater expectations from attending. For example, in an observation of the Book Club informal learning groups, one of the participants was clear that ‘this was not education’ and that she came here ‘because there was no pressure’. Which may suggest she perceives education and attending educational groups as, somewhat understandably, being a place of judgement and pressure.

As the facilitators have been through the education system themselves and in several cases, also worked within education, it could be argued they, consciously or unconsciously have been indelibly marked by education's symbolic violence, which as described earlier is not related to physical but symbolic 'violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2002: 167) and limits (Hughes, 2020). Emma, who is involved with a variety of different projects that include informal learning and groups, explains her view of the state educational system:

> The education system what it's actually about it ain't about educating us as whole human beings is it?

In view of how she perceives the education system, Emma builds upon notions expressed by other facilitators that the system is broken. Emma goes further and questions its real purpose as she explains how it systematically 'reproduces inequality' and creates 'passive recipients', echoing the work of Illich (1971) where children are taught to accept services instead of value, meaning they are essentially taught to accept uncritically. In contrast to this, Emma explains her resistance to such systemic violence, the violence sustained, reproduced and facilitated by neo-liberal bodies and structures (Zizek, 2008) when she talks about the reciprocal service exchange group that she coordinates. Emma regards this as a 'little bit of the sun' in dark times, as she passionately discusses how it can help individuals who attend and participate, and rebuild the communities devastated:

> …because it's one of the vehicles that we have to actually connect with each other in a way that is not challenging…It's a vehicle of equality, reciprocity, relational network building and trust building. So, it asked different question, it asks about what you love doing what you're, you know, things, it unlocks things, you know, particularly people who've not been in work, how many opportunities to be not in work, have to do different courses and learn different skills, but then never have an opportunity to use that.

Emma's 'reciprocity, relational network building and trust building' echoes Ledwith's (2016) values for community development. Ledwith explains values such as trust and respect are fostered from mutuality. The solidarity and respite discussed earlier in this chapter also can go hand-in-hand with groups being a substitute for adult and community learning. The connections made in groups, offer respite and a positive learning environment where individuals can grow as part of a group and was reminiscent of community learning of the past (Bowl, 2017). Emma states her informal learning group are based on 'solidarity not charity' with participants coming from 'all backgrounds'. Emma provided examples of participants who had attended groups she was part of, that would be considered to be, by any measure, success stories. In terms of informal learning groups potentially replacing the gaps left by a declining non-formal provision, Emma provided an example of the story of a refugee from Africa whom she worked alongside and supported, who is now studying at a Russell Group university. Whilst this is undoubtedly an impressive story of success, the message Emma conveyed was one of him being part of the solidarity of a welcoming community. How he and others in the group made it a place of togetherness. Here, Emma describes a group event at a local farm when one of the participants, a refugee from the African continent, shared a tradition from his culture:

> …he said to me, this is ‘the day of the fires’ … he was here and so we had a fire. And what a beautiful thing it was for him. He was telling everyone about that tradition and what they did jumping over the fire, everyone was doing that with him. That's about relationships and friendships… being able to step out of the isolated boxes that we’re being put into.

As Paula of S&R said about the informal learning groups she is involved in: ‘does all of those things which adult education used to’.

Chapter summary and conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings relating to groups being places of resistance to neoliberalism. Examples of respite and solidarity, at a time communities like Sanford were bereft of other similar welcoming spaces, were found in these groups with many benefits for the participants. Theme 4 approached the place of informal learning in the face of a broken educational system which raised the contested question of whether informal learning groups replace adult education. Many facilitators, perhaps concerned of the baggage and practices of ‘education’ were steadfast in not considering their informal learning group activity to be education. The next chapter is the discussion chapter. This will explore the main theme in greater detail and present the research’s conceptual models – the Participants as Texts model (PAT) and the Participants as texts Conceptual Model (PCM).

Chapter Eight –'Traversing the sea of liminality': a discussion of the main research question.

Introduction

This chapter returns to address the main research question: how might informal learning group facilitators' critical consciousness develop through interactions with group participants? To briefly recap: informal learning group facilitators reported their own critical consciousness had inadvertently developed through their interactions with the group participants. The facilitators gave examples of how changes had manifested within themselves and within their practice. Therefore, this discussion chapter will explore the main research question and the central theme of the thesis as reported in Chapter Six. Following this introduction, the chapter continues by deconstructing the initial point of this process: the reading of the participants as texts (PAT). The chapter discusses how the concepts of PAT, including the participants as texts conceptual model (PCM), differ from typical learning exchanges, other reflective models and interactions between facilitator and informal learning group participants. The chapter also explains how the PCM (the process ignited by the initial reading of PAT) explicates the stages and dynamics of the facilitators' critical consciousness development.

Gaps in the literature this chapter contributes to

There are gaps in the current literature concerning the relationship between informal learning settings and critical literacy education as explored in this study. Although, since Freire (1970), and particularly in the last decade, attempts have been made to capture critical consciousness development to measure the changes within the individual (Watts et al., 2011; Baker and Brookins, 2014; Diemer et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2016; McWhirter and McWhirter, 2016; Diemer, 2017) – see Chapter Three. Whereas this study is not claiming to position any of the facilitators precisely within a scale of critical consciousness development, the study has developed its own conceptual threshold themed model of the learning process to highlight the workings of the critical consciousness development stages of the facilitator from the reading of the participant as a text. This model, the PCM, is influenced by threshold theory concepts with particular inspiration from the Threshold Concept Framework (Meyer and Land, 2005). Based on the journeys as detailed by the facilitators, the PCM is used to discuss the progression of a sample of the facilitators who, in our discussions, described their critical consciousness development. Thus, their learning journey is deconstructed stage by stage within this model.

This discussion also forms a substantial part of the contribution to knowledge the thesis offers the fields of critical literacy education and critical consciousness development. The theory of critical consciousness developing in this inadvertent and dynamic manner also offers insights into the wider context of critical consciousness raising in different settings and situations.

Participants as Texts (PAT)

The reading of PAT is integral to a change in critical consciousness of facilitators but is unreported. Rather, literature conceives processes of critical consciousness development as a framework based or rooted in traditional texts such as books, films, newspapers, speeches, computer games and so on (Kress and van Leeuwun, 2001; Kress, 2003; Roswell and Pahl, 2015). Whereas, within PAT, the text is not a conventional text, it is the implicit reading of a person. I also argue that this is a ‘reading’ of the participant in the initial part of this process, rather than a reflection afterwards. Reflection, which occurs after the initial reading in the Participants as texts conceptual model (PCM), is a deliberate and conscious professional or personal practice in other reflective models (Loughran, 2002), such as Schon (1991), Tripp (1993) or Gibbs (1998). However, in the PAT, the participant is read unconsciously - as reading is an unconscious or conscious undertaking (Mikulecky, 2008) and is then reflected upon – in a later process- as described in the PCM within this chapter.

The process of reading PAT

Reading PAT catalysed the start of a progression of the facilitators’ own current threshold of critical consciousness. In the case of the facilitators of this study this cannot be precise, but from their descriptions and contributions, it becomes possible to envisage the journey through the thresholds of critical consciousness development through the changes they describe.

The unplanned and inadvertent nature of reading PAT, exposing previously hidden realities combined with the human life of the text, makes PAT potentially a more explosive and powerful text for critical consciousness raising as this is real life communicating albeit unplanned and unintentionally, as opposed to a crafted educational resource or a cultural or social artefact.

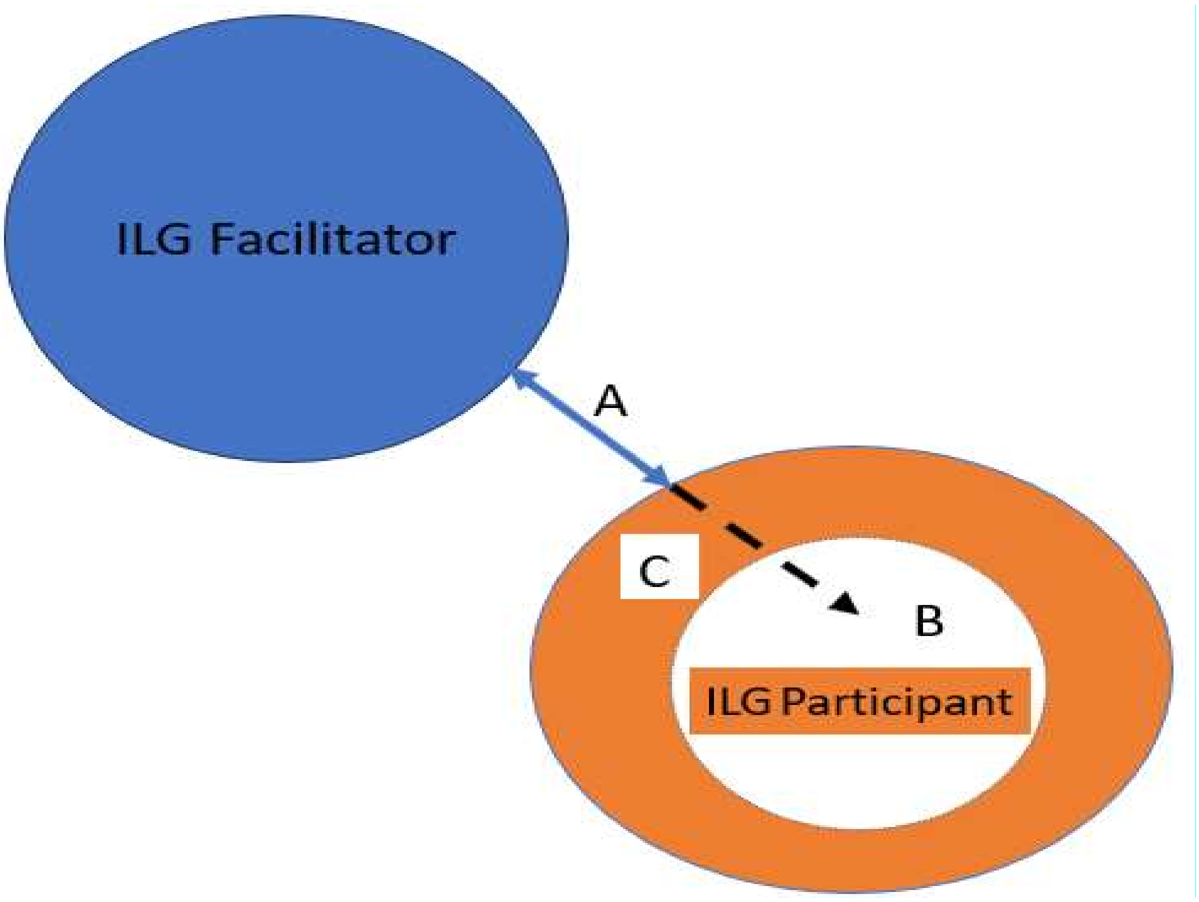

Figure 21 - demonstrates this process of the informal learning group (ILG) facilitator's initial reading the ILG participant as text (PAT)

Figure 21 demonstrates the process involved in the initial reading of PAT for informal learning group (ILG) facilitators. Here 'A' represents the typical learning process that occurs in informal learning groups, between facilitators and participants. This can be a two-way process (as the arrow back and forth suggests) as one learns from the other within the groups which is a learning exchange similar to the of Freire's (1970) teacher/student; student/teacher. 'B' is the inner 'text' within the participant. This is the part which is read by the facilitator that causes the shock and disruption within the facilitator's consciousness. This is the participant's structural and internalised oppression as a 'text' like the typical texts used in critical literacy, which potentially begins the process of raising the informal learning groups facilitators' critical consciousness. 'C' is the one-way dotted arrow line that represents the breaking through the surface into 'reading' the participant as a text. The line is dotted to represent inconsistencies in ‘reading’ the participant, and any gaps, such as if the reading took place over a period of time - as may also happen with traditional text reading. The dotted arrow line demonstrates the potential continuation of the group facilitator’s learning, but with a one-way arrow (not mutual at this stage). This is the inadvertent and unconscious, ‘reading’ of the participant.

How concepts of PAT differ from reflective models

The PAT concept developed here fundamentally differs from other reflective models as it does not offer a model that can be followed to enhance learning and development, unlike Schon (1991), Tripp 1993) or Gibbs (1988) for example. Instead, the PAT concept offers an opportunity to understand the unconscious reading of participants which triggers the inadvertent process of critical consciousness development observed within informal learning group facilitators.

The PAT concept is therefore better described as an explanatory framework. For example, part of the process triggered by PAT (demonstrated in the PCM) bears similarity to critical incident analysis (Tripp, 1993): where the teacher critically reflects upon an unforeseen issue or event, one that is ‘…vividly remembered’ (Brookfield, 1990:84) or a ‘…event or situation which is marked a significant turning-point or change in the life of a person or an institution’ (Tripp, 1993:24). The teacher, in analysing the incident, searches for the deeper meanings behind it looking to learn, and improve practice, from this point (Mohammed, 2016). The differences between Tripp’s model and the PAT concept are the reflection used in critical incidents is a self-directed inward process using questions to draw out reflections upon the critical incident, whereas PAT is an incidental process whose reading begins the process of raising an outward awareness of injustices and inequalities of the world found in the lives of others.

Other reflective models, like Tripp (1993), Schon (1991) or Gibbs (1988) also rely upon internalised interpretations of reality where the individual remains in control of the situation (Convery, 1998) They are cognitivist, consciously directed, seeking solutions and progressions from within (Tan, 2020) and typically lack reflexivity (Finlay, 2008). The PAT concept is different. Counter to the individualism of other reflective models, the PAT concept describes an initially unconscious undertaking starting a process of revealing new realities to the individual through reflection, but also re-checking, re-learning, reflexivity, praxis and action.

Threshold concepts: the critical consciousness development of the informal learning group facilitator

As Meyer and Land’s (2005) Threshold Concept Framework (TCF) was developed to provide a means of interpreting and understanding the journey between thresholds of the learning process in various disciplines in formalised areas of learning (Taylor, 2006; Timmermans and Meyer, 2017), it has been underexplored in a UK-based informal-learning context. Importantly, the TCF has been successfully adapted to help understand the inner processes of the learning journey in other disciplines (Taylor, 2006; Bleakley, and Cleland, 2015), and to suit other learning contexts including analysing co-construction processes (Rodger, et al., 2017) which is pertinent to the emancipatory themes of this study.

Meyer and Land’s (2005) revised built upon the understanding of the characteristics of a learning journey through adding concepts of ‘troublesome knowledge’ (Perkins, 1999) creating a deeper understanding of the learning process (Tucker, 2014) and one that has a greater resonance with the troubled and complex journey of critical consciousness development. The revised TCF thus consists of eight characteristics: transformative, troublesome, discursive, reconstitutive, liminality, irreversible, integrative and bounded and these are seen as the gateways to pass through in the course of completing a learning journey (Davies and Mangam, 2005). But with the key caveat that it is not typical to experience all of them within the TCF (Flanagan, 2014). In between each of these gateways, as the individual journeys amidst them, is the transformative liminal state (Bain, 2003; Schwartzman, 2010).

The critical consciousness development in this study is not measured by a precise scale, such as those developed in the works by Shin et al. (2014), Diemer (2014) or Thomas et al. (2014). However, adapting threshold theory concepts for use in this study provided a tested framework that could offer insights into the informal learning groups facilitators’ experiences in the process of their critical consciousness development.

How the concept of PAT differs from other threshold concepts

The development of critical consciousness is a different process to the typical learning of a skill or knowledge. It is one of continual and critical reflection ultimately leading to action, and this iterative process drives the process incrementally and potentially never ends (Jemal, 2017). Furthermore, as Meyer and Land (2005) explain, each characteristic of a learning journey does not necessarily need to be experienced to learn, however, within critical consciousness development, it is imperative that certain thresholds are met – such as phases of critical reflection or praxis for example.

Therefore, this journey differs from other transformational passages, such as in the TCF (2005), or those as described by Turner (1969) where the subject consciously enters into them, and has expectancy of what is to come. The rite of passage, discussed in Chapter Two, of the Ndembu male adolescents in Zimbabwe was entered into consciously by the participants and this, despite the anti-structural degrees of dislocation, flux and uncertainty they faced (Horvath et al., 2009), it was still a part of their expected social and cultural practices (Turner, 1969). They were aware that at a certain age in their life, they would enter this experience and would, in a way, leave the process transformed. In the TCF, the subjects are typically learners entering into educational arenas of some form, and regardless of their ultimate motivation or ability, would be likely to have expectation of embarking upon a process of change. However, a significant difference with the learning experience catalysed by the reading of PAT is that facilitators have no prior expectation of entering into a critical consciousness learning experience in this way.

Therefore, understanding the characteristics and the threshold concepts of the TCF was useful to examining the process conceptually as it provided the basis to analyse a dynamic learning process that had been tested, and used in many different fields (Taylor, 2006; Bleakley and Cleland, 2015; Barraddell and Pesseta, 2017; Timmermans and Meyer, 2017; Davies, 2018). Furthermore, as the TCF is consciously aware of, and to some extent, had absorbed works in transformational learning that had gone before (Land, 2018). It provided steps and junctions to examine the experience of the implicit and sporadic PAT learning the informal learning group facilitator has been exposed to.

Realising new frameworks, from the TCF to the origins of the PCM

Adapting the TCF to create early versions of the Participants as texts Conceptual Model (PCM) provided a focus tailored towards the informal learning group facilitators' critical consciousness development. It was especially important to refocus the characteristics of TCF, not only upon the thresholds and characteristics of learning applicable to critical literacy education, but also importantly on the transformative liminal space existing in between (Boyce-Tillman, 2009; Land et al., 2014), and particularly addressing the transformative qualities of critical consciousness development. This space can be crucial in understanding and interpreting critical literacy education's influence upon group facilitators and their emerging consciousness. In this liminal space, an individual's perspectives and past-understanding, can shift, change or reformulate (Land et al., 2014; Horvath et al., 2018) as reported by the group facilitators, who have relayed experiences of occurring and is powerful evidence. The TCF's influence on the PCM adds clarity to learning's dynamic but messy nature, wherein a learner 'may oscillate between old and emergent understandings' (Cousin, 2006: 4). This is particularly useful as the reading of PAT is not explicit, and is not typical critical literacy education, as it manifests incidentally. The incidental reading is through dialogue, or group activities/interactions, and disrupts the informal learning groups facilitators' world view starting the PCM process. The liminal phases in between thresholds of learning in the PCM, where both transformation and resistance may occur, may differ with the learning experiences and dynamic processes the TCF usually encounters. Therefore, the learning thresholds of critical consciousness development of informal learning groups facilitators may operate differently to those learning journeys taken in more structured or formalised learning settings other TCF advocates have practiced or conceptualised. It is also possible further work may be required on the liminal space of the PCM in the form of conceptual recalibration as the increments or thresholds may need to be reconsidered or re-evaluated to best suit informal and incidental learning spaces. However, this will further be addressed in Chapter Nine which explores these issues and considers possibilities of revising the PCM to create more bespoke thresholds and characteristics, as other fields have done with the TCF (Cartensen and Bernhard, 2008; Foley, 2011; Springfield, et al., 2017).

The PCM was initially developed using a similar framework of characteristics contained within the TCF, but with new thresholds and characteristics based on my interpretations of the journey of the participants. In the TCF all characteristics do not have to be met within a learning journey but in the PCM developed in this thesis, all thresholds identified as part of the PCM must be met to reach critical consciousness. Therefore, using this information and the influence of the TCF, a new conceptual model was created. The early draft included in the Appendices (Appendix H) was based on the data collected from Sarah only. This process was repeated with two other facilitators (note at this early point the PAT model was known as PAAT). As described in Chapter Three (Methods and Methodology Chapter) an iterative approach was taken to developing this model: a constant back and forth within the data and the literature, including (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1978; Meyer and Land, 2005; Shin et al., 2016).

Traversing the sea of liminality – The Participants as texts Conceptual Model (PCM)

The Participants as texts Conceptual Model (PCM) demonstrates the critical consciousness journey of the facilitators. Figure 23 offers a visual representation of the PCM that utilises a metaphor to both represent and understand the journey taken.

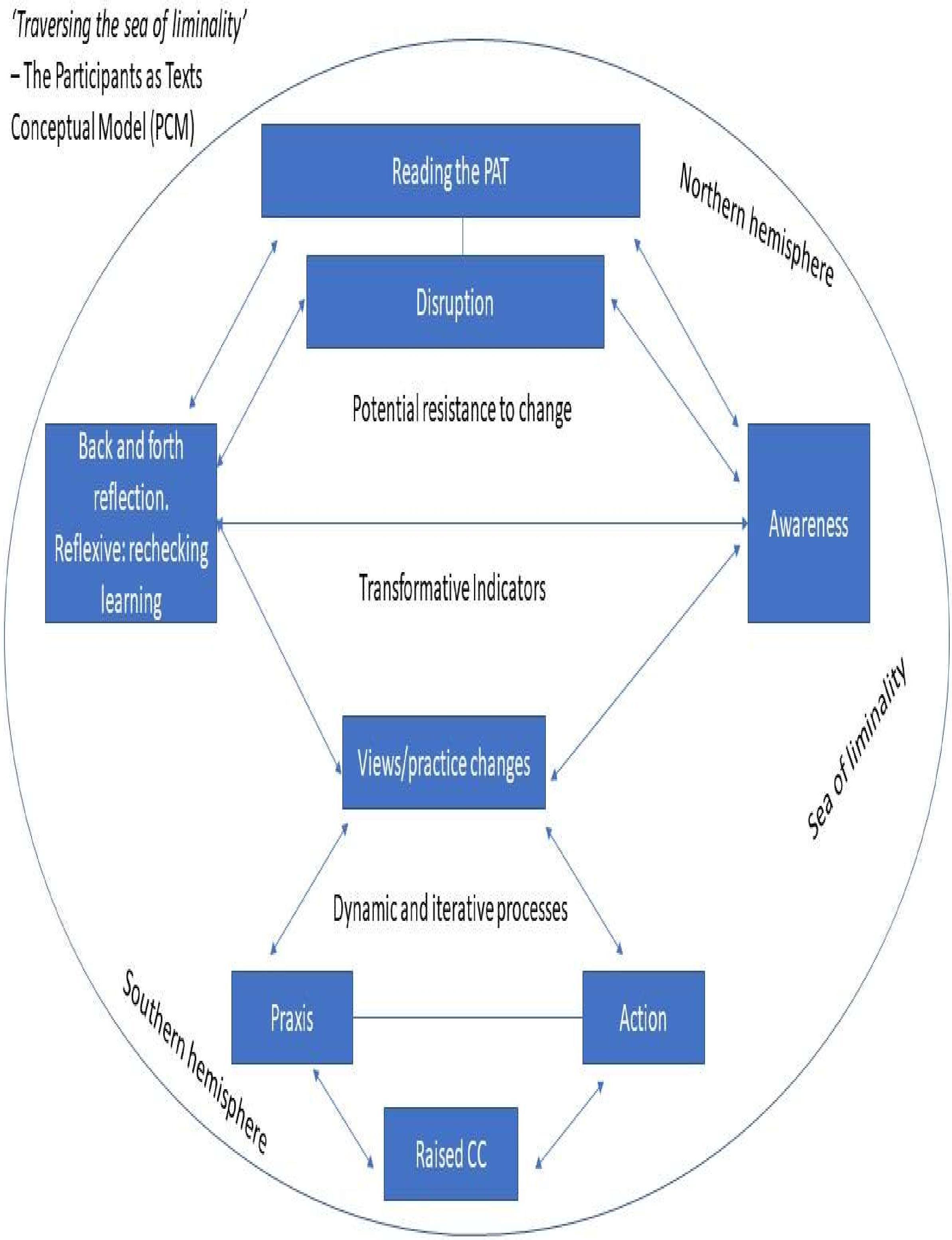
'Traversing the sea of liminality'
– The Participants as Texts
Conceptual Model (PCM)
Reading the PAT
Disruption
Northern hemisphere
Potential resistance to change
Back and forth reflection. Reflexive: rechecking learning
Awareness
Transformative Indicators
Sea of liminality
Views/practice changes
Dynamic and iterative processes
Praxis
Action
Southern hemisphere
Raised CC

Figure 22 - 'Traversing the sea of liminality ': The Participants as Texts Conceptual Model (PCM)

The model uses a globe theme, with seas and land that can be traversed in this journey. The globe metaphor is used to visualise the journey within critical consciousness development and its many complex stages. It also has been chosen to demonstrate how the facilitators' critical consciousness development changes their worldview, as they travel from the north to reach the southern hemisphere. Thus the model can be viewed as having two hemispheres – that in the metaphor draws parallels with representations of a global north and global south – where transformative and iterative dynamic processes ferry. The global north, home to the facilitator, the place in the pre-journey reality of the facilitator they broadly perceived as a less unequal place than their perceptions of the global south. These are in terms of freedom, democracy, rights, and other political and socio-economic indicators. As the facilitator, positioned in the north, is plunged into the sea by the initial reading of the PAT, the facilitator is exposed to new inconsistencies in their own reality. Rebecca would represent a good example of this point as she began to experience life in an urban working-class area for the first time and found her assumptions immediately challenged. The blue shapes on the model represent thresholds (islands) - the key thresholds encountered in the learning journey of the facilitators. Islands have been chosen here to represent the thresholds, as leaving an island requires crossing sea. Thus, the white space represents the sea – named here as the sea of liminality. This 'sea' represents the vast liminal space that not only surrounds all learning thresholds but is a transformative learning space of potential change and exploration that must be crossed to reach the next threshold (Boyce-Tillman, 2009; Schwartzman, 2010). Between the thresholds, within the sea, there is also peril, the chance the next thresholds are not met, and an individual becomes stuck in the flux of uncertainty (Barrett, 1998). The model demonstrates a process which flows southwards, with currents toing and froing between the islands, eventually percolating downwards to the south. The south was initially perceived by the facilitator as a place where the inequalities and the lack of freedoms are much more apparent and acutely felt. As the facilitator's journey takes them into the southern islands of praxis, action and a developed critical consciousness, they then see the north's reality differently, and the inequalities and symbolic violence that was initially so apparent from the surface in the global south, now becomes apparent in their global north as their reality and worldview changes. For example, Sarah spoke about seeing inequality in the world around her after going through this process.

Northern hemisphere	The facilitator's reality before the process begins: Metaphor of the normative perceptions of the global north over the global south: more democratic, developed, more wealth distribution, essentially stark differences with inequalities of the south
Southern hemisphere	The facilitator's reality before the process begins:

	Metaphor of the perceptions of the global south compared to the global north: undemocratic, autocratic, rigged, ‘developing’, huge gaps between rich and poor, visible and stark inequalities – essentially very different with the ‘more equitable’ north
Reading PAT	The trigger of the learning process that flows towards the south (as outlined in the PCM)
New reality (at the end of the process)	A facilitator with a raised critical consciousness begins to see the inequalities in the world around them. In the global north, they now see a reality that was previously hidden to them and the structural inequity they initially perceived as more applicable to the global south, becomes apparent in the global north.

Figure 23 - overview of steps from north to south on the PCM

Facilitators described their critical consciousness development within the interviews, pre - meets and post interview discussion. The development was often described by them as happening in ‘stages’ (Sarah), or as in ‘layers’ (Emma) for example, with often the reading of the PAT (the incident) catalysing the journey (for example in Sarah, Tom, Emma). From this point, facilitators talked about how this exposure increased awareness, and how they wrestled with their own preconceptions, when challenged by the reading of the PAT (for example Rebecca). Also, as their awareness was heightened, this led them to reflect (for example Sarah) and this reflection led to changes in practice, leading several of them to taking action (for example Ian).

Routes and sea road maps – navigating the model

At the top of the model, it begins with the unconscious reading of the PAT where initially the facilitator’s worldview faces contradiction causing shock and disruption from unconsciously reading the PAT.[22] This initial reading firstly creates *Disruption* within the pre-conceived beliefs of the facilitator. This disruption, akin to the critical literacy education practices outlined by Lewison et al. (2002) can, through reflection and rechecking of what they have read, lead to increased *Awareness* of the issue raised by the reading. This awareness can alert the facilitator to the contradictions in their current view which potentially problematises how they see the world. Rebecca’s naivety about working-class life in Chapter Six is a good example here, she said she thought ‘the system’ was fairer than it was, however, she increasingly began to see examples of where ‘the system’ was part of the problem in that part of Sanford. Importantly, and with a strong relation to the Awareness threshold within this model, reflection, complemented by reflexivity and rechecking (the taking in of new sources of information and rethinking knowledge and views they already held) is an important force fuelling the flow of this journey. The reflexivity of the facilitator, who is becoming increasingly aware, is continually reflecting whilst also potentially reading the PAT further. The non-linear back and forth with reflection and many of the thresholds resemble the process described by Cousin (2006) and Meyer and Land (2005) regarding the workings within the TCF model. At all points in this part of the process, there is potential resistance to change, similar to Meyer and Land’s (2005) *Troublesome* characteristic, which in the face of difficult knowledge could lead the facilitator to rejecting the PAT as a valid representation of reality potentially returning them to the pre-reading phase, or simply leaving them stuck in uncertainty. In this state of transition, Transformative indicators (akin to Meyer and Land’s transformative characteristic) can be displayed – and can include a visible changing in views, such as a concern or perception of a situation they had not had previously, such as Universal Credit (for example Sarah) or the mental healthcare system (Emma) and the effect it has on people’s lives. These changes can start to crystalise as a more sensitised and apparent sense of awareness emerges. It also can then lead to changes in practice as facilitators Sarah, Emma and Ian for example, suggest.

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[22] Furthermore, this model can also be applicable to further exposures to reading the PAT beyond the initial reading

The *Views/Practice Changes* leads onto the final phase of critical consciousness development in this model. With a heighted awareness and sensitivity to the symbolic violence faced by the participants, the questioning of the initial reading of the PAT becomes part of an iterative critical reflection concerning the wider world and society. This results in changes in how they see the world, read the world and theorise about the world (Freire, 1970). The theorising here is not necessarily in the academic and perhaps elitist sense, but more so in simply how they now connect and integrate this learning into their world view. The new meaning making they build from this learning can be across various intersections. This *Praxis* moves back and forth with *Action*. The iterative process here is demonstrated by the back and forth of the arrows between the *Views/Practice Changes*, *Praxis* and *Action* as each inform each other (Freire, 1985). The action manifests differently in different facilitators, this could be changes to session topics and approach to informal learning group sessions (for example Sarah, Paula), or a civic or community commitment they make (for example Emma, Ian or Tom) as they seek to address and change inequalities in their world (Freire, 1974; Ozer et al., 2013).

That inadvertent shove into the sea

As discussed in the findings' chapters, many of the informal learning groups facilitators explained they were initially already empathetic to the participants (for example, Sarah, Paula, Tom, Rebecca) and this was a significant reason for them to facilitate groups (Berardi et al., 2020). But none possessed a declared learning aim for facilitating beyond sharing a common interest for reading or gardening for example, nor did they see it as an opportunity to raise their critical consciousness, or even consider it. Incidents of the nature described in the initial reading of PAT were reported by several of the informal learning group facilitators. These often concerned from an initial aftershock caused by the reading, for example, the levels of poverty or structural marginalisation experienced by a participant(s), (for example Sarah, Paula, Polly). In my first meeting with Paula (Share and Read facilitator) she explained:

> [Share and Read] brought us into contact with people on…the fringes – people who face adversity and sometimes extreme challenges that I was unaware of. I know already there was a lot of people with bad circumstances – but this has been an eye opener'.

Sarah, also of Share and Read, mentioned:

> …it made me think about certain situations that had happened, that I had witnessed and how these situations had begun to change the way I think about how I view the world.

When I asked Sarah for more information on one such event, she replied:

> …we visit [a couple] and bring the group to their home. The things that happen to them, how their lives are structured… I was shocked they functioned. They function in a way I could not imagine. They have been marginalised, hidden away and they have no agency or voice. At first, it really shocked me, and I spent time thinking about them and others. So, it was these experiences and some other occurrences have really changed the way I think and how I understand how the world is for some of us.

Incidents like the above were reported in many facilitators' contributions who described a journey towards critical consciousness. Tom recalled a discussion with a participant, a working-class man, who had a staunchly anti-Labour viewpoint at the time of the 2019 General Election which mirrored the views the media at the time (Wring and Ward, 2020).

The participant, as described by Tom, was greatly concerned if Jeremy Corbyn became Prime Minister, it would spell economic disaster for the country. Tom observed the man often quoted stories from *The Sun* and Tom could see the newspaper's messages internalised within the man as he projected *The Sun's* viewpoints as his own. This again is an example of Freire's (1970) internalisation of oppressors as Corbyn's Labour Party was seen as a threat to hegemony by the right-wing media, as well as being an existential threat to the right-wing media itself (Greenslade, 2019; Whittle, 2021). The media's narrative built the Conservatives as the common-sense vote as it built a new identity of popular appeal around 'levelling up' and 'getting Brexit done' meaning Labour were national traitors blocking democracy and would ruin the economy (Maronitis, 2022). This narrative deeply effected Tom's group participant. One conversation (amongst many) struck Tom particularly, as the man did not seem angry, he seemed very upset that he, and his family, would genuinely lose their home, if Labour won. What Tom then described his initial reaction to this reading was concern, a pathos, but it made him think and reflect upon himself, about both of their upbringing and their formative experiences. Even though Tom believed it would have been in his, and other working-class people's, best interests to vote for the Labour Party in 2019, this incident of reading the PAT began a process of reflection for Tom (as explored in Chapter Six – Tom grew up in an anti-Conservative environment) yet Tom's reading of the PAT led to reflection and empathy. Tom explained that this process, despite their clear political differences, caused him to feel a growing solidarity with this man, and an empathy and understanding of his viewpoint. Tom's reflection and increasing awareness allowed him to compare their lives, suggesting that he, like the participant, both were subject to the happenstance of birth and formative experiences. Tom humanises the participant. He empathises with him and understands why he holds those views.

Ian, in a similar vein to Tom, could recognise his critical consciousness development starting prior to working with informal learning groups. He also could identify incidents that started the shock of the initiation of change. As described in Chapter Six, he had hit a 'low point' which, as Ian described, made him reflect and question his assumptions. Recognising that his mind had been closed, after various other experiences had 'opened his mind'. Ian realised and accepted the 'baggage' of his upbringing and has shaken off 'simplistic…right and wrong arguments' . He described his time working with people in his informal learning groups has further enriched him as a person, further supporting his 'mindset' change.

The variety of readings from the accounts given by informal learning group facilitators in this study, appear to be a starting point that shock the facilitator, exposing them to unfamiliar knowledge and experience. This first point which marks the beginning of the transition also bear a similarity to previous work on studies of transformational types of learning, or strategies used by practitioners of critical literacy. The disruption and shock expressed by the facilitators in this study, echoes the first of four dimensions of critical literacy as outlined by Lewison et al. (2002), 'disrupting the commonplace', whereby held views and preconceptions of the subject are shaken and disrupted so re-learning, or new learning, can take place. It also is reminiscent of influential earlier works by Mezirow (1978), in his transformation theory stage of a 'disorientating dilemma'. This can be evidenced by the 'surprise' of the informal learning groups facilitator and the uncertainty that follows. These incidents then appear to help support the informal learning groups facilitator change how they read the world, as evidenced by Sarah, with her developed understandings of neoliberal systems, or Tom, who found his resistance to horizontal violence within his empathy towards a participant who had internalised his oppressors in media views towards the Labour Party (Freire, 1970) and experiences of solidarity with those who he was brought up to politically oppose.

In several cases (for example Sarah and Paula) there was no conscious realisation of developments until I initially engaged them. However, through our discourse, a lack of familiarity with the process and a lexicon of critical consciousness development explained this, as they recalled periods of disruption, reflection, reflexivity, changing views, practice and so on. Facilitators such as Tom and Rebecca, had a greater awareness of the changes happening within them, after the reading of the PAT they described. In my first meeting with Sarah for example, it was clear she was conscious of her change in views, but it was the first time she became consciously aware of the process she had been through and why: 'that's me…I've changed' (Sarah). The explaining of critical literacy to Sarah for example, demonstrated the possibility of unconscious workings and movements within this process as she began to deconstruct her own process during our conversation. Recalling the changes in how she reads the world particularly concerning certain aspects of society and her increased knowledge of oppressive structures and barriers. She explained how she reflected upon the readings of the PAT but understandably had not labelled them or placed them in terms of critical consciousness development. This had impacted on her practice, feeling: '…inspired to reach more of these marginalised people in the area' as well as '…the topics we cover within the sessions'. Sarah also experienced political and cultural changes: 'reading about different things, causes, situations, now I have become more aware of what is going on'. Essentially, this 'shove' began the process of changing the way she sees and theorises about the world: '…I stepped outside of my bubble…the way I understand the way things work, society, the world, has totally changed since these experiences'.

Tom, like Sarah, also described unconsciously reading the PAT and recognised his awareness, practice and viewpoints had changed through his experiences with marginalised participants. Tom also explained these processes, points of interest and discussion, also without using the lexicon associated with critical consciousness development. He reflected upon a reading emphasising initial surprise as '…my own knowledge was lacking'. He began to better understand how the systematic barriers were previously hidden to him became clearer (Sayer, 2000; Bhaskar, 2016; Danermark et al., 2019), particularly within areas of intergenerational unemployment, and barriers to participating in society for working-class people with learning disabilities. Tom said he had 'thought about this a lot' and it had made him find out more and recheck his own world view. He also saw the power of the media manifested in the political views of many of the participants who were particularly marginalised (Graber, 2011). These experiences and a developing critical consciousness helped him avoid the pitfalls Freire's (1970) 'horizontal violence' when people of the same social class divide and attack each other. This was important to Tom as he was born into a 'politically aware geographical area' typically diametrically opposed to right-wing politics. He better understood the 'formative experiences' through a process of critically thinking about experiences and incidents with informal learning groups participants.

Travellers' Tales – postcards from the islands

To demonstrate the journeys from PAT onwards in the PCM, this section will examine the learning process from Sarah, Tom and Emma's perspective, as they each facilitated different types of groups and experienced different learning journeys from PAT onwards. For example, as previously discussed, Sarah, was unaware of the reading that ignited her critical consciousness development; Tom became aware of the PAT's impact after his initial reading/disruption, guiding him to experience solidarity with political opposites rather a dehumanising hate, and Emma, who described the layers of her critical consciousness development, entered into informal learning environments to help bring about change in communities and society, but did not initially recognise that reading PAT was part of her development. Within each threshold, for comparison, other facilitators' experiences will also be drawn from.

From reading the PAT to disruption

The first island on the model is Reading the PAT. Although, this potentially could be seen as more of a jetty, or a launching point, it is not intended as such. As a jetty or any form of launching point would potentially suggest a conscious decision to enter the beginning of a transformative state when the findings of the study strongly suggested facilitators did not. Thus, the facilitator is inadvertently cast off from the island into the state of disruption through the shock of the critical incident and the reading of the PAT. Starting from this reading, Sarah's critical consciousness development began. This incident, initially 'shocked her', 'pushed her out of her comfort zone… and made her re-think'. As previously discussed earlier in this chapter, she was facilitating an informal learning group at a vulnerable couple's home for the first time. Sarah's inadvertent reading of the couple and their life at home provided the disruption that threw her own world view into disruption.

Emma spoke of several readings and other critical incidents that catalysed her journey. Understanding her own critical conscious development, and as explored in Chapter Four, she described incidents prior to working with informal learning group, but then things started 'exploding' in informal learning group learning through her experiences with several participants. Emma works with people from a variety of backgrounds, but her experiences with refugees was particularly powerful. She described initial meetings with refugees and understanding the barriers they faced. Asif and Kienzler (2022) echo Emma's experiences, detailing structural barriers to health care access for refugees and asylum seekers. These could include having no suitable identification to register with a GP or language related barriers. In Emma's case, some of the structural barriers were previously visible to her, many others which were invisible in her reality (Sayer, 2000; Bhaskar, 2016; Danermark et al., 2019). Reading the PAT revealed many hidden barriers preventing their participation in society (Nimführ, 2016) and pushed Emma into the Disruption phase, as even though she was aware of the marginalisation of refugees and the barriers they face, the scale and depth of systematic oppression refugees faced, shocked her. Tom also described how his critical consciousness journey had developed through interactions with both middle-class and working-class participants. He had been initially struck by the marginalisation of participants who were long-term unemployed, struggling to reconcile that they were 'good lads' who 'worked hard' but had been systematically excluded with various gatekeepers and neoliberal systems blocking, or making their participation in employment difficult, as they navigated through life beset with learning disabilities, mental health issues and underlying poverty (Mencap, 2019; Tarlo, 2021). Tom, who declared he was politically literate, was still struck by political and social experiences that made him re-evaluate the hidden ways people were excluded from employment (Lindsay 2010). This was also the case with Ian, who was aware of his own transformation prior to becoming involved in informal learning groups, described how his experiences with group participants further developed his critical consciousness.

Liminality: a voyage through the sea

The liminal sea surrounding the thresholds is the in between - where the transformative learning takes place (Schwartzman, 2010). Facilitators encountered their initial PAT reading, becoming face-to-face with revelations about inequalities, or systematic barriers they were unaware of, and they are instantly pushed into the liminal phase of uncertainty (Horvath et al., 2009). Here the individual hopefully progresses into the thresholds and many of the facilitators described a gradual and iterative process. Ian and Emma, discuss layers in their critical consciousness development where they would operate in transformative liminal spaces before moving into new thresholds. Sarah talked about rechecking what she had learnt, ‘finding more examples’ and ‘looking beyond her bubble’ and ‘taking in new ideas’ during this period in the aftermath of a reading of PAT. Tom explained how he felt his mind was ‘constantly reappraising things’, going back to thinking about his own experiences and how these interacted with his new viewpoints. Tom found liminal phases enlightening and ‘really interesting…particularly with the variety of experiences you’d hear from people – a real mix of people – it was great’. As well as being exciting and dynamic, liminal in between phases are also characteristically of inertia and peril. If learning can be perceived as a continuous process of interactions, reflections and other forms of meaning making, such as outlined by Vygotsky (1978), to suggest the feeling of uncertainty or doubt within the learning process is one inevitably felt by most people at some point in time. This was a viewpoint held by another facilitator from this study. John, who did not explicitly describe a journey of his own critical consciousness as several of the other facilitators did, still offered a lens upon liminal phases and the role of the facilitator. John described supporting his group participants navigate their way through tricky parts of the family history learning process:

> …we have our limitations, each of us, but it’s how we deal with that on a daily basis. In terms of learning, learning anything, it’s important that we carry on the best we can, and/or we ask for help. It’s the help I try and give which is so rewarding and I see people stuck, but I can help get them out.

The idea of ‘stuckness’ is particularly pertinent in the TCF and within learning theory in general, particularly when the individual is dealing with an issue which is difficult or alien to them or challenges the assumptions of a person at the start of a learning journey (Meyer and Land, 2005). But what is particularly revealing about John's experience is he links the helping of another as helping his own development, albeit not necessarily linking it directly to critical consciousness development himself. This is particularly interesting in considering the role of the facilitator within the informal learning groups and considering the reading of the PCM. Here John is helping navigate a learner through the liminal phase, but is potentially in turn, helping his own development and transformation and extols the work of the collective:

> …when I help them, often not only do I help them move on or progress to the next rung, or in some cases finish, I enhance my own understanding. Not just about different ways or processes how to find information, no it's also about interpreting that information and the more I have done this, the better I have got – well I think so anyway.

Although, this is not a case of John's critical consciousness developing through reading the PAT, there is a case for this being a critique of the media and power itself and John's response is tailored from his experiences with the participant. John also described the false impression created by the media of the family history he is involved in within the informal learning group:

> they're told that it will be all available at a push of a button like on TV and some fantastic, exciting history will lay before them and how this ...is similar to a lot of society and expectations these days.

John did not describe a critical consciousness journey as other facilitators did, but he did discuss potential readings of PAT. For example, he discussed poverty he witnessed in the participants who could not afford to pay for family history courses. When I asked him what he thought of that, he was initially reserved and said:

> it had surprised me and made me wonder, but it made me feel like it was none of my business, so I did not ask any further questions or really think about it.

It is possible John read the PAT and after witnessing poverty he had not expected to find in a family history setting, had plunged into the sea of liminality, but had not progressed, leaving him within that uncertainty. In this case, John could be perceived to have been caught in the between disruption and a growing awareness on the PCM – stuck drifting in the Sea of Liminality. John also echoed the peril of transformational phases and the consequences for the informal learning groups facilitator if, acting as almost guides for the participants:

> you [the facilitator] can become stuck too', [which] …can be a learning experience…or one of such annoyance it makes you want to give up for the day [laughs].

Indicators of transformation become visible in the liminal phases and can be seen in the descriptions of several of the facilitators such as Sarah, Emma, Ian and others. In a critical literacy education context, it could be taken to mean they now possess broader vocabulary with their experiences (Flanagan, 2017) but also a development of their ability to question and discuss (Freire and Faundez, 1989). For example, as described in Chapter Six, Ruth (a facilitator with Share and Read) through her experiences of facilitating informal learning in a hospital, began to question a noticeboard in a hospital which brought her into conflict with her previous view of the running of the NHS. Emma, whose critical consciousness development began prior to working in informal learning, explained her work in informal learning contexts started to 'enable people to talk', recover agency and free will.

Reflection, reflexivity, rechecking, relearning

Reflection is a key aspect of critical consciousness development and the facilitators all reported periods of reflection after exposure to the initial reading of PAT, and then further reflection when they iteratively checked new learning against their world view. Their understandings and the beginnings of relearning start here which is not a simple process, as it is difficult to know if learning is complete or absolute due to the back and forth or oscillating nature of learning (Cousin, 2006). Sarah talks of a breaking-up of what she knew, being reflexive and reappraising her own bias leading to a re-learning or reforming of her world view in how she describes her new reality. Emma spoke of time reflecting upon her support of refugees for example, contrasting how normative narratives positioned them face-to-face with hidden barriers seemingly keeping many refugees in a liminal state, and unable to function in societal terms, from being access to health care, employment and related services and education (Mzayek, 2019; Hartonen et al., 2021). Emma's reflection was also reflexive as she began to unpick her former understandings, albeit Emma, unlike Sarah, was already conscious of her past consciousness developments. However, as Emma herself said 'we're all always learning, or at least should be'. This period of reflection for Emma, toing and froing between her understandings and new views, as her reality begins to change, with similarity to how as Sayer (2000) details the invisible becoming visible.

Tom also described processes of iteration and reflection during his development, particularly recognising the impact of reading the PAT. Tom explained how the reading availed him to how some of his participants were manipulated by the media to divert their attention from the true cause of their problems. This reconciled him, building feelings of empathy and solidarity with them. He found a growing humanity in valuing them as equals and felt he better understood that a person's 'formative years' and the power of the media played out differently in different people. Tom explained these reflections demonstrated to him he was 'no worse or better' than the participants and he 'liked and respected them'. Reflecting for Sarah was different than the experience of Tom and Emma, as Sarah did not realise this process was leading her through a journey of critical consciousness development. Although, she experienced shock upon the first reading of the PAT, her views became disrupted, and she progressed to a period of reflecting and rechecking. However, she also explained she was '…not consciously doing this' and she found herself thinking more and more about what had happened without fully realising she was entering a period of change. This island links to awareness and they both aid each other.

Awareness

The transformative indicators appear during the liminal stages, the raising of awareness within this model appear with a marked change in the facilitator's perception of the problem. Through reading the PAT, into disruption and reflection, they have started to blend some of the insights into the issues raised by the reading. For instance, Sarah described it manifesting as '…taking more of an interest in certain news stories, questioning them, or in things said by other participants'. Tom's increasing awareness was evidenced in a similar form, he became:

> …not necessarily more interested in stories, in the media, but about things like how the long term unemployed are treated, or those with learning disabilities for instance, but I became more aware of them - if that makes sense?

Emma spoke of increasingly seeing the barriers faced by refugees she encountered after reporting a burgeoning awareness of them at this stage. This awareness led to her supporting more refugee related projects within the work she does. At this point, even if facilitators do not progress to a raised critical consciousness as per the PCM, they will have a greater awareness of hidden inequality and power which influences a changing outlook and practice.

Views/ practice changes

Increased reflection and awareness results in changes in views or practice due to the learning experience that is '…implied by transformative and discursive aspects…that take place over time' (Smith, 2006). Furthermore, drawing from the TCF characteristic 'bounded', the views or practice changes will not be a full representation of critical consciousness development as the new insights, viewpoints, changes to practice may be 'bounded by limits' (Meyer and Land, 2006: 200). In terms of critical consciousness development for the informal learning groups facilitators, to move from this stage would be taking this learning and worldview gained from reading the PAT, into life outside - beyond the group. Emma talked of her initial experiences with a community arts group 'exploding' and from there her journey of informal learning, community groups – all working for social change – began. Emma, as she became increasingly sensitised to the many barriers affecting refugees in this country, thus supported refugees in a manner of ways, from supporting projects researching the oppression of refugees to helping raising awareness of their plight in her groups, as well as challenging perceptions about migrants in her group members. Emma described organising dances for her group, or:

> …doing something ridiculous together, as a very subtle way of actually enabling people to go to thinking slightly differently and not be as brainwashed by a weaponised media.'

Sarah spoke of many changes to her practice as a result. From the topics approached in her informal learning group, to the communities Share and Read would try and reach, and the books and poems they would select to use within sessions. Tom was more restricted in changing his practice as significantly as other facilitators as his group adherence to funding guidelines designated the group must meet specified aims and demographics only. But the impact of this learning experience 'influenced the trajectory of my career' and the things that 'I've wanted to get out of work' and made Tom want to reflect more on his practice:

> …how can these people benefit from an activity? How can we change an activity to make it more relevant to their lives?

The southern islands: Praxis, Action, and critical consciousness destinations

The islands in the southern hemisphere of the model are all heavily interlinked. The liminal phases are dynamic and iterative as these experiences move to states of praxis, action and ultimately a raised consciousness. There is an interdependence between the islands on the model, as shown through the arrows that go back and forth, but this is particularly heightened here, as the model and facilitators' experiences show. The praxis engaged in by Tom, Emma and Sarah for example, actively demonstrate the dynamic workings at play here and within the toing and froing within the southern islands, through application in their practice in informal learning contexts, to beyond into their communities and how they now see the world that surrounds them. Sarah was convinced she was a 'different person' to the one prior to these experiences, and from the examples she provided and embedded in the detail she described them, it was apparent she fully believed she was transformed in the way she sees the world. She described reflective processes, theory building in the sense she was piecing together new experiences of various forms of marginalisation and systematic oppression, she was not aware of previously, to uncover a new way of looking at the world. With a similarity to the *integrative* characteristic of the TCF (Meyer and Land, 2005), Sarah described a process which was her integration of concepts both that are closely interconnected but also those interdependent of one another. Sarah, like Emma, saw her reality change as the previously hidden world became more visible (Sayer, 2000) and made new connections that were previously invisible (Cousin, 2006). Emma here is uncovering the previously hidden symbolic violence wielded against refugees, initiated by reading the PAT (Connolly and Healy, 2004; Rahayu, 2021; Schneck, 2022). This helped her re-address questions concerning hegemonic power and its imbalances (Gramsci, 1971; Gaventa, 2005).

For Emma, her experiences in informal learning and the reading of the PAT increased her motivation for working with emancipatory and participatory groups, as well as other groups committed to social justice and bringing about social change. Her experiences with refugees, for one, and as detailed within this chapter, her increased awareness of the challenges they face, allowed her to see previously hidden realities of the refugees, such as the marginalisation that leaves them in a limbo state, and this led her to taking further action within her informal learning groups and beyond. Tom, who declared degrees of political and social awareness prior to these experiences, facilitates and participates in groups outside of the informal learning group described here, typically with an environmental justice focus. Tom, perhaps from his upbringing in a politically aware setting, understandably bore resentment towards working-class supporters of the Conservative Party. However, his work in informal learning group and the learning process he has been through seem to have made him not just simply understand why working-class people may vote Conservative, but it has enhanced his qualities of empathy and understanding to reject violence and respect them equally (Berardi et al., 2020). In addition, recognising them as facing oppression as described by cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), the dominant social order (Ledwith, 2016) and internalised oppression (Freire, 1970). However, on the PCM, Tom's critical consciousness has developed, but has not graduated to action, therefore Tom is stuck somewhere between action and critical consciousness – floating and awaiting the next move to action.

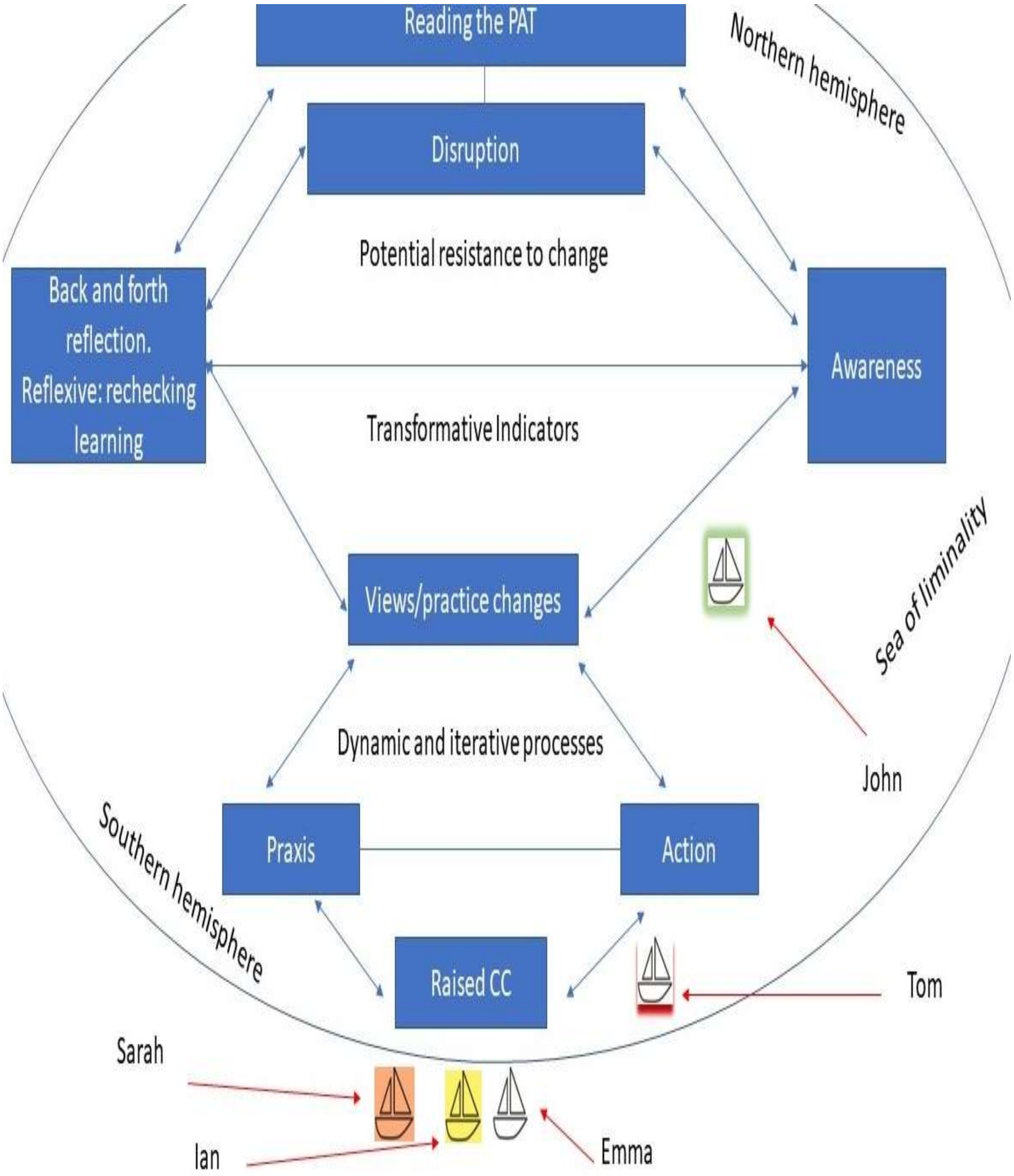
Reading the PAT
Disruption
Northern hemisphere
Back and forth reflection. Reflexive: rechecking learning
Potential resistance to change
Awareness
Transformative Indicators
Sea of liminality
Views/practice changes
John
Dynamic and iterative processes
Praxis
Action
Southern hemisphere
Raised CC
Tom
Sarah
Ian
Emma

Figure 24 - example visual mapping of facilitators' journeys on the PCM

In the example visual mapping of the PCM above, we can see Sarah, Ian, Emma and Tom docked at the raised critical consciousness island. Their development has seen them engage in action to change the world around them through the informal learning groups and in their communities. Tom is floating in the Sea of Liminality between Action and a raised consciousness as he has not yet engaged in action in the journey from reading the PAT. John is also in the Sea of Liminality but between Awareness and Views/Practice Changes. He observed how the media projects certain realities onto people and the effects of when a different reality is opened to them. But he did not state any practice changes or articulate any fundamental view changes – hence he is stuck in the northern hemisphere – albeit near the equator.

Summary and conclusions

This chapter explores the inadvertent critical literacy education of informal learning group facilitators through the reading of the PAT. This chapter explored the causes and the dynamic processes at work within informal spaces that are at play during this development. The process begins with the initial reading of the PAT – that differs from typical informal learning group interactions – as this unexpectedly shocks the previously held views of the facilitator. From here on, a journey, as conceptualised by the PCM, passes through several liminal phases, where the transformation takes place (Bain, 2003; Schwartzman, 2010), and then between the thresholds. The facilitator undergoes periods of iterative toing and froing as they wrestle with melding new insights whilst building new theories to understand their new reality. Eventually, if they come through the process, as outlined by the PCM, not only is the way they facilitate informal learning groups changed, but how they now see the world is changed. As referenced in Chapter Three there is much literature on critical literacy education, being facilitated to a range of people and in a range of contexts and settings. There is also literature on the changing critical perspectives of educators, but this generally focuses on improving educators' critical literacy skills to improve their practice (Hazard, 2021). Thus, there is a gap in the literature this thesis can contribute to.

This chapter addresses the main research question and fills a gap in the knowledge of critical consciousness development through establishing:

1. Critical literacy education can begin to occur inadvertently, and through the unintended reading of people as texts (PAT).
2. People can progress and self-navigate through unintended journeys into critical consciousness development.
3. The Participants as texts Conceptual Model demonstrates how these dynamic workings can play out.

The next chapter will discuss the conclusions to the thesis and will address the research questions. It will also examine the study's contribution to knowledge in the fields of critical literacy, critical consciousness development and informal learning.

Chapter Nine – Conclusions

Introduction

This research has contributed new findings within the fields of critical literacy and critical consciousness development, presenting the participants as texts (PAT) concept, and participants as texts conceptual model (PCM). The PAT and PCM provide insights into critical consciousness development and how its initial catalyst of reading the PAT can occur unconsciously. These models have the potential to be applied in other contexts and areas which will be discussed in this chapter. This chapter will return to the research questions and address them sequentially. It will then present the study's contribution to knowledge in the fields of critical literacy, critical consciousness development and informal learning. The chapter interrogates a selection of fieldnotes made during the research and the role they played in processes of my own development. The chapter then ends with a brief overview and conclusion.

The research questions*:*

The following section focusses on returning to the research questions. Whilst the themes and particulars of the research questions have been discussed in greater detail in the findings presented in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven, as well as the processes behind the main research question being addressed within Chapter Eight, this section comprehensively synthesises this work to provide full but concise answers to each question.

Main Research Question:

- How might informal learning group facilitators' critical consciousness develop through interactions with informal learning group participants?

Firstly, to summarise and to recap, the process of critical consciousness development initiated through unconsciously reading the PAT shares similarity to established critical literacy education. The analysis of texts is the vehicle, or the trigger, for critical consciousness development (Luke, 2000; Janks, 2000; Lewison et al., 2002). However here, rather than the facilitator consciously reading a text to begin the process, they inadvertently read the informal learning group participant in what I have conceptualised as reading the

PAT. After reading the PAT, disruption is created in how the facilitator perceives the world followed by reflection. This commences the process of critical consciousness development – explained through the PCM. Within this model, the facilitator becomes aware of the issues the reading has presented, and more sensitised to the injustice and inequality around them which echoes Freire's (1970) development of critical consciousness. PAT reading is therefore a trigger process for critical consciousness development, as would a typical critical literacy text. Furthermore, the process can create a heightened awareness as the facilitator becomes more sensitised to the issues raised by reading the PAT. They become more aware of other inconsistencies within their own realities and may begin to question more within their world as they become more adept at their 'critical reading of reality' (Freire and Macedo, 1987:36).

A range of examples of critical consciousness development presented within the facilitators' reflections and accounts of the process. For example, there was a clear and profound effect on many of the facilitators, such as Sarah, who went through a Freirean Easter Experience (1970). This experience, Freire describes as being like a rebirth, represents how dramatic the change was for Sarah. She explained the process made her completely different to how she was prior to working with the groups. She detailed the process of change, an iterative process full of shock and doubt, but eventually progressing to seeing more of the world's inequality and causes that was previously hidden to her, as her sense of reality changed (Bhaskar, 1975; Sayer, 2000; Seal, 2016). Tom described a different process, but his critical consciousness development manifested in a greater awareness of the hidden barriers to participation in society for the long term unemployed with learning disabilities. He could now see their alienation and the often hidden or subtle obstacles, such as application forms and application processes, that prevented them from working (Harrko et al., 2018; Mencap, 2019). He also found solidarity with working-class participants with vastly different political views. He gained insights, as well as fellowship, and empathised, rather than patronised, their beliefs as he was clear he was 'no cleverer than them' and pointed to their differing 'formative experiences'. Although Tom clearly had been on a journey of critical consciousness development he had not progressed to action – yet.

A few of the facilitators were aware of critical consciousness prior to facilitating informal learning groups (for example Emma, Vince, Ian). They also recognised the impact of reading the PAT as enhancing their critical consciousness development further – removing more barriers to their view of the real world (Archer et al., 2016) increasing their motivations to help people to 'free themselves' (Emma). Vince, for example, in similarity to Tom's experience, developed further understandings of why working-class people voted for Brexit in 2016. He synthesised numerous first-hand accounts from participants and felt their acute perceptions of rejection and displacement from neoliberalism were more of a factor in the vote, than the sneering accusations of ‘stupidity’ or ‘racism’ they were commonly scapegoated for (McKenzie, 2017).

In summary, the evidence provided by facilitators, foregrounds the PAT and PCM models as new and recognisable explanatory frameworks of critical consciousness development. The range in experiences described by the facilitators highlights the dynamic processes this reading can trigger, leading to critical consciousness development processes resembling results of a ‘conventional’ critical literacy education. It gives facilitators insights into previously hidden structural or systematic inequalities and prompts questions, such as who holds power, what is the agenda of this message and so forth. Insights that have crystalised the transformative processes into changing how the facilitators see and read the world.

- What forms of critical literacy education occur in informal learning groups and what are their effects?

In response to research question 2 above, a range of critical literacy education practices were highlighted within the activities of the informal learning groups of this study. These involved planned activities and other occurrences which were incidental and impromptu. A few facilitators (for example: Emma, Vince and Barry) used a lexicon demonstrating their awareness of emancipatory pedagogies. However, other facilitators talked about activities that bore the hallmarks of critical literacy education, but without using a lexicon of critical literacy. From the activities described, and motivations for facilitating them, it was clear these were critical literacy education practices in all but name as the groups analysed hidden meanings in texts and contextualised them within their own lives (for example, Sarah, Polly, Paula). In many groups, facilitators also reported impromptu discussions crossing over into critical literacy education domains, as participants discussed political or social events triggered by their activity or another action in the group (for example Tom, Ian, Rebecca reported such occurrences). Incidents often exploited by the facilitator for the focus of sessions and talking points of future sessions (for example Rebecca, Emma, Paula). These also revealed the viewpoints of participants and facilitators, in how they described their reactions to these views, juxtaposing their own.

Due to their subject matter, many groups innately crossed into domains of critical literacy education. For example, the book club’s (Johnny’s group) activities involved analysing and deconstructing texts. In group observations, discussions moved through intersections of class and gender providing critical literacy education opportunities. Although, when speaking to the participants later, many of them did not perceive the group activities as educational. At the ESOL group, I observed participants analysing meanings from words and images presented to them as part of the learning activity. These images of men and women were being matched to different contexts in employment and society. As they articulated their feelings regarding these pictures, they offered interpretations deeper than the intended exercise into socio-political conversations as they questioned normative stereotypes projected by the imagery. Only a small number of facilitators set out to directly utilise critical literacy education practices with an awareness of critical literacy, but as the examples set out by Sarah and other Share and Read facilitators, their groups began to delve more into critical literacy education in the aftermath of reading of the PAT by the facilitator. The awakenings triggered consciousness development and the learning from reading the PAT sensitised them further to the needs of the groups. For example, challenging attitudes towards migrants within settled group members, attitudes towards other working-class groups, and issues stirred by the 2016 European Union Membership Referendum. Sarah explained she wanted to help participants restore the human face of migrants dehumanised by the media, rebuild their agency, especially in their decision making in a world of increasingly populist news.

The effects of critical literacy education differed from participant to participant. Ian and Emma directly used critical literacy education practices to enthuse and motivate people to free themselves of the baggage and structures entrapping them. Echoing Freirean (1970) insistence that people, and only people, are able to free themselves; which also can be a lengthy, sometimes ‘frightening process’ (Ian). Vince used critical literacy education strategies in bible reading groups to help contextualise the bible into people’s lives today. Emma discussed using critical literacy education practices to facilitate awakenings and help them take power back for themselves and their communities. Facilitators such as Emma, Sarah, Ian and Vince reported participants moving on to other community groups. Ian, for example, described group participants developing the mindset to leave his group with increased community and civic capital, setting off on new paths. Other facilitators reported more gradual or subtle shifts in participants through critical literacy education activities (for example, Sarah, Rebecca, Ian) with manifestations of small changes in how participants approach subject and topic areas in conversation and action.

In summary, the informal learning groups in this study demonstrate the potential for critical literacy education but this seems largely dependent upon the facilitator, the subject matter and naturally, the participants. If the facilitator is closed to critical literacy education activities, and the subject matter of the group, is for example, a sport, then the opportunity for critical literacy education is likely to be more limited, apart from the potential for impromptu learning via discussion for example. However, occasionally in these situations, if groups are not supported in critical literacy education processes, it is possible notions of false consciousness, as Marx and Engels envisioned (1845), can present and prevail in contentious issues, with damaging effects on solidarity (as described by Tom detailing certain men's groups he had briefly worked with).

- What forms of resistance to the consequences of neoliberalism can be found in informal learning groups?

The pursuant of neoliberal policies in England is strongly linked to a subsequent rise in social and economic inequalities (Hall, 2011; Monbiot, 2016; Dorling, 2018; Toynbee and Walker, 2020). These inequalities tend to be most prevalent within working-class communities, like areas of Sanford, where austerity had the gravest effect (Gray and Barford, 2018). My experiences in Sanford demonstrated resistance to these effects as a palpable sense of both respite and solidarity was evident within many of these groups against the backdrop of austerity, a sense that had been lost in recent years with study participants reporting a narrative of alienation and decline in the areas they lived. As austerity policies devastated communities, other opportunities for resistance had diminished. The decline of traditional community meeting places in working-class areas also accelerated, for example community centres, local pubs and shops closed (Watkins et al., 2017; Cummins, 2018). This had greater consequences for the typically marginalised groups in society, such as the old, carers and the cared for (Hawkley, et al., 2008; Babudu, et al., 2016) and immigrants (Christodoulou, 2014) who felt this isolation acutely (Kearns, et al., 2015).

However, resistance particularly in the form of respite and solidarity was evident within many informal learning groups. The groups facilitated by Emma, Ian and Vince provided spaces for respite in their communities, and sites of resistance against austerity. They collectively tackled community problems, engaged in critical and emancipatory pedagogies working towards action for change. Additionally, other groups, such as those facilitated by Polly, Paul and Dawn offered a safe space to escape the everyday trauma carers, hospice workers, hospital patients, and migrants face. These informal learning groups offered the chance to escape the everyday problems and oppression, share in a communal common interest, to interact with peers and be themselves away from stresses of life, their alienation and as Hall explains, their representation as unemployed, a patient or as a worker (1997). The alienation stemming from neoliberalism has affected both community life and solidarity in working-class areas (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), but one of the strengths of informal learning groups are they can pop-up in local communities where they are needed. They can still thrive in places decimated by austerity, where social and health services have been cut and where a stripped-down adult and community education could not typically reach. For example, Vince spoke of being able to utilise the vacated spaces in communities, Tom's groups were based in the abandoned green spaces of council estates, and Share and Read, had groups in hospitals, hospices, prisons, people's homes and so forth. Many of the participants also explained about how the groups had helped restore them from their feelings of dislocation and being trapped.

However, as the working class in communities are frequently pitted against each other in various forms (Becker et al., 2021) several of facilitators spoke of the activities to break down these barriers and bring a sense of community to the group (for example, Emma, Vince and Ian) thus helping to restore or build solidarity within the groups. Other barriers to group solidarity were more subtle and trickier for the facilitators to directly address, such as certain participants unaware the groups were set up to target their isolation. Participants would perceive themselves as different to other participants, under the belief they had an auxiliary status of being helpers rather than being helped. This echoes Freire's (1970: 45) concept of 'submersion' as their perception of themselves is distorted - submerged by the norms of oppression (Winston, 2018). Facilitators such as Vince and Polly explained group solidarity rebuilt self-confidence members had seemingly lost, allowing them to speak and share common problems that felt liberating. This solidarity also could enhance the groups taking further action beyond the initial premise of the group (for example groups facilitated by Ian, Emma, or Barry) tackling more of issues and problems – as they decodified their problems in the Freirean sense.

In summary given many working-class communities have been greatly damaged by neoliberalism, informal learning groups can offer the opportunity for respite and solidarity for participants, especially in areas that have seen such drastic cuts to funding and related problems. The informal learning groups encountered in this study played important roles in these areas of Sanford. Groups provided resistance to austerity itself, using forms of critical pedagogies to support the participants in their own critical consciousness development and then taking action itself towards change; or to broaden the worldview of the participant to combat the divisions agitated by the media. However, not every community I visited in

Sanford had informal learning groups visible to my research. Other groups were dependent upon external funding, which is not guaranteed to continue. Many had a specific subject area, such as family history, bible reading, gardening and so forth, which could act as a barrier to people who would benefit from being part of a group. Also, despite the groups being located within communities, they tend to advertise locally or through word of mouth. Isolated and alienated individuals therefore might not be aware of groups to find this respite.

- Can informal learning groups fill the gaps left by adult and community education?

Informal learning, as described in Chapter Three, is a broad spectrum that can offer a range of learning experiences for the participants (Ziegler et al., 2014; Van Noy et al., 2016). As adult and community education has become both narrower and utilitarian in its offer (Bowl, 2017; Duckworth and Smith, 2019), coupled with prohibitive entry conditions for both settled and migrant learners, the prospect of informal learning groups filling the gaps left by adult education is considerable. Especially, as in many cases highlighted by this study, adult and community education was not meeting the needs of the disadvantaged (UNESCO, 2020), and in most cases, no longer had a presence in many of Sanford's communities as its centres closed. Education is broken and not fit for purpose, for both children and adults, was a widely held view of the facilitators. Much in the vein of Reay (2017) or Ball (2003) facilitators spoke of formal education as being the learning of facts for tests, and little for the development of skills such as critical literacy. The reduced presence of adult and community learning within the communities of Sanford was perceived as a symptom of the system being broken. However, doubts were raised by several facilitators whether informal learning groups could fill this gap in an educational sense, as they did not agree their practice was education (for example Dawn, Lucy, Paula). Facilitators clearly had a deep distrust of 'education' and were acutely aware their participants often were disenfranchised from it, thus labelling their groups as education or as educational may act as a barrier. However, many agreed the groups were, in the community and wellbeing sense (a former core part of adult education's offer), 'doing what adult education used to' and what it 'should do now' (for example Paula, Sarah, and Paul).

The response to this question, therefore, is not straight forward and is dependent upon what the individual's motivation is. If it is to experience a sense of community and personal wellbeing, informal learning groups can meet a community need adult education vacated. Additionally, to improve or develop certain skills, such as learning English or arts and crafts, these groups may provide an alternative to the now formalised adult education. Furthermore, as demonstrated in Chapter Six of the study's findings, several informal learning group participants developed key critical literacy skills that several of the facilitators identified as absent from formal education such as Emma and Lucy. But, if the individual wants to gain nationally recognised qualifications for further study or employment purposes for example, then informal learning groups do not fill the gaps left by adult education in local communities. Importantly, in terms of filling the gap, many of the users of the informal learning groups, were disenfranchised by adult education for a variety of reasons (such as past experiences, health or travel and distance) thus informal learning groups were their only option. Those participants outside of the language learning groups I observed, did not tend to see it as educational, even though they engaged in overt educational practices such as learning a variety of skills, or discussing and analysing texts. The term 'education' to them was full of negative connotations, understandably, as many were set up to fail when they were within it. However, on the other hand, many of those participants attending language learning groups, who were usually excluded from formalised ESOL classes due to costs or ineligibility, found informal learning groups as invaluable sources of education. The groups were often their only opportunity to learn English and offered respite from the alienation migrants are subjected to. So, for these group participants, the informal learning group filled the gap that adult education, or rather the system, had created. Therefore, this answer depends upon the needs of the community and the individual, but there is a case that, in a sense, these groups can fill the void left by the system, as well as coexisting alongside adult education provision.

Contribution to knowledge

The research's contribution to knowledge can be seen in four parts, described below:

1. Reading participants as texts (PAT) can trigger critical consciousness development processes.
2. The participants as texts conceptual model (PCM) demonstrates the process triggered by reading the PAT and explains a process of critical consciousness development.
3. Insights into critical literacy education workings in informal contexts.
4. The role informal learning groups can play in communities, offering resistance to austerity through respite and solidarity.

1.There are numerous examples of various kinds of texts being used within critical literacy education (Kress and van Leeuwun, 2001; Kress, 2003; Roswell and Pahl, 2015;) and different types and forms of critical literacy education learning activities (Giroux, 1983; Apple, 1999; Luke, 2000; Janks, 2000) - see Chapters Three and Four for discussion on this literature. Incidental and inadvertent informal learning, through impromptu conversations and interactions, have been captured in various fields (for example Tresselt, 1960; Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Kerka, 2000; Wagnon et al., 2019; Aka, 2020) but is particularly under - represented regarding the role it can play in critical consciousness development. However, its border crossing and transformative potential has been approached by Mezriow (1991), Schwartzman (2010); Marsick and Neaman, (2018) and others. Further, Schon (1983) and Mezrow (1991) have also examined its potential for triggering critical reflection processes that have similarity to those processes described after the initial reading of the PAT and the PCM journey that follows. There is, to the best of my knowledge, no literature concerning learning from the inadvertent and unconscious reading of individuals as texts and this being both the trigger for, and a text used for, critical consciousness development. Therefore, the process and subsequent theoretical model and framework of PAT is the study's main contribution to knowledge.

2. The initial development of PAT was iteratively advanced to draw on the threshold concept framework (Meyer and Land, 2003), which highlighted how the process of developing critical consciousness through PAT combined these elements together to produce the PCM process and theoretical model/framework.

3. This study also adds to the knowledge of community based critical literacy education being facilitated in informal settings (Ledwith, 2015; Duckworth and Smith, 2017; Duckworth and Tett, 2019), from intentional and planned activities to the incidental, occurring in groups geared around community interests, wellbeing, language learning and so on. Furthermore, these insights are contextualised through its setting in a post-industrial northern urban area, at a time when communities were intensely damaged from austerity, with a rising and divisive threat of right-wing populist politics.

4. Finally, the study adds to the literature on community and grassroots groups countering the effects of neoliberalism and offers insights into the respite and solidarity found in informal learning groups. These can also be sites that cultivate resistance against austerity (Slay and Penny, 2013; O'Campo et al., 2019).

Post-it notes from my small island – sketches and iterative observations from my own critical consciousness development - from the field to the fieldnote and back

Working with the data involved continuous iterative processes. On reflection, this bore similarity with the facilitators' processes as mapped in the PCM, with the back and forth between the data resembling the path the facilitator was navigating in the PCM. This manifested in praxis like theory building to understand the mechanisms of PAT and the PCM. Writing notes then returning to them, adding layers, and linking them to other fieldnotes and thoughts, provided the opportunity to look backwards and understand my own developments throughout the process. One revealing observation, from reviewing fieldnotes for this chapter, was the impact of the facilitator explaining their reading of the PAT to me. Firstly, as described in Chapter Six, the process of PAT was not observed directly by me as the researcher, and it is doubtful such an incident could be observed by a third party. Its process was constructed through conversations with facilitators who identified incidents of interactions with informal learning groups participants which catalysed a process of change within the facilitator. As I met and conversed with the facilitators, especially those who facilitated groups I did not observe, I built mental images and feelings about the participants they explained they read as PAT. Their descriptions, whilst typically not naming them or detailing them as individuals, were not always particularly expansive in terms of the information given about them, often to protect the anonymity of the informal learning group participant, but more so they were compelled to describe the systems, barriers and the oppression they could now see the participants faced rather than portraits of the participants involved. Perhaps, most striking, and with reference to my notes, it was the emotion in the descriptions they conveyed, particularly when describing the impact of the readings of PAT.

This helped create a particularly powerful essence of marginalisation participants were experiencing in my own consciousness, rather than a mental image as such. Even though I was conscious I was in most cases examining the participants through the lens of the facilitator, I could not only understand why this participant was read as a PAT, but I also felt, albeit in a reduced way, that I was reading the PAT by proxy (particularly in descriptions by Sarah, Tom and Emma). Instead, I was reading a form of typical type of text, instead of the inadvertent unconscious reading that the facilitators were doing. I was consciously listening to an aural text of a facilitator's account of a reading of a participant that they felt had political, cultural, or social messages. Naturally, I considered that, as per considering any text, this text would also contain many biases and distortions based on the facilitator's lens, which given the power of the reading of the PAT, could also be unintentionally and unconsciously distorted by the after effects of reflecting upon the reading of the PAT. As I was listening and engaging in conversation with the facilitator, the essence of marginalisation taken from the facilitators' accounts that I describe and reflect upon in the fieldnotes, was powerful perhaps due to the imprint of the reading of the PAT that had been left on the facilitator. As their PAT reading had been the catalyst for change in the facilitator, and they may have had an emotional response to the experience with commonly reported feelings of shock and worry, incidents that are emotional are often better remembered (Christianson, 2014) and emotion is sometimes used as a learning tool for this reason (Shen et al., 2009). In recalling these incidents within the interview, they find themselves returning to this emotional experience, hence the emotion they convey and the powerful impact it had upon me as the researcher.

Future research recommendations:

Following on from my critiques of the study, there are several potential areas of future research:

- *Longitudinal study of a limited set of informal learning groups and facilitators*

As this ethnography was cut short by Covid-19, it was denied the full planned time for the research phase. A longer examination of the groups may have perhaps enabled an opportunity to observe the workings of critical literacy within the groups in more detail, but also may have diluted the iterative process with the data. Therefore, a recommendation of longer study with a smaller sample of groups, that are observed and interviewed regularly, may provide a more comprehensive picture of PAT and the PCM (as detailed in the next recommendation) as well as the critical literacy development within the group participants. Furthermore, the study also examined the prospect of the groups as sites of resistance against the consequences of neoliberalism. Many examples of respite and solidarity were found within these groups, and a longer study could have provided the opportunity to experience and expand upon those important facets of informal learning group.

- *Specific focus on the thresholds and liminal phases within the Participants as texts Conceptual Model (PCM)*

A longer study, as described above, focusing on the facilitators may illuminate the in between liminal planes where transformation takes place. It also may allow more in-depth explorations of the PCM thresholds, for example, how the facilitators engage with critically reflecting upon the process, particularly with tricky areas many facilitators may not progress from, or the feelings of shock and doubt other facilitators experienced. Therefore, a longer study with regular informal learning groups, observations and interviews with facilitators and participants may allow for a greater insight into the workings of PAT, the PCM and the potential critical literacy education learning opportunities and effects within the group. It may also allow for the capture of incremental changes to the facilitators' practice and world view, potentially observing how their critical consciousness development plays out in terms of their role as facilitators, the way they interact with participants and the impact on their outside lives.

- *Researching PAT in other fields*

As PAT and its processes are entered into inadvertently, it is possible that it may also occur in other areas of formal and non-formal education. For example, there is a lot of research into the critical literacy development of formal educators, but these are framed around critical literacy practices that are consciously entered into by the educator to change their way of being (Vasquez et al., 2019) as well as a valuable tool to improve their practice (Massuda, 2012; Pandya, 2012). Whereas an investigation into PAT in a different environment could test and develop the concept further, potentially revealing much more about this and the PCM process.

- *Unveiling Systematic Oppression: An Autoethnographic Exploration*

Future research could explore and develop the autoethnographical dimensions of this study, focusing on working-class backgrounds and positionality in more detail. Employing an autoethnographical methodology could analyse personal experiences, with a particular focus on education, to expose multiple forms of systematic oppression, including symbolic violence, against the working class in educational and social contexts. Drawing from the work of Reyes (2022) personal experiences in education can highlight class-based discrimination within academic and other educational institutions. Reyes' (2022) concept of the liminal outsider can be adapted here as a lens to enhance a deeper understanding of oppression within broader educational settings. Also, as Reyes (2022) contends, understanding the intersectionality of class with race, gender, and sexuality is essential to comprehending how multiple marginalised identities compound experiences of exclusion in educational contexts.

Therefore, accompanying the autoethnographic research is collaboration with community groups and individuals from underserved areas. This will be crucial for co-creating knowledge and addressing systemic barriers faced by working-class people. Engaging community members as equal research partners ensures the study accurately reflects their realities and priorities. The study can advocate for systemic change within both society and academia. Sharing personal narratives may inspire other working-class academics to speak out against injustice and challenge stereotypes.

Conclusion

This study has provided insights into informal learning groups within a post-industrial urban area setting that has been greatly damaged by neoliberalism and the pursuant of austerity policies. The areas of Sanford I visited during this research demonstrated not only the strength and resistance of the inhabitants, who contribute to the rebuilding of communities, but also the informal learning groups facilitators who help provide the setting and stimuli for this rebuilding through their work in the communities that have been so deeply affected by austerity. Set amongst this backdrop, the study set out to examine the potential for critical literacy education within informal learning groups, as critical literacy education is largely absent from formal and non-formal education. This exploratory ethnography of informal learning groups from the communities of Sanford, led to an important discovery: the reading of the PAT. PAT is an inadvertent and unconscious act catalysing the critical consciousness development of the facilitators. Upon reading the PAT, it casts the facilitators into a dynamic and transformative liminal space, in which they to-and-fro between the various thresholds of critical consciousness development, using critical reflection to help with the rebalancing of their world views. Their reality changes and they now see the oppression that they initially did not perceive. This became this study’s main contribution to knowledge, particularly in the fields of critical consciousness development and critical literacy.

As the landscapes change for the facilitators, as demonstrated in this study, so too does the landscape for the participants. The critical consciousness development of the facilitators manifests in their practice, which in turn, may have effects on the participants, their critical literacy and critical consciousness development. In this sense, as it was the facilitator who initially read the participant to start this process, there is a beautiful symmetry in the potential for the participants to then learn with the facilitators as they embark together on mutually liberatory critical literacy education practices.

Finally, to revisit the words of Sarah, facilitator from Share and Read, the effect catalysed from reading the PAT was profound:

> I would say absolutely on a very personal level for me I would describe myself as a different person. I've said to people, ‘I'm a different person to the person I was before I started working on this project’.

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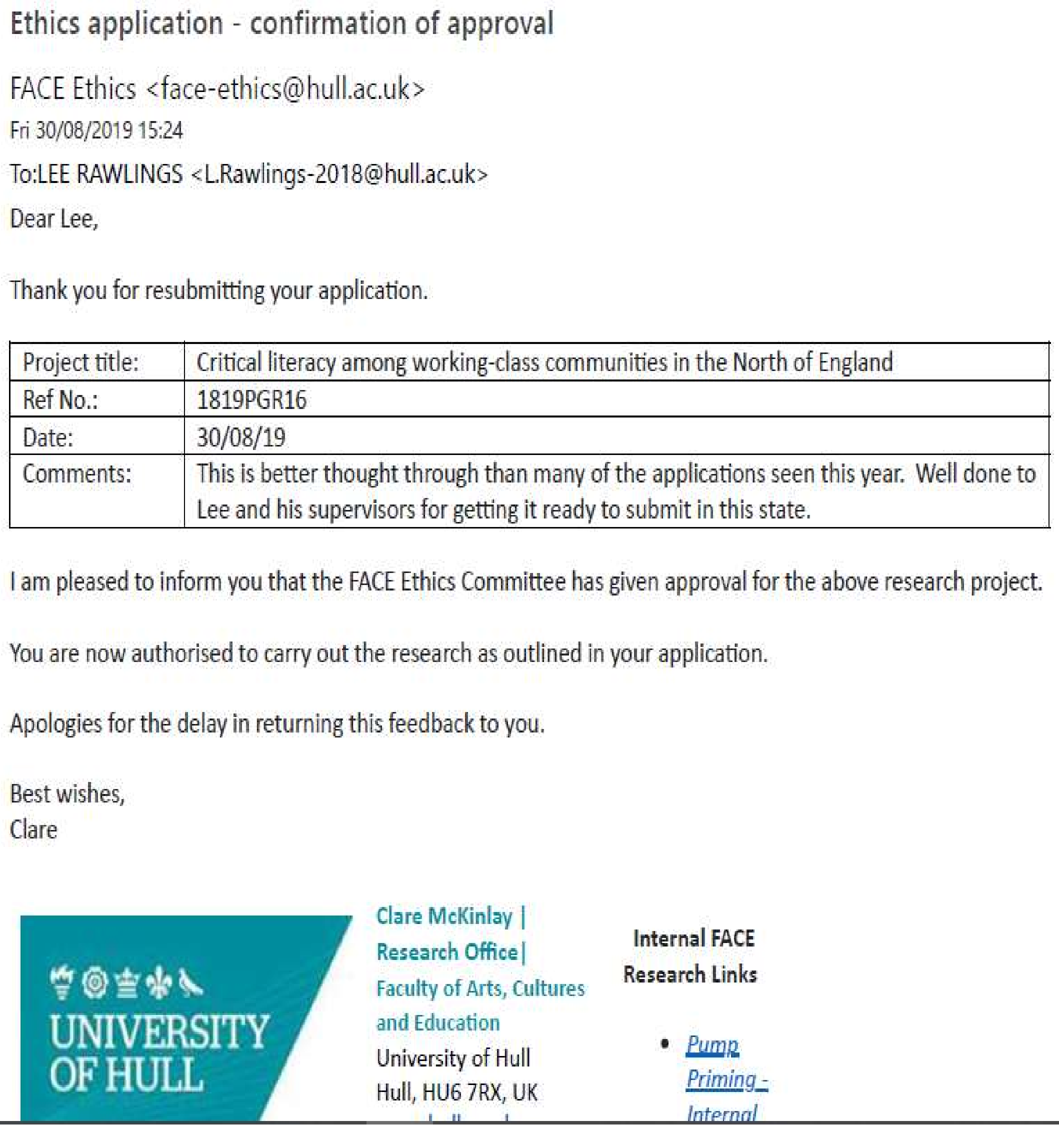
Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics approval granted 30/08/2019



Ethics application - confirmation of approval

FACE Ethics <face-ethics@hull.ac.uk>
Fri 30/08/2019 15:24
To:LEE RAWLINGS <L.Rawlings-2018@hull.ac.uk>

Dear Lee,

Thank you for resubmitting your application.

Project title:	Critical literacy among working-class communities in the North of England
Ref No.:	1819PGR16
Date:	30/08/19
Comments:	This is better thought through than many of the applications seen this year. Well done to Lee and his supervisors for getting it ready to submit in this state.

I am pleased to inform you that the FACE Ethics Committee has given approval for the above research project.

You are now authorised to carry out the research as outlined in your application.

Apologies for the delay in returning this feedback to you.

Best wishes,
Clare

UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Clare McKinlay |
Research Office |
Faculty of Arts, Cultures and Education
University of Hull
Hull, HU6 7RX, UK

Internal FACE Research Links

- Pump Priming - Internal

Appendix B – Information Sheet for participants

Information Sheet

Who am I?

My name is Lee Rawlings. I am a full-time PhD student from the University of Hull.

I would greatly appreciate it if you would consider being a participant in my research.

What is my research about?

The study aims to examine the potential for critical literacy education in community-based informal-learning groups in working-class communities in Hull.

What is critical literacy education?

Critical literacy can broadly be seen as an approach that develops our ability to question when we examine the world and the media around us, looking at deep meanings, causes, contexts and power.

Why is it important?

According to a recent report, only 2% of school children are able to spot fake-news stories. So, in the context multiple news sites and varying takes on news stories, it is increasingly important to be able to decide what we think is true and what is not.

What are informal learning groups?

Informal learning can mean many things, but this study is interpreting an informal learning group as being one that does not offer a formal qualification, or is a group that is typically situated outside of the mainstream of adult education.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited as you are involved with an informal learning group that broadly fits the criteria for this study. The group facilitator for your group has already been approached and has and agreed that I may contact the individuals within your group.

What happens if I take part?

Initially, I plan to come to one of your sessions and observe and experience the group. This will only be with your consent. During this observation, I will not make any notes or write anything down, but I will make brief notes afterwards that relate specifically to my research, such as how the learning is taking place and I may ask you about some of these observations if you attend an interview.

From there, hopefully, you will consent to take part in an interview(s) for approximately 30 minutes. This will be an informal discussion that with your consent will be audio recorded and I will ask you for your opinions and experiences in regard to learning, the group you attend and other related experiences.

All of the data (information) you provide is strictly confidential and is only seen by me. This will be stored on the University's secure cloud system (Box).

In terms of publishing the study, all names given (including yours and your group) is anonymised to ensure confidentiality and nothing you say will be directly traceable to either you as an individual or your group.

You are free to withdraw part or all of the data you provide at any point up to the end of the study (expected to be around September 2021).

I can provide you with some sample questions to give you an idea of the interview too.

The data that you give at interview will enable me to explore if, how and when critical literacy education is occurring in informal learning groups.

Original hard copies of forms or data that contain confidential information will be destroyed using the University of Hull confidential data disposal service.

Where will the interviews take place?

At a safe public space convenient to you. Perhaps at the venue of the group you attend or another, nearby, community area. We can arrange a venue which is convenient for you.

Will I be paid for taking part?

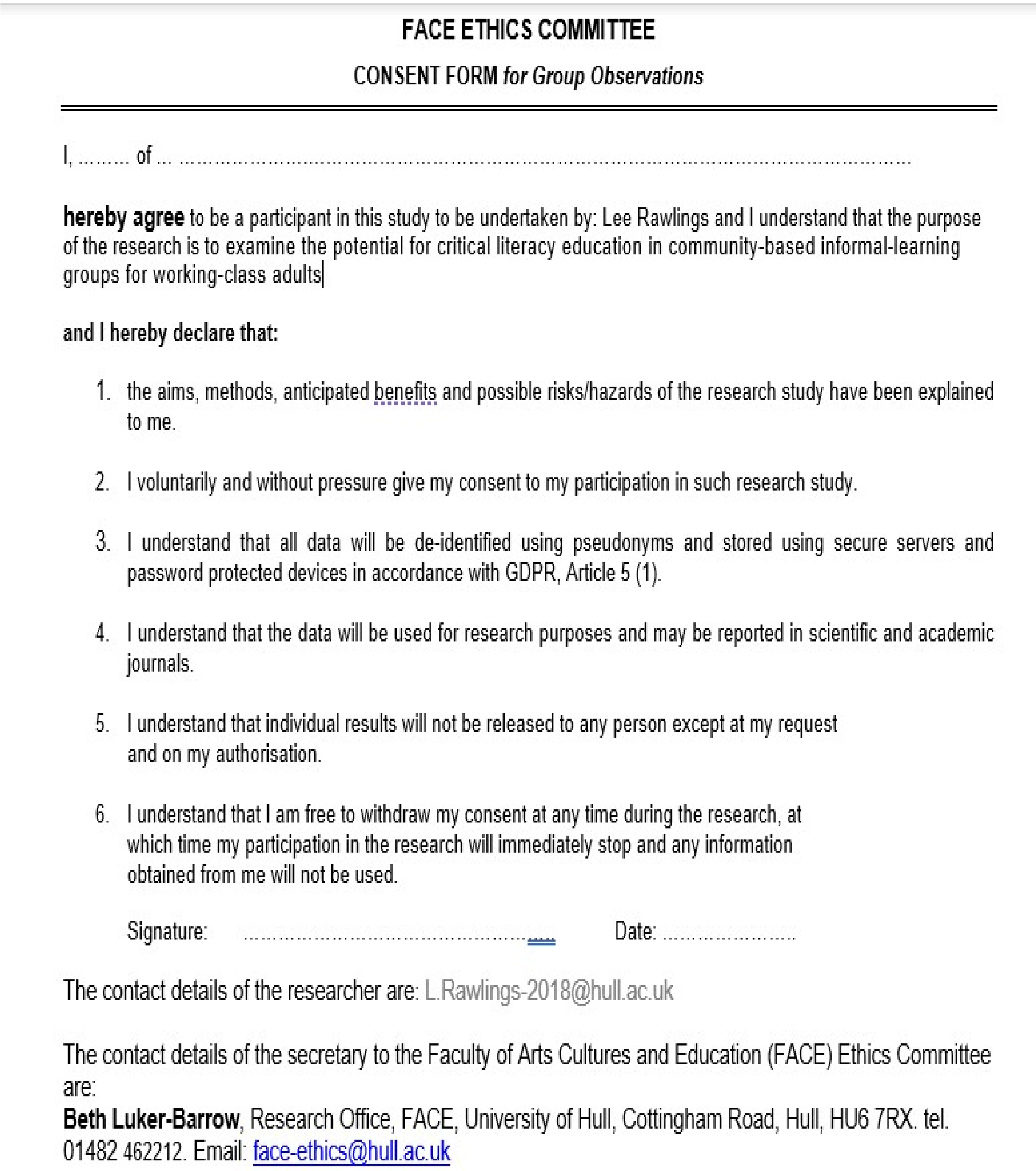
There are no funds for paying participants but you will have the knowledge of having contributed to research.

Contact information

The contact details of the researcher are: L.Rawlings-2018@hull.ac.uk

The contact details of the secretary to the Faculty of Arts Cultures and Education (FACE) Ethics Committee are:
Beth Luker-Barrow, Research Office, FACE, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX. tel. 01482 462212. Email: face-ethics@hull.ac.uk
.

Appendix C – Consent form for group observations



FACE ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSENT FORM *for Group Observations*

I, ……… of … ………

hereby agree to be a participant in this study to be undertaken by: Lee Rawlings and I understand that the purpose of the research is to examine the potential for critical literacy education in community-based informal-learning groups for working-class adults

and I hereby declare that:

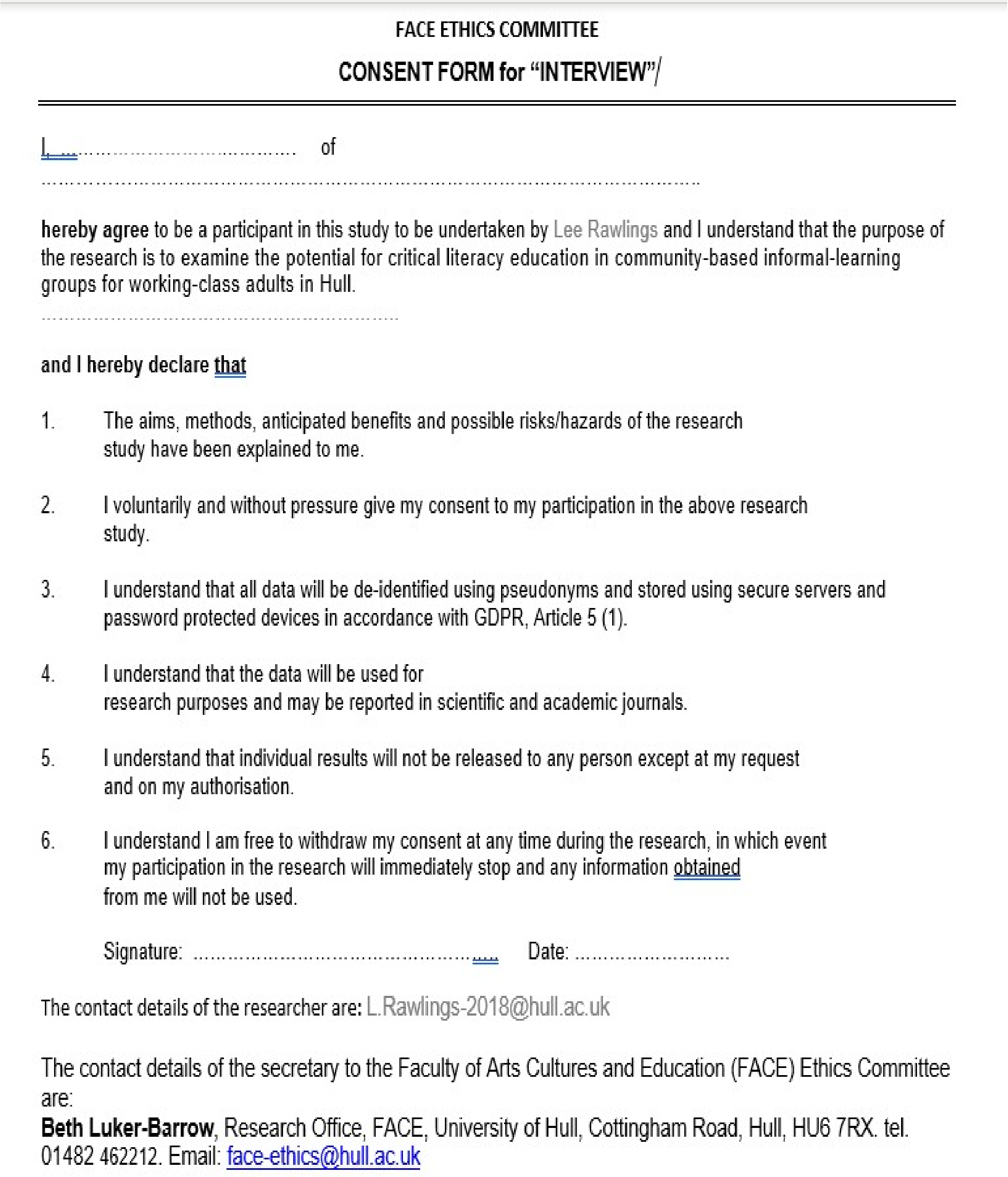
1. the aims, methods, anticipated benefits and possible risks/hazards of the research study have been explained to me.
2. I voluntarily and without pressure give my consent to my participation in such research study.
3. I understand that all data will be de-identified using pseudonyms and stored using secure servers and password protected devices in accordance with GDPR, Article 5 (1).
4. I understand that the data will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals.
5. I understand that individual results will not be released to any person except at my request and on my authorisation.
6. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the research, at which time my participation in the research will immediately stop and any information obtained from me will not be used.

Signature: ……………………………………………… Date: ……………………

The contact details of the researcher are: L.Rawlings-2018@hull.ac.uk

The contact details of the secretary to the Faculty of Arts Cultures and Education (FACE) Ethics Committee are:
Beth Luker-Barrow, Research Office, FACE, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX. tel. 01482 462212. Email: face-ethics@hull.ac.uk

Appendix D – Consent form for interview



FACE ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSENT FORM for "INTERVIEW"/

I, ...…………………………………… of

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

hereby agree to be a participant in this study to be undertaken by Lee Rawlings and I understand that the purpose of the research is to examine the potential for critical literacy education in community-based informal-learning groups for working-class adults in Hull.

…………………………………………………………

and I hereby declare that

1. The aims, methods, anticipated benefits and possible risks/hazards of the research study have been explained to me.

2. I voluntarily and without pressure give my consent to my participation in the above research study.

3. I understand that all data will be de-identified using pseudonyms and stored using secure servers and password protected devices in accordance with GDPR, Article 5 (1).

4. I understand that the data will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals.

5. I understand that individual results will not be released to any person except at my request and on my authorisation.

6. I understand I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the research, in which event my participation in the research will immediately stop and any information obtained from me will not be used.

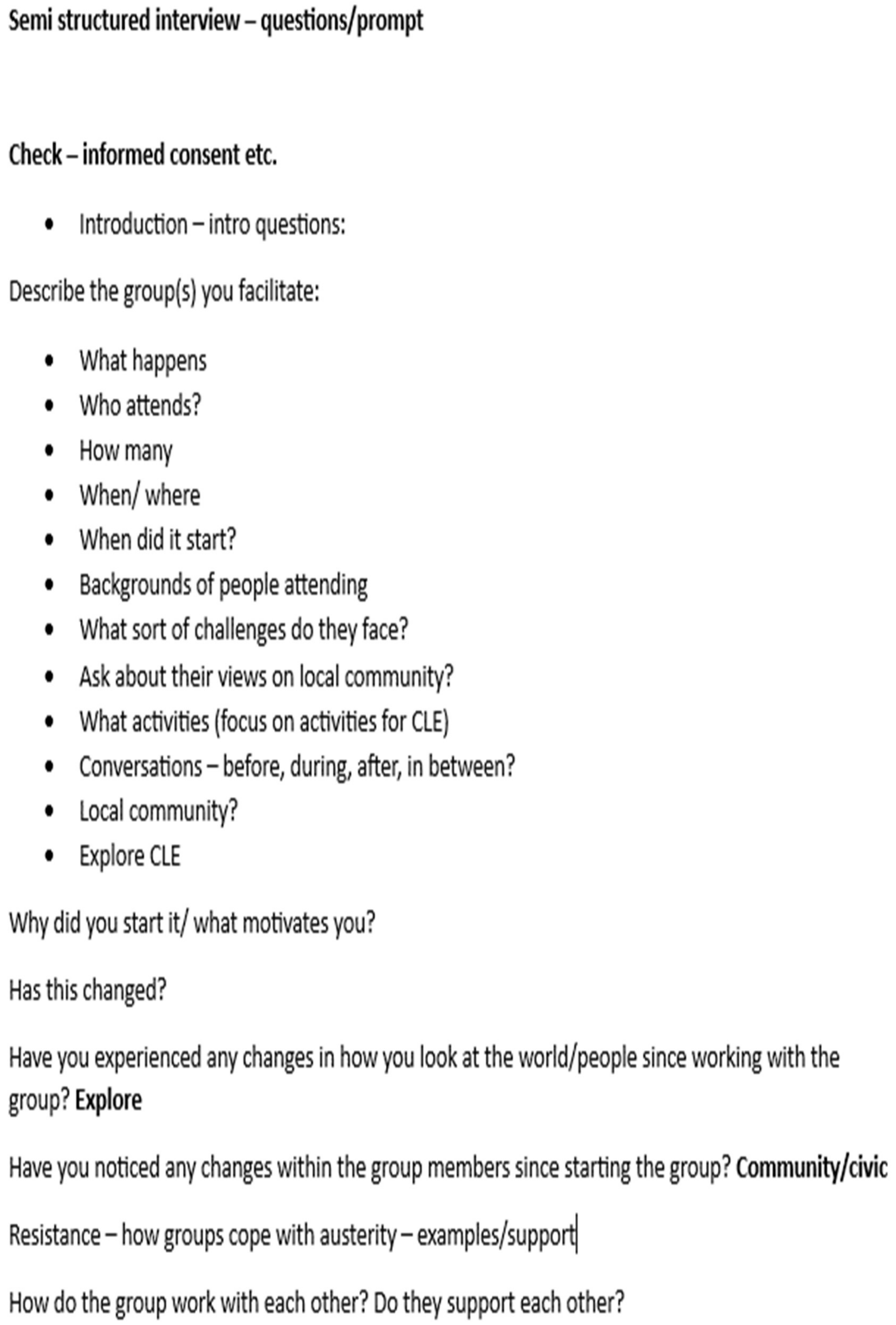
Signature: ……………………………………………..... Date: ………………………

The contact details of the researcher are: L.Rawlings-2018@hull.ac.uk

The contact details of the secretary to the Faculty of Arts Cultures and Education (FACE) Ethics Committee are:

Beth Luker-Barrow, Research Office, FACE, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX. tel. 01482 462212. Email: face-ethics@hull.ac.uk

Appendix E – Sample interview schedule



Semi structured interview – questions/prompt

Check – informed consent etc.

- Introduction – intro questions:

Describe the group(s) you facilitate:

- What happens
- Who attends?
- How many
- When/ where
- When did it start?
- Backgrounds of people attending
- What sort of challenges do they face?
- Ask about their views on local community?
- What activities (focus on activities for CLE)
- Conversations – before, during, after, in between?
- Local community?
- Explore CLE

Why did you start it/ what motivates you?

Has this changed?

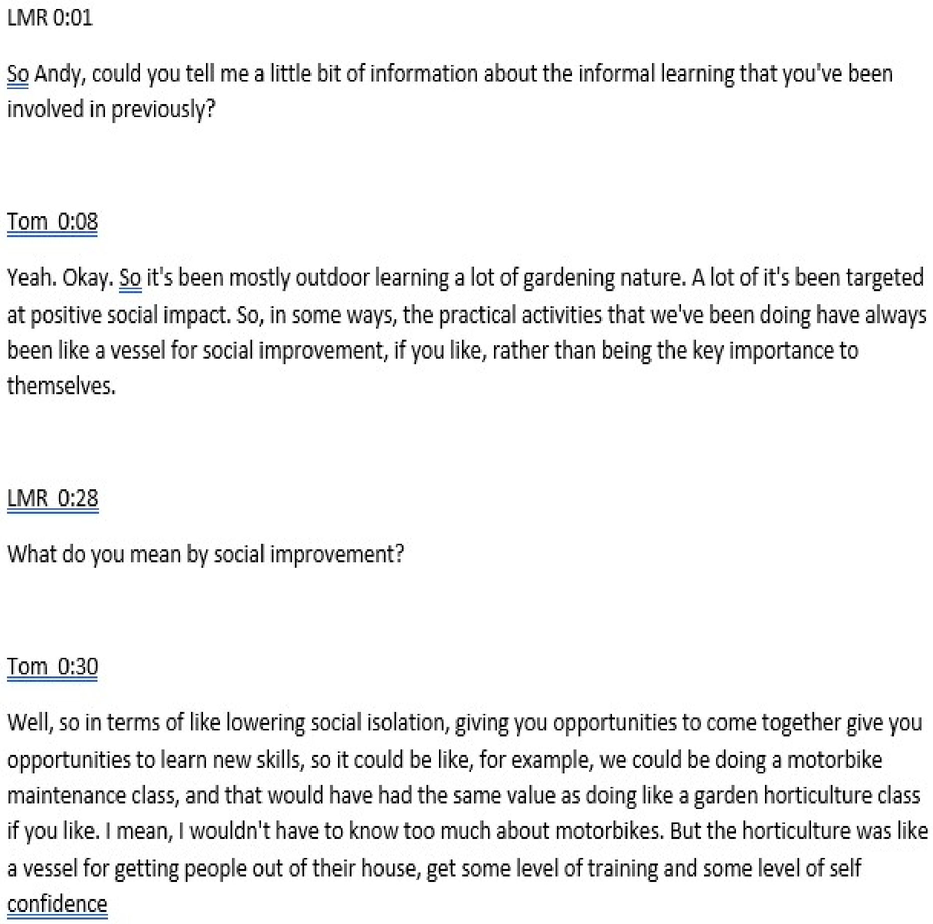
Have you experienced any changes in how you look at the world/people since working with the group? **Explore**

Have you noticed any changes within the group members since starting the group? **Community/civic**

Resistance – how groups cope with austerity – examples/support

How do the group work with each other? Do they support each other?

Appendix F – Sample pages from transcripts (Tom)



LMR 0:01

So Andy, could you tell me a little bit of information about the informal learning that you've been involved in previously?

Tom 0:08

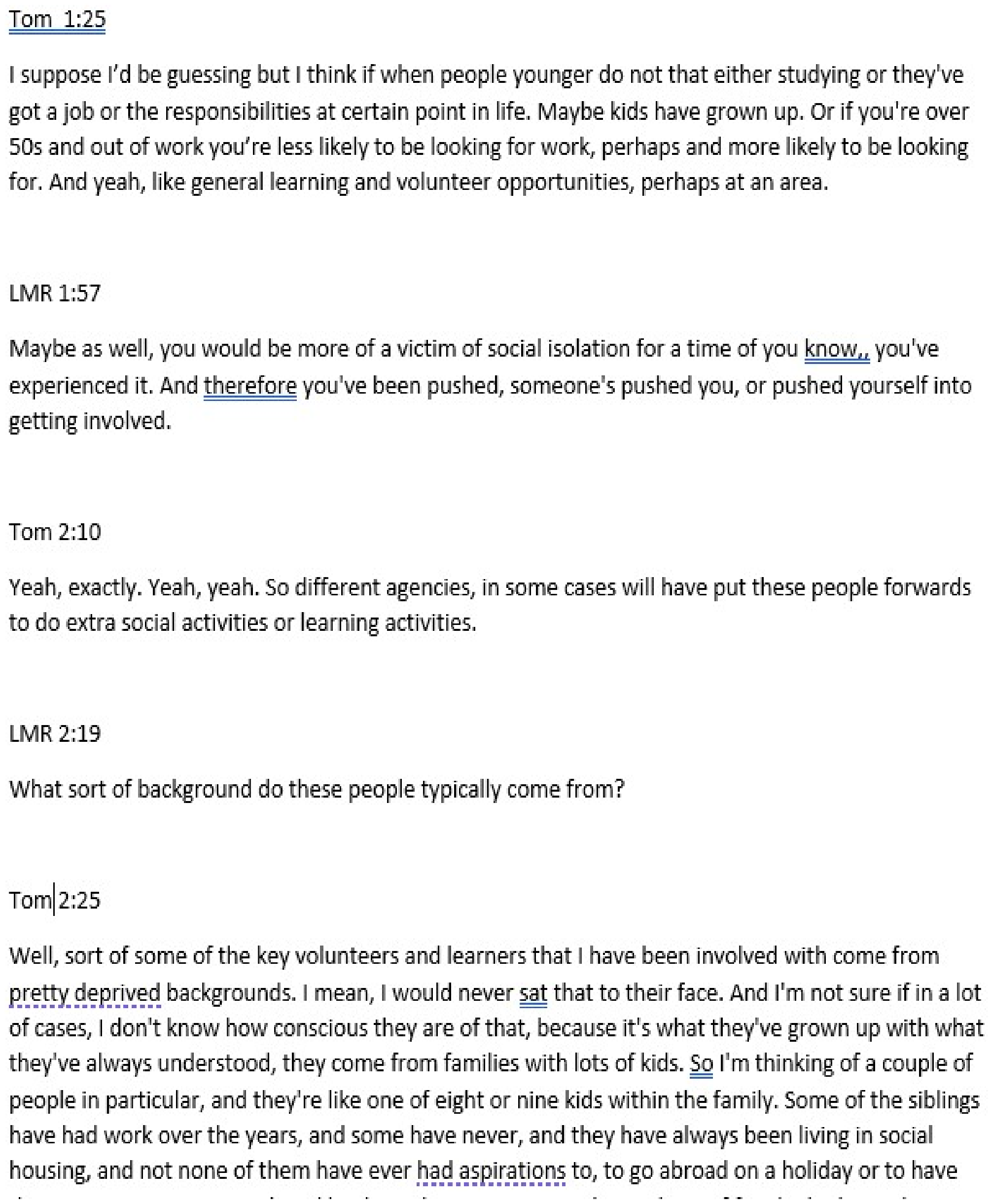
Yeah. Okay. So it's been mostly outdoor learning a lot of gardening nature. A lot of it's been targeted at positive social impact. So, in some ways, the practical activities that we've been doing have always been like a vessel for social improvement, if you like, rather than being the key importance to themselves.

LMR 0:28

What do you mean by social improvement?

Tom 0:30

Well, so in terms of like lowering social isolation, giving you opportunities to come together give you opportunities to learn new skills, so it could be like, for example, we could be doing a motorbike maintenance class, and that would have had the same value as doing like a garden horticulture class if you like. I mean, I wouldn't have to know too much about motorbikes. But the horticulture was like a vessel for getting people out of their house, get some level of training and some level of self confidence



Tom 1:25

I suppose I'd be guessing but I think if when people younger do not that either studying or they've got a job or the responsibilities at certain point in life. Maybe kids have grown up. Or if you're over 50s and out of work you're less likely to be looking for work, perhaps and more likely to be looking for. And yeah, like general learning and volunteer opportunities, perhaps at an area.

LMR 1:57

Maybe as well, you would be more of a victim of social isolation for a time of you know,, you've experienced it. And therefore you've been pushed, someone's pushed you, or pushed yourself into getting involved.

Tom 2:10

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, yeah. So different agencies, in some cases will have put these people forwards to do extra social activities or learning activities.

LMR 2:19

What sort of background do these people typically come from?

Tom 2:25

Well, sort of some of the key volunteers and learners that I have been involved with come from pretty deprived backgrounds. I mean, I would never sat that to their face. And I'm not sure if in a lot of cases, I don't know how conscious they are of that, because it's what they've grown up with what they've always understood, they come from families with lots of kids. So I'm thinking of a couple of people in particular, and they're like one of eight or nine kids within the family. Some of the siblings have had work over the years, and some have never, and they have always been living in social housing, and not none of them have ever had aspirations to, to go abroad on a holiday or to have

Tom

Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. Probably not even conscious of that, to some extent, because they won't even realise some of the things that are going on that they're not.

LMR

So when we talk about these things, is that something you're more aware through your experiences with these people?

Tom 4:27

definitely become more aware , yeah. I think I have a reasonable understanding because I come from an old mining town. So you know, I always understood that some people get jobs and some people don't and are affected by government decisions and much worse, worse than others. I've always understood, on some level that there's, there's the haves and the have nots and are social dynamics at play are in control of and sometimes not conscious of. But definitely, I know a lot more now, from working with these people about how government decisions, local council decisions effect their lives and how isolation and alienation can really impact on their lives.

LMR 5:03

Has that changed the way you think?

Tom 5:05

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, it's changed sort of my focus in terms of... Yes. It's influenced the trajectory of my career and the things that I've wanted to get out of work. Made me less focused on what I can get out of it for me and my family and more focussed on contributing to the local community where I live and now is benefiting the people are accessing the service and, and yeah, making much more not focused on, not so much like how, how good can this activity be in and of itself, but how, how

Appendix G - Guide to the facilitators and groups visited

The meetings and frequencies of the informal learning groups described here are based on information provided by the facilitators between October 2019 and July 2020.

Study participants and group names are anonymised by use of pseudonyms and are presented in alphabetical order.

Barry: Experienced in various community and informal learning contexts for over four decades. Barry's contribution to this study focussed upon his experiences with community groups in the 1970s/1980s, in particular, in the history of a community action group that eventually formed a community centre organisation. Since that time, Barry has worked in the communities of Sanford, in various roles but predominantly within adult and community education.

Emily: has over four decades of experience community groups and community centres. Currently the custodian of a well-used community space in Sanford. Emily discussed her perspectives on community and informal learning historically and its changing face, as well as discussing the informal learning she has facilitated and encountered.

Emma: involved in many community-based projects. She facilitates, and is in contact with, many other informal learning groups. Attendees vary in number but can be as many as twenty plus and are from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds. The informal learning that she facilitates is also varied, from support with finding employment to film clubs. Emma also coordinates a successful reciprocal service exchange in the community.

Ian: is the director of an urban farm situated on the outskirts of Sanford town centre. Its fundamental aims are to make the local urban area more food resilient. Informal learning groups typically focussed on food literacy themes with many embedded aims, such as helping participants undergo a change in mindset in how they view the world and improve their own well-being.

Participants/attendees come from a wide cross section of the community, from vulnerable and marginalised groups, prisoners, long-term unemployed, but can include those from more affluent backgrounds.

Jim: Managed a third sector organisation that facilitated informal learning groups aimed to engage with the unemployed to help them find work and gain confidence (and other soft skills). Jim would also work with the group facilitators, as well as facilitating groups himself. He would also participate in the groups alongside the participants to try and understand the participants' point of view. Participants where from a variety of backgrounds, including refugees.

John: facilitates two family history groups per week at a local history resource centre. John explained circa 12 participants would attend each group, but participants may not return after the end of each group cycle (participants self-fund each cycle of ten weeks). John supports participants' researching their own family history, teaching of techniques and strategies for doing so.

Johnny: facilitates a local book club that meet once a month in a pub. Typically around 20-30 participants attend each month meeting and discuss the club's chosen book. The club started online and quickly built a membership, to the extent the club does not actively seek new members. Participants are from a range of backgrounds and are predominantly female.

Linda: Attends and facilitates informal learning groups across the local area. Under the umbrella of a national organisation, typically meet in community spaces, or in facilitators' houses. Small groups (often of three or four participants) focus on language learning and practising conversation, meeting twice a month. Linda explains that the participants are usually women and are both from working class and middle-class backgrounds.

Lizzy: Worked in a community arts organisation for several years that engaged with various forms of informal learning. The groups she facilitated would vary in number, from very small (3 or 4) to 20 plus. She worked with people, of all ages, from a variety of backgrounds but often marginalised groups. She is passionate about the difference that art and culture can make and how it can help facilitate empowering the marginalised.

Pam: experience in community work and informal learning since the late 1960s. She has engaged in social work, youth and community work, and community activism in different parts of the country. Pam resettled in this area in the 1980s, working in local community centres. She is currently involved in a project that collects and curates people's stories from Sanford.

Rebecca: is involved in various and different informal learning groups, held at a church. Groups have a variety of purposes: from religious themes to well-being and self-help groups. Groups meet on a weekly basis, with smallish groups (under ten typically) attending. Participants were typically local, of various ages, and not usually part of the church congregation (or attend services regularly).

Share and Read: externally funded shared reading project aiming to give their participants 'a voice', reduce social isolation and promote mental well-being. In the locale of this study, it employs paid staff who coordinate and facilitate various groups, and recruit volunteer facilitators. The volunteer facilitators tend to be retired and from a range of professions and social backgrounds who facilitate their own groups.

Groups take place in a range of venues: community centres, care homes, hospitals, hospices, streets, buses, and people's homes. It also engages in one-off 'pop up' events with participants who are passing by in the street, attending various events or even are waiting in a hospital or medical centre waiting room. Typically, activities involve the reading of a short poem or a story (with consent if the participant) and a brief discussion afterwards.

During this research, I met with Share and Read staff on different occasions, for meetings, facilitator interviews, and a focus group of staff and volunteer facilitators:

Project Manager: Sarah

Administrator: Lucy

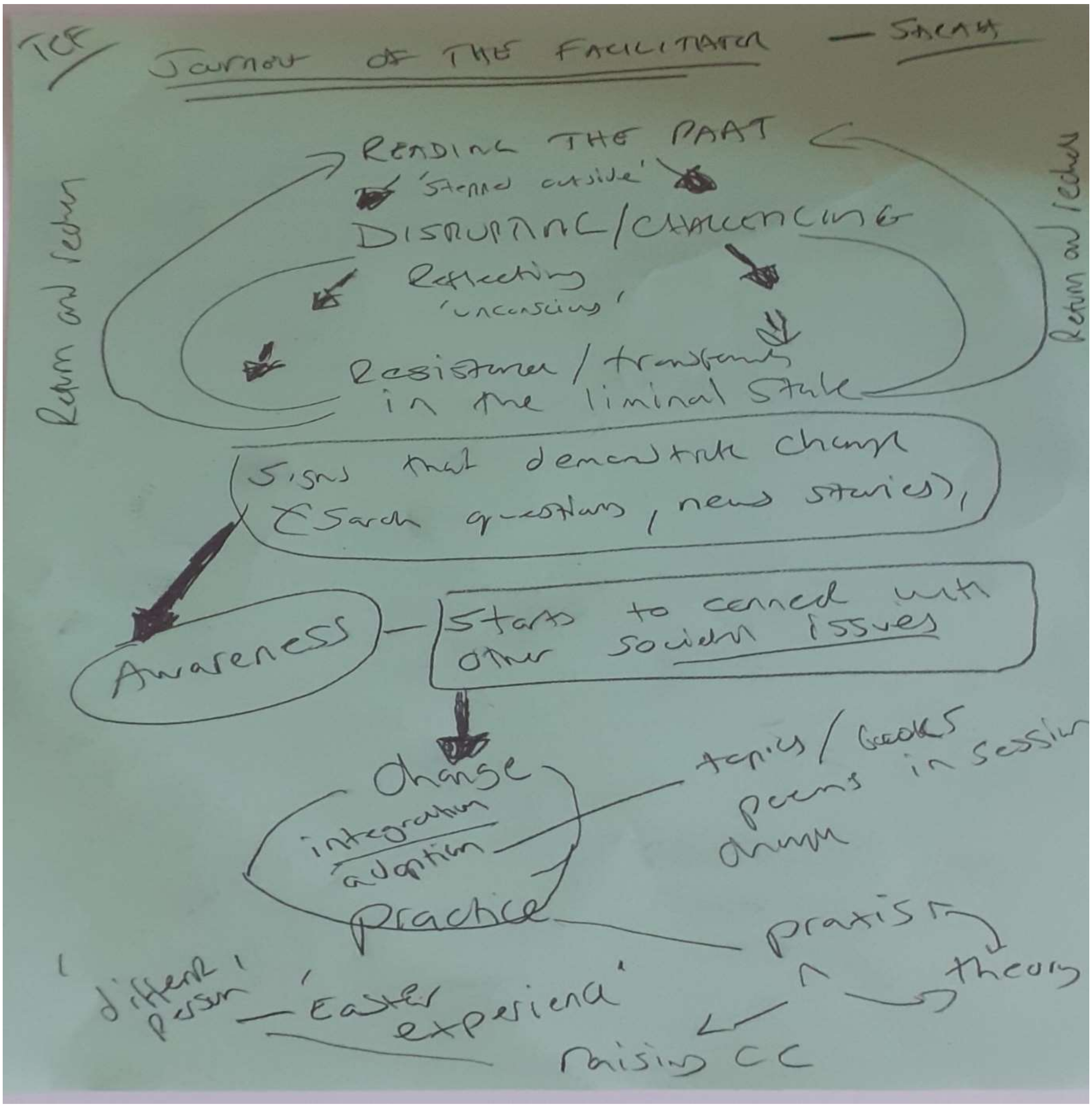
Facilitators: Paula, Polly, Rachel,

Volunteer Facilitators: Dawn, Peter, Ruth, Joan

Tom: facilitated various informal learning groups for over a decade, typically groups with environmental or sustainability themes and aims. Tom discusses his work with groups engaged in outdoor community gardens work, in which people from the local area (and sometimes beyond) were recruited to help renovate or improve a community shared space. Groups usually targeted reducing social isolation and promote mental well-being, although aims were not explicit to the participants. Group participants tended to be over 40 and male.

Vince: works in community and social development and facilitates informal learning groups across the area. Vince provides insights into groups including drama and Freirean bible interpretation, to life skills groups such as cookery and budgeting.

Appendix H: Early draft of conceptual model based on Sarah's journey


TCF
Journey of the Facilitator — Sarah
Reading the part
'stepped outside'
Disrupting/Challenging
Reflecting
'unconscious'
Resistance / transforms
in the liminal state
Return and reclaim
Return and reclaim
Signs that demonstrate change
(Sarah questions, news stories),
Awareness
Starts to connect with
other social issues
Change
integration
adoption
practice
topics / books
poems in session
change
praxis
theory
raising CC
'different person'
'Easter experience'